

From latest buzzword to conceptual framework: Unraveling the complexities of democratic resilience

Kevin Walz  · Lion Merten · Matthias Rosenthal · Jana Niedringhaus ·
Johannes Helgest

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Abstract Resilience makes its debut in an increasing number of research areas, most recently also in democracy research. Even though progress has been made in conceptualizing democratic resilience, the concept still appears to be rather diffuse and underdeveloped. We address these shortcomings by (re-)conceptualizing democratic resilience through the lens of Gerring and Christensons’s criteria of conceptual goodness with a special focus on *resonance*, *internal coherence*, *external differentiation*, and *theoretical utility*. We argue that democratic resilience is best understood as a capacity that stems from various resources at different system levels. Drawing on these resources, the resilience capacity provides the democratic system with certain abilities that enable democratic actors to apply concrete strategies to deal with stressors. In doing so, the resilience capacity ultimately operates as a moderator in the stressors-processing that make certain outcomes more or less likely. We contribute to the existing literature by systematically strengthening the concept of democratic resilience and distinguishing it from neighbouring concepts like consolidation. We conclude with a brief outlook on how the developed conceptualization of democratic resilience could contribute to systemizing and advancing empirical research on the decline and survival of democracies in the future.

Keywords Democracy · Democratic Resilience · Democratic Backsliding · Autocratization · Consolidation

✉ Kevin Walz · Lion Merten · Matthias Rosenthal
Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Mainz, Germany
E-Mail: kwalz@uni-mainz.de

Jana Niedringhaus
Department of Business and Economics, Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Mainz, Germany

Johannes Helgest
Department of Sociology, Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Mainz, Germany

Zusammenfassung Resilienz hält in immer mehr Forschungsbereichen Einzug, zuletzt auch in der Demokratieforschung. Obwohl bei der Konzeptualisierung von demokratischer Resilienz Fortschritte erzielt wurden, ist das Konzept immer noch recht diffus und unterentwickelt. Wir adressieren diese Defizite, indem wir demokratische Resilienz anhand von Gerrings und Christensons Kriterien für konzeptionelle Güte mit besonderem Fokus auf *resonance*, *internal coherence*, *external differentiation* und *theoretical utility* (re-)konzeptualisieren. Wir argumentieren, dass demokratische Resilienz am besten als eine Kapazität zu verstehen ist, die sich aus verschiedenen Ressourcen auf unterschiedlichen Systemebenen ergibt. Auf der Grundlage dieser Ressourcen verleiht die Resilienzkapazität dem demokratischen System bestimmte Fähigkeiten, die es demokratischen Akteuren ermöglichen, konkrete Strategien zur Bewältigung von Stressoren anzuwenden. Auf diese Weise fungiert die Resilienzkapazität letztlich als Moderator bei der Verarbeitung von Stressoren, die bestimmte Ergebnisse mehr oder weniger wahrscheinlich machen. Wir leisten einen Beitrag zur bestehenden Literatur, indem wir das Konzept der demokratischen Resilienz systematisch stärken und es von benachbarten Konzepten wie Konsolidierung abgrenzen. Wir schließen mit einem kurzen Ausblick darauf, wie die entwickelte Konzeptualisierung demokratischer Resilienz dazu beitragen könnte, die empirische Forschung zum Niedergang und Überleben von Demokratien in Zukunft zu systematisieren und voranzutreiben.

Schlüsselwörter Demokratie · Demokratische Resilienz · Democratic Backsliding · Autokratisierung · Konsolidierung

1 Introduction

Resilience appears to make its debut in an increasing number of research areas inspiring some authors even to call it one of the latest buzzwords (Sisk 2017, p. 5). While the concept of resilience has predominantly been featured in environmental science and psychology, the term has recently also found its way into democracy research (Boese et al. 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Holloway and Manwaring 2022). This can be deemed particularly relevant considering the democratic backsliding in democracies around the globe as well as the increasing political clout of populist parties. So far, however, the concept of democratic resilience remains, as we will show, rather diffuse and underdeveloped as it has not yet been sufficiently conceptualized nor differentiated from other comparable concepts such as consolidation. Both aspects hinder its consistent application to democratic systems and the visibility of its usefulness for analyzing democratic persistence and decline.

We aim to address these shortcomings and strengthen resilience as an analytical concept in democracy research by applying Gerring's and Christenson's (2018) criteria of conceptual goodness. A special emphasis is placed on the criteria *resonance*,

internal coherence, *external differentiation* and as a consequence *theoretical utility*.¹ According to the criterion of *resonance*, the definition of a concept should resonate with the standard usage of the respective term in other disciplines as well as ordinary speech. The criterion of *internal coherence* states that the characteristic attributes of a concept and how they are related must be sufficiently specified. However, this can only really be fulfilled if the concept can be sufficiently differentiated from neighboring concepts, which is what the criterion of *external differentiation* captures. The *theoretical utility* of a concept refers to its theoretical and empirical applicability within the respective field of research, which often results from the fulfillment of the above-mentioned criteria.

The structure of the paper follows these criteria: Section 2 is dedicated to the *resonance* of democratic resilience as a concept which will be addressed by giving a systematic overview of how resilience is understood and used across various disciplines and, building upon that, extracting central core aspects of the concept. In section 3, we define and elaborate on democratic resilience by systematically addressing these core aspects which, in turn, strengthens the *internal coherence* of the concept of democratic resilience. Section 4 focuses on the *external differentiation* and clarifies the relationship between democratic resilience and democratic consolidation.

Our contribution lies in systematically strengthening the concept as well as its applicability. As a result, we propose a conceptual framework that highlights the reading of democratic resilience as a moderating capacity, which interacts with stressors of different kinds and intensities, based on complex actor and resource interactions on multiple system levels. The amount and kind of these resilience resources ultimately define the availability of and ability to pursue different strategies that actors can initiate to deal with upcoming stress. Different constellations of the democratic resilience and democratic stressors accordingly result in distinct outcomes for the quality and persistence of the defining meta-principles of democratic systems. As we point out, such a resonant and coherent concept of democratic resilience delivers significant additional value compared to existing lenses on democratic persistence. We therefore help to open the black box of democratic resilience and advance the discussion about the concept, which has the potential to become a valuable tool in assessing democratic survival and decline.

2 Charting the terrain: defining aspects of resilience and its state of the art in democracy research

Especially when a concept is used in several disciplines, as in the case of resilience, finding common ground in terms of characterizing and defining it is highly important

¹ The criterion of *consistency* considers if the meaning of a concept is consistently used throughout a study (Gerring and Christenson 2018). Therefore, this criterion focuses on the application of a concept rather than the concept formation, which is why this criterion will not receive any attention in this paper. However, we do believe that our paper will contribute to future studies being able to meet the criterion of *consistency*, as we aim to address the remaining criteria of conceptual goodness and thereby improve the applicability of the concept of democratic resilience.

to meet the criterion of *resonance* (Gerring and Christenson 2018, p. 32). We aim to improve the *resonance* of resilience as a concept applied to democratic regimes by, first, identifying central characterizing aspects of the concept across disciplines that inevitably need to be clarified to gain a comprehensive and clear understanding of the term. Second, we systematically elaborate on these aspects when transferring the term to the resilience of democracies. To do so, we discuss how well its usage in democracy research addresses the identified aspects building upon a systematic review by Holloway and Manwaring (2022) who have examined contributions in democracy research related to resilience.² Thereby, we can identify weaknesses in the usage of the term in democracy research and highlight how the concept can be improved by relying on its *resonance* with interdisciplinary perspectives on resilience.

