

What is Digital Democracy?

Prof. Christian Fuchs
Paderborn University
Department of Media Studies
Media Systems and Media
Organisation Research Group
christian.fuchs@uni-paderborn.de
<https://fuchsc.net>
<https://fuchschristian.bsky.social/>



Structure

1. Introduction
2. Models of Democracy
3. Models of Digital Democracy
4. Conclusion

1. Introduction

Introduction

This typeface book invites the reader to join in on a voyage of discovery through the jungle of typeface variety. It should be regarded as both a typeface definition book and as a typeface compass with the aid of which the traveller arrives safely and speedily in the harbour of the "one and only right typeface".

This book addresses first and foremost the typographical artist who is looking for a certain typeface, and although the notion of this typeface is not yet tangibly clear, his feeling him with certainty of what he is looking for—a typeface complete congruity with the message it is meant to convey. It is no use at all to typographers looking for a standard gravity of grey-value with minus 1) over all medium presump-

Interdisciplinary Knowledge Base on Digital Democracy

Authors

Christian Fuchs, Kevin Friesch, Joel Museba (Paderborn University);
Laurien Coenen, Victor Werimo (KU Leuven);
Octavio Barriuso Varela, Andrés del Alamo Cienfuegos (Fundación Cibervoluntarios);
Hasan Suzen (Hybrid Core);
Fatih Yilmaz, Derek Metivier, H. Turner (Beyond the Horizon)



2. What is Digital Democracy?

Author:

Christian Fuchs (Paderborn University, Germany)

2.1. Introduction

This chapter wants to answer the question: What is digital democracy? In order to provide an answer, we need to first outline what democracy is all about (section 2.2). After that, we will discuss definitions of digital democracy and outline a comprehensive understanding and model of digital democracy (section 2.3). The public sphere and political deliberation, that is, debate and communication on issues that matter for a political community and society, are two important aspects of democracy. Therefore, we also engage with the notions of the digital public sphere and digital deliberation (section 2.4). The section concludes by summarising the main findings.

Understanding digital democracy has become an urgent matter, given the multiple threats that digital technologies pose to democratic processes and values. Digital environments present numerous challenges, including digital capitalism, which creates monopolistic structures; surveillance by state and corporate actors; and the growth of anti-social media platforms that serve as vehicles for authoritarian ideologies. Other problems include algorithmic manipulation via automated bots, the fragmentation of public discourse into homogeneous filter bubbles, the prevalence of tabloid-style content, influencer-capitalism that commodifies political engagement, and the acceleration of information consumption, which puts a strain on attention capacity. These digital spaces also facilitate the widespread circulation of fake news and post-truth politics, contributing to a lack of trust in expertise and the emotionalisation of political discourse. In order to counter these threats, it is essential to strengthen digital democracy. However, this requires establishing a solid conceptual foundation that clarifies what digital democracy actually means, what models exist for its implementation and how democratic principles can be effectively translated into digital contexts. This chapter contributes to this task of elaborating conceptual foundations of digital democracy.

