

# What is anti-pluralism?

## Outlines, varieties, and application contexts of a (re)emerged concept

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**Abstract** In recent years, the issue of possible early warning signs for democratic regression has become increasingly relevant. In this regard, the focus is often on how democracy-threatening actors can be identified as early as possible. Within this debate, one term has recently emerged again, as various contributions suggest that anti-pluralist actors are in the driver's seat of democratic backsliding. However, anti-pluralism in this literature usually remains completely undefined, or at least under-theorized. This study intends to contribute to clarifying the theoretical dimension of these issues by specifying anti-pluralism as a concept and discussing its relationships to competing concepts for identifying actors threatening democracy. The conceptual analysis shows that anti-pluralism is best understood as the negation of the benefits of societal diversity and thereby also the functional and normative necessity, purpose, and merit of pluralism as a structure principle. Furthermore, it can be shown that anti-pluralism is a feature of various other isms that are commonly used as indicators to identify actors threatening democracy. I conclude that while anti-pluralism is not necessary for actors to threaten democracy, it is sufficient to identify potentially threatening actors and has advantages over competing markers such as populism and extremism.

**Keywords** Anti-pluralism · Autocratization · Democratic backsliding · Democracy · Pluralism

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**Zusammenfassung** In den letzten Jahren hat die Frage nach möglichen Frühwarnzeichen für demokratische Regression zunehmend an Bedeutung gewonnen. Dabei geht es häufig um die Frage, wie demokratiegefährdende Akteure so früh wie möglich identifiziert werden können. In dieser Debatte ist in jüngster Zeit ein Begriff immer wieder aufgetaucht und verschiedene Beiträge legen nahe, dass es anti-pluralistische Akteure sind, die democratic backsliding vorantreiben. Allerdings bleibt der Anti-Pluralismus in dieser Literatur meist undefiniert oder zumindest untertheorisiert. Diese Studie soll einen Beitrag zur Klärung der theoretischen Dimension dieser Fragen beitragen, indem sie den Anti-Pluralismus als Konzept spezifiziert und seine Beziehungen zu konkurrierenden Konzepten erörtert. Die Konzeptanalyse zeigt, dass Anti-Pluralismus am besten als Verneinung der Vorzüge gesellschaftlicher Vielfalt und damit auch der funktionalen und normativen Notwendigkeit, des Zwecks und des (Mehr-)Wertes des Pluralismus als Strukturprinzip verstanden werden kann. Außerdem kann gezeigt werden, dass Anti-Pluralismus ein Merkmal verschiedener anderer ismen ist, die als Indikatoren zur Identifizierung demokratiebedrohender Akteure geläufig sind. Ich komme zu dem Schluss, dass Anti-Pluralismus zwar keine notwendige Bedingung dafür ist, dass Akteure die Demokratie bedrohen, aber hinreichend ist, um potenziell bedrohliche Akteure zu identifizieren, und er Vorteile gegenüber konkurrierenden Indikatoren wie Populismus und Extremismus hat.

**Schlüsselwörter** Anti-Pluralismus · Autokratisierung · Democratic Backsliding · Demokratie · Pluralismus

## 1 Introduction

According to the prevailing view in current research discourse, democracies today do not perish by chance, but in the course of processes that are deliberately driven forward by executive actors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Kneuer 2021). Such phenomena—often referred to as democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018)—appear to have increased in recent years, as the latest annual reports of the V-Dem Institute suggest (Boese et al. 2022; Wiebrecht et al. 2023). Against this backdrop, the issue of possible early warning signs for democratic regression has become increasingly relevant. In this regard, the focus is often on how democracy-threatening actors can be identified as early as possible. Within this debate, one term has recently emerged again as various contributions suggest that it is *anti-pluralist* actors who are in the driver’s seat of democratic backsliding (e.g., Lührmann 2021; Boese et al. 2022).

Consequently, this literature suggests *anti-pluralism* representing the crucial attitudinal characteristic of potential would-be autocratizers. Unfortunately, however, anti-pluralism in this literature usually remains completely undefined, or at least strongly undertheorized. The only attempt at a general definition here can be found in Medzihorsky and Lindberg, who equate anti-pluralism with “lacking commitment to democratic norms as such” (2023, p. 2). Against the background of this fuzzy definition, it remains unclear what is actually meant by anti-pluralism and thereby also

whether their operationalization<sup>1</sup> of anti-pluralism on an attitudinal level captures the supposed reference concept or something different.

This study is intended to contribute to the clarification of the theoretical dimension of these issues by (1) specifying anti-pluralism as a concept and (2) discussing its relationships to neighbor concepts. To conceptualize anti-pluralism, I begin by examining the theoretical relationship between democracy and pluralism by referring to selected conceptions of pluralism. Using these conceptions as a negative foil I refer to the roots of anti-pluralism as a concept in the history of ideas and extract a sufficient definition. Subsequently, I comparatively point to other (thin-ideological) concepts often associated with mapping threats to democracy on an attitudinal level—for example, anti-systemness, extremism, illiberalism, populism, and elitism. This analytical step not only serves to externally differentiate anti-pluralism itself but also to evaluate whether anti-pluralism is a feature of any concept associated with marking would-be autocratizers.

Based on that I argue that anti-pluralism can be defined as the negation of the benefits of societal diversity and thereby also the functional and normative necessity, purpose, and merit of pluralism as a structuring principle. Consequently, I argue that anti-pluralism is based on the conviction or belief that homogeneity and unity are preferable to diversity and pluralism. Thereby anti-pluralism threatens a structuring principle of any democracy. The comparative conceptual analysis also shows that anti-pluralism is inscribed as a feature for each of the other concepts considered. I conclude that while anti-pluralism is not a necessary condition for actors to threaten democracy, it is sufficient to identify potentially threatening actors and has advantages over competing markers such as populism and extremism.

## 2 Pluralism, anti-pluralism, and democracy

From the view of democratic theory, pluralism—understood as a social as well as a political phenomenon—is an essential feature of any democracy (Schaal 2016, p. 256) or even of politics in general (Lembcke and Weber 2016, p. 100). We can identify the roots of this perception across the history of liberal political thinking (see Holthaus and Noetzel 2012). Political liberalism emphasizes the immutable rights of individuals and their capacity for self-determination. This results not least in the concept that a society is to be regarded as heterogeneous considering their interest. A core problem of political liberalism consequently is how uniform political decisions can be made and legitimized based on this heterogeneity. Political pluralism is one way to solve this issue and I argue that this is deeply inscribed in democracy as a form of government. The relevance that democratic theories—for example, Dahl's (1991; 2015) liberal-procedural model—and empirical democracy

<sup>1</sup> This operationalization explicitly leans on the so-called 'litmus test' developed by Linz (1978) and revisited by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018). Whereas Linz (1978, p. 29) aims to measure actors' "loyalty to a democratic regime", Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, p. 24–25) elaborate a further operationalization of the litmus test for predicting "Authoritarian Behavior". Neither contribution explicitly connects the litmus test with the term anti-pluralism. Only Medzihrorsky and Lindberg (2023) do that.

research (see Coppedge et al. 2020, pp. 30–33) ascribe to pluralism supports this understanding.