2.1 Core aspects of resilience across disciplines

The term resilience is used in many scientific disciplines such as ecology (see e.g., Folke et al. 2010; Harrison 1979; Bodin and Wiman 2004), psychology (see e.g., Pan and Chan 2007; Wu et al. 2013), economics (see e.g., Martin and Sunley 2015; Kennedy and Linnenluecke 2022), as well as sociology (see e.g., Endress 2015; Schafer et al. 2009) and political science (see e.g., Holloway and Manwaring 2022; Bourbeau 2018). Despite the variety of conceptualizations and definitions, we identify six core aspects that we derive from the application of the term across various fields. In our view, these aspects constitute the essential elements of the term resilience that all disciplines somehow address, even though they might differ in how these elements concretely look. In this section, we briefly describe these core aspects that must be clarified to achieve a clear and comprehensive understanding of the concept, namely: (1) resilience ‘*of what*’, (2) resilience ‘*to what*’, (3) possible *readings* of resilience, (4) *resources* and (5) *levels* of resilience, and (6) *abilities* provided by resilience.

The first two aspects that need to be clarified are (1) resilience ‘*of what*’ and (2) ‘*to what*’ (Walker et al. 2002, p. 7). Although the former depends on the respective field and object of research (e.g., an individual in psychology), it is a necessary prerequisite for studying a system’s resilience to define its characteristic features and, hence, to specify what ultimately needs to remain unaltered in order to be resilient. Otherwise, it is difficult to evaluate whether a system has been resilient or not. The latter is often linked to an event, stressor, or external shock challenging a system’s persistence. Since a system can only prove to be resilient vis-à-vis a stressor, it is important to determine what kind of threat endangers it because its response—and ultimately its resilience—depends on it (Somers 2009, p. 13).

Reviewing existing understandings reveals (3) three possible *readings* of resilience (Southwick et al. 2014, p. 2): First, resilience is thought of as a dispositional feature or capacity that enables or helps a system to deal with upcoming

² We do not claim to conduct a comprehensive review of the existing literature across different disciplines, as this is not the main intention of this paper and would be beyond its scope. Moreover, such overviews already exist (Holloway and Manwaring 2022).

stress (Duchek 2020; Pan and Chan 2007, p. 164f.). Second, resilience can be interpreted as the process of handling stressors (Egeland et al. 1993). In psychology, for example, both readings are distinguished: resilience as a “human ability or capacity to bounce back from, overcome, survive, or successfully adapt to a variety of adverse, or major or multiple life stresses” on the one hand, and resilience as a “dynamic process of positive or successful adaptation despite the experience of adversity, trauma, threats, or stressful life events” on the other hand (Pan and Chan 2007, p. 164f.). Thirdly, resilience is used to describe an outcome, for instance, a system that has successfully overcome exposure to stressors and, thus, has proven to be resilient (Soucek et al. 2016, p. 133). While clearly distinguishing these perspectives might be difficult due to interdependences, stating and reflecting on the applied reading is crucial to contribute to the comprehensibility of the term.

To open the black box and better understand the phenomenon of resilience, and to make the concept empirically applicable, it is essential to identify possible sources of resilience. In this context, scholars across disciplines refer to (4) various *resources* that ultimately constitute a system’s overall resilience (Sleijpen et al. 2016, p. 9ff.; Adger et al. 2011, p. 763f.). According to Wilson, resources (or what he calls components) are interdependent which implies that the system’s overall resilience is strong if all resilience resources are well developed and weakened if one resource is disrupted (Wilson 2012b, p. 1223). Depending on the system, resources can be embedded on (5) different *levels*. In psychology, for example, a child dealing with stress can benefit from resilience resources on various levels, such as the child itself, the child’s family, school and sports clubs, the broader community, and society as a whole (Masten 2007, p. 924–926; Vella and Pai 2019, p. 237). Levels interact with each other as well, and one level’s resilience resources can be influenced by stressors on another level (Walker et al. 2004, p. 3). Levels can vary in (a) their amount of resilience resources and (b) the resilience resources can vary in the kind of stressors they are resilient against meaning that one level could increase the overall resilience against a particular stressor whereas another level could increase vulnerability to this stressor (Wilson 2012a, p. 34ff.; Stollenwerk et al. 2021, p. 1223; Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 6). In light of the previous considerations, resilience can be considered a spectrum with resilience being on the one and vulnerability on the other end (Wilson 2012a, p. 20; Figs. 1, 2).

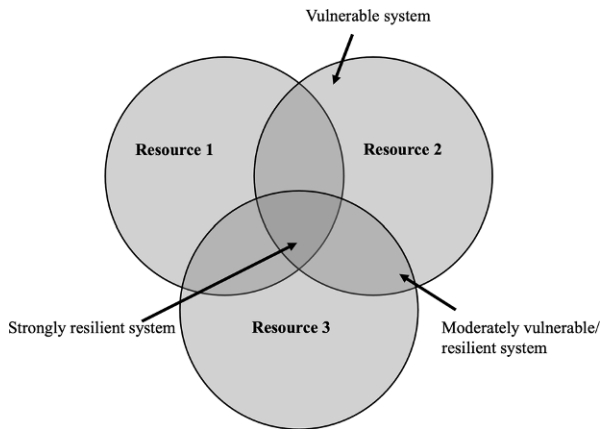
Lastly, high resilience is suggested to be expressed in (6) certain *abilities* to successfully process upcoming stress, for example by adapting, withstanding, absorbing, and bouncing back. Due to these abilities, a system is able to uphold its defining characteristics without falling below its breakdown threshold (Walker et al. 2004, p. 6). However, the collection and naming of these abilities varies greatly between as well as within disciplines which makes it inevitable to specify the understanding and role of these abilities within a concrete concept.³

³ For instance, while Pike et al. (2010, p. 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, p. 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.

Fig. 1 Resilience and vulnerability as opposite ends of a spectrum. Own figure (based on Wilson 2012b: p. 1221)



Fig. 2 Resilience and various resources. Own figure (based on Wilson 2012b, p. 1223)



2.2 Resilience in democracy research

While resilience is an established concept in fields like ecology and psychology, the term has recently gained momentum in democracy research as well which is especially linked to events of democratic backsliding and challenging of long-standing (political) institutions. These developments not only threaten the functioning of a democracy but also pose the question of whether and how democratic regimes can obtain and maintain resilience. Even though seminal contributions like the ones of Boese et al. (2021) and Merkel and Lührmann (2021) have considerably advanced the field, a proper and well-developed conceptualization of resilience is still lagging in democracy research (Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 69). Since “there is seemingly not a problem facing democracies to which a democratic resilience lens cannot be applied” (Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 78), democracy research could benefit from further advancements in the concept. However, several of the derived core aspects remain unaddressed and unclarified in the case of democratic resilience which impairs the criterion of *resonance*.

Starting with (1) resilience ‘*of what*’, we see the necessity to clarify the applied understanding of what constitutes a democracy. Existing conceptualizations of democratic resilience often neglect that democracy, and hence a system’s defining characteristics that need to be resilient, are somewhat contested (Skaaning 2021). Theoretical approaches to the concept should actively incorporate this problem by highlighting their chosen definition of a democratic system since, as we will show below, the definition ultimately affects what phenomena are considered in the context of a system’s resilience.

When it comes to the aspect (2) resilience ‘*to what*’, scholars identify both a “general deterioration in democratic conditions, as well as [...] specific threats—where

specific threats can disrupt either individual components or the entirety of the democratic system” (Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 78). Constituting the narrow majority of contributions reviewed by Holloway and Manwaring (2022), the former refers to democratic breakdown and episodes of autocratization. The rest deals with specific threats such as populism (Guasti 2020) or polarization (McCoy et al. 2018). However, even when analyzing general deteriorations, there always needs to be a stressor involved since (a) democracies do not die by coincidence (see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann 2021) and, as stated above, (b) resilience becomes directly observable only vis-à-vis stressors. Even if scholars do not specifically identify one, there must be a stressor at work (Holloway and Manwaring 2022). Moreover, resilience resources and, thus, the system’s overall resilience can be to some extent stressor-specific in a way that a system might be resilient against one, but more vulnerable towards another stressor. Hence, as an integral aspect of any conceptualization of democratic resilience, the concrete constellation of threats must be described.

