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Parliaments and Representative Democracy: Perspectives from the Past and the Present

Conference abstracts

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Session 1: Early modern concepts of representation, parliaments and democracy.

Location: Bancroft Building, David Sizer Lecture Theatre
Chair: Pasi Ihalainen

Paul Seaward (History of Parliament): Parliaments and the management of disagreement: faction, party and the structure of political argument in early modern Europe

Modernity regards parliaments as places where decisions are made, where authorised representatives agree legally binding solutions (or putative solutions) to the problems that face a modern state, generally through an adversarial process in which different options are presented and determined by vote. Yet historians have recently tended to present early modern parliaments and political assemblies as bodies that placed a high premium on consensus, and usually avoided adversarial forms of proceeding and counted voting: they have stressed that these were sites at which existing power structures were symbolically confirmed, rather than routinely challenged. To what extent should this be seen as generally true, and if so, when, and how, did it change? This paper considers some recent historiography concerning decision-making in political assemblies Britain and Europe between 1500 and 1800. In particular it assesses its relationship with the formation of political parties, and discusses the structural distinctions and transitions between the ancien regime assemblies of estates and post-revolutionary parliaments.

Keywords: Parliaments, consensus, estates, party, faction

Markku Peltonen (Helsinki): Political science and democracy in early modern Germany

The paper briefly examines comprehensive, though hitherto mostly overlooked, discussions of democracy in 17th-century Germany, where numerous authors explored democracy's key characteristics, its variegated forms and the question of how to preserve it. Most importantly, some of them defended democracy as the best form of government. The paper thus offers new perspectives on two central questions regarding the history of thinking and writing about democracy: How did democracy shed its negative associations and become regarded as a good – indeed, for some, the best – form of government, and how did democracy become understood as a system of representative government?

The discussions the paper explores took place in a newly established university discipline – political science. At the heart of them was the distinction between 'open democracy' and 'restricted democracy'. The former was a direct democracy where the citizens' assembly made the crucial decisions. The latter was an indirect democracy where the citizens elected a number of magistrates who exercised sovereignty on the citizens' behalf and therefore represented the people. Whereas 'open democracy' was generally deemed to be the worst kind of democracy and thus a particularly bad constitutional form, 'restricted democracy' was widely taken to be the best form of popular rule and a viable, sometimes even the best, form of constitution.

Keywords: democracy, political representation, the best form of government

Session 2: Changing theories and practices of representation in the Age of Revolutions.

Location: Bancroft Building, David Sizer Lecture Theatre

Chair: Paul Seaward

William Selinger (Oklahoma): William Blackstone and the turn to parliamentary sovereignty.

It has often been argued that the concept of parliamentary sovereignty emerged in the late eighteenth century in opposition to older ideas of "fundamental law" and "the original compact." This paper proposes a different history: it shows how the concept of parliamentary sovereignty developed out of these traditional ideas. The first part of the paper distinguishes three ways of thinking about fundamental law and the social contract at the turn of the eighteenth century. Each had been associated with a major author. There was the theory which vested ultimate sovereignty in the people (Locke), the theory which vested sovereignty in a limited monarch (Pufendorf), and the theory which placed it in a limited and mixed monarchy (Grotius). I will show that in eighteenth-century Britain, the third of these theories nearly always superseded the second and that rather straightforwardly, it became a theory of parliamentary sovereignty. We will see that behind this surprising transition was the importance of the House of Commons as a representative body—a body capable of truly standing in for the people. What underlay parliamentary sovereignty was parliamentary representation.

Keywords: William Blackstone, parliamentary sovereignty, representation, fundamental law, the social contract

Zachris Haaparinne (Jyväskylä): Hark, the People Speak! Wilkes, people's petitions, and the rise of scale-based reasoning, 1770—1795.

People in the twenty-first century are used to think that referring to the will of the majority is a standard way of arguing in representative politics. Though an intrinsic part of contemporary politics, the question of scale is much more complicated in historical perspective. Indeed, for most parts of the last millenium, arguments emphasising scale—whether in terms of numbers or through other discursive means—were treated with deep suspicion, even contempt. While the growing emphasis on mass-based participation and the general trends regarding the changing perceptions on representation are both widely recognised, some of their underlying tenets remain understudied. How did the emphasis on 'the many' attain the legitimate status it enjoys in modern societies? What sort of changes did the thinking on scale undergo on long term? When did the change occur, and what sort of background processes did it involve? Based on a long-term analysis of parliamentary debates, this paper argues that the breakthrough of the language of scale occurred in the aftermath of the crisis on John Wilkes' seat (1769—1770).

