



D3.1: Report summing up the overall patterns of representative disconnect

WP3 - Redirect: An intermediation disconnect

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this report is—in accordance with REDIRECT’s WP 3—to provide an assessment of the overall patterns of representative disconnect. The approach that is used for this assessment is what we have chosen to term *a representative disconnect democratic audit*. Democratic audit is by now a well-established approach for assessing democratic character and quality (Beetham et al. 2008); Lord 2004). Audits are generally speaking broadly designed assessments that consider not only the character and quality of elections but citizenship, law and rights; representative and accountable government; civil society and popular participation; and democracy beyond the state (Beetham et al. 2008).

This report tailors the democratic audit to the assessment of disconnects in representative democracy. That requires adapting the democratic audit to the more specific assessment of the representative disconnect. The representative disconnect is multifaceted: it refers to an intermediation disconnect, a governance and accountability disconnect, and an affective disconnect. These three refer to different forms and intensities of democratic (dis)embeddedness, with social embeddedness more contingent than institutional embeddedness. The latter lies at the heart of the representative disconnect and revolves around the key components of the representative system: elections, parliaments and political parties.

A democratic audit is a broad-based assessment of the state of democracy, and REDIRECT is interested not only in the representative system but in the broader ecology of representation. We therefore assess the core representative institutions—parties and parliaments—within the broader socio-economic, socio-cultural, legal and administrative context within which democratic representation unfolds. This helps to ensure that we do not lose sight of democracy and its mediating values, which are authorisation, participation, responsiveness, representation, transparency, accountability and solidarity (Lord 2004). The assessment will show how those values are affected by the problem of the representative disconnect.

Representative democracy is the main type of actually existing democracy, and as such is what is normally audited. The audit must pay attention to the fact that representative democracy must reconcile a built-in tension between “the adherence to democratic principles and the practical demands embedded in the logic of representation” (Castiglione 2024:5). By structuring and conducting the audit in accordance with REDIRECT’s core tenets of representative disconnect and representative ecology we believe we can reconcile the core tenets of the democratic audit with REDIRECT’s focus on representation.

The report is organised in three steps. The first step defines what constitutes a democratic audit and explains why this is the preferred approach for assessing democracy and representative disconnects. The second step explains how and in what sense the democratic audit must be devised to sit with REDIRECT’s two core notions of representative disconnect and representative ecology. The third and final step surveys the findings from relevant research projects as well as other sources (government and think-tank reports and the academic literature) to provide an overview of the situation across a range of cases in Europe: member states, the EU-level, and affiliated non-members such as Norway.

The report forms an intrinsic part of the database that REDIRECT builds on the nature and sources of representative disconnects. That serves as a basis for assessing the most relevant and useful strategies for reconnection and redirection—the two main strategies REDIRECT has devised for dealing with representative disconnects. This report is designed to summarise the research that is explicitly focused on parties and party systems as well as parliaments in REDIRECT, and view that in light of a much broader body of literature, especially REDIRECT’s sister projects. The report is a living document and will be updated with additional research on parties and parliaments in WP 3 and WP 5—as well as in REDIRECT’s other WPs—as the findings come along.

2 What is the purpose and design of the democratic audit?

Since Robert Dahl (1971), many attempts have been made to design methods of ‘invigilating’ how well democracies meet democratic standards. Within the academic literature, at least the following have dared to propose indicators of different democratic standards and means of assessing those indicators against qualitative and quantitative data: Democratic Auditing (Beetham et al 2008); the Democracy Barometer; and the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) project¹.

Of those methods, we use Democratic Auditing to assess the representative disconnect. The idea of democratic auditing was developed by the political philosopher and political scientist David Beetham. In various collaborations, he sought to:

develop a method and a framework which can be used by citizens of any country to audit their own democracy. The point of such an Audit is to identify the most significant strengths and weaknesses as a contribution to reforming and strengthening the democratic process (Beetham 2005: 161).

The ‘go to’ publication for understanding the idea and methods of Democratic Auditing is *Assessing the Quality of Democracy: A Practical Guide* (Beetham et al 2008). The Guide justifies the Democratic Audit as a framework and method of democracy assessment. It compares the audit framework with other methods of assessing democracy. It discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different data sources in evaluating different aspects of democracy. It draws lessons from Democratic Audits in at least 24 states in all corners of the world. Democratic Audit indicators have also been used to contribute to the debate on democracy and the European Union (Lord 2004).

As with so much else that is involved in defining, justifying or realising democracy, attempts to use indicators to assess the democratic quality of political systems have provoked much disagreement: on what indicators should be used; on how each indicator should be assessed; and on how, if at all, assessments given to individual indicators should be combined into overall evaluations of how democratic is a political system (Coppedge and Gerring 2012).

One response is simply to welcome the *contestedness* of any one method of evaluating democracy. Democracy would, arguably, not be democracy if there were not limits to how far it can be

¹V-Dem; democracybarometer.org. For more specific aspects, see also [Political Polarisation - Research and data from Pew Research Center](#); [Home - Political Party Database Project](#).

evaluated by any one set of indicators. If people are to be free to choose their own form of democracy for reasons and standards of their own, there would seem to be limits to how far democracy can be measured by standards that can be universalised or even compared across systems.

But the difficulty with that argument is that democracy is a 'boundedly contested concept', not an 'essentially contested' one (Lord 2004: 12-3). Disagreements about indicators are to be expected, but only within the bounds of needing *some* standard of public control, *some* standard of political equality, *some* standard of rights, and *some* rights to a justification. We might even argue things the other way round: precisely because there are multiple possible conceptions of democracy, any evaluation of how democratic anything is can be improved in at least the following ways by specifying indicators.

- 1) ***Reasoned standards.*** Beetham started by defending public control with political equality as a core definition of democracy. He then went on to identify practices and further values that 'mediate' the delivery of public control with political equality: participation, authorisation, representation, accountability, transparency, responsiveness and solidarity (Beetham et al 2008: 22). From there, he framed up to 90 'indicators' or 'guiding questions' (ibid) that ask how well a political system delivers public control with political equality through their mediating values. For sure, not everyone would come up with exactly the same indicators specified in exactly the same way. But the Democratic Audit indicators are indicative, not stipulative. They assume those who live in any one political system may well choose their own indicators and certainly weight them differently or consider some more relevant to themselves than others. More than an invitation to follow a specific set of indicators, the Audit is an invitation to follow a method in which each indicator is justified singly and in relation to all the others.

This report devises standards and indicators by presenting questions and indicators whose design is inspired by the democratic audit framework but adapted to tap into and provide relevant information on the three dimensions of representative disconnect that REDIRECT has identified.

- 2) ***Explicit and Accountable standards.*** By making indicators fully explicit, the Audit also provides a more accountable method of assessing the democratic quality of political systems. Justifying one set of indicators rather than another, or one way rather than another of framing one particular indicator, establishes an 'Audit trail'. Every step in any evaluation—from the choice of each standard to the application of each standard to any assessment of how democratic any one political system—has to be laid out in a way that is open to being 'tested in adverse controversy' (Mill 1972 [1861]: 239) by anyone who would have reached a different evaluation.

The questions asked by the Audit are quite specific and come with suggestions for what to look for, in terms of legal provisions, practice and negative indicators. We will, under each question, specify how relevant this is for the representative disconnect, as well as how we think this question can be best tailored to the assessment of the various types of disconnect.

- 3) ***Coherent standards.*** As Beetham put it (2008: 25), “we aim to construct the assessment framework around a coherent understanding of democracy, rather than a random set of elements put together without explanation”. We can easily miss the importance of this. As Ronald Dworkin (2011: 117) highlights in *Justice for Hedgehogs*, precisely because there are no facts in the world that make them true, normative principles are justified by nothing more than their coherence with one another.
- 4) ***Comprehensive standards.*** Beetham also aimed at a ‘comprehensive and systematic assessment of a country’s political life against core principles of public control with political equality’. The challenge is one of how to avoid a kind of ‘blind persons and elephants problem’ where someone touches the trunk, the hoof or the ear, yet no one understands democracy overall as a form of government and a form of society, as an idea and as a practice. Here is a direct point of contact between the audit and the REDIRECT framework: the notion of representative ecology is precisely devised to ensure a comprehensive and systematic assessment. With representative ecology we mean “a web of practices and relations interacting and influencing each other (often contingently)” (Castiglione 2024:20). This web consists of several layers or circles, with the core institutions of representative democracy (parties, parliaments and citizens’ rights) at the heart and supported by the range of government institutions, civil society and the system of communication (media and public sphere).

How to make sure that everything that is important to democracy is included in any assessment? How to identify trade-offs and predicaments? How to distinguish problems for one standard of democracy that arise in the delivery of some other ‘imperative of democracy’ (Beetham 2005: 42) from instances of ‘pure loss’? All those questions require forms of democracy assessment that at least aim at completeness in their specification of standards.