Largely overlooked even by comprehensive literature reviews (Holloway and Manwaring 2022), existing contributions on democratic resilience almost never elucidate the applied (3) *reading* of resilience which neglects the importance of specifying “whether resilience is being viewed as a trait, a process, or an outcome” (Southwick et al. 2014, p. 2). Yet, as we show below, this comes along with significant consequences for the *internal coherence* and *theoretical utility* of previous conceptualizations, as the applied reading is instructive for the general theorization and empirical application of democratic resilience.

Regarding (4) *resources* and (5) *levels* of resilience, also Holloway and Manwaring (2022, p. 80f.) identify a need for improvement. According to them, levels of resilience (what they refer to as *scale*) are currently only implicitly discussed in most contributions on democratic resilience, which is a gap that needs to be addressed in a further concretization of the concept. At the same time, they pick up the idea of sources of democratic resilience on various levels by mentioning sources on the macro-, meso- as well as micro-level (Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 81f.). However, once more they see potential for improvement since identifying the sources of democratic resilience is (a) a promising starting point for operationalization and measurement and (b) a fundamental prerequisite for an enhanced understanding of what constitutes democratic resilience (Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 76).

Holloway and Manwaring (2022, p. 79f.) also address the aspect of (6) *abilities* (what they call *form*) and distinguish the reviewed contributions into those that focus on either maintenance (stability and recovery), marginality (adaption and innovation), or transformation. Two issues occur: On the one hand, equating resilience with maintenance is dominating in the literature on democratic resilience. However, concentrating mainly on maintenance bears the question of why the concept of resilience is chosen over more established ones, such as democratic consolidation. This emphasizes the need for further improvement of *internal coherence* as well as *external differentiation* (Holloway and Manwaring 2022, p. 80). On the other hand,

similar to the literature on resilience in general, the collection and naming of these abilities varies which hinders a consistent application within the field.⁴

In sum, this section reveals that the conceptualization of resilience is lagging in democracy research compared to other disciplines since both the *resonance* and the *internal coherence* of existing approaches require further advancements. Many aspects of the concept remain diffuse, are often under-conceptualized, and are only implicitly discussed. In the following section, we will use the above-derived core aspects of resilience (1)–(6) to extend upon previous approaches and strengthen both its *resonance* as well as its *internal coherence*. As our review has also shown, existing conceptions of democratic resilience largely ignore the criterion of *external differentiation*, especially concerning already established concepts like democratic consolidation. Thus, a second step consists of a concise comparison of both concepts (section 4). This allows us to highlight the added value of introducing democratic resilience into the study of democratic persistence and decline.

3 Democratic resilience: a definition and its implications

Building upon the outlined understandings of resilience across different disciplines as well as the conceptualization by Merkel and Lührmann (2021), we define democratic resilience as a democratic system's capacity to prevent, cope with (either by withstanding or adapting) or recover from stressors challenging democratic quality and persistence without losing its democratic character.⁵ This definition has four main implications that require explanation in more detail: maintenance of the democratic character (section 3.1); stressors as a challenge and threat to democracy (section 3.2); resilience as a stressor-processing capacity (section 3.3) and resilience capacity as a moderator that make certain scenarios and outcomes of the stressor-processing more or less likely (section 3.4). In doing so, we systematically address the general aspects of resilience that we identified across disciplines: (1) resilience of what, (2) resilience to what, (3) three possible readings of resilience, (4) constituting resources and (5) levels of resilience, and (6) abilities provided by resilience.

3.1 Resilience of what? Maintenance of the democratic character

By further elaborating on the term 'democratic character', we specify what exactly needs to be resilient and, hence, address the question resilience 'of what'. 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 representing the defining core and substance of

⁴ In contrast to Holloway and Manwaring (2022), Sisk (2017, p. 5), for instance, uses the terms flexibility (ability to absorb stress or pressure); recovery (ability to overcome challenges or crises); adaptation (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).

⁵ We include resilience against declines in democratic quality (persistence in degree) as well as against democratic breakdown (persistence in kind) in our understanding of democratic resilience, mirroring the differentiation between "onset-" and "breakdown"-resilience in an article by Boese et al. (2021).

a democratic system (similar to Merkel and Lührmann 2021, p. 872). While concrete institutions might change, the crucial point is that these meta-principles of democracy remain intact. This is essential because there might exist some institutional components that—under certain circumstances—do not necessarily contribute to (or even prove to be dangerous for) the resilience of the democratic meta-principles, even though they once might have had some importance in this regard. One striking example of this scenario is the filibuster in the U.S. Senate. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, p. 74f.), (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 conditions “they could easily lead to gridlock and conflict” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 74f.) hindering the democratic process. Against this background, modifications to the filibuster would not necessarily represent a dismantling of the democratic character.

This perspective comes with the necessity to specify the benchmarks for a political system to qualify as democratic. However, democracy remains a “contested concept” (Skaaning 2021) and there are many different conceptions of democracy complementing and competing (see Held 2006). Accordingly, existing approaches to democratic resilience have argued for a variety of conceptions that can or should be applied to what we call the democratic character. McSwiney et al. (2024) apply the normative theory of deliberative democracy to their proposed framework. As a result, communicative space and public discourse become the central reference for democratic resilience. Contrary, Volacu and Aligica (2023, p. 631) plead for applying minimalist conceptions of democracy “to avoid getting bogged down in the classical controversies surrounding the ‘best’ model of democracy.” This results in a focus of their conception of democratic resilience on the dependence of political decision-making power on electoral competition for representative offices. We agree with Volacu and Aligica (2023) in advocating for a rather minimal approach, as this can prevent democratic quality and resilience capacity from becoming analytically confused. This can be the case, for example, when applying liberal conceptions of democracy which regard judicial independence as part of the democratic core. At the same time, judicial independence and the rule of law can also be considered as prerequisite of important protective mechanisms that democratic actors and institutions can apply in the face of democratic erosion (horizontal accountability) and, thus as important resilience resources. However, the conception of democracy applied should also not be too thin. Minimalist conceptions proposed by Schumpeter (1994) or Przeworski (1999) might be suitable to distinguish political systems in their kind (democratic vs. non-democratic) but make it more difficult to differentiate them in their degree (cross-case and diachronous). Given this, we argue that it can be recommendable to fall back on normatively more demanding but still not too thick conceptions.

In this respect, the electoral component, as outlined in Dahl’s concept of polyarchy (1971), can be considered as lying at the heart of most conceptions of democracy (see Roller 2016; Skaaning 2021; Coppedge et al. 2020, p. 30ff.), while explicitly allowing to consider judicial independence as crucial part of a protective umbrella of the democratic core. Following Dahl (1971), participation and contestation are

the abstract meta-principles defining a democracy which are specified in six (meta-)institutions (see also Roller 2016 p. 344; Schmidt 2019, p. 204). This definition of democratic character has the advantage of being covered by well-established democracy indices (Coppedge et al. 2020) which is why it can be easily operationalized (see also Boese et al. 2021). While we do not suggest that it is necessary to apply *this* conception of democracy, we want to emphasize that it is necessary to link *any* concrete definition of democracy to the concept of resilience, as this is both an answer to the question resilience *of what* as well as a first step towards an empirical analysis. Yet, the implications of the applied understanding of democracy for the concept of resilience must be reflected and made explicit as well.

3.2 Resilience to what? Stressors as a challenge to democratic meta-principles

As elaborated in section 2, the resilience of a democratic system is mobilized and, therefore, ultimately becomes observable only vis-à-vis one or more stressors attacking its democratic character. In the end, the outcome of this interaction process depends on both the system's resilience capacity as well as the challenging stressors. To get a more comprehensive understanding of both parameters, we will briefly discuss (1) what stressors are, (2) how and in what ways they can potentially harm the democratic system, and (3) what this implies for the concept of democratic resilience.

Stressors can be considered as anything challenging or posing a threat to the quality or persistence of democratic meta-principles. Ranging from overall contextual conditions or long-term developments (like economic inequality, polarization, or globalization and modernization processes) over sudden eruptions and shocks (like economic crises, migration peaks, natural catastrophes, or pandemics) to concrete actions of certain actors (like military coups or actions by erosion agents trying to dismantle democratic principles) (IDEA 2017, p. 10ff.), they can be described and categorized along several characteristics. For instance, Merkel (2023, p. 144), distinguishes between external challenges (such as developments of globalization) on the one hand and internal challenges (like economic inequality) on the other hand. While differentiations like these may be valuable, we focus on two characteristics: the intensity and kind of stressors. As we will show below, both are essential to a fundamental application of resilience to democratic systems.