Keywords: representation, parliament, petitions

Joanna Innes (Oxford): Corporate vs individual representation.

Research focus: The contested emergence of the one-person one-vote basis for representation.

Approach methods: This will essentially be a think piece, based on wide reading in secondary sources, with some reference to primary sources (constitutions, laws, pamphlets). It will draw especially on work I've undertaken in relation to the current 'central and northern European' phase of the 'Re-imagining democracy' project, but also on work for other phases of the same project.

Key arguments or findings: in the literature, the emergence of a one-person one-vote basis for representation, with votes aggregated in territorial units defined with some reference to population, often seems to be taken for granted as a direction of travel. Older systems tend to be seen as archaic, destined for supersession; the development of new corporatist schemes tends to be interpreted primarily as an expression of reactionary politics aimed at preserving the power of elites. That view certainly has merit. Still, for that and sometimes other reasons, the notion that representation should take account of people's belonging to other than just territorial communities persisted through the nineteenth century, and generated many experiments with modernised corporate systems. Modern corporatism (in more than one of its senses) has of course responded to changing perceptions of need in changing political environments, but should not be entirely disconnected from that longer history. The design of democratic systems involves many choices, and how and why some and not other choices are made always deserves attention.

Keywords: representation, corporatism, individualism

Lauren Lauret (Leiden): Colonies as catalysts for change or continuity? Political representation in the Dutch Age of Revolutions.

This paper illuminates a new arena of exclusionary politics within a European metropolitan elite: returning colonial expatriates re-migrants had to work their way into the political orbit and, once in, had to adopt the required standards of behaviour. It interrogates new questions about colonial-metropole interaction. The political exchange between colonies and metropole has come to the fore in recent studies of parliamentary history across Europe. The Netherlands presents an interesting case to study this European phenomenon for two reasons. First, since the Dutch colonies were not settler colonies, repatriation was more the rule than the exception. Second, the metropolitan political system itself allowed for little change, which highlights the impact colonial re-migrants had on changing this political system.

Whereas the rise of metropolitan democracy and modern imperialism coincided, we usually associate democracy with a marked critique of colonialism. As this paper investigates, however, while experience in the colonies strengthened politicians' authority, colonial subjects complicated ideas on who could participate in politics. By looking at how returning expats interacted with democratic practices in the Netherlands, I argue that colonialism and democratic politics in the metropole reinforced one another.

Keywords: Colonialism, change vs. continuity, democracy, Dutch parliamentary history

Session 3: Experiences of lacking representation in the Age of Restoration, 1800-1860.

Location: Bancroft Building, David Sizer Lecture Theatre
Chair: Willibald Steinmetz

Morten Nordhagen Ottosen (Oslo): The case for limiting representation: The liberal political culture of capacity and limited suffrage.

“The whole world needs civic liberty”, the Bavarian first minister Maximilian von Montgelas remarked in 1817, “but how many people in a state are there who can make use of political liberty, yes even understand what it is?” Conservative though Montgelas was, his case for restricting representation was not alien to nineteenth century European liberals. This paper is concerned with the liberal political culture of limited suffrage in post-Napoleonic Europe, arguing that the liberal case for limiting representation was above all a question of individual capability and responsibility determined by capacity, usually measured by liberal standards in property, education and income. Liberals did not only fear that universal (male) suffrage and all-powerful unicameral parliaments would yield a return to the Jacobin excesses of the 1790s, but also that the masses were prone to wielding such rights to vote for conservatives and reactionaries. The events of 1848 may perhaps have proven the point, inspiring conservatives to “turn the artillery of the revolution against the revolutionaries”, as one Prussian conservative put it. Hence, limits imposed on representation – even in the most liberal parts of post-Napoleonic Europe (i.e. Norway, Sweden and Baden) – should not merely be seen as forces of reaction striving to dam up the democratic aspirations of the party of movement (let alone turning the clock back to 1789), but also of liberal ideology, through which the near-obsession with capacity also very much informed liberal concepts of the nation.

Keywords: Liberals, suffrage, representation, capacity, nationalism

Alvin Jackson (Edinburgh): Parliamentary union, representation and militancy: Ireland, 1800-1880.

