

Semi-open panel: Search movements in democracy research

Second International Conference on Political Theory, „Backsliding, Resilience, Renewal? Democracy in Eras of Transformation“, October 5–7, 2026, University of Passau, Germany.

Panel Chairs: Norma Osterberg-Kaufmann (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and Christoph Mohamad-Klotzbach (Universität Würzburg)

Abstract:

Democracy research faces an urgent challenge: how can it renew itself in response to the growing gap between citizens' commitment to the idea of democracy and their deepening dissatisfaction with its practice? Across the globe, people continue to profess democratic ideals - yet trust in democratic institutions is steadily eroding. Elections are held, parties compete, parliaments legislate, and still, many citizens feel unheard, unseen, and unrepresented. This dissonance raises a crucial question: do the criteria and conceptual frameworks that underpin democracy research still suffice to explain what democracy is and what it might become?

Building on Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions, this panel conceptualizes the current moment as one of paradigmatic crisis. Paradigms, understood as shared frameworks of theories, values, and methods, enter crisis when anomalies accumulate, when established models of thought can no longer account for emerging realities. Much of democracy research continues to operate within a liberal-procedural paradigm centered on elections, institutions, and formal representation. Yet, a growing number of approaches now question and expand these assumptions, generating what Kuhn called a "search movement": a phase of theoretical exploration preceding a possible paradigm shift.

Papers:

The Dual Crisis of Liberalism and the Paradigm of Democracy

Osterberg-Kaufmann, Norma; Schäfer, Saskia (both HU-Berlin); Mohamad-Klotzbach, Christoph (Universität Würzburg); Bein, Simon (Universität Regensburg); Boese-Schlosser, Vanessa (WZB Berlin); Selk, Veith (Universität Wien)

The paper conceptualizes the current dysfunctionality of liberal democracy as a dual political and scientific crisis and argues for a reflexive, interdisciplinary search for a new paradigm capable of renewing democracy research beyond the limits of liberalism.

Generative Democracy (Research)

Mohamad-Klotzbach, Christoph (Universität Würzburg)

Democracy is understood as a dynamic, self-generating, and continuously evolving societal condition whose openness and adaptability shape not only political practice but also academic inquiry, making the study of democracy itself a generative part of democratic development.

Decolonializing „Decolonializing Deliberative Democracy“

Dannica Fleuß (Universität Heidelberg)

The paper critically examines how current attempts to decolonize deliberative democracy may themselves reproduce epistemic hierarchies, calling for a reflexive "decolonialization" of the very discourse of decolonization.

Description of intended presenters:

The intended presenters are scholars working at the intersection of democratic theory, empirical democracy research, political philosophy, and the sociology of knowledge, who engage in critical and reflexive inquiries into the conceptual and methodological foundations of democracy research, and share an interest in rethinking democracy beyond the liberal paradigm.

They include both early-career and established scholars, fostering an intergenerational dialogue on the future of democracy research.

Open for 2 more papers.