- 5) ***Ideal and attainable standards.*** Another difficulty is that ‘democracy is not an all or nothing affair, but rather a shifting continuum’ (Beetham et al 2008: 17) of what is possible under attainable’ states of the world’ (Sen 2006). Democracy assessment, therefore, requires standards of what is good enough and not just ideal. But, perhaps even more so than ideals that can be defined in the abstract, only those who live under a form of government can define what is ‘good enough’ for them. Yet, the prize is an important one. Publics that can form opinions on minimum thresholds can better protect themselves from domination by non-democratic systems that pretend to be democratic ones. Even those systems that really can be justified by their own public’s conception of democracy mostly lie somewhere in between the minimally acceptable and the ideal. Those democracies will need to follow a law of non-regression: infeasibility cannot be an argument against standards they have themselves shown to be feasible (Appelbaum 2019: 143). So any method of democracy assessment needs to be complete, coherent and diagnostic enough to identify where things are getting better or worse; and where a system is failing even to attain the attainable as defined by its own standards, its own past and comparisons it itself makes with others.

This applies to the issue of representative disconnect because even the delegate notion of

representation—where representatives act on instructions from the represented—offers little assurance that the diversity of the represented will be adequately addressed. That is also why so many theorists of representation underline the need for some gap between representative and represented², as is most clearly reflected in the trustee model. In addition, as constructivists underline, representation is a recursive process with both sides influencing each other (see notably Saward 2006, 2010). Thus, the core issue is not whether there is a gap but whether that amounts to some form of disconnect, whether that gap has increased over time, and, if so, what this implies for democracy.

The issue of standards takes on special importance in today's world, facing as it does increased autocratisation³. The implication for this report is that we cannot confine the analysis to a range of search questions for tapping into the nature and magnitude of representative disconnects, but need to take the additional step of discussing representative disconnect up against regime change, whether of an explicit or of a more creeping kind. At what point is there no longer simply a disconnect but a regime change—from democracy to autocracy? As Levitsky and Zieblatt (2018) note, “(d)emocracy no longer ends with a bang—in a revolution or military coup—but with a whimper: the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms.” In line with this, V-DEM also operates with the category electoral autocracy to signify how this process retains important vestiges of electoral democracy whilst subverting them so that they no longer function properly and democratically.

- 6) **Measurement** Terms such as ‘Audit’ or ‘Indicators’ might suggest measurement. Some measures can tell us some things about some elements of democracy. Voter participation, support, satisfaction, and trust in democracy are examples. It would also help to locate those aspects of democracy that often are measured within a framework—such as a Democratic Audit—for assessing how democratic a political system is overall. In some ways, it is also trivially true that everything can be measured. So, for example, even the most qualitative evaluations can be turned into numbers by asking people to give scores out of ten. Yet also obvious are limits to attempts to measure, aggregate or rank democracy. Even the design of measures involves much judgment and many normative assumptions. Still more question-begging are attempts to aggregate this or that aspect of a country's political life into a single score of how democratic it is overall. How can different elements of democracy be aggregated into an overall score where different conceptions of democracy, and different reasons for valuing it, put different weights on those elements? In addition, there are important trade-offs between different types of political systems. Much ink has been spent on discussing the relative merits of parliamentary versus presidential systems (Strøm 2003). The authors compare the two systems in terms of regime stability, responsiveness to citizen preferences and process of governance and survey the literature, which shows that conclusions depend on what factors are included in the analysis. This testifies to the importance of broad-based assessments—properly steeped in the ecology of

²See, for instance, Urbinati 2008.

³See V-DEM's Democracy Report 2025 for an overview and assessment of global patterns of autocratisation. See, for instance, Schäfer and Zürn (2024).

representation.

We discuss this below in connection with the presentation of the relevant questions for the representative disconnect democratic audit categories. As part of that, it is important to bring out possible trade-offs.

- 7) *Social Construction*. Rather than a measure, Democratic Auditing was conceived as a help to citizens in reflecting and deciding on their own democracies: on what they value in them; on their form; and on their strengths and weaknesses. Democracy is a performative concept; or, in other words, a concept which people form and to which they commit themselves in everyday public debate and in coping with the world. It is also a 'social concept' (Searle 2010) that depends on others also interpreting (Dworkin 2011) the concept, if not agreeing with it. All that has important implications for why democracies need methods of assessing themselves. Assessing democracy helps constitute democracy. Standards cannot just precede assessments. Rather, they need to be recursively defined. By reflecting together on their democracies—and by assessing them in everyday debate—publics elaborate standards ever more closely. They fill out standards with assessments of means, applications, priorities and trade-offs. They continuously recreate their democracies by assessing them. Each assessor 'performs an act' of reaffirming her own commitment to each standard she uses in any assessment and in any attempt to convince others of that assessment. That is also how this report is conceptualised.
- 8) *A responsibility of democracy*. But above all, democracy is a form of collective decision, shared law, and shared coercion. Democracies regulate 'aspects of lives in common' (Habermas 1996). That, arguably, entails a responsibility on democracies—based in democratic principles of self-rule and non-domination—for assessing how well collective and coercive decisions can be justified as forms of self-coercion. All the more so if any one way of doing democracy pre-empts other ways of organising democracy. That a democracy should have the means of assessing itself is a part of its obligations to its citizens, and the responsibilities of citizens to one another that follow from any use they make of procedures of public control with political equality to author laws and policies that will apply to all co-citizens.

This is part of REDIRECT's oeuvre. The project not only assesses the representative disconnect. It also proposes strategies for rectification, both through *reconnection* of publics to representative institutions and through *redirection* to alternative ways of organising and practising democracy.

The eight factors presented above make up what we see as the key considerations pertaining to the democratic audit: what it is, what it is intended to achieve, and how we may go about conducting audits.

3 The audit adapted to the REDIRECT framework

Democratic audits are, as noted above, broadly designed and, generally speaking, devised for representative democracies. That also means that the democratic audit framework is suitable for capturing what REDIRECT refers to as the representative ecology. The question is, therefore, how much of an adaptation is needed for applying the democratic audit to the question of representative disconnect.

Representative disconnect can be defined as “(a) multidimensional phenomenon of regression of the demos-kratos linkage involving institutional, behavioural and affective components, which risks undermining the trust in and legitimacy of the overall system of democratic representation” (Castiglione 2024b). The notion of disconnect is, of course, derived from the forms of connection and connectiveness that representation brings about. Representation is a complex notion. According to Hanna Pitkin’s classical definition, “representation does have an identifiable meaning, applied in different but controlled and discoverable ways in different contexts. It is not vague and shifting, but a single, highly complex concept that has not changed much in its basic meaning since the seventeenth century. Representation means, as the word’s etymological origins indicate, *re-presentation*, a making present again. Representation, taken generally, means the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact” (Pitkin 1972: 8).

There are, as noted above, three core manifestations of the representative disconnect from an ecological perspective. The first is an intermediation disconnect, which revolves around citizens’ rights, political parties and parliaments; media (conventional and social); and civil society. That includes such factors as declining participation in the democratic process and disengagement from public debate. An intermediation disconnect can also manifest itself in various forms of deconstruction of representation, such as when parties and parliaments cease to be a process of dynamic representation in which claims to represent are made, accepted, rejected and tested.

The second is a governance and accountability disconnect, which revolves around political leadership, public administration, and courts.

The third and final is an affective disconnect which pertains to citizens’ trust in governing, disaffection with governing and their identification. This can also manifest itself in alienation and anomie, as well as fatalism (Levitsky et al. 2026). The specification of the themes of the audit will bring forth a range of additional relevant factors. It will also point to possible tradeoffs and complex relationships.

The three forms of disconnect appear to be at the meso or micro level, especially when the disconnect is tied to specific or individual institutions such as political parties. But the fact that the disconnect couples directly to the representative ecology underlines the need to think of the representative disconnect as operating on all levels, micro, meso, and macro. Because there is a clear link to the macro level makes it important and interesting to discuss the question of disconnect against the issue of regime change, especially through autocratisation. More on this below.

In the following, we develop the relevant questions for the representative disconnect democratic audit. That we do by combining the dimensions of representative disconnect with the Beetham et al. (2008) practical guide on democratic audit, as well as through drawing on relevant bodies of literature, especially on political parties and parliaments. The questions will be specified to render them amenable to specifying the nature and scope of relevant disconnects. In addition, we develop a set of indicators to capture authoritarian regimes and autocratisation processes and dynamics. Thus, as noted above, the audit is tailored to the representative system and its ecology, with particular emphasis on the core components of the representative system: basic rights and rights protection; free and fair elections; political parties and parliaments.

A representative disconnect can be a gap or a lacuna; it can also be a partial disconnect, especially since the disconnect is multifaceted. There may be institutions in place that are bent on connecting citizens to the political system, but a lack of trust could mean that there is an effective disconnect. The obverse is less likely, at least in Western democracies: it is not very likely that citizens will exhibit high trust in government *without* there being parties or parliaments serving as vital intermediary bodies between citizens and the state. For this report, therefore, the disconnect is assessed with the presence of intermediary bodies in mind. In addition, for systems that are formally defined as democracies, we discuss the disconnect as a variable entity, on a continuum from lack of connectivity to high connectivity. But we also underline that the issue of connectivity is complex when it is considered in a democratic light.