This paper argues that the parliamentary and representative institutions created in 1801 with the foundation of the new United Kingdom, while relatively malleable and lasting, left deeply problematic popular legacies. The supersession of the Dublin parliament through Irish representation in the union parliament replaced one type of religiously inflected minority representation by another, and yet more constricted, form: an exclusive Irish parliament was replaced by a numerically more exclusive Irish representation at Westminster as well as the unwanted complementary burden of an established, Anglican, union church. The incomplete nature of the union of 1801 and the continuing survival of distinctive Irish institutions simultaneously created flexible political structures together with the stimulus and space for organised challenge. In addition, the new parliamentary institutions created by the union were associated with a range of imperially inflected political styles which influenced both successive British governments as well as Irish representatives. Successive governments sought to manage Ireland through advancing some interest groups while relegating others: this reflected the governance styles of other complex imperial polities, such as the Dual Monarchy. On the other hand, Irish representatives were subject

to governments which were characterised by the application of partial reinforcement, raising expectations of reform, but rarely delivering either fully or on time. In these ways, the parliamentary and other structures of the union were sufficiently malleable to permit a sustained if precarious survival; but they simultaneously fostered popular political cultures which ultimately looked to militancy as a means of redress.

Keywords: parliamentary union, Ireland, militancy

Anne Engelst Nørgaard (Norwegian University of Science and Technology): Petitioning as a means of gaining representation. Denmark and Norway c. 1820-1850.

This paper asks, «Where do the people go when parliament is not for the people?» The first half of the 19th century saw the development of representative political bodies in Norway and Denmark, in 1814 and 1834 respectively. While censitary suffrage granted a portion of the population the right to elect parliamentarians, most remained excluded from full political rights throughout the century.

In this paper, I argue that petitions served as a method for expressing political discontent among those excluded from representation in Denmark and Norway during the early 19th century. The paper is based on two separate projects examining political participation and petitioning by Danish peasants from 1830 to 1850, and the petitioning of politically excluded groups in Norway from 1790 to 1910 (with a focus on the Danish project, which is now complete).

I will explore how politically excluded groups used petitioning as a strategy to communicate with parliament and negotiate political and social rights. I contend that petitioning became the primary means of experimenting with political communication for groups with limited access to parliament and the print press. Through this, I demonstrate how petitioning became a key driver of mobilisation and organisation among groups lacking political representation.

Keywords: Representation, Petitioning, politically excluded groups, Communication between parliament and people

Jussi Kurunmäki & Jani Marjanen (Helsinki): In absence of representation: Foreign models, conceptual innovation, and the emerging public sphere in Finland.

The post-Napoleonic Europe of the Holy Alliance was a continent characterized by imperial dependencies. The political map of Europe was made of a number of units with quite different statuses, ranging from imperial powers and nation states to states within a personal union, grand duchies, Länder, provinces, principalities and so forth. Although these units usually had a recently drafted written constitution and a representative assembly of some sort, this was not always the case. In Finland, a grand duchy within the Russian empire since 1809, the Diet was not convened between 1809 and 1863. Taking the contemporary notion of the age of constitutions as the point of departure, we study how the absence of representation and written constitution was dealt with in the Finnish context. As opposed to previous research, we showcase how the emerging press in Finland wrote about representative assemblies and constitutions in other countries in Europe and beyond. An analysis of the Finnish newspaper texts shows how foreign examples provided a kind

of contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, where the lack of representation was concretely felt in Finland, but ideas of representation and constitution were still present in the domestic press.

Keywords: representation, constitution, Finland

Session 4: Emerging parliamentary democracy from the reforms of the 1860s to the First World War.

Location: GHIL Bloomsbury Square, 17 Bloomsbury Square
Chair: Henk Te Velde

Anne Heyer (Leiden): How to represent “the masses”? Discussions about mass politics in the German Reichstag and beyond, 1860-1914.

By the end of the nineteenth century, “the masses” had become essential to a new logic of political legitimacy: it was no longer the quality of political representatives but the quantity of the represented that justified power. This paper examines how the concept and practice of mass politics were debated and negotiated in the German Reichstag, asking how parliamentary actors represented, invoked, and contested “the masses” as a political category.

Building on previous work on popular assemblies (Volksversammlungen), the paper extends this line of inquiry in three directions. First, it broadens the range of political practices under consideration, examining how petitions, electoral mobilization, and other forms of mass participation generated parliamentary discussion about the role of ordinary people in politics. Second, it attends to the wider semantic field of “the masses,” exploring how appeals to the people and the nation as a whole were deployed to legitimize or delegitimize political claims. Third, it extends the analysis beyond explicitly political contexts to consider how gatherings with no inherent political purpose, including church assemblies, royal visits, and carnivals, informed parliamentary discourse about the masses and their place in public life.