“[...] [D]emocracy would not be necessary in the absence of a diversity of interests, identities and ideas [...]. In a society, where all shared the same interests, a single collective identity as members and the same ideas about the common good, democracy would be pointless, since collectively binding decisions could be adopted unanimously or be taken by each individual on behalf of all others without any need for a procedure that aggregates their political preferences. Democracy is a system of political rule that provides legitimacy for collectively binding decisions and coercive government under conditions of deep and persistent diversity (Bauböck 2018a, pp. 7–8).

Though Bauböck (2018b) can be neither considered a study focusing on pluralism nor a classic of democratic theory, in my opinion, the quote illustrates the close links between pluralism and democracy in an unprecedentedly pointed way. Accordingly, a minimum degree of pluralism is a necessary condition of democracy. There must be at least two alternatives of choice, as it is inherent to minimalist definitions of democratic rule, for example, Schumpeter's (1950, pp. 269–283) theory of competitive democracy. At the same time, functioning pluralism presupposes liberal liberties (see Bobbio 1987). Consequently, democracy without a liberal dimension securing pluralism as an unavoidable societal fact and political structure principle is hardly conceptualizable. In line with this, Sartori characterizes liberal democracy as a political system functioning under the conditions of “dissent and diversity” or a “dissenting consensus” (1997, p. 59).

Thus, we should not equate diversity with pluralism. Whereas diversity simply points to societal differentiation and complexity per se pluralism adds “the belief that diversity and dissent are values that enrich individuals as well as their polities and societies” (see Sartori 1997, 58). Taking this into account, “[p]olitical ideologies that consider diversity as a non-ideal condition to be overcome [...] are therefore always potentially hostile towards democracy” (Bauböck 2018a, p. 8) as they question the basic premise of pluralism. In other words, by conceding pluralism's importance to democracy, it follows that anti-pluralism must be under suspicion to capture something that is potentially jeopardizing democracy.

Logically, it is impossible to define anti-pluralism without understanding the concept of pluralism, as both terms are antonyms. Thus, I argue that we can conceptualize the relationship between both terms as a continuum and that we can even locate existing or historical political regimes or parties on it. This allows us to compare, describe, and classify empiric phenomena in a finer-grained way than an exclusively dichotomous categorization. For example, we can rank regimes depending on how much they reflect conceptions of pluralism. Furthermore, we can also refer to the continuum for building (quasi-)dichotomous categories. We can also apply this conceptualization to political parties and evaluate whether a party represents rather pluralist or rather anti-pluralist conceptions of politics, or whether party x is more anti-pluralist than party y.

## 2.1 Diversity in unity? Conceptions of pluralism

In principle, we can distinguish between different traditions of thinking about pluralism—a rather Anglo-American, liberal-procedural one, and a rather continental European (or even German), republican-communitarian, one (Schmidt 2019, p. 203). Accordingly, we need to look at conceptions of both strands to understand what pluralism is about and to synthesize a sufficient working definition. A complete review of these strands is neither possible within the scope of this article, nor can we assign each conception exclusively to one or the other strand since both got entangled over time. However, I argue we can learn a great deal about the essential characteristics of pluralism as a concept through a comparative, exemplary examination of selected conceptions of pluralism that resemble (more or less) either the liberal-procedural or the republican-communitarian tradition of pluralism theory. For the liberal-procedural strand, I refer to *Robert A. Dahl* and *John Rawls*. On the other side, I argue that we can consider *Ernst Fraenkel*, and *Jürgen Habermas* as modern representatives of republican-communitarian conceptions of pluralism. What I want to show by this comparative consideration is, that different conceptions might emphasize slightly diverging issues that come along with thinking about pluralism while the core problem they try to address is always very similar since it is inherent to pluralism as a concept. That is generating political unity in societal plurality, or much more with recognition of social plurality.

### 2.1.1 The liberal-procedural tradition

The liberal-procedural strand of pluralism theory is characterized by an emphasis on procedures, the input, and the institutions of a political system. Robert A. Dahl can be considered the main representative of this tradition (Schmidt 2019, p. 207). Therefore, Dahl is the starting point of this consideration. According to Schaal (2016, p. 260), Dahl's procedural democratic theory especially emphasizes the liberal dimension of fundamental rights on the one hand and the fact of pluralism on the other hand. In his earlier works, Dahl (1978) distinguishes between two types of pluralism, *conflictive* and *organizational pluralism*, where the former is in a way presupposed by the latter. By conflictive pluralism, Dahl (1978, p. 192) points to the conditions resulting from the existence of various intersectional cleavages in society. Organizational pluralism is therefore best understood as the transmission of these conditions into the associational sphere as it

“[...] refer[s] to the number and autonomy of organizations that must be taken into account in order to characterize conflicts among a given collection of persons. [...] The extent of organizational pluralism within a political system [...] is mainly to be explained [...] by: (1) the amount of latent conflictive pluralism; (2) the nature of the socioeconomic order; (3) the nature of the political regime; (4) the concrete structure of the political institutions” (Dahl 1978, pp. 192).

In Dahl's later works like *Democracy and its Critics* (1991), the differentiation of pluralism has taken a back seat. However, pluralism implicitly plays a vital role in Dahl's democratic theory when it comes to its moral justification and the *Idea*

of *Intrinsic Equality*, especially considering its implementation into the democratic process in the form of the criteria of *effective participation* and *voting equality* (see Dahl 1991, p. 104, 109). Following Dahl's argument, equality—and thereby a fundamental principle of democracy—means that the “interests of every person subject to the laws” must be taken into account *equally* in any legislating process (Dahl 1991, p. 104). From this derives the necessity for an equal and effective right to vote and the equality of votes (Dahl 2015, p. 95), and ultimately all the other principles being considered guarantors of free and competitive elections, for example, freedom of expression and freedom of association (see Dahl 2015, pp. 96–99). Early on, this leads Dahl (1978, p. 191) to conclude that “subsystem autonomy and organizational pluralism are always marked features of the social and political order” in polyarchies.

Another conception of pluralism that we can assign to the liberal-procedural tradition is associated with John Rawls' work on *Political Liberalism* (1995). According to Rawls, one of the core features of political liberalism consists in its ability to recognize and allow the *fact of pluralism* (see Rawls 1995, pp. 134–135). The fact of pluralism has already been implemented as an idea in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and simply focuses on the diversity of comprehensive doctrines within a given society or political community, suggesting divergent conceptions of the good (Rawls 1995, p. xvi). However, from this diversity also arises one of the main challenges facing political liberalism: “[H]ow is it possible that there can be a stable and just society whose free and equal citizens are deeply divided by conflicting and even incommensurable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines” (Rawls 1995, p. 133)? Rawls (2016, p. 120) takes the view that the legitimacy and stability of a political system depend on whether its fundamental political conception is supported by an *overlapping consensus* of *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines or not. Rawls outlines the genesis of such a consensus as a process of *public reason* starting from the situation of a *constitutional consensus*.<sup>2</sup>

“Public reason is characteristic of a democratic people: it is the reason of its citizens, of those sharing the status of equal citizenship. The subject of their reason is the good of the public: what the political conception of justice requires of society's basic structure of institutions, and of the purposes and ends they are to serve” (Rawls 1995, p. 213).