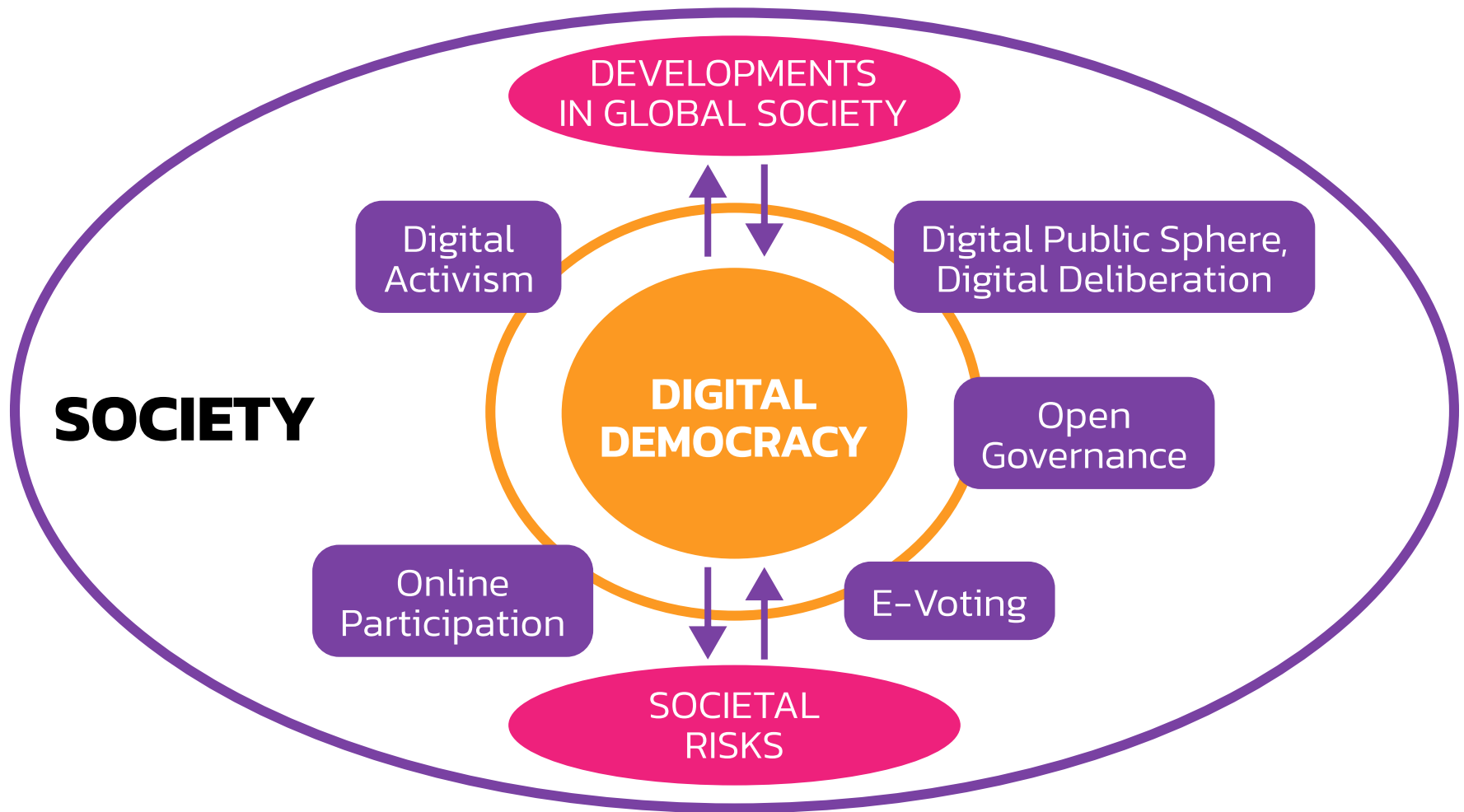
2.2. Democracy

The Contested History of Democracy

The two political scientists Mendonça and Asenbaum (2025) argue that deliberative democracy as institution, theory/scholarship, and practice is “deeply rooted in Western thought” (2), which could be overcome, among other things, by Western scholars entering into “a genuine dialogue with scholars from the Global South” (2) as well as taking serious and supporting “scholarly contributions of the Global South” that are “virtually absent from the literature canon on deliberative democracy” (9).

The epistemic injustice of not recognising scholarship, knowledge, and practices from the Global South certainly does not apply to deliberative democracy, but democracy in general. The origins of democracy are often associated with Ancient Greece and the development of the Western world. For example, the political theorist Bernard Crick writes in *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction*: “The invention of democracy and *political* rule, and then the tradition of governing by means of political debate among citizens, has its roots in the practices and thoughts of the Greek *polis* and the ancient

Structure

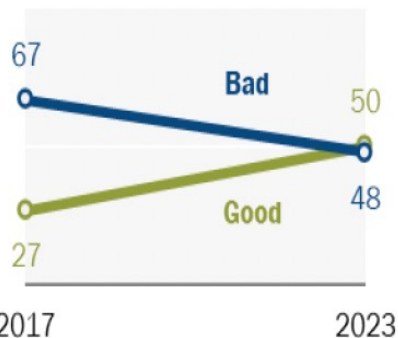


Support for rule by a strong leader has increased in 8 surveyed countries

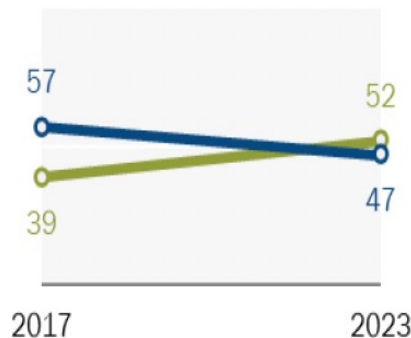
% who say a system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts would be a **good/bad** way of governing their country