In this way, these three lines of inquiry shed new light on how parliamentarians conceptualized their representative function and grappled with the growing presence of ordinary people (in large numbers) in political life, revealing the Reichstag not merely as a legislative arena but as a site where the meaning of mass politics was actively produced over time.

Keywords: Mass politics, popular assembly, Germany, 19th century, political history

Marnix Beyen (Antwerp): The compte rendu de mandat (mandate report) as a hub between citizens and députés in the French Third Republic.

In the French Third Republic, the députés were required to account annually for the way they had exercised the mandate they had received from their voters. This could be done in a written way, but in urban constituencies, those “comptes rendus de mandat” often took the form of physical meetings between the député and his constituents. They took place at central public spaces, most often schoolyards. These mandate reports have hardly been studied, partly because they left few paper traces. A precious exception are the records that the police kept of the meetings of those députés

whose activities were deemed threatening to the state's security - mainly socialists. These records not only contain a reflection of the words spoken by the député, but also a description of the interactions between the député and the constituents. As such, they enable us to catch one of those moments where the representatives of the people actually met 'the people'. On the basis mainly of these police reports, I will offer in my contribution a political anthropology of these meetings as they took place in Paris during the first decades of the twentieth century. My main question will be whether these meetings were moments when representation genuinely became a process of co-creation of political values, or whether they functioned primarily as a propagandistic tool for the député.

Keywords: representation, accountability, France, Third Republic

Karen Lauwers (Helsinki): Negotiating individual liberty in Western European parliamentary debates and petitions, turn of the 20th century.

Throughout my research on Belgian and French political cultures around the turn of the 20th century, I have approached individual liberty from a dynamic discourse-analytical rather than a legal-historical perspective. I have particularly focused on how language choice tested the boundaries of representative parliamentary work in the contexts of Belgian Chamber debates and French-Algerian petitioning practices.

In the Belgian House of Representatives, the arrival of Dutch-speaking members in the 1890s challenged a dominant Francophone culture. While speaking Dutch was a constitutional right, meta-debates about courtesy and intelligibility showed that choosing Dutch over French was a strategic gamble. Deputies had to weigh their right to represent their constituency in their native tongue against the risk of being ignored by an elite who traditionally performed such representation in a language shared by their peers in parliament.

A similar dynamic appears in French Third Republic petitioning practices. Theoretically, anyone was allowed to petition in any language regardless of citizenship status, as did Algerian Muslims, who were considered French subjects without French citizenship. In practice, however, admissibility depended on supposed "legibility" and expectations of "authenticity." A petition was either taken seriously or archived into obscurity based on deputies' subjective interpretations of vague formalities. The presence of an individual sympathetic member on the Committee of Petitions could prove decisive.

These examples showcase individual liberty, in the context of these two incomplete democracies, as a performance, operating in the gap between legal rights and social realities, where people and parliament negotiated "appropriate" political language and representation.

Keywords: language choice, Belgium, France, French-Algeria, petitions

Robert Saunders (Queen Mary University of London): ‘A War for Democracy?’ Remaking British Democracy in World War One.

The First World War was commonly understood in Britain as a war for democracy, and by the time war ended the parliamentary vote had been extended to almost all adult men and 8 million women. Yet the war posed serious challenges to British democracy. General elections were suspended, emergency powers were granted to government and democratic liberties like the reporting of Parliament and freedom of the press were frequently violated. The democracy of the pre-war era was widely blamed for failing to re-arm, and it remained to be seen whether democracy could defeat 'despotism' on the battlefield. Parliamentarism, in particular, came under assault from advocates of more personalised, populist or charismatic forms of democracy, while the Russian Revolutions opened up new ways of imagining (or fearing) a democratic future. This paper explores the recasting of democratic debate during the war, its troubled relationship with Parliamentarism, and its consequences for the post-war era.

Keywords: Democracy, War, Parliament

Session 5: Digital histories of representative democracy.

Location: GHIL Bloomsbury Square, 17 Bloomsbury Square

Chair: Christina von Hodenberg

Luke Blaxill (Oxford): Text mining and the history of representative democracies: challenges and opportunities in the age of big data.