According to Rawls' considerations, public reason includes not only policy issues but more fundamentally, reasonable political arguments in the context of fundamental questions regarding the justice conception inscribed in a constitution (Rawls 1995, pp. 213–216). The subjects of a possibly resulting overlapping consensus are not individuals but the reasonable comprehensive doctrines they are associated with (Niesen 2016, p. 38). The premises and results of public reason conceptually

<sup>2</sup> A *constitutional consensus* must be understood as the intermediate station on the way from a *modus vivendi* to an *overlapping consensus*: “The constitution at the first stage satisfies certain liberal principles of political justice. As a constitutional consensus, these principles are accepted simply as principles and not as grounded in certain ideas of society and person of a political conception, much less in a shared public conception” (Rawls 1995, p. 158).

constitute what Rawls calls *reasonable pluralism*—namely the rational discourse between differing reasonable comprehensive doctrines regarding essential questions of a constitution’s underlying concepts of justice.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the institutionalization of certain procedures per se—in this case, public reason—Rawls also emphasizes the importance of reciprocal recognition of the reasonable comprehensive doctrines involved in the procedure.

### 2.1.2 *The republican-communitarian tradition*

The republican-communitarian strand is characterized by a comparatively state-centric and state-friendly orientation (Schmidt 2019, p. 203). *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* can be considered the ancestor of this tradition. Rousseau intends to solve the problem of generating unity in plurality by referring to the figure of the *volonté générale*. However, I argue that Rousseau’s political theory bears somewhat anti-pluralistic implications. I will therefore only return to Rousseau in detail later on.

*Ernst Fraenkel*—who was socialized in the *Weimar Republic* and the United States—can be considered an ideal modern representative of the republican-communitarian tradition and the most important author regarding pluralism in democratic Germany after World War II. He states that besides the incongruencies between different traditional strands, all perceptions of pluralism of the first third of the 20th century share two commonalities: first, the resistance to the state’s monopoly on the loyalty of its citizens. Second, the demand for the general equivalence of the power of the state on the one hand side, and the power of free associations within the state on the other hand side (Fraenkel 2007a, p. 383).

Contrary to totalitarianism, pluralist democracy must not assume the a priori existence of a determinable common will in a Rousseauist sense (we will go back to this issue later). Instead, pluralist democracy could only approximately identify the common good a posteriori by leaning on common rules of procedure, fair play, and a code of values (Fraenkel 2007b, p. 259). Consequently, Fraenkel (2007c, p. 38) considers the tension between the representation of interest pluralism and an assumed common will accompanied by the striving for balancing both principles by free and public contention as a characteristic of the Western, or representative, democracy. Going on from that he concludes:

“Pluralism has the merit of having drawn attention to the role that pressure groups play in the state and society of modern mass democracy by emphasizing the importance of associations in creating and shaping the will of the state” (Fraenkel 2007a, pp. 384–385, own translation).

Starting from another point, *Jürgen Habermas*, in my view, somewhat attempts to reconcile the republican(-communitarian) and the liberal(-procedural) traditions (see also Habermas 1999). He starts by recognizing the contradictions inherent to the term of popular sovereignty, as the *people* only appear in the plural (Habermas

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed differentiation of the *rational* and the *reasonable* in Rawls’ Political Philosophy see Krasnoff (2014). The term *reasonable* catches whether political conceptions are generalizable under the conditions of reciprocal recognition of other conceptions of the good.

2009, p. 42). In accordance with Rousseau, he finds that the genesis of the unified will of all citizens entails the exclusion of all non-generalizable interests and only permitting regulations guaranteeing the same liberties to all (Habermas 2009, p. 47). Habermas (2006, pp. 401–402) rejects established theories of pluralism, as they do not acknowledge citizens' individual interests but associations and organized interests only. Going on from that he justifies deliberative politics as an existence requirement of any democracy under the conditions of a pluralist society (Habermas 2009, p. 77; 2022, pp. 18–20).<sup>4</sup>

“The deliberative politics approach recommends itself above all by explaining how, in pluralistic societies without a common religion or worldview, political compromises can come about at all against the background of an intuitive constitutional consensus” (Habermas 2022, p. 20, own translation).

Accordingly, deliberation as a procedure in a Habermasian sense is in the civil society and the public sphere, respectively (Habermas 2006, p. 443) serving the formation of opinion and will. Mass media, political parties, interest groups, and other civil societal actors (re-)present a plural of competing public opinions to a scattered audience so that any citizen is put in the position to form their own opinion based on an *informed pluralism of opinions*. Consequently, on this basis, citizens can make an election decision that is as rationally motivated as possible from their point of view (Habermas 2022, pp. 23–24). Following the *extraordinary problem-processing mode*, even beyond citizens' election decisions, the result of public deliberation can be inserted into the political center through the channels of parties, legislation, judiciary, administration, and government (Habermas 2006, pp. 431–434). Political decisions then are best understood as compromises between functional necessities, societal interests, and voters' preferences, which are under public spheres' further review until the end of the legislature (Habermas 2022, pp. 24–25).

### 2.1.3 Summary

What can we take away from this cursory literature review? First, we can note that thinking of pluralism always starts with the acknowledgment of societal heterogeneity resulting in a pluralism of interests. Second, from these premises arise tensions between individuality and (civil) society on the one hand, and unity and the state on the other hand. Balancing these relationships and tensions and finding institutions and procedures to reconcile individuality in unity (and vice versa) is a problem any democratic theory must address. Consequently, there are various proposals for dealing with this balancing dilemma. The distinction between a liberal-procedural and a republican-communitarian strand is one way to schematically illustrate this: Whereas liberal-procedural theories place more emphasis on the consideration of the individual's interest, opinion, and will, republican-communitarian theories put the determination of the common good/will and the state in the foreground.

<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Habermas considers representative democracy as a variety of deliberative democracy (see Landwehr 2023, p. 19).

Hence, and third, when designing a democratic regime at the drawing board, one must consider the challenge of how to transform individual interests into collective political decisions in compliance with the principle of popular sovereignty. There are different options for institutionalizing this. The most prominent solution is the basic configuration of representative democracy. We can identify references to this possibility in virtually all the authors considered above, but especially in Dahl's and Fraenkel's conceptions. Focusing on the democratic theories of Rawls and Habermas, we also find some relatively innovative attempts to political pluralism by referring to procedures and institutions of public discourse and deliberation.