Stressors can change and evolve in their appearance as well as their threatening potential. On the one hand, according to many observers of modern-day democracies, anti-democratic actors seeking to dismantle the democratic character seem to have modified their strategy (Pirro and Stanley 2022; Scheppele 2018). Whereas previously radical upheavals like military coups marked an abrupt and visible end to democratic governance, nowadays we rather observe gradual erosion processes from within the democratic frame (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). On the other hand, stressors might smoulder under the surface for a long time being undetected and at least not obviously harmful. However, they can—without necessarily changing themselves—unfold their destructive potential when circumstances change. For example, economic inequality can exist little perceived for a long period. Nevertheless, it can turn into a severe challenge when

people develop a sense of how excessive economic asymmetries are, for instance, because an economic crisis or certain actors make them more salient and visible. As a further example can serve the before-mentioned filibuster in the U.S. Senate which initially was designed as a crucial part of the checks-and-balances system. In light of changed circumstances, however, it has been used as a tool to hinder the democratic process (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, p. 74f.). Consequently, not only the quality and extent of stressors themselves but also the interplay between stressors as well as between stressors and resilience capacity is an important factor since some stressors unfold their destructive potential only in combination with other stressors or when the resilience capacity is weak.

How can stressors harm a democratic system? On the one hand, they can attack resilience resources and, thus, lower a system's resilience capacity. As a result, this makes the system generally more vulnerable. Mirroring a lack of resilience (capacity), high levels of vulnerability can open windows of opportunity and potential targeting points for (other) stressors like anti-democratic actors (Lührmann and Rooney 2021; Lührmann 2021; Mettler et al. 2022). Being one example, high levels of economic inequality can undermine citizens' support for and perceived legitimacy of democracy as one decisive resource of a system's resilience capacity (Kriekhaus et al. 2014; Menocal 2017). This, in turn, can increase the tolerance or even acceptance of anti-democratic and authoritarian actors making it less likely that their actions are being punished by civil society (Karl 2000; Lindberg and Lundstedt 2022). On the other hand, stressors can directly attack and challenge the maintenance of democratic meta-principles. For example, economic inequality can pose a direct challenge by creating extreme asymmetries in economic resources. This can translate into discrepancies in the exercise of political power and influence over decisions which in the end undermines the ideal of political equality and, at worst, creates hegemonic tendencies (Dahl 1971, p. 82). Finally, deliberate actions of anti-democratic actors can actively and purposely seek to dismantle democratic meta-principles (Sisk 2017, p. 3; Lührmann 2021).

What do these elaborations on stressors imply for (the concept of) democratic resilience? As stressors are diverse and can evolve, they come along with different demands for the resilience of a democratic system. Hence, there can never be a one-size-fits-all resource of resilience for all threats. Rather, the resilience of a democratic system is relative to a range and a degree of potential stressors, as “[d]emocracies have different starting points and capacities to overcome such crises, and shocks are not all the same in terms of type, severity, or timing” (Tirado Castro 2023, p. 3). We argue that democratic resilience is always specific in nature and can never be seen as “general” against all kinds of stressors. For instance, accountability mechanisms might be a crucial part of a democracy's resilience capacity when the rules of the game are challenged by deliberate actions of anti-pluralists in government (see Lührmann 2021; Laebens and Lührmann 2021), whereas these are less relevant when increasing social inequality structurally undermines political equality. Instead, a system's capacity to process upcoming threats necessarily depends (1) on the quality and kind of both, the stressor(s) as well as the resilience capacity, and (2) the overall stressor-resilience-constellation capturing potential interplays between different stressors as well as between stressors and the resilience capacity.

3.3 Resilience as a capacity

Turning towards the third implication of our definition of democratic resilience, we argue that it can be best understood as a capacity; more precisely: the overall capacity of a democratic system to deal with, and process upcoming stress in a way that its persistence—both in degree (democratic quality) and kind (democracy vs. autocracy)—becomes more probable. As will be discussed within the following subsections, this stressor-processing capacity ultimately stems from various resources (e.g., accountability mechanisms, democratic support, etc.) at different levels. Drawing on these level-specific resources, the resilience capacity provides the democratic system with certain abilities that enable pro-democratic actors to apply concrete strategies to deal with stressors. While elaborating this in more detail, we aim to discuss three aspects of the concept: Firstly, concerning the three possible readings of resilience (capacity, process, or outcome), we briefly explain why we conceptualize democratic resilience primarily as a capacity. Secondly, we explain what this capacity is and where it comes from by focusing on its constituting resources. Thirdly, we elaborate on how these resilience resources enable a system to maintain its democratic character by providing it with three rather general abilities that translate into distinct processing strategies to tackle concrete stressors.

3.3.1 *Why resilience as a capacity?*

As shown in our overview of existing conceptualizations across different disciplines, resilience is either referred to as (1) a capacity, (2) a process, or (3) an outcome, resulting in three potential readings of (democratic) resilience. Keeping these readings in mind and making them explicit will improve the *internal coherence* as well as the *theoretical utility* of the concept. As stated before, democratic resilience can, in our view, be best understood as a capacity. Although we explicitly acknowledge democratic resilience also being expressed in specific processes or outcomes, these are always inherently linked to and rooted in a system's capacity to respond to challenges. A democratic system may prove to be resilient, as an outcome (through its persistence in degree and/or kind), yet this outcome always rests upon its overarching capacity to successfully deal with stressors. The system may also permit or promote certain processes or strategies to deal with stressors, but, again, the ability to activate them is rooted in its resilience capacity. This also reflects the predominant understanding in recent literature (see e.g., Boese et al. 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Holloway and Manwaring 2022), which is why we focus on resilience as a capacity.

3.3.2 *What constitutes resilience capacity? Its resources at different levels*

Given its importance in providing a democratic system with certain abilities to respond to stressors, it seems inevitable to address the question of what ultimately constitutes resilience capacity. The resilience capacity of a democratic system is ultimately reliant on level-specific resources. The amount and kind of these resilience resources define the availability of and ability to pursue different strategies to deal

with stressors. Consequently, a high amount of resilience resources results in a high level of stressor-processing capacity which offers the democratic system a larger availability of response strategies and, hence, a broader scope of action. In contrast, a lack of these resources comes along not only with a low level of resilience but also with an increasing vulnerability of the democratic system (Lührmann 2021; Mettler et al. 2022). Such an increased vulnerability might open a window of opportunity and potential targeting point for stressors (see, e.g., Lührmann and Rooney 2021).

What are these resources and where do they come from? In contrast to other conceptualizations (see Burnell and Calvert 1999; Sisk 2017; Boese et al. 2021), Merkel and Lührmann (2021, p. 872f) distinguish four constitutive levels of democratic resilience. The (1) *macro-institutional level* encompasses the main institutions (e.g., the parliament, government, and judiciary) as well as procedures (e.g., the electoral process) of a democratic regime. Resources of a system's resilience capacity can be, for instance, institutionalized accountability mechanisms. These can serve as initial bulwark against "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo 2016, p. 10ff.) by agents of democratic erosion who seek to re-design democratic institutions in their favor (Laebens and Lührmann 2021; Merkel and Lührmann 2021). Furthermore, a democratic process that is sufficiently inclusive, fair, and transparent is able to foster input legitimacy. This increases the legitimacy and ability of a democratic regime to implement collectively binding decisions to confront and deal with eminent or emerging threats as well as the acceptance of adopted policies which makes other more costly and problematic mechanisms like coercion less necessary (Easton 1965; Scharpf 1998; Stollenwerk et al. 2021).