Historians' long-standing ambivalence towards computational textual analysis has left the discipline—particularly political history—poorly prepared for the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence and large language models such as ChatGPT. The digitisation of parliamentary debates, electoral materials, and newspapers transformed the evidential landscape from scarcity to abundance over a decade ago. While data-hungry fields such as political science and computer science were quick to capitalise on these datasets, political historians largely avoided sustained methodological debate about text mining despite its transformative potential.

The paper advances three claims. First, historians failed to engage seriously with computational analysis at a moment when its methods were relatively transparent and open to scrutiny. As a result, no shared epistemological framework emerged for analysing political language at scale. Second, the rapid ascent of large language models from fringe to ubiquity has outpaced these unresolved debates. These systems can now generate fluent syntheses of political discourse, encroaching upon qualitative forms of interpretation previously untouched by computational analysis, while operating through opaque processes. Third, this shift places historians at a disadvantage: cautious but methodologically transparent text mining (often inspired by corpus linguistics) now appears pedestrian when compared to powerful “black box” tools that encourage rapid, decontextualised readings of the past. That such systems may still err is a technical problem; when they cease to do so, it becomes an existential one.

The paper argues that political historians must reassert methodological authority over the political past or risk ceding interpretive ground to amoral computational systems.

Keywords: text mining, AI

Hugo Bonin (Center for Sociological and Political Research in Paris), Pasi Ihalainen (Jyväskylä), Jani Marjanen (Helsinki) & Risto Turunen (Jyväskylä): Quantitative conceptual history of parliamentary democracy.

This presentation surveys a methodological toolkit for historians studying how democracy has been debated over time. Moving from simple to more complex text-mining approaches, we demonstrate what each method can reveal when applied to machine-readable parliamentary debates, and how computational results are best validated through targeted close reading. We begin with word-frequency analysis which can track not only change over time but also synchronicity across sources, for example, how debates on democracy rise in parallel in parliamentary and press discourse, or how similar surges appear transnationally across multiple parliaments. We then turn to co-occurrence analysis which maps the most frequent two-word combinations around the concept of interest, enabling a transparent view of what historical actors explicitly described as ‘democratic’ and how this changed, such as a late-twentieth-century shift from institution-centred formulations toward the language of democratic principles and procedures. Next, word embeddings add a broader semantic lens by modelling contextual similarity within time-sliced corpora, allowing us to trace longer-term shifts in meaning, for instance, ‘democratic’ moving closer to concepts such as legitimacy, accountability, pluralism and participation after the 1960s. Finally, we discuss how transformer-based language models open new possibilities for comparing democracy discourses at the level of individual speech acts in the shared semantic space, including cross-lingual semantic search and sense clustering. Our core argument is methodological: computational analysis is historically most useful when it locates patterns and outliers that then guide close reading. We believe this approach can scale conceptual history towards more genuinely transnational histories of democracy.

Keywords: conceptual history, text mining, democracy, parliamentary debates

Marie Puren (School of Engineering And Computer Science EPITA) & Florian Cafiero: From digitised archives to computational history: Reconstructing agenda-setting in the Third Republic. The DECIDON project.

This paper presents DECIDON, an interdisciplinary project that re-examines the functioning of parliamentary democracy under the French Third Republic (1870–1940) through the lens of agenda-setting. Its central hypothesis is that the visibility, framing, and persistence of public problems in Parliament were not solely shaped by institutional dynamics, but also by the circulation of issues between the legislative sphere and the press. The project investigates how public issues emerged, circulated, and were placed on the parliamentary agenda, assessing the extent to which media narratives influenced legislative attention and timing.

Historians have long studied the parliamentary life of the Third Republic, but most research focuses on emblematic moments. By contrast, the day-to-day shaping of the political agenda remains

understudied. DECIDON addresses this gap by analysing parliamentary debates and newspapers in parallel, enabling a systematic comparison between media discourse and legislative attention, and revisiting the foundations of agenda-setting in a long-term historical perspective. While agenda-setting theory has been widely mobilised in political science since the 1970s, it has seldom been applied to long-term historical corpora. Conversely, historical studies of the Third Republic rarely benefit from large-scale computational approaches capable of capturing both the fine-grained rhythms of parliamentary deliberation and its entanglement with the media sphere. DECIDON seeks to bridge this gap by combining digital humanities methods, natural language processing (NLP), and knowledge graph technologies in a unified research framework.