At one end, a repressive totalitarian system is marked by a lack of connectivity, especially in the two-directional manner that must exist for there to be democracy. A totalitarian system is based on top-down domination and arbitrary rule, and it seeks to do away with all intermediaries between the state and the citizen, so as to ensure full control of what citizens do (and think).

Authoritarian systems may contain some form of connectivity, in the sense that the system exhibits some responsiveness to citizens' demands, but the system decides when, what and how that is to take place. Authoritarian systems are not democratic because they lack the vital two-directional form of connectivity that marks democracies.

Beyond that and towards the democratic end, we may find systems suffering from forms of connectivity but lacking clarity with regard to the terms of representation: who represents whom and under what terms of representation? This can be a trait of complex multilevel systems or political systems undergoing profound changes of all sorts. Disconnects can be part of democratic decline or autocratisation, or they can be part of gradual change processes that occur without regime or system change/transformation. Or disconnects may appear in functioning democracies at various degrees of seriousness. The world contains regimes of all these stripes. Representation is about making present that which is absent; there is therefore necessarily some form of gap, since the representative is necessarily separate from the represented. The critical issue is to establish how wide that gap is and what it entails for democracy.

Our sample is confined to Europe and encompasses functioning democracies and autocratising systems (under the rubric of electoral rather than full-fledged autocracies).

In the following, we develop the more specific questions and indicators that inform the audit.

3.1 Elections

Elections are a key element of a functioning representative democracy. Without the peaceful and orderly change of government that the election result authorizes there is no workable democracy. A critical issue is therefore whether elections give the people control over governments and their policies (Beetham et al. 2008: 74). Critical conditions are accordingly that elections are competitive and lead to change in governing parties or personnel; that they are accessible for all voters (low barriers against registration); that they are organized and conducted independently of government and party control; and that citizens are faced with meaningful choices.

Election results are used to populate parliament. Levels of participation and biases in voting, abstention or exclusion from the vote are therefore directly reflected in parliament's composition. We also expect that parties use elections to structure voter choice in ways relevant to the powers of the political system. In terms of the role of parties, it matters whether, to what extent, and how they use elections as a competition for the people's vote (Schattsneider 1942, 1960). As part of those parties in functioning democracies will deliver promissory and anticipatory representation (Mansbridge 2003).

We can thus identify elections with representative disconnects insofar as there are formal or informal barriers to or biases in citizens' electoral participation; insofar as elections fail to provide citizens with even a modicum of control of governments and their policies; insofar as parties fail to structure voter choice; insofar as parliaments are captured by special interests or sidelined by various institutions; or insofar as parliaments are lacking in will and resources to express citizens' choices and defend democratic values.

3.2 Political parties

With regard to political parties, they play a vital intermediary role between citizens and the political system. Giovanni Sartori defines a party as *"any political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office"* (Sartori 2005: 56, italics in original). Nancy Rosenblum's definition is more specific: *"a party is a group organized to contest for public office; it is avowed in its partisanship and operates not conspiratorially but in public view; it is not an ad hoc coalition or arrangement for vote trading and compromise on a specific issue, but an institution formed for ongoing political activity; and it can claim a substantial number of followers, in current terms, a partisan "base" (Rosenblum 2008:20). Rosenblum's underlining that a political party is an organisation matters⁴. There are three analytical dimensions in play when discussing political parties. They are: partisanship, party as organisation, and party system. The party as an organisation is a phenomenon at the meso-level; the party system is the total of parties and links up to the macro or systemic level.*

⁴We could go further and refer to the political party as an institutionalised organisation, with institution defined as *"an organisation infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task"* (Selznick 1957).

From the perspective of legitimacy, the literature depicts political parties as receivers of societal inputs; as shapers of societal inputs; as shapers of governmental inputs; and as furnishing leaders and undertaking governing. Political parties accordingly play a central role at the level of input; at the level of throughput; to some extent at the level of output (especially in situations where government ministries understand themselves and act as political secretariats); and in terms of societal feedback. It follows that political parties undertake a broad range of normatively salient tasks. They, for instance, civilise conflicts and structure deliberation (Rosenblum 2008; White and Ypi 2016); they receive and structure opinion and will formation processes; they give content and direction to political action programs; they recruit leaders; they furnish political leadership; and they are responsible over time for public decisions. Parties promote contending world views and train leaders to reconcile these conflicting views when acting in a political leadership capacity.

In modern democracies, representative government is largely party government (Mair 2008)⁵. Parties are—or should be—responsive and responsible to voters for the outputs of government. That is in no small measure due to the political party’s central role in the functioning of modern democracy. The party system is the only organisational category that is present in all parts of the political cycle (input, throughput, output, and feedback). Further, the party has a virtual monopoly on the supply of candidates for political office⁶. The late Peter Mair put it succinctly: “The same organisation that governed the citizenry also gave that citizenry voice, and the same organisation that channelled representation also managed the institutions of the polity” (Mair 2009:5).

Political parties perform a range of roles that likely place different or conflicting requirements on parties. Parties must prepare for governing or power-sharing, but also for providing organised opposition. There are always opposition parties that enable publics to replace governments. In addition, parties must, on their own or in cooperation with other parties, both mobilise voters and instil loyalty, but at the same time they must prepare leaders for office and for the requirements of governing, including governing on behalf of the whole population, and not only the party faithful. The latter may require striking compromises and having to relate to partisan disagreement and conflict. That requires exercising self-restraint. It is therefore not simply a matter of checking whether parties fulfil roles, but how they manage to reconcile those roles and functions that place conflicting demands on parties and their officials.

In Table 1, we present the questions that Beetham et al. (2008) *explicitly devised* for assessing the democratic character and quality of political parties. The framework does refer to parties under other headings, but these are the questions that are specifically directed to parties. They are not explicitly tailored to the representative disconnect. In addition, whereas the complete audit does address what we here refer to as the broader ecology within which parties are embedded, that is only faintly reflected in these questions. Our approach instead has been to consider how

⁵Mair (2008: 224) summarises Katz’s (1987) criteria for party government as follows: “1. Decisions are made by elected party officials or by those under their control; 2a. Policy is decided within parties, which 2b. then act cohesively to enact it; 3a. Officials are recruited and 3b. held accountable through the party”.

⁶How independently the party can authorise leaders is a major issue of contestation in today’s United States due to Donald Trump’s hostile takeover of the Republican Party, his lack of respect for basic electoral procedures, and his complicity in the January 6, 2021, attempt to take over Congress.

representative disconnect and representative ecology are related.

Table 1: The Beetham et al. (2008) versus the disconnect assessments

The Beetham et al. (2008) assessment questions specifically on parties	Disconnects associated with these audit tests
How freely are parties able to form and recruit members, engage with the public and campaign for office?	This is a question we address in overall terms for each country.
How effective is the party system in forming and sustaining a government in office?	RE: b) social uprooting; and d) fragmentation of the party system
How far are parties effective membership organisations, and how far are members able to influence party policy and candidate selection?	RE: d) party organisational changes
How far does the system of party financing prevent the subordination of parties to special interests?	RE: d) party organisational changes
To what extent does support for parties cross ethnic, religious and linguistic divisions?	RE: b) social dislocation

In the table, we have shown how each question is incorporated in our broader scheme of questions tailored as they are to the disconnect-democracy dimension of parties. In the following, our assessment scheme is presented and assessed.

3.3 In search of disconnect-democracy indicators on parties and party systems

Our approach focuses on political parties in relation to the different dimensions of representative disconnect as presented above⁷. This approach draws on the criteria of Beetham et al. (2008) and situates those within a broader survey of the literature and analyses of political parties. Based on that, we identify six sets of possible sources of parties and representative disconnects⁸. These are:

- 1) a **decline in partisanship**, which refers to a weakened commitment to the normative tenets of partisanship.
- 2) the **social uprooting** of parties:

⁷ A relevant data source is the [Political Party Database](#).

⁸ Poguntke and Hofmeister, in their comprehensive book on Political Parties and The Crisis of Democracy (2024:4), ask the contributors to address the following questions that are useful as inspiration for our assessment of parties and representative disconnects: (1) Party organisation: What characterises the organisation of these parties? What role do variables such as the number of party members play? Why do parties gain members, and why do they lose members? What kind and degree of intra-party democracy characterise these parties, and how strong is the party leadership? (2) Party ideology: What are the most important features of these parties' ideologies or programmes? Are there new, even provocative, responses to a country's challenges? (3) Connection to social groups: With which groups do individual parties maintain strong contact? Which groups are more relevant today, and which have lost their importance? Do the parties grant a formal status to certain groups within their organisation (e.g. youth, women, workers, professionals, civil servants, entrepreneurs)? (4) Significance of state subsidies: Do state subsidies exist? Are the parties dependent on them? Do state subsidies help to distance the parties from their voters, or are they used to incentivise parties to maintain contact with the voters? (5) Party unity: How united are the parties? How frequent are internal party conflicts, and how serious are they? Have they led to the resignations of prominent leaders? How do they affect (if at all) voting behaviour in the legislature? Are there disciplinary measures against legislators? (6) Communication: What characterises the form of communication of the parties. How do they use social media?