However, the very core of the term pluralism remains unaffected as well as the requirement for institutional enabling conditions: Pluralism means the acknowledgment of societal heterogeneity and "the belief that diversity and dissent are values that enrich individuals as well as their polities and societies" (see Sartori 1997, p. 58). Consequently, pluralism can find expression on two levels that are of particular importance for the context of this article: First, as a formal structure principle that is, for instance, reflected in the institutionalization of a political system (see Oberreuter 1980, p. 28) and second, on an attitudinal and behavioral level.

Pluralism as a structuring principle guarantees the (formally) free and equal competition of interests and opinions. For instance, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly are often associated with this since they enable the articulation of the interests to be considered equally. Free and fair elections, in turn, represent the procedure by which this equal involvement in political decisions is ultimately institutionalized. Organized interest groups and public discourse can also complement these processes. Guaranteeing fair competition of interests and opinions also includes checks and balances that can safeguard the interest of minorities against unrestrained majoritarianism (see Hamilton et al. 2009 [1787/1788]). Even when a democratic majority supports a government or a specific policy, the principle of pluralism is that deviant opinions and interests still must be considered. Accordingly, again there must be structures enabling a vital civil society as well as the insertion of minorities' interests, opinions, and preferences into the political process.

Furthermore, I argue, that there is a second level of pluralism, namely an attitudinal or behavioral one. I argue, that just as democracy needs democrats (see Almond and Verba 1963), pluralism—and therefore ultimately also democracy again—needs pluralists: citizens and political actors who acknowledge and respect both the fact of societal diversity and the legitimacy of other individuals' interests and the legitimacy and validity of pluralist structure principles regardless their subjective interests, opinions and (policy) preferences. As we know from the literature on democratic consolidation democracy can only persist when all players accept the rules of the game (see Linz and Stepan 1996). This also includes all citizens and political actors acknowledging that other citizens and actors might have divergent—but still legit—preferences, and that all the interests and preferences must be taken into consideration equally in proceedings of decision-making. Accordingly, the structure principle of pluralism and the other rules of the game must be matched on an attitudinal and behavioral level by all players involved. Conversely, anti-pluralist attitudes and behavior would indeed have to be understood as a threat to democratic

institutions and their persistence. This leads us to the question of what exactly anti-pluralism is.

## 2.2 Anti-pluralism and its roots and legacies in the history of ideas

To clarify what the term anti-pluralism entails and what not, it is once more recommendable to take a closer look at the history of democratic thought. Contrary to pluralism, the list of relevant, more or less comprehensive, contributions is rather short. However, I argue that two authors stand out when dealing with the theoretical roots and legacies of anti-pluralism in the history of ideas: *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* and *Carl Schmitt*.

### 2.2.1 Rousseau: the republic and the general will

As already hinted above, Rousseau's *Du contrat social* plays an ambivalent role in political theory. Although Rousseau's idea of the general will (*volonté générale*) is a central concept in democratic theory, it is also an important reference considering anti-pluralist thinking. According to Rousseau (1999 [1762], 1st book, 6th chapter), the general will must be the supreme guideline of a polity. Hence, Rousseau's *social contract* must include a silent agreement on empowering the whole political corporation to enforce individuals to follow the general will when necessary (Rousseau 1999 [1762], 1st book, 7th chapter). Contrary to the will of all (*volonté de tous*), which must be understood as the sum of private and therefore particular interests existing in a society, the general will aims at the common good of a political corporation (Rousseau 1999 [1762], 2nd book, 3rd chapter). In Rousseau's ideal republic, particular interests must not be taken into consideration when it comes to political decision-making, as this ultimately leads to a defective form of public association.<sup>5</sup>

However, according to Rousseau, there are some problems to be considered when it comes to identifying the *volonte générale*. First, it needs virtuous citizens (*citoyens*) to identify the general will. The *citoyen* is defined as an ideal type in contrast to the *bourgeois* and is characterized by his/her ability to step back from his/her particular interests and reflect on what is good for the community. Accordingly, every citizen who succeeds in this must be regarded as *citoyen*. If there were no *citoyens*, then basically the common will could not be determined, but only the sum of particular interests (*volonté de tous*) (see Rousseau 1999 [1762], 2nd book, 3rd chapter; Schaal and Heidenreich 2017, p. 191). Second, citizens' associations and political parties, in Rousseau's view, are problematic as they cannot resemble the general will of the whole political corporation, but only of their self-interested members and therefore only a *volonté de tous* when it comes to the republic (Rousseau 1999 [1762], 2nd book, 3rd chapter). Consequently, to Rousseau essentials of a pluralist society and political representation are problematic.

<sup>5</sup> In Rousseau's view the states of nature in Hobbes' and Locke's contract theories—especially when it comes to private property—already resemble such a defective form of public association (see Becker et al. 2021, pp. 66–67).

Besides the citizens' virtuousness and the problem with sub-associations, there are even more criteria Rousseau considers as necessary for detecting the pre-political general will: a will formation process that is free, autonomous, non-discursive, and oriented towards the common good; well-informed citizens; the voting of all citizens; the autonomy of all citizens; and an as homogenous as possible society of manageable size (Schmidt 2019, p. 73). When these prerequisites are met, the general will *can* be detected by public vote. The closer the result is to unanimity, the closer the decision is to the general will. Vice versa, the voting minority must recognize that they were mistaken about the content of the general will. Unfortunately, Rousseau does not make it any clearer, at this point.

In summary, what about Rousseau's social contract bears anti-pluralistic credentials? I argue that two aspects are problematic for different reasons. First, the conception of a pre-political general will, but especially Rousseau's demand that positions deviating from the majority decision must be regarded as misconceptions of the common good. Under these circumstances, minority positions have no legitimacy and do not have to be included anymore regarding the issue in consideration, as the common will is attributed as infallible. Second, the differentiation between *citoyen* and *bourgeois* is more a theoretical and ideal-typical differentiation and might not intend to divide society into good and bad citizens originally. However, some reception of this distinction can be problematic. This may be because virtuousness (of the citizen) itself is a rather vague and context-dependent criterion. In combination with the idea of an infallible general will, this can lead to highly problematic results, as history shows: While Rousseau is considered to have paved the way for the French Revolution, his political philosophy is also credited with having served to justify the Jacobin terror under *Robespierre*. In other words: With recourse to Rousseau, the elimination of supposedly unvirtuous, counter-revolutionary, citizens who would supposedly deviate from the general will, could be legitimized (see Becker et al. 2021, p. 71; Winkler 2016a, p. 209, 356). It also fits in with this that the empathic collectivism inhabiting Rousseau's thinking and the idea of a general will can also be considered as a foundation for patriotism (see Yonah 1997) and later nationalisms (see Miller 2008, p. 531). Both isms (at least) can contain or feed strong exclusionary narratives.