2024 global survey on political attitudes conducted in 24 countries, N=30,861

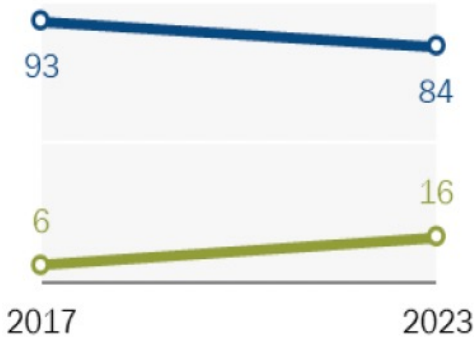
Mexico



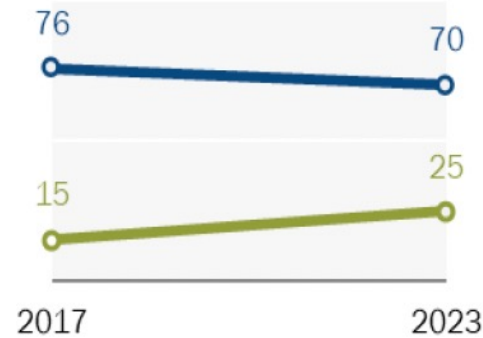
Kenya



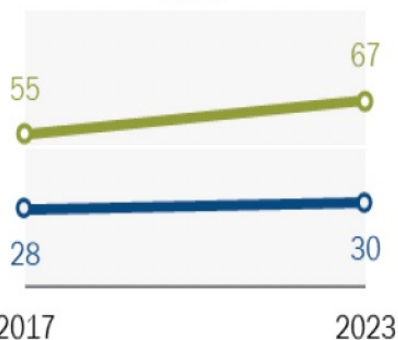
Germany



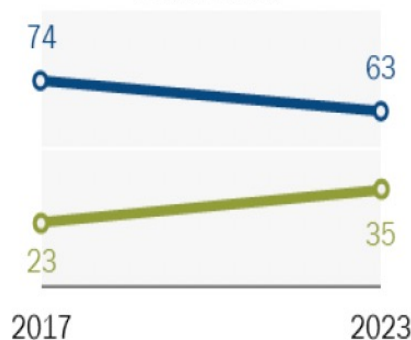
Poland



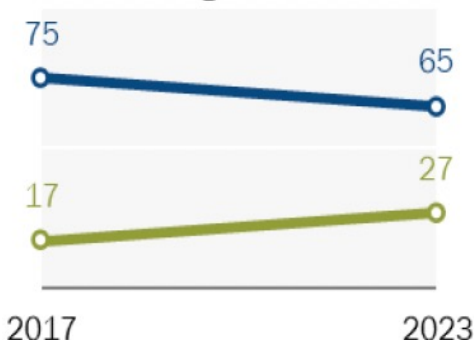
India



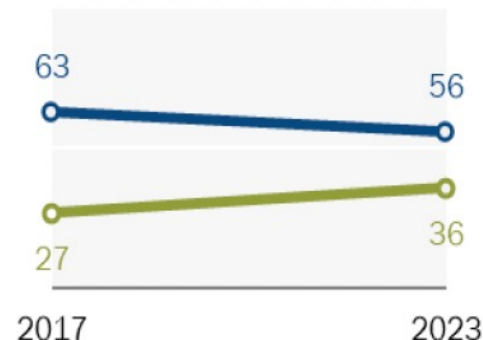
South Korea



Argentina



Brazil



1. Introduction

In a **post-democracy**, there is the danger that “the institutions of democracy [...] become a formal shell” (Crouch 2013). According to **Colin Crouch**, **illiberal, authoritarian politics** is part of **post-democracy**.

Crouch characterises **far-right extremism** as **politicised pessimistic nostalgia** is “defensive, exclusionary, potentially life-denying, and therefore liable to **violent expression**” (Crouch 2020, 97), which can lead to “a love of killing” (99).

Crouch, Colin. 2013. “Five Minutes with Colin Crouch (Interview).” *LSE Blog*, February 5, 2013.

Crouch, Colin. 2020. *Post-Democracy After the Crises*. Cambridge: Polity.

Society

Public sphere



Public information
and opinions

Economy

Resources, funding,
lobbying

Politics

Rules, regulation,
public funding,
lobbying

Culture

Skills, meanings,
worldviews,
lobbying

Society

Colonised/ feudalised public sphere



Controlled public
information and
opinions

Economy

Control by money

Politics

State control

Culture

Ideological
control

1. Introduction

The public sphere's problems include:

- The digital giants' big tech monopolies
- Fake news
- Misinformation and information manipulation
- Digital authoritarianism
- Post-truth culture
- Online hatred on anti-social social media
- Digital acceleration leaves no time for debate
- Echo chambers and filter bubbles
- Privacy violations by digital surveillance
- AI-generated algorithmic politics that downgrades human action
- Digital tabloid culture
- Influencer capitalism

1. Introduction



If (digital) democracy should be defended, then one needs to know what it is that should be defended.