- the weakened role of ideational and societal structuring;
 - the organisational delinking of parties from other portions of society, such as trade unions, sports associations, etc., that marked especially socialist and social democratic parties;
 - decline in societal responsiveness.
- 3) the emergence of new **transnational cleavages** that transcend the society's internal conflict structures/conflict configurations with an increase in polity contestation.
- pitting communitarians against cosmopolitans (cf. de Wilde et al. 2019).
- 4) parties' **organisational changes**:
- partisan de-institutionalisation and decline;
 - the declining role of parties in the socialisation of politicians and political leaders;
 - hostile takeovers of party leadership by external forces;
 - declining party membership and party identification.
- 5) The declining role or presence of parties in the **media sphere** due to the delinking of parties and legacy media and the rise of social media.
- 6) The emergence of **new party types**:
- the rise of cartel parties:
 - i. instrumentalisation of politics;
 - ii. prioritising responsibility over responsiveness.
 - the rise of anti-system⁹ as well as populist parties:
 - i. 'fake authenticity'

Some of these forms of disconnect are related or overlap. They are listed separately here so that we can examine each in more detail. As part of that is also an assessment of how or in what sense they constitute disconnects and whether what appears as a disconnect is democratically important or not. Some of the items presented here are more closely associated with autocracy and autocratisation as an ongoing process than others. We will discuss that in further detail below¹⁰.

⁹There is some ambiguity associated with the notion anti-system party. Bickerton and Acetti (2018) use the label to deem such parties in opposition to democratic pluralism and minority rights, whereas Zulianello (2018:1) argues that an anti-system party "qualifies as such in the light of both its antagonistic and ideological profile and its status of non-integration in cooperative interactions at the systemic level." Since the label is often used on populist parties and many of them are involved in governing, the term can usefully be confined to those parties that cover both. We therefore distinguish between anti-system and populist parties and basically only use the latter throughout this report.

¹⁰This list has not addressed the problem of independents. Are independents, by definition, a sign of a partisan disconnect? Or would a rise in the number of independents signal a partisan disconnect? Or is the status of independent merely a different or distinct form of partisanship, which Rosenblum (2008) discusses? The role and status of independents appear to be a more pressing issue in the United States than in Europe, and are therefore not addressed here, since this report focuses on Europe.

For each of the six disconnects, we need to examine whether the disconnect is party-specific, party family-specific or systemic. With systemic, we mean either that it concerns all parties or the dominant ones, in other words, those parties that determine the nature and direction of the party system. For two-party systems, the most obvious form of systemic disconnect involves both main parties. However, if one of the two major parties changes so much that the party system is no longer functioning in accordance with democratic norms and procedures, then that also constitutes a systemic disconnect. For multi-party systems, the issue of systemic disconnect is more complex. If all parties exhibit serious disconnects, the effect is systemic. What constitutes a critical mass in a multi-party system depends on the size and composition of the main parties participating in governing. The more fragmented the system, the larger the number of parties we need to include as part of a systemic disconnect.

With regard to a) **decline in partisanship** matters because a weakening or undermining of the value associated with partisanship has bearings on parties' and political systems' functionality and legitimacy. What this entails requires clarifying what normative values or salience are ascribed to partisanship. There are several positions in the literature. White and Ypi (2016) link partisanship to civic virtue and argue that it has at its core a distinct partisan claim, which refers to "advancing principles and aims that are *generalizable*" (2016:5, italic in original). Muirhead and Rosenblum (2008), on the other hand, associate partisanship with a distinct political identity and argue that the main normative merit of partisanship is that of civilising conflicts. Partisanship's merit is that it enables reconciling parties' political mobilisation along ideological, value- and interest-based lines with a norm of self-restraint.

A decline in parties' will in arguing for the greater good (along the lines prescribed by White and Ypi) or in parties' will and ability to respect their opponents and come to agreements across party lines constitutes a representative disconnect. These two positions on partisanship draw different dividing lines for when partisanship is weakened or undermined. One indicator could be when parties govern in a way that only takes partisans' interests into account. Another could be when parties cease to refer to their opponents in a respectful manner. An absolute bottom line indicator could be when a party no longer fully stands behind and supports a peaceful and orderly transfer of power after an election.

Finally, it matters a lot whether these forms of weakening or undermining of partisanship are specific to individual parties or whether they are systemic, either by encompassing all parties or the dominant parties. In two-party systems, it is generally enough for one party to go rogue for the system to collapse or be seriously weakened; in multiparty systems, it matters how many and whether those parties that command the greatest support and structure partisan competition go rogue.

With regard to b) **social dislocation**, this refers to a change over time and may vary with party type. Historically speaking, in the age of mass politics, political parties strove to establish more or less closed political communities, sustained by reasonably homogeneous electoral constituencies, strong and often hierarchical organisational structures, and a coherent sense of partisan political identity. Voters, at least in the majority of cases, were believed to 'belong' to their parties, and rather than reflecting the outcome of a reasoned choice between the competing alterna-

tives, the act of voting was seen instead as an expression of identity and commitment” (Mair 2013:78).

The disconnect stems from weakened party identification, as reflected in declining party membership numbers, much higher electoral volatility, more pronounced patterns of issue-based voting, and changes in partisan support, as voters move back and forth between parties. Changing cleavage structures is an important contributing factor and pertains to changes in the socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political conditions that produce and sustain conflict structures in society.

Lipset and Rokkan (1967) posited a ‘freezing’ of the party systems before the 1920s along certain cleavages and cleavage structures that varied from one country to the next. In retrospect, this now appears to have marked the period up until the 1970s.¹¹ One important question is therefore whether the role of cleavages has changed so that cleavages play a less prominent role in structuring society, or whether the main effect is the emergence of other cleavages, or whether the link between cleavages and political parties has transformed. If so, how?

This development can encompass all three dimensions of representative disconnect: intermediation, governing, and affective. It can be considered an intermediation disconnect insofar as the parties’ role in communicating social demands and reflecting social diversity is weakened. That is often referred to as a decline in parties’ role in opinion formation.

It can be about a governing disconnect insofar as the party in government—its views and stances—are less clearly reflected in a distinct set of social groupings. There is then a disconnect insofar as societal actors cannot identify with what the government is and what it does.

The issue of social dislocation of parties is hardly unrelated to the type of political party. We can, for instance, expect social dislocation to manifest itself differently in mass parties or catch-all parties¹² than in what has been termed ‘programmatic parties’ (“consistent over time, non-centrist and extremely ideologically coherent on core programmatic issues” (Mainwaring and McGraw (2018:676).

In this context, if greater social fluidity means that parties move towards becoming catch-all parties that may facilitate governing, since governments are less explicitly tied to certain social groupings. Greater social fluidity can therefore increase governments’ social resonance since it may be easier for governments to reach across various social groups and constellations. The intermediation disconnect can therefore either be directly linked to a governing disconnect, or the intermediation disconnect can be somewhat compensated for through increased social fluidity and change. At the same time, a general move towards catch-all parties can increase people’s epistemic insecurity, given that their ideological anchorage is weakened. Further, insofar as increased social fluidity is associated with parties absorbing some but far from all social groups, and those left out are ideologically charged and committed, then they can feel marginalised and become radicalised. These comments underline that there is also an affective disconnect,

¹¹Recent research has noted that the initial freezing premise requires reconsideration: Emanuele and Marino (2025:21), in their reassessment of the freezing hypothesis, conclude that “it is rather hard to claim that Western European cleavage politics was electorally frozen during the period under consideration.”

¹²This notion was introduced by Kirchheimer (1966).

and this again can work either to reinforce a governing disconnect or to modify the governing disconnect.

What do these changes entail for the role of parties and party systems in sustaining democracy? Or, more precisely, how is a representative disconnect connected to democracy? Is there a strong and direct link? Is there an identifiable link whose effects are less clear? Is the link mediated through something else, or is it not possible to establish a direct link between disconnect and weakened democracy? In the above, we have suggested that partisan dealignment from well-entrenched social cleavages can take either good or bad forms. Dealignment can be good or beneficial for democracy, where parties have to compete and cannot just rely on an uncritical pool of voters. In that sense, weakened social anchorage leaves parties with more space for seeking cooperation and may move politics towards the political centre. But weakened partisan social anchorage can also lead to atomization and a stronger focus on specific issues, and in turn a decline of the organising ideologies, which played an important role in structuring partisan dynamics. Under such circumstances, parties may start to resemble civil society and special issue organisations. That feeds into a fragmentation of the party system.

One way of building a more reliable indicator for when dealignments are beneficial and when not could be to combine data on dealignment with partisan rhetoric, cross-partisan cooperation and overall fragmentation of the party system.