### 2.2.2 Carl Schmitt: unity and will

Rousseau's political philosophy, thus, for all its positive achievements for democratic theory, also carries with it a dangerous anti-pluralist seed. A seed that has been further nurtured, and sometimes perverted, by other authors. Carl Schmitt is one of them (see Schaal and Heidenreich 2017, p. 196). Therefore, I want to go even further and argue that if we are looking for something like a comprehensive political theory of anti-pluralism, we are most likely to find it in Carl Schmitt's infamous work, especially focusing on his "identity-based concept of homogenous democracy" (Kelly 2016, p. 237). Theoretically, Schmitt can be treated as representative of the identitarian camp (Lehnert 2003, p. 72) and the founder of right-wing positions perceiving pluralism first and foremost as a threat to state unity and authority. Historically, he must be considered "the crown lawyer of the Third Reich" (Koenen

1995, own translation) and the theoretic forerunner and advocate of the *Führerstaat* (Oberreuter 1980, p. 31; Meierhenrich 2016, p. 171; Winkler 2016b, p. 700). At the very center of Schmitt's political theory are the concepts of *unity* and *will* as such.

In his view, the political is constituted by the (potential) conflict between *friend* and *enemy*. The latter is even synonymized with any stranger, being strange in the sense that they are different in an existential meaning (Schmitt 2009, pp. 25–26). The possibility that it could come to a fight for life and death is what ultimately defines the enemy in Schmitt's conception. In this situation of threat, the *people* become aware of their existence (Roellecke 2003, p. 93). This understanding of the political inherits different fundamental consequences for Schmitt's thinking about the state and democracy. Focusing on democracy Schmitt claims:

“Every real democracy is since not only equal things are treated equally, but, with unavoidable consequence, things that are not equal are not treated equally. Democracy therefore necessarily involves first homogeneity and secondly—if necessary—the elimination or annihilation of heterogeneity” (Schmitt 2017a [1923], pp. 13–14, own translation).

Accordingly, Schmitt (2016 [1931], pp. 82–83) considers societal *identity* as a necessary pre-condition of what he calls democracy, and at the same time *unity* as an essential feature of the state. The meaning of *identity* in Schmitt's thinking gains contours when focusing on the remarks on the *principle of identity* in his *Verfassungslehre* (2017b [1928]). According to the principle of identity, a people can gain political unity by a directly given strong similarity. Schmitt (2017b [1928], p. 205, own translation) describes this constellation as “immediate identity with oneself”, meaning the identity of the people with the political unit. Going on from that he argues that there can be no state without a real people present (Schmitt 2017b [1928], p. 205).

The principle of identity points in the same direction as Schmitt's differentiation of friend and enemy. In Schmitt's view, enabling political unity in the form of a state ultimately rests upon a minimum degree of internal homogeneity of the people, whereby the threshold value here is very high as Schmitt speaks of identity. Conversely, this internal homogeneity in Schmitt's view can only be constructed by referring to external differences and heterogeneity (see differentiation friend vs. enemy), for example by excluding or even annihilating dissimilar individuals (Brodcz 2016, p. 300). Consequently, when Schmitt speaks about equality, he means substantial similarity in physical or moral qualities (Schmitt 2017a [1923], p. 14).

The other principle that Schmitt considers instrumental to gaining political unity is the one of *representation* which is based on the perception that the people cannot be present permanently. Therefore, individuals have to represent the people (Schmitt 2017b [1928], p. 205). However, Schmitt sees the two principles of identity and representation in mixed appearance, as the impossibility of absolute identity requires representation of the political will of a community (Brodcz 2016, pp. 301–306). This perspective can also be defined as the starting point of Schmitt's criticism of the political system of the *Weimar Republic* in specific and pluralism in general.

Schmitt considers pluralism as a driving force of fragmentation and therefore as a threat to the unity of the political community, which is so important to him. The place where this becomes most obvious for him is the party system or the parliament. According to him, parties in a pluralist system become advocates of distinct special interests and clients, and thus prevent the formation of a unified state will (Schmitt 2016 [1931], p. 88).

“The firm social ties which today are the bearers of the pluralistic state make of parliament, where their exponents appear in the form of factions, a mere reflection of the pluralistic division of the state itself. In this state of affairs, where is the unity to come from, in which the hard party and interest ties are abolished and merged?” (Schmitt 2016 [1931], p. 89, own translation).

Schmitt fears that going on from this, pluralism erodes the citizens’ loyalty to the state in favor of a “plurality of loyalties” to social organizations, parties, etc. In his view, this ultimately leads to the stabilization of the pluralist division of society and threatens the unification of the state. Another result, he argues, is a “pluralism of legality terms” perpetuating the public support for a constitution, which sufficiently degenerates into a new terrain of political conflicts—again threatening unity (Schmitt 2016 [1931], p. 90, own translation). That is why Schmitt is, as has been shown, not only open to the negation of pluralism but even considers it as urgently required (Oberreuter 1980, pp. 31–32).

### 2.2.3 Summary

What can we take away from reading Rousseau and Schmitt about anti-pluralism as a concept? I argue that there are at least three bigger commonalities between both authors. First, the arguments of both rely on the fundamental assumption that there is a *general will* (Rousseau) or something like a *unified state will* (Schmitt) that comprises the common interest of all citizens and must be detected as it should serve as the central guideline of a political community. Interests, preferences, or positions that deviate from the general or unified state will are therefore problematic. Consequently, and secondly, Rousseau and Schmitt perceive the unity of a polity as desirable (see also Oberreuter 1980, pp. 30–31). That is why, third, both either problematize (Rousseau) or even reject (Schmitt) the idea of a pluralist system in which associations and parties aggregate the interests and preferences of citizens, as they fear that this undermines the formation of a unified/general will and leads to political fragmentation.

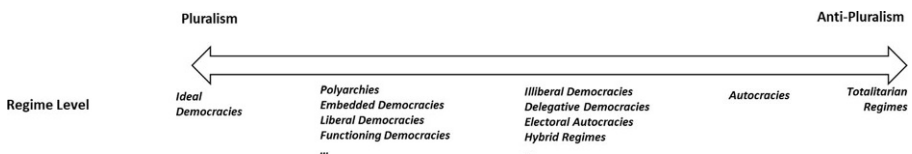
Furthermore, Rousseau, as well as Schmitt, emphasize the importance of moral qualities for gaining the general will. However, Rousseau assumes that citizens can be taught virtue. Contrary, Schmitt permanently refers to a substantive equality of substantive physical and moral qualities. These categories are fixed and there is no idea of dynamic change, as Schmitt connotes this aspect with racist and antisemitic resentments. Rousseau does not speak explicitly about the annihilation of deviants in the sense of the Jacobin terror. However, Schmitt over and over makes things clear—to him, it is *required* to exclude or even annihilate the *enemies*.

