

# No democracy without active democrats

Sascha Kneip and Bernhard Weßels

For its long-term survival, democracy depends on active democrats. Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the Weimar Republic, elected almost exactly 100 years ago, knew about this condition early on (“democracy needs democrats”), and he would not be the only one. The great liberal sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, who in his later years had a special connection to the WZB as a research professor, also believed that liberal democracy would only survive in the long term if it rested on two things: the rule of law and a well-functioning civil society with its associated attitudes, virtues, and institutions. While the rule of law seems to be alive and well, for the most part (even if current trends in Poland, Hungary, and other places do raise some serious doubts), it is rather the state of civil society that is disconcerting today – and arguably should be disconcerting.

Democracy, after all, seems to be running out of democrats. Universal support for democracy as a form of political order seems to have diminished. One thing we know for certain is that the share of active democrats is getting smaller. Party membership is on the decline in nearly all democracies, and voter turnout is decreasing in many countries. Political parties and organizations are no longer as embedded in society as they once were. Citizens get less and less involved in large mass organizations.

Some are alienated from the democratic system and dissatisfied with the way democracy works and the outcomes the process is producing. Likewise, we are seeing a decline in non-institutionalized forms of political participation, such as taking part in demonstrations, initiating petitions, flash mobs, and other forms of protest. That decline is even more pronounced among the young than in the average population. Active democrats who are able and willing to defend liberal democracy against the damage done by illiberal governments seem to be in short supply throughout the developed world. Sometimes it seems that those who do take to the streets are, in fact, not out to defend the liberal principles of democracy, but rather want to see them weakened. In other words, public discourse (“the people versus democracy”) gives the impression that twenty-first-century democracy is slowly but steadily running out of democrats.

But is that impression correct? In reality, the situation is not as dramatic as these discourses suggest. At least over the past fifteen years, the proportion of those who say it is essential to them to live in a democracy has not declined in Germany. That said, the proportion of those under 30 years of age who agree with that statement is certainly lower – and

“There seems to be ample evidence that our democracy is taken for granted by many people – its vulnerability and fragility is often overlooked.”

the gap with the other age groups has grown somewhat over the past fifteen years. Does this mean we are facing a shortage in the supply of young democrats? Do we find commitment to democracy to be lacking?

When it comes to Germany, this doesn't really apply, especially because we should distinguish between people's attitudes towards democracy as an ideal, and the functioning of democracy, to arrive at a meaningful assessment. For example, the data of the 2012 European Social Survey show that 84 percent of respondents in Germany believe that free elections and the rule of law are absolutely essential for democracy – and those 84 percent are those who chose the highest value on an 11-point scale for both elements of democracy. Among those younger than 30, a group especially important for the future of democracy, the corresponding share is 78 percent. This is somewhat lower, but not dramatically so. The European average on this question mirrors Germany's results with a small but not catastrophic reduction.

In their assessment of democratic performance, by contrast, people's views are not quite as favorable. In Germany, only about 40 percent of respondents, both young and old, agree with the statement that

free elections and the rule of law are fully realized. Germany is a positive outlier in this regard, as the European average of citizens agreeing with this statement is a mere 20 percent. This means there certainly is a substantial proportion of “dissatisfied democrats,” who think the two core elements of democracy – free elections and the rule of law – are essential but not fully satisfied in practice. Given that these people generally have a positive attitude towards democracy, they are not much of a problem for the future of democracy. On the contrary, they are most likely the ones who will fight for the preservation and ongoing development of democracy.

The challenge for democracy arises instead from those citizens who are not fully committed to democratic principles and are dissatisfied with democratic performance. In Germany, the share of this group amounts to no more than 12 percent, below the European average of 17 percent. It is this group that populist parties are enaging and working to mobilize.

Democracy can certainly tolerate having 15 to 20 percent of citizens dissatisfied and, for the time being, that level of disagreement does not endanger the future of democracy. However, there is much to

suggest that democracy is being taken for granted by many – and especially the youth – and its vulnerability and fragility is often overlooked. Democracy is a collective good achieved through extensive historical struggle and preserving it requires active democratic practice. Raising awareness of this issue will be crucial to the future stability and functioning of democratic governance. Citizens must remain engaged, and by and large, they are – for now. A severe crisis of democracy is not to be expected in the future, but it would be unwise to underestimate the dangers it faces.

*Sascha Kneip is a research fellow in the research unit Democracy and Democratization.*

*Bernhard Weßels is deputy director of the research unit Democracy and Democratization and a professor at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin.*



### Click, clack, ding!

When Lord Ralf Dahrendorf arrived at the WZB as a research professor in 2005, the institute was of course equipped with state-of-the-art office technology, including computers and LAN networks. However, the German-British sociologist, politician, and writer (born 1929) wanted to remain loyal to mechanics. He asked his assistant Birgit Hahn to purchase the above-pictured Olivetti “Lettera 42” typewriter at an online auction. In 2009, the WZB dedicated its in-house font, developed by designer Stefan Huber, to the great researcher and typographical eccentric. The present publication is set in “Dahrendorf” as well.

*Typewriter “from Ralf Dahrendorf’s former office at the WZB” (Photo: Heiko Huber).*