Keywords: agenda-setting, French Third Republic, parliamentary debates, press and media discourse, digital humanities

Jure Gašparič (Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana) & Adéla Gjuričová (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague): The Europeanisation of post-socialist parliaments in the light of corpus analysis: Czech and Slovene cases.

The presentation will introduce the initial findings of the ParlAge project. This international project aims to conduct a systematic, in-depth analysis of the fundamental transformations of the national parliaments of the Czech Republic and Slovenia between 1993 and 2004, i.e. the period preceding their accession to the EU. By studying this period as the “age of Europeanisation”, we can address the intertwined histories of deliberative decision-making and political representation, and explore the relationship between the EU and nation states as they are imagined, constructed and enacted in politics.

Within Europeanisation studies, national parliaments offer a unique and hitherto neglected perspective on the deep transformations occurring in the post-socialist region and Europe as a whole. We hope to gain a better understanding of the key political issues of the past that are necessary to interpret and understand the challenges that the EU is currently facing, such as the rise of previously unpopular political parties and movements, the decline of others, and the rise of EU-sceptic ideas.

The project combines historiographical analysis with digital humanities methods. This presentation will focus on the latter, demonstrating some of the principles of corpus analysis and the analytical insights that can be gained by applying it to parliamentary corpora.

Keywords: Post-socialist parliaments, Europeanisation, corpus analysis, Czech Republic, Slovenia

Session 6: Postwar Western democracies: parliamentary perspectives.

Location: GHIL Bloomsbury Square, 17 Bloomsbury Square

Chair: Jani Marjanen

Martin Conway (Oxford): The divorce of democracy and parliaments?

Parliaments – central, regional and local – were central to the rituals and practices of democracy in Western Europe after 1945. Everything about them embodied the new spirit of democracy: sober,

serious, and compromising. The heavy buildings and the arcane procedures reinforced this message. This was no platform for facile demagogy or still less direct conflict. Representatives – predominantly male and besuited – were there to work, and to construct out of their individual and party policies something larger: a considered reflection on the priorities of the country. Yet parliaments were rarely the place where democracy happened. The committees and conventions of political parties, the private cabinets of ministers, and the public platforms afforded by newspapers, radio stations, and eventually television channels, eclipsed the theatre of parliaments; and, a few set-piece occasions aside, robbed them of any substantial democratic role. The purpose of my intervention will be to reflect on the consequences of the marginalisation of parliaments for the changing practices and mentalities of democracy after 1945. Ideological debate was replaced by corporatist negotiation; the indirect role of representatives diminished by the direct communication between rulers and ruled; and the institutional power of parliaments diminished by the ambitions of legal authorities, and of a medley of regional assemblies and socio-economic councils. The purpose is not to see in these changes a strengthening or a weakening of democracy, but to track its changing currents.

Keywords: democracy, parliaments, corporatism

Pasi Ihalainen & Risto Turunen (Jyväskylä): Defining the democratic West: Cold-War semantics of parliamentary and representative democracy.

This paper analyses how ‘parliamentary’ and ‘representative democracy’ became key terms through which Western states defined themselves during the Cold War. These terms operated simultaneously as unifying labels of an anti totalitarian Western identity and as objects of ideological contestation within parliaments and between blocs. Across Britain, France and West Germany, parliamentary debates reveal divergent constitutional trajectories but shared efforts to defend a procedural model of democracy against both Communist claims to ‘people’s democracy’ and fears of democratic decline.

Britain appears as the most stable exemplar of parliamentary democracy, where the concept underpinned constitutional continuity and Cold War rhetoric, even as decolonization, executive dominance and television triggered doubts about its universal applicability and domestic responsiveness. France, by contrast, oscillated between parliamentary ideals and constitutional redesign: the unstable Fourth Republic fuelled critiques of parliamentarism, while the Gaullist Fifth Republic redefined democratic legitimacy through presidential authority, referendums and appeals to ‘direct democracy’ that hollowed out representative institutions. In West Germany, the Basic Law institutionalized a fortified model of representative parliamentary democracy designed explicitly to avoid Weimar’s collapse. Strong parties, constitutional safeguards and Western integration stabilized the system, though debates persisted over executive dominance, popular sovereignty and citizen participation.

Through additional distant reading analyses, the paper demonstrates a transnational discursive consolidation of democracy around constitutionalism, parliamentarism and anti-totalitarianism, even as national vocabularies retained distinctive ideological inflections. By the late 1960s, rising

social movements and participatory critiques exposed the limits of this postwar settlement, preparing the ground for a broader rethinking of legitimacy.