Political parties and the party system represent the core of the (2) *intermediary level*. Here, one resource of resilience is the loyalty of political parties towards democracy and its meta-principles. In this regard, strong parties, both in government and in opposition, that are loyal to democracy boost its resilience capacity (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023, p. 40f.; Merkel 2023, p. 350). Additionally, the ability of democratic parties to represent societal interests seems to be essential. A high level of responsiveness reduces the risk of raising discontent among citizens which, in turn, makes them less likely to alienate from democratic institutions and parties (see Schäfer and Zürn 2020; Lührmann 2021, p. 1021). At the same time, this diminishes the probability of anti-democratic or illiberal parties emerging and succeeding in taking office. If democratic parties lose trust among the electorate, this potentially opens windows of opportunity for anti-systemic parties (Petrarca et al. 2022).

Besides structures and organizations of the civil society, the (3) *societal level* also includes political culture and public discourse. In this case, for example, the extent of democratic culture and support (Easton 1965, 1975; Almond and Verba 1963) strengthens the immunity of a democratic system towards threats to its democratic principles. This might be expressed in widespread and deeply anchored pro-democratic values, attitudes, and behaviors of citizens as well as political elites (Merkel and Lührmann 2021), and congruent conceptions of "democracy" (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016). On the one hand, a stable consensus on democratic norms and procedures among political elites leads to fairer outcomes, also from the perspective of ordinary citizens (Merkel and Lührmann 2021). When there is a "procedural consensus" (Landwehr 2020) in place, this fosters the output legitimacy of a democratic sys-

tem and might thereby reduce the risk of electoral success for semi-loyal parties. 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).

Centering around the relationship between individuals and groups, the level of (4) the *political community* captures (latent) feelings of belonging and identity (see also Merkel 2023, p. 346 ff). One crucial resource of resilience capacity at this level is the extent of social trust as this promotes the ability and willingness of societal actors to cooperate. Especially in the face of emerging or present threats to democratic institutions, trust helps to overcome collective action problems and, thus, enables effective governance (Stollenwerk et al. 2021). At the same time, social trust has a decisive impact on the (perceived) extent of societal conflict and affective polarization as, for instance, the latter is fed on and expressed in the tendency to "dislike and distrust one another" (Druckman and Levendusky 2019, p. 114). High levels of societal conflict may also compromise the political elites' ability to play by the constitutional rules of democratic systems. If this conflict reaches a certain level of severity, it may foster the willingness to question established procedures to reach political goals (Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Stollenwerk et al. 2021), leading to lower levels of resilience.

Certainly, the dividing lines of these levels are not clear-cut. Indeed, resilience resources on multiple levels might interact in numerous complex relationships with each other (Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Volacu and Aligica 2023, p. 634). Especially two potential scenarios for this interaction seem plausible: On the one hand, if the resilience resources on one level are weak, the overall resilience capacity might be more vulnerable to potential threats as important 'lines of defense' are missing. An example of this could be that widespread discontent and, as a result, crumbling democratic support create a lack of resilience resources at the societal level. Possibly coming along with little support for established democratic parties, low turnout rates, and low efforts to punish anti-democratic behavior, this could open a window of opportunity for anti-democratic parties to gain political relevance and become established actors in the political competition which, in turn, normalizes anti-democratic forces and increases their chance to take over government offices. On the other hand, however, a lack of resilience resources on one level could be compensated by resources on another level. For instance, an anti-democratic party could try to hijack the political discourse and harm the political process. While other actors on the macro-institutional and intermediary level are not able to prevent this (e.g., due to a lack of loyalty to democratic principles), a high degree of resilience resources at the societal level can compensate this by punishing the actions of the anti-democratic party through mass protests or in the next election (see Guasti 2020, p. 57; Laebens and Lührmann 2021, p. 912).

Summing up the previous paragraphs, Table 1 provides a cursory overview of the constitutive levels and level-specific resilience resources as well as the relevant actors (inter)acting at different levels. While not claiming any completeness at this stage, this systematic differentiation nonetheless offers added value compared to existing listings. Firstly, we not only describe the various levels and give examples for concrete resources but explicitly point to potential overlaps and interactions between

Table 1 Levels based on Merkel and Lührmann (2021). Main actors are our own elaborations

Level	What does the level encompass?	What are level-specific resources of the resilience capacity?	Who are the main actors?
Macro-institutional	Constitutional branches and institutions	Dominant institutional configurations (e.g., majoritarian vs. consociational)	Members of ...
	Fundamental rules of the political process	Institutionalized vertical and horizontal accountability-mechanisms	... parliament
	...	...	... government
			... judiciary
Intermediary	Political parties	Extent of ...	Political parties and elites
	Party-system	... democratic orientations of political elites and parties	Political associations
	...	... political responsiveness	...
		... affective polarization among political elites and parties	
Societal	Civil societal actors and organizations	Extent of ...	Political parties and elites
	Political culture	... institutionalization of civil society	Political associations
	Public discourses and processes	... general and specific democratic support	Civil societal actors and organizations
	...	... inclusiveness and quality of public discourses and processes	Media
Political Community	Feelings of belonging	Extent of ...	Citizens
	Identity narratives	... social trust	...
	...	... social cohesion	
		... inclusive identity narratives	

these levels. Secondly, we identify relevant actors at each level and emphasize their importance for (1) the mentioned interactions and overlaps between the levels (see e.g., political parties). Building upon the given resources of resilience capacity, these actors (2) ultimately represent the driving forces who initiate certain strategies to prevent harm to the democratic meta-principles. Thirdly, we stress that when applying democratic resilience as an analytical concept, we must not consider the four levels as hermetically separated from each other. This does not mean that one cannot focus on a specific level or a distinct resource of resilience capacity. Rather the overall constellation of resources has to be taken into account, vis-à-vis the stress a democratic system faces in a given situation.

3.3.3 How can resilience capacity help to process stressors? Providing abilities and enabling strategies

The last and still unaddressed of our identified core aspects is the one of resilience abilities. While looking at medium- and long-term outcomes gives insight into the overall resilience at the macro-level, it provides little to no information about the processes linking a system's resilience capacity and these outcomes. However, when obtaining an analytical concept that allows for a more nuanced analysis of democratic resilience and thereby improves its *theoretical utility*, we need to understand *how* a democratic system, building upon its capacity and its constituting resources, can process stressors. Resilience abilities play a crucial role in filling this gap: We argue that resilience capacity provides the democratic system with certain abilities that can be expressed in applying certain strategies to deal with challenging stressors. In doing so, these abilities and strategies constitute a valuable and insightful link between resources and outcomes, as their amount and kind help to create more favorable conditions to successfully prevent any harm to a system's democratic quality. In the following, we will have a closer look at the abilities to withstand, to adapt, and to recover as well as the strategies which are associated with each ability (absorption, adaption, innovation, and rebuilding).

As shown before, both the literature in democracy research and in other disciplines have repeatedly referred to the three rather general abilities to withstand, to adapt, and to recover. Importantly, not all abilities are required for a democratic system to be resilient, though more than one ability may be at work (Merkel and Lührmann 2021, p. 872). Yet, these rather generic resilience abilities are used as bin categories for a variety of complex and interacting strategies. We argue that the abilities to withstand, to adapt, and to recover translate into distinct processing strategies in the face of specific stressors, namely: absorption, adaption, innovation, and rebuilding.⁶ However, these strategies do not always simply run automatically but must be triggered, enhanced, accompanied, and supported by relevant actors at the various levels (see example in section 3.3.2). Table 2 systematically structures some of the different terms used in the context of describing reactions of a democratic system to upcoming threats by distinguishing between abilities and the underlying strategies. Based on this systematization, we describe one by one the strategies in which the different abilities can find expression and illustrate them with empirical examples we consider as ideal-typical.