Based on the literature review of Rousseau and Schmitt we can define some core characteristics of anti-pluralism we find in the history of ideas.: First, the assumption of a pre-political general or unified will, which does not require a discursive process of opinion and will formation; second, the idea that the disclosure of this will is attached to some minimum degree of societal homogeneity; third, the premise that the unified or general will should function as the supreme guideline of the polity; fourth, from this can arise some friend-foe distinction focusing on the political landscape—not necessarily in a radical form like Schmitt's, but deep enough that it can question political pluralism and its institutions. However, both Rousseau's and Schmitt's political philosophies are complex and very specific. Thus, it is reasonable to abstract a little bit from their conceptions and only include the very core of anti-pluralism when formulating a sound definition. I define anti-pluralism in contrast to pluralism as

*the negation of the benefits of societal diversity and thereby also the functional and normative necessity, purpose, and merit of pluralism as a structuring principle.*

Consequently, I argue that anti-pluralism is based on the conviction or belief that homogeneity and unity are preferable to diversity and pluralism, for instance, because it might be easier to translate rather homogenous interests into uniform and binding legitimate political decisions. Starting from this premise, pluralism as a belief system as well as a structuring principle that can be derived from it must almost necessarily be considered something critical. Going on, I argue, that we can conceptualize the relationship between pluralism and its antipode as a continuum. The poles of this continuum cannot be reached as neither pluralism nor anti-pluralism can be fulfilled perfectly in reality. I illustrate this by referring to the regime level. Considering pluralism as a structuring principle of democracy, I argue that totalitarian regimes inherit strong anti-pluralist structures. However, we will find neither a perfect democracy nor a 'perfect' totalitarian dictatorship in reality. What we can observe, indeed, are regimes that rather live up to the ideals of pluralism or anti-pluralism (see Fig. 1).

Thinking about the attitudinal level of anti-pluralism, we can assume that actors with anti-pluralist attitudes are by far more likely to start with eroding democratic institutions when they have the opportunity to do so than actors who do not share those attitudes. This is because anti-pluralists might intend to create a polity that matches their conception of politics better than democracy. In other words, I argue that anti-pluralists share the intention to shift the democratic system in which they find themselves further to the right on the continuum in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1** Pluralism and Anti-Pluralism on the Regime Level

### 3 Conceptual comparison

The backsliding discourse of recent years has certainly given the question of early warning systems for potential threats to democracy a particular boost. However, it is not as if there are not already concepts other than anti-pluralism that could be considered markers for potential future autocratizers. These concepts usually describe attitudes towards democracy as a political system but sometimes operate on different levels. In some cases, these are well-established concepts under which ideologies or ideological actors with strong anti-democratic tendencies can be grouped (e.g., anti-system parties, extremism, radicalism, fundamentalism). In recent years, reference has often been made to hazards populism—understood as a thin ideology—potentially bears for (representative) democracy (Lauth and Schlenkrich 2021; Zürn 2023). The situation is similar to the concept of illiberalism, which is also used as a collective term to describe and categorize supposed threats to (liberal) democracy (Smilova 2022). Furthermore, there has also been increased discussion in recent years about technocracy threatening democratic principles and procedures (Bickerton and Accetti 2017; Caramani 2017; Landwehr 2018). As if things are not complicated enough, finally scholars point to populist radical right parties (Mudde 2007) or technocratic populism (La Torre 2013; Havlík 2019) combining characteristics of different isms that are suspected of representing threats to democracy.

Against the background of this complex conceptual field, the question is why we could even need the concept of anti-pluralism. Why not just continue working with established concepts? I argue that anti-pluralism as an attitudinal feature can be attributed to any of the abovementioned concepts. If this is the case, all potentially problematic actors could theoretically be identified by resorting to anti-pluralism, regardless of what specific (ideological) positions they represent. To illustrate this, I have to map the relationship between anti-pluralism and those other concepts. For this purpose, I concisely review established concepts that are associated with potentially threatening democracy and particularly concerning whether anti-pluralism is an integral part of these concepts. I start this enterprise with the most general concepts one might traditionally think of when it comes to parties and actors threatening democratic principles, institutions, and procedures: anti-system parties, extremism, radicalism, fundamentalism, and totalitarianism.

#### 3.1 Ideological anti-systemness, extremism, radicalism, and fundamentalism

The most universal concept being used to mark actors that might be a threat to democratic institutions is the one of *anti-system parties*. According to the original definition by Sartori (1977, p. 133)

“[...] an anti-system party would not change—if it could—the government but the very system of government. [...] [A]n anti-system opposition abides by a belief system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates. [...] [A]nti-system parties represent an extraneous ideology—thereby indicating a polity confronted with a maximal ideological distance.”

Capoccia (2002, pp. 18–23; 2005, pp. 32–34) names this distance the *ideological anti-systemness*. In other words, ideological anti-systemness describes the principle of dismissing core principles of the domestic political system, for example, democracy. Consequently, anti-systemness is best understood as a collective term marking actors, especially parties, that openly oppose the rules of the system they operate in. However, the concept does not include any information about which principle is opposed and ‘why’, as an anti-system party’s opposition can refer to a variety of ideologies, for example, communism or fascism (see Sartori 1977, p. 132). Furthermore, the anti-systemness in the context of democratic regimes also depends on the concept of democracy attached to the analysis (Capoccia 2002, p. 24). Consequently, if we regard pluralism as an inherent structural principle of democracy, anti-pluralism is suspected of being a feature of anti-systemness in the democratic context.

Since we can regard ideological anti-systemness as a cumulate of ideological attitudes and positions conflicting with one or more principles of a democratic system, the next obvious concepts being eligible are the ones of extremism or radicalism, respectively. Both terms are often used quasi-synonymously (see Carter 2018). Like anti-systemness, these terms allow comprising different kinds of ideologies, as they are usually additionally attributed to the left or the right pole of the political-economic spectrum (see Arzheimer 2018, p. 24). However, there are also approaches distinguishing between right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist extremism additionally (Jaschke 2020, p. 27). I consider the latter as a specific variety of religious extremisms, or fundamentalisms.

According to Falter (2018, p. 41), dogmatism, fanaticism, and exclusivity thinking pose the formal commonalities of political extremism, whereas anti-parliamentarianism and anti-pluralism are common attributes of content. Hence political extremism is also conceptualized against the background of the core principles and components of constitutional democracy (Falter 2018, p. 41). However, I argue that anti-pluralism is the logically inevitable content cumulate of the formal commonalities of political extremism: dogmatism, fanaticism, and exclusivity thinking—each of them, but even more in interaction with each other. This is also in line with the argument by Lipset and Raab (1978, p. 4, 6) who consider anti-pluralism as the “common nub” of left and right varieties of political extremism and—maybe somewhat simplifying—state that “Extremism is antipluralism”.