With regard to c) **emergence of new cleavages and cleavage structures**, one important development is globalisation and what de Wilde et al. (2019) and Schäfer and Zürn (2024) refer to as cosmopolitans pitted against communitarians. Along similar lines, we find the reference to GAL-TAN (GAL= Green, Alternative and Liberal; TAN = Traditional, Authoritarian and Nationalistic) as a new cleavage constellation.

This development is suggestive of both a new cleavage constellation and an altered political landscape. The question of democratically relevant forms of representation has previously mainly revolved around institutions and practices within the democratic state. In a globalised world and through the development of supranational entities such as the European Union with representative-democratic institutions, we need to include attention to forms of democratic connection and connectivity to systems of rule-making beyond the state. How, then, could this new cleavage constellation constitute a representative disconnect? The answer relates to the acceptance or rejection of supranational governance. The TAN pole of the GAL-TAN dimension is typically Eurosceptic or perhaps even Europhobic. The argument then is that the more politics is oriented along these lines, the more political contestation over Europe will revolve around the issue of the EU as a polity rather than over EU policies.

Hooghe and Marks (2009) refer to a change over time in citizens' attitudes to the EU from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. Is that attributed to the development of a new GAL-TAN cleavage, or does it relate to something else? The development can also be linked to the emergence of new political parties, notably right-wing populist parties of a national ethnic bent.

What do these changes entail for the role of parties and party systems in sustaining democracy?

Is there a strong and direct link? Is there an identifiable link whose effects are less clear? Is the link mediated through something else, or is it not possible to establish a direct link between disconnect and weakened democracy? The clearest link is when contestation over the EU moves from policy to polity, in other words, when the political scene is one where parties are advocating the dismantling of the EU. This does not directly translate into a democratic disconnect because parties may argue on democratic grounds, but that leaves open the question of how to deal with interdependence and externalities. Parties advocating the abolition of the EU and replacing democracy with autocracy represent a clear democratic disconnect.

With regard to d) **parties' organisational changes**, this refers mainly to intra-party factors and has several facets. One facet pertains to what Katz and Mair (1993) refer to as the party's different faces: the party in public office; the party on the ground (its members and activists); and the party in central office. Another refers to the organisational density of the party or the extent to which the party serves as an institutionalised organisation (Poguntke and Hofmeister 2024).

Disconnect can here mean dropping or downplaying one or several functions or faces so that parties become decentred; it can also mean weakening of the party as an organisation, through loss of resources, competence, or staff.

Disconnect in cases where party organisation is largely based on volunteers and/or cooperating with other civil society organisations takes place when such cooperation breaks down, and the party is no longer able to perform its basic functions. Disconnect in cases where party organisation is based on professionals occurs when the party can no longer fund its employees or they leave for whatever reason, and the party consequently has to scale down its activities.

Opening up leadership selection to the populace can make parties more inclusive. But it can also increase the polarisation of politics, especially when extremists and persons not socialised in the political game and partisan politics take over political parties. That is, to a large extent, the story of Donald Trump in the United States. The disconnect is therefore when the opening up of leadership selection leads to outsiders taking over parties and undermining the partisanship ethic of civilising conflicts (Poguntke et al. 2024).

In a similar vein, there is a disconnect if or insofar as political parties are being too easily bought by big money. If well-resourced parties can shape public opinion, it may be more important for parties to respond to donors than voters; hence, a party-electorate disconnect.

Then it is readily apparent that the most pronounced form of disconnect under this heading is the intermediation disconnect.

What do these changes entail for the role of parties and party systems in sustaining democracy? Or, more precisely, how is a disconnect connected to democracy? Party de-institutionalisation and weakening means that parties can no longer uphold those functions that are democratically beneficial. Parties, after all, are important not only in aggregating citizens' views and interests to the political system, and recruiting and training leaders and furnishing government, but parties are also sources of innovation and repositories of political memories. Party weakening or de-institutionalisation is therefore problematic when it occurs in the political parties that alternate

in governing the system.

Poguntke et al. (2024:584) note that “(p)arty systems which are characterised by a lack of institutionalisation and a correspondingly high degree of fluidity cannot provide a stable linkage between voters and the institutions of governance, which is the precondition for democratic accountability.” What then would constitute party system fragmentation? Where to draw the lines? Does party system fragmentation mean that all parties are de-institutionalising? Or does it refer to the most important parties under the assumption that some parties are necessary for sustaining the party system? This does not need to refer to specific parties, but rather that there are parties catering to the main interests and lines of division in society. How to measure fragmentation? What is the relationship between fragmentation and fluidity? Fluidity refers to voters moving across parties and parties rapidly changing form and content. Is that fragmentation, or is fragmentation de-institutionalisation to such a degree that parties no longer fulfil core functions? For our purposes, we opt for this more restrictive definition to avoid an overly encompassing category.

De-institutionalisation and fragmentation are not the only challenges. Overly strong centralisation and hierarchization of the party can also be a problem. For instance, was Michels (1962) concerned about parties becoming oligarchies? That refers to an overly strong party organisation. There is, therefore, not a direct one-on-one relationship between a weakened party organisation and a representative disconnect. This depends on how the representative disconnect is configured. Is it about the party rank-and-file; is it about party members; is it about party officials; or is it about party leaders? We probably need to develop disconnect indicators/assumptions for each of these groups.

The strongest indicator of organisational disconnect is when *the party system* is either fragmenting or when the system is developing overly centralised party organisations.

Both party fragmentation and parties turning into oligarchies generate governing disconnects because in both cases, parties cease to play their role in connecting citizens to government. Under those circumstances, they do not structure voter choice in ways relevant to the exercise by governments of the powers of the political system, and fail to provide responsive and responsible government. This does not necessarily mean that parties vanish, but either that they are functionally replaced by other actors, such as governments or courts or that parties exist and govern, but party political and partisan competition is done away with. Authoritarian systems can operate with parties, but they are neither democratic nor is there a rotation of power. Totalitarian systems are typically one-party states.

With regard to e) **declining role or presence of parties in the media sphere** refers to several sets of developments. From the perspective of a partisan disconnect, this means that parties’ central role as intermediaries between citizens and governments becomes sidelined by changes in the media scene. Another possibility is that changes on the party scene weaken or undermine the media as important conveyers of knowledge and information and as upholders of viable public spheres. This latter possibility is about how changes in the broader ecology have bearings on parties.

Historically speaking, political parties had a more prominent role in the communication landscape than is the case today. Developments include de-linking of bonds between parties and traditional media (many of the political parties were earlier associated with specific media outlets). Whether such delinking counts as a representative disconnect in democratic terms is less clear, since the media's role in 'speaking truth to power' was also hemmed in through such tight links, especially when 'their' parties were in power.

Perhaps of more direct importance for the representative disconnect are changes within the media by two sets of profound developments, one being the commercialisation and commodification of information, and the other being the digital revolution, including the rise of new media. Both can be associated with oligopolistic ownership and editorial control, thus informal censorship, silo-isation, echo-chambers, and manipulation. The rise of so-called social media is associated with a bypassing of legacy editor-governed media as important gatekeepers, audience fragmentation, the rise of influencers, the personalisation of politics, and the erosion of trust in institutions. These developments all defeat such things as attempts to give fair media time to parties.

One recent study argues that "(c)urrent journalism practices tend to exacerbate tribal us-vs-them thinking by emphasising partisan cues, nudging citizens toward not listening to political ideas from the other political camp. A more helpful news-choice architecture tones down partisan language, nudging citizens toward more diverse political listening" (Arendt et al. 2023:413).

When assessing these changes, we should consider how changes in the party-media interface, broadly speaking, are contributing to representative disconnects rather than merely focusing on whether parties are sidelined by new media or whether parties have negative effects on media and communication systems. The effects are obviously most pronounced when they pertain not to individual parties or even party families but to whole party systems.

With regard to f) **the emergence of new party types**. Two (or three) types figure particularly in the literature. The first is the cartel party, which refers to especially established parties re-treating into the state (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009). This is also linked to the social dislocation of parties and refers to new patterns of interaction and dependence: the party being dependent on the state for financing and benefitting from direct access. At the same time, as Poguntke et al. (2024:583) underline, state funding of political parties "may undercut parties' over-reliance on funding by rich individuals or strong companies, and thus in other senses such models could be said to stabilise party democracy." Castiglione (2024) underlines how this development of cartel parties as part of an instrumentalization of politics, in other words that this development is associated not only with an intermediation disconnect but also with an affective disconnect.

The second type of party that has emerged is not really new but has taken on distinct new forms. How to define the types of populist parties that have emerged in the last three-to-four decades? The most commonly used definition of contemporary forms of populism is as "*a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' and 'the corrupt elite.'*" And which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté*

générale (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012:8, italics in original) The authors discuss the different manners in which populism variously has positive and negative effects on democracy. Here we list those factors that pertain directly to the representative connect.