Starting with the first column, the ability to withstand means that a system successfully deals with a certain stressor without major changes. We consider *absorption* as the strategy in which this ability is expressed. The term absorption describes prob-

⁶ Some authors use the term flexibility in the context of democratic resilience (see e.g., Sisk 2017). However, its contours are often fuzzy because it remains unclear whether it is meant to denote an ability, a capacity, or something different. We argue that flexibility is best understood as a component of several abilities and can generally be divided into two components: (1) flexibility within a given structure; and (2) flexibility to leave said structure, which allows for a fundamental change beyond the current system. We regard flexibility as an unspecific collective term that carries the danger of conceptual stretching. We therefore consider the tripartite distinction of different abilities (withstand, adapt, and recover) presented above to be more adequate.

Table 2 The first row is based on Merkel and Lührmann (2021) which captures possible reactions and consequently certain abilities a system can have to be resilient. The second row of the table is related to Sisk (2017), who identified four properties of systems, which we frame as the underlying strategies.

Ability ...	... to withstand (without major changes)	... to adapt (through internal changes)	... to recover ¹ (after initial damage or disorder)	
Strategy	<i>Absorption</i> ² (within existing framework)	<i>Adaption</i> (within existing framework)	<i>Innovation</i> (outside existing framework)	<i>Rebuilding</i>
Example	Triggering accountability mechanisms in backsliding countries (e.g., in Slovenia)	Reform of New Zealand's electoral system	Implementation of Deliberative mini-publics and Citizens' Assemblies	Regaining democratic institutions after a backsliding episode (e.g. in Slovenia)

¹ In the literature about (democratic) resilience, scholars often talk about the ability to bounce back (see e.g., section 2), which reflects the inconsistent naming convention.

² Sisk (2017, p. 5) would regard this ability as flexibility since his definition explicitly refers to the "ability to absorb stress or pressure."

lem-processing and -solving strategies that do not require any major changes and leave the basic systemic framework unchanged. The most obvious examples of this are vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms in the face of governmental actors trying to hollow out democratic principles and institutions. As research has shown, those strategies must be successfully triggered and supported by actors like the parliamentary and civil societal opposition or a still-independent judiciary. Often mass mobilization and defenders of democracy publicly rallying around the flag is crucial in these contexts (see Laebens and Lührmann 2021; Gamboa 2022; Tomini et al. 2023). For example, in 2022, Janez Janša was voted out of office as prime minister of Slovenia after years of continually attacking and undermining the country's democratic institutions. Janša's ouster was favored by widespread protests against his government, resistance from the parliamentary opposition, and the democratic-loyal behavior of the still sufficiently independent judiciary. Electoral defeat then was 'only' the ultimate trigger for stopping Janša from further damaging Slovenia's democracy (Wiebrecht et al. 2023, p. 785f).

Adapting refers to deliberately changing the existing systemic framework from within to better deal with certain stressors that the democratic regime faces. Here we differentiate between two types of strategies: *adaption* and *innovation*. Whereas adaption only includes changes within the existing framework, innovation means changes beyond this scope including the implementation of institutions and practices that had not existed in the system before (see Elstub and Escobar 2019, p. 11). *Adaption* can be found in the 1993 reform of New Zealand's electoral system. The previous pure first-past-the-post system had led to a series of growingly irresponsible governments which, faced with economic decline, provoked increasing levels of political discontent and party dealignment. To counter these negative developments, actors both from within the political system as well as civil society proposed a more proportional mixed-member system, which was later endorsed by a national referendum (Vowles 1995). In this case, adapting the electoral system through a process of

democratic reform resolved a challenging situation in which the previous first-past-the-post system produced outcomes that threatened the functioning of the democratic process and raised discontent. The introduction of participatory processes, such as direct democratic decision-making, citizen budgeting platforms, or deliberative mini-publics, can be seen as examples of democratic *innovation* (Harris 2019, p. 45). They depict the implementation of democratic procedures formerly alien to the political system, aimed at increasing the uptake of political preferences into the political system, reducing possible lack of responsiveness by elites and therefore reducing democratic deficits and dissatisfaction. Several cases of the sincere institutionalization of representative citizen forums to discuss possible pathways of future policy, such as in Ireland, France, or Switzerland, are possible examples of such strategies (Geissel 2019).⁷

The third column captures the ability to recover, which is expressed in processes of *rebuilding* democratic institutions after initial damage or disorder. Since bouncing back as an outcome can be seen as an indicator of democratic resilience (see section 3.4), this is the most clearly observable expression of it. In the process of rebuilding, damaged and dysfunctional democratic institutions are repaired or replaced with intact functional equivalents. Accordingly, rebuilding does not necessarily have to but can also include elements of adaption and innovation. Moreover, rebuilding can include both, the case of failed “onset resilience” with a subsequent stabilization or regeneration of democratic quality, as well as the case of failed “breakdown resilience”, with a subsequent regeneration of the democratic character of a political system. Therein, rebuilding represents a distinct ability associated with democratic resilience, which can result in a variety of outcomes, ranging from stabilization at lower levels, recovery of previous levels, and even improvement of democratic quality (Nord et al. 2024). Let us return to the example of Slovenia to illustrate this context and the strategy of rebuilding itself. After the democratic opposition defeated Janša in parliamentary elections in the spring of 2022, the new government immediately began rehabilitating democratic institutions. This included inter alia the withdrawal of all restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, the reappraisal of injustices that occurred during the pandemic, the appointment of public prosecutors against corruption, improving government transparency on COVID-19 issues, and the legalization of same-sex marriage after the Janša government’s legislation was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court (Freedom House 2023). Furthermore, there was a reform of the media system initiated by the new government and confirmed by a referendum, according to which a new central supervisory council will be created whose members will be elected by broadcasting

⁷ We want to emphasize that democratic innovations can only be integrated into the concept of democratic resilience, as we understand it, if they do not transform the core of the democratic system. For example, if mini-publics are implemented as complements to the existing institutions and procedures of representative democracy, (e.g. to improve the responsiveness of the system and thus counteract disenchantment with politics) this can be seen as a strategy of innovation in the sense of our concept of democratic resilience. Conversely, if mini-publics are aimed to replace existing representative structures and thus to revamp the fundamental architecture of the political system, this perspective is at least questionable. Consequently, the assessment of the implementation of such innovations also depends heavily on the status quo of the political system and the choice of which conception of democracy is applied.

staff and civil society (Freedom House 2023). These and other reform processes can explain the trend reversal in the development of Slovenia's democratic quality, which has ensured that the country is considered a model of a "u-turn" (Wiebrecht et al. 2023, p. 785ff.) indicating democratic resilience.

Some implications are worth highlighting: Firstly, there exists a relationship between actors and the democratic system's overall structure. The strategies of absorption, adaption, innovation and rebuilding do not necessarily run automatically but often can and must be called upon or shaped by certain actors. This is the point at which the structure and actors come together: a resilient democratic system is characterized by (1) the general abilities and specific strategies, as well as resources inscribed in the multi-level structure and (2) actors who are willing and able to trigger certain problem-handling strategies. Consequently, we argue that deficits in one of these dimensions indicate a lower overall resilience capacity. Secondly, there are more and less institutionalized strategies of democratic resilience. While institutionalized strategies are rather automatic responses to specific stressors to the democratic system, often embedded within the system due to past learning experiences or as constitutive processes of the system itself, less institutionalized strategies consist of activated scripts, which actors have actively selected in response to a specific stressor of the democratic system. Consequently, there is a difference in how much initiation efforts and active engagement by actors is required.

In sum, resilience capacity provides the democratic system with certain abilities which are expressed in applying concrete strategies to deal with challenging stressors. Although these ideal-typical and exemplary strategies cited in each case are analytically distinguishable, they often occur together and are therefore also interrelated, contributing reciprocally to their respective success or failure. Nevertheless, the above systematization contributes to a better differentiation of resilience strategies, which also enables a more differentiated analysis of their respective success and interactions. Moreover, it becomes apparent from the cited examples that each of these strategies needs to be selected adequately to meet the challenge of the respective stressor which democracy faces. This activation, again, relies on the presence of necessary resources and cooperation of actors at multiple levels of the democratic system and is therefore not self-evident. As shown above, these insights strengthen both the *internal coherence* as well as the *theoretical utility* of the concept of democratic resilience, which ultimately can also help to improve its empirical application.