However, as there are different forms of extremism, I argue that they differ *inter alia* when it comes to how anti-pluralism is inscribed. I will illustrate this using the examples of *fascism*, *communism*, and *religious fundamentalism*.<sup>6</sup> Although it is nearly impossible to agree on a common definition of fascism as an ideology (see Eatwell 2013; Gottfried 2017), there is one important commonality for the context of this section. According to Eatwell (2013), the “celebration of the holistic nation” is a core theme of fascism. Comparing German and Italian fascism in the 20th century Eatwell emphasizes that “Nation was at the heart of fascist thinking” (2013, p. 482). Regardless of the exact conception of the term nation—whether it

<sup>6</sup> However, I have to mention that the exact theoretic-conceptual relationship between, for example, right-wing extremism and fascism is debated controversially (see Rydgren 2018, p. 7).

is conceived as “cultural nationalism” or “biological racism”—both fascisms aimed to exclude “Jews and other racial enemies from the national community” (Eatwell 2013, p. 482). Therefore, I argue that anti-pluralism is inscribed in fascism in the form of excessive nationalism or nativism, respectively (see here Mudde 2007, p. 19).

Communism, according to Brown (2013), can be broken down into six key characteristics: the monopoly power of the ruling communist party; democratic centralism; state ownership of the means of production; centrally planned rather than market economy; membership of an international communist movement; and the aspiration to move to a stateless, classless communist society. At least two of them can be associated with anti-pluralism. First, the claim of the monopoly of power of the communist party, and thereby the rejection of a pluralist party system or even of the legitimacy of pluralist interest organizations in general. And second, the ambition to generate a classless society, which can be understood as the refusal of a heterogeneous society. Both fascism and communism can also be perceived as totalitarian ideologies (see Arendt 1973; Gentile 2013), and therefore as radically anti-pluralistic.

Religious fundamentalism in political theory is often equated with Islamic political ideologies (see Browers 2013). According to Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992, p. 118), fundamentalism features a holistic religious monism. This results in a friend-foe differentiation of the good (the believers) and the evil (the non-believers). The anti-pluralism inscribed into religious fundamentalism thus is the result of a supposed claim to the uniqueness of a special religious doctrine. The common good is determined by the supposed will of God, which can not be changed. Consequently, to religious fundamentalism, there is no need for democratic procedures to balance interests or determine the common good.

I thus showed that anti-pluralism can be considered a significant component and common nub of the typical isms associated with ideological anti-systemness in democratic contexts. This applies both to a more abstract (extremism, radicalism) perspective as well as to *thick* ideologies like fascism, communism, or (religious) fundamentalism. Consequently, this is also true for related terms like totalitarianism, since totalitarianism describes a specific exercise of dominion whose goals and measures are defined and legitimized by a totalitarian (or extremist) ideology or doctrine (Backes 1989, 294–295). Accordingly, at this point, it seems to play no vital role what ideological color anti-systemness wears. Anti-pluralism is a core characteristic of extremism, radicalism, and especially totalitarian doctrines like fascism or communism. Contrarily, what seems to differ is how anti-pluralism is inscribed in the belief system of each doctrine.

### 3.2 Illiberalism

Another term eligible as a label for (aspiring) autocrats is the one of *illiberalism*, made famous in the public debate by Victor Orban’s recourse to what he calls “il-

liberal democracy” (Canihac 2022, p. 3).<sup>7</sup> What he means is an electoral regime without liberal institutions, for example, minority rights—quite congruent with the use of terms in the scientific debate (see Zakaria 1997; Merkel 2004). However, when it comes to actors’ attitudes and behavior illiberalism is “used as a fuzzy and inconsistent classification, an intuitive way to describe ideologies and practices that diverge from liberalism [...] without being entirely identifiable with authoritarianism, or dictatorship” (Laruelle 2022, p. 303). Similarly, Canihac (2022) evaluates the concept of illiberalism as “elusive”, under-theorized and sometimes overlapping with other concepts. The most significant problem in this context is, that even the intrinsic relationship to liberalism—and its varieties (see Freeden and Stears 2013)—remains unexposed (Laruelle 2022, p. 312). However, following the recent attempt by Smilova (2022, p. 193) the ideational core of “democratic illiberalism” not only comprises anti-liberal anti-globalism, and the idea of unrestrained popular sovereignty but also anti-individualism and anti-pluralism that are ethno-nationalistically justified.

Consequently, in my view, the analytical merits of the term illiberalism are more than in doubt, as systematic literature reviews point out significant inconsistencies in the use of the concept. However, the contribution by Smilova (2022)—which seems to be the most elaborated attempt to conceptualize (democratic) illiberalism by now—suggests that anti-pluralism is also part of the ideational core of illiberalism.

### 3.3 Populism

*Populism* over the last years has become one of the most popular terms in political science (see Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017) but is also a common buzzword in the public debate on politics. Today, there are countless approaches to defining the term (see Abromeit 2017; Hunger and Paxton 2022). According to Lewandowsky (2022, p. 23), we can distinguish four significant paths: approaches that understand populism as a (1) complete ideology, (2) *thin* ideology, (3) discourse, or (4) as a strategy. When focusing on ideological conceptualizations—and these are the relevant ones for this examination—it is noticeable that in the past populism has often been equated with *right-wing* populism (see Betz 2018; Heinze 2022). However, over the last few years, approaches conceptualizing populism as a thin ideology have established themselves as a minimum consensus (Lewandowsky 2022, p. 18). The most significant contribution to this is the one by Mudde, who defines populism as

“[...] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (2004, p. 543).

<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile Viktor Orban has switched to another, less clear and preloaded term, and stages himself as an advocate of what he frames as *Christian Democracy*. However, substantially Orban still opposes the principles of liberal democracy (see Coakley 03.08.2021).

In the view of populists, there is nothing supreme to the general will of the people, “not even human rights or constitutional guarantees” (Mudde 2007, p. 23). This radical Rousseauist position already indicates that populism generally inherits anti-pluralist characteristics. Similar to Mudde, Müller (2017, p. 14) notes that populism is per se anti-democratic because it is anti-pluralist. This becomes clearest with a view of the special representative claim populists make, namely: ‘We—and exclusively we—represent the people!’ Against this background, any other claim or form of representation consequently becomes illegitimate (Müller 2017, pp. 18–19). Going further, Müller outlines significant differences between Rousseau’s conception of the *volonté générale* and the populist perception of the general will. According to his argument, the detection of the former is at least tied to regulated political processes including the participation of the citizens, whereas the latter can simply be ascertained by the populist. The guideline of (symbolic) political representation here is rather a *Volksggeist* than the *volonté générale* (Müller 2017, pp. 46–48). This can also correlate with the perception that a popular leader functions as a detector of the general will (Urbinati 2019a, p. 113; see Olivas Osuna 2021). Furthermore, Müller (2017, p. 52) differentiates between populists’ perceptions of the identity of the people and nationalist and racist constructions in the tradition of Carl Schmitt. According to Müller’s argument, populism does not necessarily include the latter, but any totalitarianism comprises characteristics of populism.