According to the authors, populism can:

- give voice to groups that do not feel represented by the elites;
- mobilize excluded sections of society (e.g. ‘the underclass’), improving their political integration;
- represent excluded sections of society by implementing policies that they prefer;
- provide an ideological bridge that supports the building of important social and political coalitions;
- increase democratic accountability by making issues and policies part of the political realm;
- bring back the conflictive dimension of politics (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012:21).

With regard to negative effects, populism can:

- use the notion and praxis of popular sovereignty to contravene the ‘checks and balances’ and separation of powers of liberal democracy;
- use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent and ignore minority rights;
- promote the establishment of a new political cleavage (populists vs. non-populists), which impedes the formation of stable political coalitions;
- lead to a moralization of politics, making compromise and consensus extremely difficult;
- foster a plebiscitary transformation of politics, which undermines the legitimacy and power of political institutions (e.g. parties and parliaments) and unelected bodies (e.g. organizations such as central banks or inspections offices) that are indispensable to ‘good governance’;
- by advocating an opening up of political life to non-elites, populism’s majoritarian, anti-elite thrust can easily promote a shrinkage of ‘the political’ and cause a contraction of the effective democratic space” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012:21-22).

The position on populism that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser adopt is far from shared among all analysts. Schäfer and Zürn (2024), Jan-Werner Müller (2016), and Nadia Urbinati (2019) situate populist parties much closer to authoritarianism than does Mudde. In her important book *Me the People*, Urbinati claims that they usher in a distinct type of representation.

The country studies must reveal how much variation there is across the countries in terms of populist parties’ subversion of the rule of law, democracy and democratic representation. In addition, in the section on autocracy and autocratisation, we will develop more fine-grained indicators for making the necessary distinctions.

An interesting issue with regard to partisanship is where to place ‘negative partisanship’ (Bjånesøy 2023) in this picture. The term refers to an unwillingness to cooperate with other parties, notably with right-wing populists (it is therefore not used to depict situations where there is a rejection of the normativity of partisanship, which seems to be the most relevant interpretation). If anything, provided the opposition is to populist parties that undermine democracy, such resistance may affirm rather than undermine democratic values.

From a practical political perspective, it is difficult to provide clear guidelines for whether practical cooperation with populists helps or subverts democracy. On the one hand is the possibility that cooperation will incentivise populists to adopt more mainstream positions; on the other hand, there is the problem when democratic parties prioritise the benefits of cooperation with autocratic populists over upholding their commitment to democracy and basic rights. The issue is therefore not whether there should be cooperation, but the terms under which such cooperation should take place.

A tricky issue is that since right-wing populists place so much emphasis on immigration, they may seek to undermine the rights of immigrants and especially asylum-seekers, but not the rest of the population. How to judge the following far from unrealistic scenario: populists uphold internal democratic norms and values and prove to be reliable cooperation partners, but at the same time work to actively undermine the rights of asylum seekers (as appears to be the case with the Progress Party of Norway)? This type of bifurcation between domestic and international arenas brings up questions of where to draw the line with regard to representative disconnects.

In the following table, we summarise the dimensions, indicators and modes of operationalisation that inform the empirical data gathering (as presented in the case tables below). For each dimension, we need to include attention to whether the phenomenon in question pertains to an individual party, a distinct party family, a distinct type of party or the party system as such. It is clear that the most pronounced and democratically deleterious situation is when the representative disconnect marks the whole party system or when it marks the parties that dominate the system, not in power terms but in operational terms. In other words, whose role is system-sustaining or undermining.

Table 2: Overview of dimensions, indicators and operationalisation of parties’ democratic disconnect

Dimensions	Indicators	Operationalisation/measurement
A decline in partisanship	Peaceful transfer of power, respect for other parties, cross-partisan appeal.	Party leader/party undermining the legitimacy of elections and election results (no longer assurance of peaceful and orderly transfer of power through elections). Hostile party leader/party towards other political parties that undermines the legitimacy of other parties. Parties govern in a manner that only takes partisans into account.

Table 2: Overview of dimensions, indicators and operationalisation of parties' democratic disconnect

Dimensions	Indicators	Operationalisation/measurement
The social uprooting of parties	Changes in the historical connection between a specific political party and a specific socio-economic, socio-cultural and/or religious.	Decline in party identification. Decline in parties' ability to mobilise support from socio-economic, socio-cultural and/or religious groups. Parties lose social anchorage due to greater fluidity in voters' choices. New socio-economic, socio-cultural and/or religious groupings replacing parties as social intermediaries.
The emergence of new transnational cleavages	EU polity contestation supersedes EU policy debate.	Diminished parties'/party leaders' support for EU integration and democracy. The more systemic (encompassing all or all the dominant parties), the greater the disconnect.
Parties' organisational changes	Changes in intra-party structures and conditions through: professionalisation of party; composition of party; leadership; party policy; and party funding and financing	Decline in party members' ability to influence party policy and candidate selection. Decline in parties' ability to prevent state, personal or corporate capture Decline in parties' ability to generate support across different ethnic, religious, social and cultural groups Decline in parties' ability to form and sustain government Emergence of hierarchical and oligopolistic parties
The declining role or presence of parties in the media sphere	Delinking of parties and legacy media, coupled with the rise of social media	Rise of oligopolistic media ownership and informal editorial control (censorship) Rise of media echo chambers and silos Increased manipulation and loss of information due to the rise of social media and 'big tech' Increased audience fragmentation Rise of influencers Rise of the personalisation of politics in social media Decline of legacy media with editorial standards

Table 2: Overview of dimensions, indicators and operationalisation of parties' democratic disconnect

Dimensions	Indicators	Operationalisation/measurement
The emergence of new party types (intermediation and affective disconnect)	Rise of populist and cartel parties	Populist parties undermining minority rights Populist parties undermining compromise and consensus; propounding disinformation and pursuing active manipulation Populist parties undermining political institutions (parliaments, and/or central banks, inspections offices) Parties undermining 'checks and balances' Cartel parties instrumentalising politics Cartel parties privileging state interests and responsibility over responsiveness

Table 2 summarises the dimensions and the more specific indicators that we discern from each dimension.

The overview of parties and possible sources of disconnect has been deliberately framed in a broad and encompassing manner. At the core of this is a distinct view of democracy, or perhaps better, institutionalisation of democracy as party democracy, which highlights the central role of parties in ensuring functioning democracy.

The notion of a representative system underlines the close relationship and mutual dependence of parties and parliaments. That in effect introduces a further institutional model of democracy, that of parliamentary democracy. It is entirely possible for tensions to arise between a party and a parliamentary democracy. But for the purposes of this representative-disconnect democratic audit, the assumption is that parties and parliaments can complement each other in the sustenance of democracy. It is widely argued that democracy without parties is unthinkable; democracy with parties without parliaments (or similar representative bodies) is equally unthinkable.

3.4 Parliaments

Parliaments are vital elements of representative democracy. They also, as noted above, form a distinct institutional model of democracy, that of parliamentary democracy. In effect, the Inter-parliamentary Union, in its draft report on parliament and democracy, notes that "(p)arliament is widely acknowledged as the pivotal institution of democracy" (IPU 2005:4). This importance is echoed by prominent analysts. That applies not only to those that subscribe to representative democracy but to the deliberative democracy champion par excellence, Jürgen Habermas, who notes that "public influence is transformed into communicative power only after it passes through the filters of the institutionalised procedures of democratic opinion- and will-formation and enters through parliamentary debates into legitimate lawmaking. Not influence per se, but influence transformed into communicative power legitimates political decisions. To generate

political power, their influence must affect the democratically regulated deliberations of democratically elected assemblies and assume an authorised form in formal decisions” (Habermas 1996:371-72). There is therefore no substitute for what Habermas calls the parliamentary principle, where i) representatives ii) elected on the principle of one person, one vote can iii) debate all opinions in relation to all others during iv) the process of law-making itself, and all v) within parliaments can subsequently hold executives accountable for the administration of laws.

Modern parliaments are strong publics—a term which denotes a sphere of institutionalised deliberation and decision-making—and are, as Habermas notes, embedded in the broader system of communication that takes place in general public spheres. The elected members of modern parliaments are partisans, and the activities of parliaments are to a large extent run by the political parties. As shown above, modern representative democracy is to a large extent party democracy, with parties operating in civil society, in parliament and in government. There is, therefore, both a productive cohabitation and a tension between parliaments and political parties. They overlap but also perform different functions. Parliaments are core public institutions, but they at the same time also perform a fundamental role in linking citizens, political parties, and organised interests in society with the institutions of the state, notably government and the public administration. How parliaments interact with governments varies: in parliamentary systems, there is a form of government-parliament fusion, whereas in division of powers systems, each core institution has an independent source of power, and they interact through a system of checks and balances.

The basic functions parliaments perform are as Beetham outlines in the IPU report authored by Beetham (2006:5):

- Law-making;
- approval of taxation and expenditure, generally in the context of the national budget;
- oversight of executive actions, policy and personnel;
- ratification of treaties and monitoring of treaty bodies;
- debating issues of national and international moment;
- hearing and redressing grievances;
- approving constitutional change.