3.4 Resilience capacity as a moderator: scenarios and outcomes of the moderation

Bringing together what has been discussed so far, we understand democratic resilience as a system's capacity to process upcoming stress to preserve its democratic character. This stressor-processing capacity is rooted in resources that are located at various levels and provide the system with certain abilities to respond to upcoming stressors. Being applied in concrete strategies, these abilities allow the democratic system to form a reaction to and, thereby, deal with stressors posing a threat to its democratic character. As a consequence of the described process and as the fourth

implication of our definition, we assume that a system's resilience capacity ultimately operates as a moderator in the outlined stressors-processing by influencing the extent to which a stressor poses a threat to a democratic system's quality and persistence.

How successful and effective a democratic order is in processing stressors depends mainly on two factors: the extent and kind (1) of the resilience capacity composed by the resources and actors at different levels, and (2) of the stressor(s) (Pascu and Vintila 2020, p. 62f.; Stollenwerk et al. 2021). However, the overall contextual situation must be taken into account as well, especially with regard to the constellation of both, (different) stressors and challenges on the one hand and of the resilience capacity on the other hand. The system's resilience capacity does not only have to be sufficient in its extent, but also matching and adequate for the upcoming stressor(s) to be effective. While some strategies might prove to be an effective way of dealing with a particular challenge, every situation is unique and therefore requires a unique response from the democratic system. Thus, the specific constellation and combinations of both, stressor(s) and resilience capacity, affect the ability of a democratic system to process the challenges.

Consequently, even when a certain stressor hits (1) different democratic systems with a similar amount of overall resilience capacity simultaneously or (2) the same democratic system at different points in time, the course and outcome may vary. Due to the complexity and uniqueness of a concrete contextual setting, deterministic claims on which stressor-resilience-constellation ends up in which concrete outcome or which amount and kind of resilience resources and abilities are needed to deal with certain stressors or to achieve a specific outcome seem unrealistic. Instead, we propose that the extent and quality of resilience capacity and the concrete stressor-resilience-constellation provide more or less favorable conditions to process stressors which, in turn, create a higher or lower probability for a certain outcome. Following this idea, a certain resilience capacity can contribute to making—in a specific contextual setting—certain outcomes more or less likely. This allows to take the complex interactions between (various) stressors and the overall resilience capacity, constituted by various resilience resources and abilities, in a specific and unique context into account. Depending on the previously mentioned factors, the interaction between a system's resilience capacity and stressors can result in the following outcomes:

1. *Improvement*: The system processes stress successfully and without any loss of democratic quality and builds up new resources and strategies that might even increase democratic resilience and quality;
2. *Continuation*: The system processes the upcoming level of stress without major changes to its democratic quality;
3. *Bounce-back*: The system suffers from initial democratic damage or even breakdown but is able to stop autocratization, partially or fully recover previous levels of democratic quality, or even increase them (Merkel and Lührmann 2021; Stollenwerk et al. 2021; Nord et al. 2024);
4. *Decline*: The democratic quality declines which results from a lack of democratic onset-resilience (Boese et al. 2021). This, however, does not necessarily mean that

the system is leaving the democratic spectrum. Instead, a decline can also indicate the existence of breakdown resilience (Boese et al. 2021).

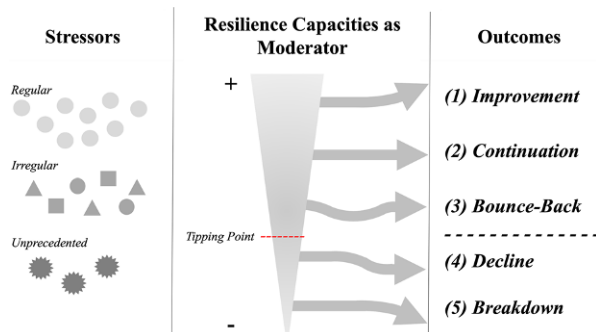
5. *Democratic breakdown*: The regime is leaving the democratic spectrum due to deficits in both, onset- and breakdown-resilience (Boese et al. 2021).

Following Stollenwerk et al. (2021), the previous insights are summarized in Fig. 3. Stressors are met by a system's resilience capacity, which moderates to what extent the stressor can affect the system. If the resources and abilities, and thus the system's stressors-processing capacity, towards a specific threat exceed or at least match the kind and intensity of stress and if the overall stressor-resilience-constellation is favorable, the system has the ability to withstand, adapt to, or recover from the exposure to the stressor without losing its democratic character (scenarios (1), (2), (3), or potentially (4)). Even if stress may hit the democratic system significantly and lead to an initial decline in its quality, the given resilience capacity can negate or mitigate the shock and may lead to a recovery of previous levels of democratic quality. If the resilience capacity does not suffice and falls below a certain "tipping point", the system may still recover even from breakdown, in a reactive use of their regenerative capacity (3). Otherwise, the system is not able to adequately process the stressors, with negative consequences for democratic quality (scenario (4)) or even its persistence (scenario (5)). A "tipping point" can be considered a threshold where the stressor(s) overpower as system's resilience capacity, which can be due to the relative size or the qualitative constellation of resources and abilities and stressor(s), or both.

4 Same-same but different? On the relationship between democratic resilience and consolidation

In the last sections, we strengthened the *internal coherence* of democratic resilience as a concept by systematically elaborating on the core aspects of resilience that we identified across disciplines. However, as Gerring (2012, p. 127) notes "[a] concept cannot be internally coherent unless it is distinguishable from other concepts." Living up to what Gerring (1999; 2012) calls the criterion of *external differentiation* requires examining democratic resilience and most similar concepts comparatively

Fig. 3 Conceptual framework on democratic resilience as a capacity (based on Stollenwerk et al. 2021, p. 1225)



for common and divergent attributes. This serves to further sharpen the boundaries of the concept as distinct from its semantic environment. A sufficient degree of *external differentiation* is achieved when the new concept unsettles “the semantic field as little as possible, leaving other concepts as they were (more or less)” (Gerring and Christenson 2018, p. 33).

The obvious and most relevant neighboring concept to democratic resilience, as we and others like Merkel and Lührmann (2021) understand it, is *democratic consolidation* (see Merkel 2023, p. 361). 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 evaluating the probability of ongoing stability or persistence of democratic regimes (see Schmitter 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996a, b; Merkel 1998; Morlino 1998; Diamond 1999). Nevertheless, the literature still lacks a sufficient discussion of the relationship between the new concept of democratic resilience and the well-established one of democratic consolidation. Addressing this issue not only promotes *external differentiation* but is also necessary to improve the *theoretical utility* and convincingly justify the necessity and usefulness of democratic resilience as a concept.

We proceed in two steps: First, we undertake a concise review of the concept of democratic consolidation. Subsequently, we comparatively discuss the concepts of democratic consolidation and democratic resilience. We argue that both concepts are not congruent to each other but that the first can be integrated into the latter since we consider degrees of democratic consolidation as an important component of the resilience capacity of a democratic system. Conversely, this means that we view democratic resilience as a broader concept, especially as it makes the processing potentials of democratic systems in the context of multiple sources of stress more explicit.

4.1 What is democratic consolidation?

Democratic consolidation is quite fundamentally defined in the literature either as a process or a result (see Morlino 2019). Consolidation as a *process* starts with democratic founding elections (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1991), or adopting a new, or revising an already existing democratic constitution (Merkel 2010, p. 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, p. 105). The process of consolidation itself can be disaggregated differently. For instance, into four stages (constitutional, representative, behavioral, and civic consolidation) that successively blend into each other as each of them generates requirements for the effectiveness of the following sequence (Merkel 2010, p. 112). Morlino (2012, p. 112f.) further distinguishes between the subprocesses of *anchoring* institutions, actors, and rules in civil society and *legitimation* in the sense that positive societal attitudes towards the democratic institutions unfold. Following those conceptions, we can abstract democratic consolidation as a “multifaceted process by which democratic structures, norms, and regime-civil society relationships are firmly established and become well embedded within society” (Morlino 2012, p. 109). The absence of politically significant anti-system or semi-

loyal parties and movements is often considered indicative of a successful process of democratic consolidation (Morlino 2019, p. 460).