Consequently, anti-pluralism must be considered a necessary characteristic of populism as a thin ideology. Populists’ perception of society being separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups is paired with their notion of a general will of the people which *must* function as the supreme guideline of politics. Thus, populism in power tends to result in rampant majoritarianism (Urbinati 2017), or in other words, the manifestation of a populist anti-pluralism on the structural level. Populism stands in an antagonistic relationship with pluralism, and therefore ultimately with liberal democracy (see Plattner 2010, pp. 89–91; Rummens 2017). From a populist point of view, institutions of *checks and balances* constrain the assumed majority and unanimity of the ‘true people’ (see here Urbinati 2019b, pp. 77–112) and their general will.

### 3.4 Elitism and technocracy

After explaining populism we must also take a look at another potentially anti-pluralistism, namely *elitism*. Mudde (2004, pp. 543–544) considers populism as the opposite of pluralism and elitism. Whereas elitism and populism share a Manichean worldview, they differ in whose views and will should be the guideline of politics—the one of (moral) elites (elitism) or the ones of the ‘normal’ people (populism). According to Caramani (2017) and Bickerton and Accetti (2017), both populism and technocracy (elitism) can also be read as critiques of party representation that also offer alternative forms of representation. Whereas populists consider representative democracy as not responsive enough, technocrats complain that representative democracy is over-responsive and therefore unable to create responsible and effective rule (Caramani 2017, p. 59).

What populism and elitism have in common is (1) the assumption of a unitary, general common interest of a given society, (2) a non-pluralist perception of society and politics, (3) the perspective that the relationship between people and the elite is “unmediated”, and (4) the dispersion of accountability-institutions as they tend to distort the common interest (Caramani 2017, pp. 60–61). According to Landwehr (2018, p. 164), technocratic or elitist configurations of democracy are associated with different changes in form. On the supply side, technocracy promotes institutional and discursive de-politicization, delegation to expert panels, and non-majoritarian institutions and decision structures. On the demand side, elitism comprises conflict aversion and the objectification of the common good, approval of expert decisions, immaturity, and disinterest, and, in recourse to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2003), *stealth democrats*.

Anti-pluralism is inscribed in technocracy and elitism based on the idea that the general common interest of a society can be defined by the reasoned reflection of experts or elites. Contrary to deliberative democracy, elitism does *not* refer to both, the principle of people’s sovereignty and the epistemic dimension of political decision-making, but exclusively emphasizes the latter. The objectification of the common good legitimizes the exclusion of ‘normal’ citizens, imagined as stealth democrats, from the processes of decision-making. In this conception of politics, the consideration of individual interests and pluralism are undesirable.

### 3.5 Anti-pluralism as common brand core of democracy threatening parties, movements, and candidates

After concisely reviewing different concepts that are often associated with marking actors that can be a threat to democracy what can we say about their relationship to anti-pluralism? First and foremost, the review has shown that anti-pluralism, indeed, is a necessary feature in virtually all concepts in consideration. Anti-pluralism is undeniably and particularly a characteristic feature of extremism, radicalism, and fundamentalism. Anti-pluralist narratives are also inherent in populism and elitism or technocracy. Illiberalism may be the only exception among the concepts considered since the term is often used inconsistently. However, there are also indications that the rejection of pluralism can be considered an important feature of what Smilova (2022) calls democratic illiberalism. However, second anti-pluralism can be ideologically justified in different ways, by referring to different legitimization strategies. For instance, the legitimation strategy of populism comprises radical Rousseauist references. Institutions of pluralism, especially those functioning as protection against the rampant rule of majorities, are negated because they might distort the general will. Contrary, in the view of elitists and technocrats pluralism of interests and its institutionalization in democratic procedures for aggregating interests and finding compromises are undesirable, because they consider the common good as objectifiable by an elite. Religious fundamentalists justify the negation of pluralism by referring to the unchangeable and divine will that only must be interpreted correctly, and so forth.

Against the background of these findings, I argue that anti-pluralism can be a useful concept when we want to identify potential would-be autocratizers. The negation

of pluralism is a feature of different ideologies that are at least under suspicion of representing a threat to democracy. Consequently, when referring to anti-pluralism as a marker, we run less risk of overlooking problematic actors than if we only consider populists, for example. The disadvantage of using anti-pluralism as an analytical category compared to, for example, distinct ideologies is the great loss of information that is associated with it. Anti-pluralism is ideologically justified in different ways and the ideologies considered comprise more than only anti-pluralism. The different justifications for anti-pluralism can, for example, play a role if we want to ask what kind of political system an actor might consider to be ideal. This is one limitation we should be very aware of when referring to anti-pluralism as an analytical concept. A second important caveat is associated with the conceptualization of pluralism and anti-pluralism constituting a continuum. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we could observe a temporary shift in decision-making to the executive branch in many democracies (see Merkel 2023, p. 217). This was justified in a quasi-technocratic way, arguing that quick and evidence-based decisions were now necessary to gain the common good (low number of deaths). Does this already indicate a high enough degree of anti-pluralism to be concerned about democratic backsliding? Some would argue that this can be dismissed as a special crisis mode, which, for example in Germany, was democratically legitimized by parliamentary resolutions and that this kind of anti-pluralism could also have had its merits in the form of more effective government action in an emergency. The question then arises as to whether it can always be determined exactly at what point anti-pluralism inevitably becomes a serious problem for democracy. This is an issue that we ultimately also must take into account when thinking about operationalizing measurements of anti-pluralism.

## 4 Conclusion

In this contribution, I have attempted to give stronger conceptual contours to the recently (re)emerged term of anti-pluralism. I show that anti-pluralism bears genuine anti-democratic characteristics as it negates the benefits of societal diversity and thereby also the functional and normative necessity, purpose, and merit of pluralism as a structuring principle of (liberal-representative) democracy. Instead, anti-pluralism is based on the belief that homogeneity and unity are preferable to diversity and pluralism. Furthermore, I demonstrated that anti-pluralism is *one* characteristic of every ideology considered dangerous or hostile to democracy. Thus, the results of this study suggest that all actors who are anti-pluralists pose a threat to democracy. However, we can imagine actors who are not necessarily anti-pluralists, but might nevertheless be open to damaging democratic institutions, for example, to enrich themselves economically (e.g. through corruption). Hence, I conclude that *anti-pluralism is not a necessary but sufficient indicator* for identifying actors threatening democracy. The advantage of using anti-pluralism as a marker consists in its extension as it covers very different actors posing a threat to democracy—for example, extremists, fundamentalists, and (technocratic-)populists—without falling into conceptual stretching. However, since the narratives of how anti-pluralism is

being legitimized differ significantly between ideologies, and the respective ideologies comprise more than only the negation of pluralism, applying anti-pluralism as an analytical concept is also associated with strict limitations. For instance, to derive hypotheses about the kind of political system anti-pluralist actors and parties will aspire to, we will still require information about the thicker ideologies they subscribe to.

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