Keywords: parliamentary democracy, representative democracy, Western democracy, Cold War, conceptual history

Henk te Velde (Leiden) & Ruben Ros (Utrecht): Knowledge, Expertise and Parliamentary Democracy in the Netherlands, 1848–2022.

This paper examines the relation between knowledge, expertise, and parliamentary democracy in the Netherlands between 1848 and 2022. Rather than treating expertise as an objective resource that political actors draw upon or resist, it approaches this history through the cultural frameworks that shape how politicians understand knowledge and expertise. We situate historically evolving conceptions within broader political cultures to explain how they structured both individual parliamentary behaviour and the institutional relationship between legislative bodies and expert institutions. To trace these shifts across nearly two centuries, the paper combines close reading of parliamentary debate with distant reading methods.

The paper identifies four broad phases. In nineteenth-century liberal political culture, knowledge was primarily envisioned as a character trait of individual politicians, who exercised independent and rational judgment over matters of state — rendering recourse to outside experts largely unnecessary. The advent of mass democracy unsettled this ideal: expanded political participation and a growing state compelled politicians to draw upon external expertise, while parliamentary specialisms emerged as a distinct mode of organizing knowledge within the legislature. From the 1960s onwards, conceptions of expertise became increasingly oriented around managerial values of professionalism and efficiency. The paper concludes by connecting these phases to the recent era of "technopopulism," made visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when parliament was pulled between technocratic governance and populist rejection of expert authority.

By tracing these transformations, the paper contributes to understanding how changing cultures of knowledge have continuously redrawn the boundaries between expertise and democratic legitimacy in the Netherlands.

Keywords: parliament, knowledge, expertise, technocracy, specialism, institutional change

Session 7: The interwar crisis of parliamentarism and democracy.

Location: GHIL Bloomsbury Square, 17 Bloomsbury Square

Chair: Marnix Beyen

Jörn Leonhard (Freiburg): Challenging democracy after the Great War: Crises of parliamentary cultures and representation in comparison.

Against the background of millions of war victims, the end of the First World War saw the breakthrough of mass democracy in many post-war societies. High expectations of political and social democracy were often based on new universal references such as "national self-determination", which had been prominent both as a key concept of liberal internationalism, the

Paris Peace Conference and the League of Nations and the Bolshevik counter model of world revolution and anti-colonial emancipation. In the course of the 1920s many of these expectations turned into experiences of crisis, challenging the idea of democratic representation. The paper concentrates on a comparative study of these crises of parliamentary cultures and the meaning of representation in the course of the 1920s and early 1930s, with a particular focus on European case studies.

Keywords: First World War, post-war, mass democracy, crisis of representation

Marcus Llanque (Augsburg): Political movements and parliamentary parties: Tensions between democracy and parliamentarianism in the interwar years.

[MISSING]

Pasi Ihalainen, Risto Turunen & Milla Virolainen (Jyväskylä): Crisis of democracy as a transnational concept in interwar Europe: IPU, France and Finland.

This paper analyses how the crisis of democracy and parliamentarism was conceptualised in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and two national parliaments in 1919–39. Combining distant-reading of large parliamentary corpora with close-reading of key debates, it shows that the IPU functioned as a transnational arena where parliamentarians confronted the rise of authoritarian movements and the perceived waning legitimacy of parliamentary government. Within the IPU, the crisis was typically framed not as a failure of ‘parliamentary democracy’ as such, but as a challenge of procedure, efficiency and institutional adaptation – a reformable system rather than a collapsing one.

National cases reveal how this transnational discourse interacted with local political struggles. The French Third Republic became a central point of reference both for diagnosing the crisis and for proposing remedies. Conflicts between Communists, Socialists and the parliamentary right produced competing redefinitions of ‘democracy’, each embedding the concept within broader struggles over the Republic, parliament and universal suffrage. These contests illustrated how representation acted as the conceptual hinge binding these notions together.

Finland shows how the crisis could appear as a struggle over the very locus of legitimate popular authority. The far-right movement cast itself as the authentic voice of the people while using intimidation, kidnappings and political violence, prompting fierce parliamentary conflict over whether sovereignty lay in elected institutions or in extra-parliamentary mobilisation. Finnish debates highlight the ‘paradox of tolerance’: democratic actors defended parliamentarism while simultaneously deliberating how far civil liberties might be restricted to prevent anti-democratic forces from undermining the democratic order.