In the best case, this process culminates in the genesis of a *consolidated democracy*, most prominently defined by Linz and Stepan (1996b, p. 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.’” Accordingly, this must be reflected not only on a constitutional but also on a behavioral and attitudinal level (Linz and Stepan 1996a, p. 6). Consequently, consolidation can also be understood as the *result* of successful processes of anchoring and legitimation (see Morlino 2019, p. 459). Following this conception high degrees of consolidation are associated with a higher probability that a democratic regime might persist for the foreseeable future and vice versa. Those degrees can be determined via different key indicators, for example, measures of electoral volatility, party fragmentation, or turnover in party leadership (Morlino 2012, p. 110f.).

4.2 Democratic resilience and democratic consolidation: a conceptual discussion

Conceptions of democratic consolidation are therefore fundamentally linked to similar explanatory claims that we and others also make for democratic resilience. In both cases, the aim is to explain democratic persistence or to estimate its probability over a certain period of time. The conceptual levels of democratic resilience and consolidation are also very similar, and we can assume that this is no coincidence. Merkel and Lührmann (2021), for example, may have deliberately based their conceptualization on existing ones of democratic consolidation. Nonetheless, the relationship between the two concepts remains largely underexposed in the literature. We observe only a few exceptions to this and start the comparative analysis of both concepts from these very points.

For instance, Boese et al. (2021, p. 887f.) review democratic consolidation as a fuzzy concept that is eventually based on predictions about the stability and survival of democratic regimes—or conversely, about the likelihood of an autocratic reverse. They argue that the central problem with the concept of consolidation then consists of its disability to incorporate the fact that democracies survive even before they accomplish consolidation on all levels. Likewise, the concept in this reading is not able to explain the phenomenon of decline and breakdown of already consolidated democracies (see e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Schäfer and Zürn 2020). However, Boese et al. (2021) overlook that democratic consolidation is first of all a descriptive concept. We can observe to what degree democratic principles and norms are grounded in political elites, parties, and society using various established indicators (see section 4.1). And there is evidence that consolidated democracies *indeed* break down more rarely than less or un-consolidated democracies (see Morlino 2019, p. 459). Even the results by Boese et al. (2021) indicate support for this argument. They show that a high degree of previous democratic experience (democratic stock) of a country is positively associated with onset as well as breakdown resilience. We argue that, at the very least, it cannot be ruled out that democratic stock might be a proxy for democratic consolidation, as the degree of previous democratic

experience and the degree of consolidation can be assumed to be closely related. For instance, we would consider Western European democracies overall as consolidated, and they have been fairly stable for decades. This in turn also gives them a higher democratic stock than comparatively weakly consolidated young democracies in Central Eastern Europe. Overall, the relationship between democratic resilience and consolidation remains unclear in Boese et al. (2021).

The second notable exception in the literature can be found in Merkel's (2023) contribution. He notes that both concepts allow differentiated descriptions of a status quo as well as explaining processes resulting in higher probabilities for democratic persistence—both considering the interaction and interdependencies between different structural levels and the relevant actors involved (Merkel 2023, p. 361). Going on, Merkel (2023, p. 361) argues that democratic resilience is more compatible with the current discourses on the challenges facing democracy. This is, *inter alia*, due to another point: Democratic resilience explicitly emphasizes the resistance potential of democratic regimes and focuses more on the openness of problem-solving processes and strategies than on structures (Merkel 2023, p. 361).

We have sharpened and extended a conceptualization of democratic resilience according to which certain resources at different levels shape different abilities to successfully deal with problems or challenges. However, these abilities do not lead to quasi-automated problem processing in the sense of strategies. Rather, the various relevant actors, such as constitutional institutions, parties, or civil society movements, can call on these abilities in different ways or trigger and shape corresponding processes by pursuing various strategies. The decisions of actors and coordination problems between different actors cause a certain degree of contingency regarding concrete problem processing. This contingency or functional openness is what Merkel (2023, p. 361) considers the distinguishing feature of democratic resilience. In comparison, democratic consolidation clearly emphasizes the structural determinants of the persistence of democratic systems and leaves the concrete processing of problems in the background.

At this point, we argue that it becomes clear that the two concepts should neither be seen as congruent nor as conflicting. Rather, we argue that attributes of democratic consolidation should be seen as an integral part of democratic resilience. More specifically, we view the degree of democratic consolidation as an important component of a democracy's resilience capacity. Consequently, we argue that a high degree of democratic consolidation increases the likelihood of the persistence of a democratic system in the foreseeable future because it makes successful problem-solving by democratic means more likely. Conversely, weak consolidation is likely to be associated with less effective and democratic problem-processing, as for example, semi-loyal parties that are supported by voters without a particularly strong commitment to the democratic regime override democratic principles and procedures when it seems opportune to do so. These assumptions are also in line with scholars considering *de-consolidation* as a forerunner to significant autocratization (see Ágh 2019; Foa and Mounk 2016). However, according to our conceptualization, the resources of democratic resilience comprise more than means of democratic consolidation, for instance, institutional configurations that incentivize and stabilize different kinds of actors' behaviors in dealing with challenges.

5 Conclusion

Resilience has become a popular buzzword that is used in many different disciplines including democracy research. Nevertheless, existing conceptualizations in democracy research are still lagging behind compared to other disciplines. To advance the concept of resilience applied to democratic systems, we referred to Gerring and Christenson's (2018) criteria of conceptual goodness with a special focus on *resonance*, *internal coherence* as well as *external differentiation*, which ultimately strengthens the *theoretical utility* of the concept.

To improve the *resonance* and the *internal coherence*, we identified core aspects of resilience across disciplines that we systematically addressed when applying the term to democratic systems: (1) resilience of what, (2) resilience to what, (3) three possible readings of resilience, (4) constituting resources and (5) levels of resilience, and (6) abilities provided by resilience. We define democratic resilience as a capacity to prevent, cope with or recover from stressors challenging democratic quality and persistence without losing its democratic character. This overall capacity rests upon various resources on different levels of the system as well as the actors associated with each level. Drawing on these resources, the resilience capacity provides the democratic system with certain abilities which are expressed in actors being enabled to apply concrete strategies to deal with stressors. Thus, the overall resilience capacity can moderate the extent to which this stressor poses a threat to the system. Depending on the capacity-stressor-constellation, this interaction may result in different possible outcomes, such as improvement, continuation, bounce-back, decline, or breakdown of the system. Lastly, we sharpened the *external differentiation* by explicitly relating the concept of democratic resilience to the concept of democratic consolidation showing that the former offers a comprehensive added value when analyzing the persistence and decline of democratic systems.

Despite the considerable contribution of this paper, we still acknowledge some limitations. First of all, the issue of time remains unaddressed in this paper. We are aware that the duration and frequency of exposure to stressors can play a crucial role regarding the outcome scenario. Moreover, we do not explicitly look at learning experiences of democratic systems and how these transfer into future resilience resources and capacity. We believe that both issues should be considered in further contributions. Moreover, one essential prerequisite for the (empirical) analysis of democratic resilience lies in addressing the question of how democratic resilience can be measured. Building upon our conceptualization, we argue that two complementary approaches seem to be promising: First, macro-quantitative studies could be used to investigate which resources, or configurations thereof, correlate with which resilience-indicating outcomes. Whether there are differences depending on the stressor or the intensity of exposure to it could and should also be examined. Secondly, comparative case studies could be used to investigate how the identified resource configurations contribute to abilities and strategies that ultimately lead to a resilient outcome, and how successful strategies work in detail. While we did not specifically focus on an empirical analysis, we have laid some necessary foundations by highlighting which aspects of resilience should be made explicit in research on democratic resilience and provided a deeper understanding of the different abilities

and related strategies. From our perspective, pursuing these pathways in future research appear to be a promising endeavor to obtain a more detailed and in-depth understanding of democratic survival and decline.

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