Beetham in the IPU report (2006:6) sums up the democratic contribution of parliament in the following manner: “Parliament ... makes a vital contribution to democracy at many levels simultaneously. Within the institutions of government, it is the representative body through which the will of the people finds expression, in which their diversity is manifested, and in which the differences between them are debated and negotiated. At its best, parliament embodies the distinctive democratic attributes of discussion and compromise, as the means through which a public interest is realised that is more than the sum of individual or sectional interests. Moreover, the effectiveness with which parliament carries out its central functions of legislation, budgetary control and oversight of the executive is essential to the quality of democratic

life. In carrying out these tasks, it works together with the associations of civil society and has the distinctive responsibility of safeguarding the individual democratic rights of citizens. It can only do all this, finally, if it itself observes democratic norms, by showing itself open, accessible and accountable to the electorate in its own mode of operation.” A democratic parliament is supposed to be: representative, transparent, accessible, accountable, and effective.

Table 3: The Beetham et al. (2008) questions versus the disconnects assessment

The Beetham et al. (2008) assessment questions specifically on parties	Relationship to the disconnects framework
How independent is the parliament or legislature of the executive, and how freely are its members able to express their opinions?	RE: c) biased/distorted horizontal—inter-institutional—links b) weakened internal operation
How extensive and effective are the powers of the legislature to initiate, scrutinize and amend legislation?	RE: b) weakened internal operation
How extensive and effective are the powers of the legislature to oversee the executive and hold it to account?	RE: c) biased/distorted horizontal—inter-institutional—links
How rigorous are the procedures for approval and supervision of taxation and public expenditure?	RE: b) weakened internal operation
How freely are all parties and groups able to organise within the parliament or legislature and contribute to its work?	RE: b) weakened internal operation
How extensive are the procedures of the parliament or legislature for consulting the public and relevant interests across the range of its work?	RE: a) weakened vertical links/connects
How accessible are elected representatives to their constituents?	RE: a) weakened vertical links/connects
How well does the parliament or legislature provide a forum for deliberation and debate on issues of public concern?	RE: a,b,c)

Table 3 presents the questions that inform the parliament-portion of the Beetham et al. (2008) democratic audit. We have specified how this is reflected in the overview of dimensions that we provide based on the representative disconnects. There is a closer correspondence between our framework and the questions Beetham et al. (2008) presented for the assessment of parliaments than for parties.

With regard to parliaments, these questions and the framework on the parliamentary contribution to democracy in Beetham (2005) help discern possible sources of parliament-centred representative disconnect. We complement these with a survey of the literature on parliaments. Before spelling out these forms of disconnect, it should be noted that the very notion of disconnect is not theory independent. For instance, from a public choice perspective that highlights the principal-agent dimension, we can group problems under such headings as democratic delegation problems and agency problems (adverse selection and moral hazard) (Strøm et al. 2003). Our approach is not tied to a specific theory but is rather intended to be accommodating of multiple theoretical approaches.

3.5 In search of disconnect-democracy indicators on parliaments

We can group disconnect under three core headings, which speak to two principal forms of disconnect. One is that parliaments are disconnected from all relevant actors that it is supposed to cater to. The other is that it is losing power in relation to other parts and institutions of the political system and is accordingly becoming increasingly incapable of ensuring that the will and interests of those it claims to represent are what is actually carried out by the government, administration and courts. These observations are summed up in three dimensions of disconnect:

1) **weakened vertical links/connects:**

- to the population (composition out of synch with population/serious social biases in composition; exclusion of marginalised voices);
- to the political parties;
- to organise society;
- to the media/social communication;
- in a multilevel politics setting.

2) **weakened internal operation:**

- lack of resources;
- lack of knowledge;
- lack of competence;
- lack of transparency.

3) **biased/distorted horizontal—inter-institutional—links:**

- executive dominance;
- technocracy;
- juridification.

The questions will be tailored to take these dimensions into account. In the following, we specify what each disconnect entails in more concrete terms.

With regard to a) **weakened vertical links/connects**, the most obvious weakening of links to citizens is when there are formal and informal barriers to participation, through legal and other regulations and arrangements. This has been a recurrent issue in the U.S. Another problem is gerrymandering, or the tailoring of constituency bounds to serve partisan ends rather than fairly reflecting popular composition. Both instances are about manipulation and can be dealt with through the analysis of elections and election procedures.

A source of disconnect is when parliaments are not properly reflective of the popular composition or when certain groups are underrepresented in parliament's composition. Efforts to bridge

such gaps may include special provisions for marginalised groups to ensure a better match between parliament and the popular composition of society.

A further source of vertical disconnect is when parliament and/or its representatives are inaccessible to the public or interest groups (subject to transparency procedures and lobby registration, etc.). A vertical disconnect also appears if and insofar as citizens are not kept well-informed of parliament's work.

A vertical disconnect may also occur in multilevel systems insofar as there is no or little contact between parliaments at different levels (upwards to supranational-transnational-intergovernmental levels and downwards to regional-local levels), or complex interdependence and unclear/overlapping competencies across levels of governing (Däuble et al. 2018).

A clear example of disconnect is when decision-making is moved to bodies beyond the state, where parliaments are less able to exercise control. Weiler's argument that the executive re-constitutes itself as the legislature where law-making occurs beyond the state is a particularly apposite example.

With regard to **b) weakened internal operation**, this is mainly about the organisation, resource basis, and internal operation of parliament. It of course relates to a) and c), which highlight parliament's various relations. Parliament's relations with society and other parts of the state are profoundly affected by parliament's own resources, where parliament should have full control of its own budget. Parliament also requires its own non-partisan professional staff that is separate from the civil service to ensure a measure of organisational independence. In other words, we can consider such instances where parliament is dependent on other institutions for its agenda-setting and internal operations as a form of disconnect because such forms of dependence hamper parliament's ability to instruct and hold other institutions to account. Parliamentary dependence on other institutions in terms of knowledge, expertise and resources suggests that parliament cannot exercise its functions properly.

With regard to **c) biased/distorted horizontal—inter-institutional—links**, this dimension contains three elements, all of which speak to parliament being bypassed, sidelined or domineered by other institutional bodies/systems. These are: executive dominance, technocracy and juridification. These three forms of external control are not watertight compartments and may reinforce each other. But the three generally speaking link to different institutions taking over/sidelining parliaments. Executive dominance is, as the name suggests, directly linked to the government and those political bodies it directly controls; technocracy can include the government but is generally speaking foremostly associated with governing agencies and agencification; and juridification is associated with court-based rule.

In addition to these three forms, we may also consider the role of parties here. To what extent have parties been partly responsible for any poor performance of parliaments? This would be the case if and insofar as parties are more interested in controlling parliaments than in electing good parliamentarians.

With regard to executive dominance, this should be contrasted to executive presence, which refers to the important role of the executive to execute parliament's will. A dysfunctional exec-

utive is itself a form of disconnect because citizens have no assurance that their will is carried out.

Executive dominance, however, refers to a severe **imbalance** in executive-legislative relations. It exists when executives either lack proper democratic authorisation or too easily escape meaningful accountability to the people through their popularly elected bodies, and where there are strong asymmetries of information that hugely favour executives over parliaments: those who need to be controlled over those who are supposed to exercise control.

The sources of executive dominance may relate to the nature and actions of executives, but they cannot be confined to the executive. The nature and (in)action of relevant controlling agents also matter. For instance, parliaments may engender dominance if they increase arbitrariness (e.g., by compelling executives to strike informal deals or by undermining or sidestepping minority rights and the role of courts). Further, the basic structure within which executive-legislative relations unfold can engender executive dominance by heightening vulnerability to societal or other actors or increasing arbitrariness through inadequate institutional and legal-constitutional arrangements.

We can speak of three forms of executive dominance (Fossum and Laycock 2021). The first is executive control of decision-making at the same level of governing and is the most obvious aspect of executive dominance. It refers to an executive-legislative imbalance through a very high measure of executive control of decision-making. This involves the executive setting the agenda for the legislature, effectively formulating the set of policy option choices, directing or determining the legislature's choice among the alternatives specified, being in charge of implementing its selected policy options, and playing a central role in dealing with popular feedback. Thus, a system marked by executive dominance more or less reverses the parliamentary principle of formal executive responsibility to the legislature.