Keywords: crisis of democracy, interwar, conceptual history, Europe

Session 8: Challenges to/of political representation and populism: Theoretical and historical insights.

Location: GHIL, 17 Bloomsbury Square

Chair: Jussi Kurunmäki

Samuel Hayat (Sciences Po, CEVIPOF) Antipolitical representation: mobilizing citizens against parliamentary politics during the French Second Republic (1848-1852).

The French Second Republic (1848–1851) is often studied as a laboratory of democratic experimentation. This paper examines it as a moment when democratic actors systematically sought to reinvent political representation against parliamentary politics itself. Drawing on parliamentary archives, revolutionary periodicals, and socialist publications, it analyzes how the experience of universal male suffrage — far from settling the question of popular sovereignty — intensified antipolitical critiques of representation and generated competing projects to overcome it.

The paper identifies three distinct strategies of what it calls "antipolitical representation." First, domesticating representation: demands for imperative mandates, recall, and work-based delegation aimed at reducing representatives to mere agents of the sovereign people. Second, bypassing representation: proposals for direct government in which citizens would legislate themselves, rendering representatives superfluous, or for direct economic organization. Third, the party as anti-party: the democratic-socialist Montagne built the first modern mass party while framing it as transitional — a temporary instrument destined to dissolve once popular unity was achieved. Revolutionary communists also did so in their own insurrectional way.

These three strategies share a structural paradox: mobilizing citizens against parliamentary politics required political organization and representative claims. This paradox made democratic antipolitics vulnerable to authoritarian capture, as Bonapartism resolved the tension by combining plebiscitary appeal with the suppression of parliamentary life. The paper argues that antipolitical representation is not a pathology of democracy but a constitutive tension between popular sovereignty and its institutionalization through representative government.

Keywords: Antipolitics, citizenship, representation, direct democracy

Hugo Bonin (CRESPPA-CSU): The contingent construction of 'liberal democracy': A conceptual history (1918–2001).

This presentation explores the contested and contingent history of 'liberal democracy' as a political concept, drawing on my forthcoming book. Far from a stable or timeless ideal, 'liberal democracy' emerged as a historically constructed and strategically deployed label, consolidating only in the late 20th century. Through a conceptual history of Britain and France, I trace how the term evolved from a marginal, even oxymoronic, notion to a hegemonic normative framework—one that now structures both political discourse and academic analysis.

Focusing on parliamentary debates, intellectual controversies, and academic literature, I argue that 'liberal democracy' became a legitimating tool for increasingly technocratic and elitist governance,

obscuring its internal tensions and exclusionary origins. The concept's rise was not linear but marked by moments of crisis: postwar constitutional settlements, Cold War ideological battles, and the 1970s–80s backlash against radical democracy. By the 1990s, it had naturalized a specific fusion of liberalism and democracy, eliding their historical antagonism and presenting this synthesis as inevitable.

This analysis challenges the retrospective coherence often granted to 'liberal democracy', revealing its semantic instability and political instrumentalization. It invites reflection on how conceptual histories can illuminate both the limits of current democratic imaginaries and the possibilities for rethinking democracy beyond its liberal framing.

Keywords: Liberal democracy, conceptual history, political representation, populism, Britain, France

Alan Finlayson (University of East Anglia): Parliamentarians' representative claim in the age of the online influencer.

The function of Parliament is not restricted to formal deliberation and the passing of legislation. Debating chambers are also public arenas for the representation and performance of dispute, the formal inclusion of opposition to the government and what Laski called 'the ventilation of grievances'. In this respect Parliament is also an important 'theatre' for the performance of a national antagonistic drama and part of the history of Parliaments is (a) the effects of the recirculation of such performances to extra-Parliamentary audiences via print, radio broadcast and television and (b) the relationship of Parliament to alternative, rival, stages for the performance of opposition and the ventilation of grievance. In the present-day online platforms are providing stages for all kinds of political performance and 'representative claim'; Parliamentary debate is at a disadvantage when it comes to competing with the speed, volume, immediacy and style of digital disputation. Consequently, the performance of opposition to government is turning into opposition to Parliamentary politics as such. There are limits to what Parliament can do about this, but I suggest that once we understand the problem better there are some steps it can take to affirm its place in the national conversation.

Keywords: representation, social media, opposition, rhetoric