Table 4: Dimensions, indicators and operationalisation of parliamentary disconnect

Dimensions	Indicators	Operationalisation/measurement
weakened vertical links/connects	Changes in interaction between parliaments and citizens, political parties, media/social communication and institutions in multilevel governance structures.	Parliament is out of sync with the public (the population at large is not being accurately reflected in the composition of parliament) Strong social biases in parliament's composition Exclusion of marginalised voices in parliament Decline in the connection between parliaments in a multilevel system (for example, a decline in contact between the EU and national parliaments)

Table 4: Dimensions, indicators and operationalisation of parliamentary disconnect

Dimensions	Indicators	Operationalisation/measurement
Weakened internal operation	Intra-parliament changes: changes in how parliaments interact with other political institutions, lack of resources, lack of knowledge, lack of competence and lack of transparency.	Shrinking parliament budget Diminished parliamentary control of own budget/operating conditions Decrease in parliament's own professional staff (separate from the civil service and government institutions) Increased parliamentary dependence on civil service staff or outside experts/organisations Decline of parliament's ability to set its own agenda
biased/distorted horizontal—inter-institutional—links	Executive dominance, technocracy and juridification.	An increase in the executive branch of government's control and/or capture over parliament, with the executive becoming the agenda-setter for parliament. The parliament is sidelined by the executive in constitutional amendments. Dominance increases the more the executive can operate outside of the legal remit and proper procedures. Parliament is subject to increased control or capture by technical experts and/or corporations that are not accountable to the population. Expansion of laws and regulations in a manner that increases the scope, density and influence of laws in political, social and economic activities Diminished role of government institutions because power is shifted away from administrative institutions to the judiciary

The second is executive dominance through multi-level intergovernmental dynamics and focuses more on the vertical dimension, or relations between the different levels of governance. It highlights the central role that executives occupy in multi-level governing systems structured as two-level games (cf. Putnam 1988), such as some federal systems and the EU. A hallmark of executive dominance is that executives enjoy direct and privileged access to both main levels of governance, and they can play off other actors at both levels against each other; in this way, they evade responsibility to parliaments and citizens. Policymaking in these multi-level systems takes place in a densely organised system of executive interaction. The general assumption is that the more informal and the less subject to procedures such systems are, the greater their potential for arbitrariness. When that is matched by a significant executive-legislative imbalance, in structural and resource terms, executive dominance is further enhanced.

The third is executive constitution-making or change and refers, on the one hand, to process and procedure, and on the other to substance and institutional-constitutional design. With regard

to process, the relevant scenario occurs when executives play a central role in constitutional amendment, while legislatures and direct popular input through referendums play limited roles, typically at the end of a complex process, thus limiting citizens' collective responses to a mere aggregated yes or no. This type of domination, while not constitutionally lacking foundations, gives executive officials a unique role in shaping the very nature of the polity. Again, it matters considerably whether the procedures are legally entrenched and complied with or whether they are more informal or ad hoc, with considerable executive leverage in their design and execution.

3.6 The Macro-Level: Representative disconnect versus regime change

In the following, we will present the problem of regime change, more specifically associated with profound autocratisation. A full-fledged system of autocracy, even if it may include parties, represents the abrogation of party politics and party democracy as well as parliaments and parliamentary democracy.

The fact that in the contemporary world autocratisation is often an ongoing process rather than an abrupt regime change makes it more difficult to draw a clear line between what constitutes a disconnect and what does not. A further important issue is to establish what might count as rectifiable and what might count as non-rectifiable forms of representative disconnect. Is this about the type of disconnect, or is it about the magnitude of disconnect (number or salience)? Is it about the longevity of disconnect, or is it about the system-threatening nature of disconnect? These questions bring us from disconnect to demise and the problem of autocracy and autocratisation.

Michael Zürn (2024: 65) defines autocracy as a political form of rule "in which different types of rulers (1) claim to exercise (depending on the type) far-reaching power and limit or prevent opposition, (2) claim to represent the people as a whole along with different legitimisation narratives depending on the variant, and (3) insist on a one-sided (or possessive) understanding of public authority, the manner of enforcement of which can vary." Autocracies claim and assert control of identities and values; the configuration of interests; and the institutional arrangements in a non-pluralist and top-down manner.

It is obvious that an autocratic regime is undemocratic. Does that mean that a hallmark of autocratic regimes is non-connection or lack of any representative connection? Or is this not about connectivity as such but how that is structured and conducted? It is clear that autocratisation often attacks parties and parliaments as forms of representative connection. These questions suggest that when discussing disconnects against autocratisation, we need to be particularly attentive to the relationship between disconnects on the one hand and democracy and citizens' rights on the other.

Autocracies fail to offer any semblance of public control with political equality, which is the audit's democratic baseline. But does that rule out that autocracies may harbour forms of connectedness that would qualify under the heading of representative connect? An autocratic regime can be responsive to citizens' wishes, which therefore suggests a form of connection. Consider

the cases of Singapore and China. As Schäfer and Zürn note, for these cases, “(p)ursuit of the common good is a recognisable component of their policy, and they can claim considerable progress in combating poverty in particular. These states demonstrate that social progress is possible without those in power being subject to democratic oversight and without individual rights being guaranteed; in this way, they undermine the notion, entertained especially after 1989, that there is no alternative to liberal democracy” (Schäfer and Zürn 2024:3). These authoritarian systems present themselves as alternatives to liberal democracies and boast a measure of output legitimacy. But there is hardly any input legitimacy and limited throughput legitimacy. Citizens have no assurance that their wishes will be respected. This underlines the fact that it is not connectedness as such that is the key, but whether or to what extent there are democratic institutions capable of upholding a representative relationship that is properly multidirectional and where citizens have the ultimate power to decide the terms of this interaction.

A critical issue that requires further attention is: Does autocratisation require the need for us to reconceive the representative disconnect? Is there a need for underlining other sets of factors? Or is the main issue to tailor the categories listed above to the autocratic context? If so, is it mainly about amplifying some of those discussed under the heading of disconnect in democratic societies?

With regard to the first question, that of reconceiving the representative disconnect, it is clear that an assessment of autocratisation needs to place particular emphasis on the role of the law and rights, as part of a shift in governing from law-based to (arbitrary) politics-based. More concretely, particular emphasis needs to be placed on rights violations/undermining of citizens’ rights and any semblance of a free and open civil society. Further, explicit attention must be placed on efforts at legal backsliding through undermining the integrity of courts, as well as forms of legal-constitutional backsliding through undermining the role of parliaments as representative bodies proper. Attention must also be paid to the role of political culture and communication, especially with regard to fake news and manipulation.

During processes of autocratisation, we also need to look at politicians’ and, in particular, political leaders’ role-conceptions. We can consider the demands of public office as a particular form of responsibility (for this notion, see Mair 2013). This links directly with the notion of appropriateness: there are certain structured expectations that others hold of certain offices, in particular offices that are attributed with great power, authority and dignity. Office-holders have particular responsibilities in acting in conformity with core norms. This is both about policy substance and political symbolism. Politicians themselves undermine the norm of responsibility. How then to think of responsiveness when politicians no longer abide by the basic norms of responsibility?

These observations and reflections show that autocratisation activates more of the representative ecology and brings it into direct contact with other, more familiar forms of representative disconnect. Undermining rights and the rule of law is undermining the institutional and normative infrastructure that ensures that there can be a viable representative connection in the first place.

4 Cases

The framework developed above will be applied to a range of cases in Europe, across levels of governing to include the EU, a select number of EU member states, as well as some key affiliated non-members. Each country case will consist of a statement outlining the key features characterising the case at hand, complemented with responses to the questions posed in Tables 2 and 4. Several country pilot studies have been written up to test the usefulness of the tables. One important lesson thus far is that it is important to be clear on the systemic dimension. It is quite easy to point to disconnects, but whether these constitute systemic flaws or party systems operate with some dysfunctional elements is important to clarify. The autocratisation threat underlines the need for such a distinction because it is possible to fall into either an underestimation or an overestimation trap when it comes to representative disconnects.

The reports on the cases will be written up by the UiO team and published as an addendum to this deliverable, after an appropriate discussion with all the country experts involved in the REDIRECT project. The data will be discerned from REDIRECT's findings, complemented with its sister projects and broad surveys of academic literature and public documents. Each country report will be sent to one or several country experts for critical assessment before it is circulated to the REDIRECT consortium.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to outline the framework for a democratic audit and devise that in such a manner as to capture the three forms of representative disconnect that REDIRECT operates with: an intermediation disconnect, a governance and accountability disconnect, and an affective disconnect. What this report therefore provides is the basic framework for a representative disconnect democratic audit, which needs to ensure that the assessment of representative disconnects is tailored to the democratic dimension, and that we can read out from assessments of democratic problems what forms of representative disconnects are involved. This report's strong emphasis on representative disconnects naturally highlighted the core representative-democratic institutions involved, namely parties and parliaments. It surveyed the literature in search of proper indicators. The democratic audit framework is useful for ensuring that these institutions are assessed with a proper view to the broader representative ecology within which parties and parliaments are embedded. The report also points to the autocratisation challenge, and queries how and in what sense that dovetails with representative disconnects. The problem of autocratisation, often a gradual and subtle process of undermining democratic institutions from within (without formally abolishing them), puts the issue of assessing disconnects in a somewhat new light. If we overstate the problem of disconnects, we may implicitly serve the autocratisation cause. Conversely, if we understate the problem of disconnects, we may miss out on the gradual deterioration of systems. These observations underline the need for paying sufficient attention to the systemic dimension involved.

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