Therefore, the highly topical question arises:

What is (digital) democracy?

2. Models of Democracy



2. Models of Democracy

Anthony Giddens, the duality of structure:

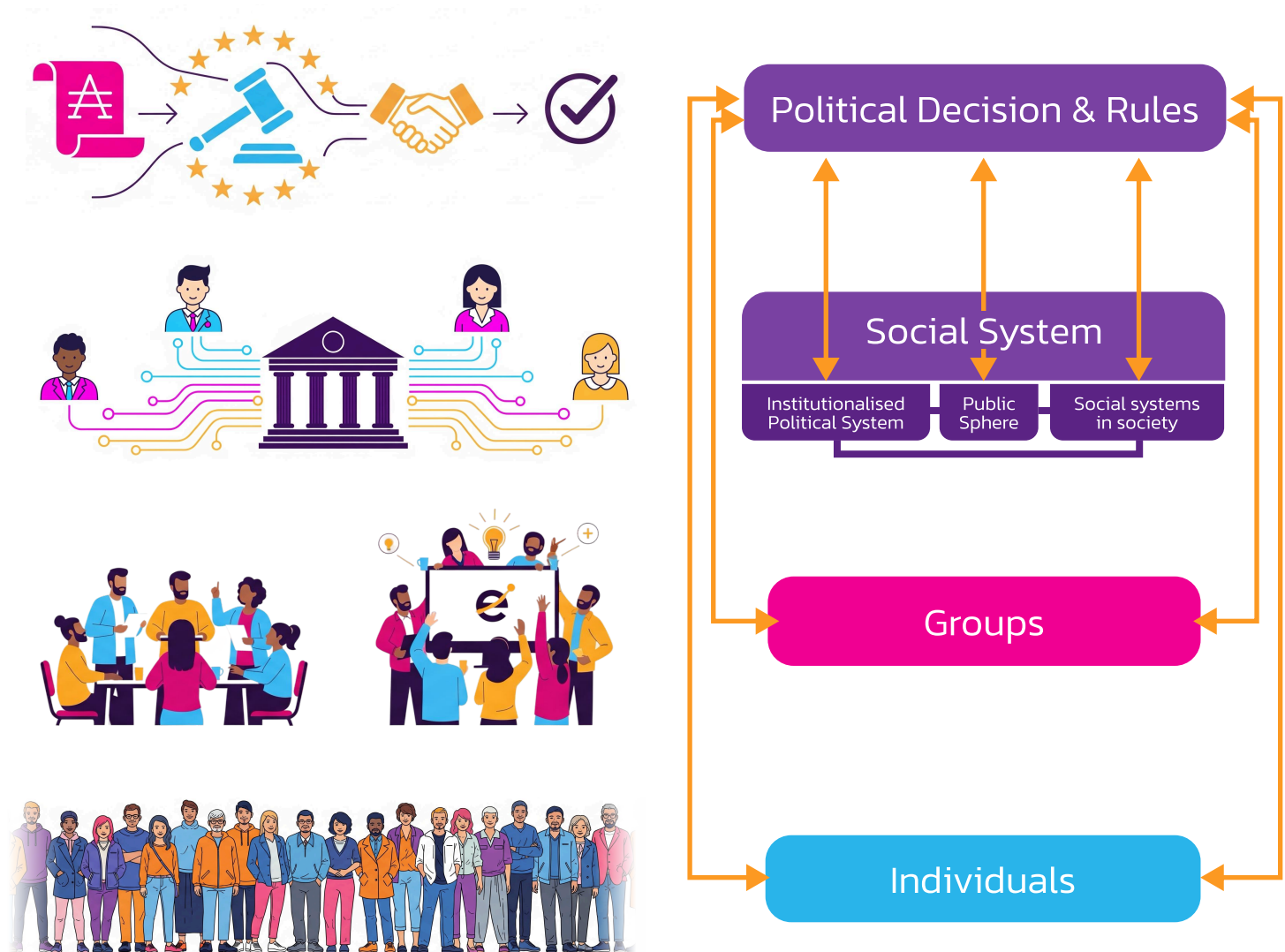
social structures and human agents

“According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize“
(Giddens 1984, 25)

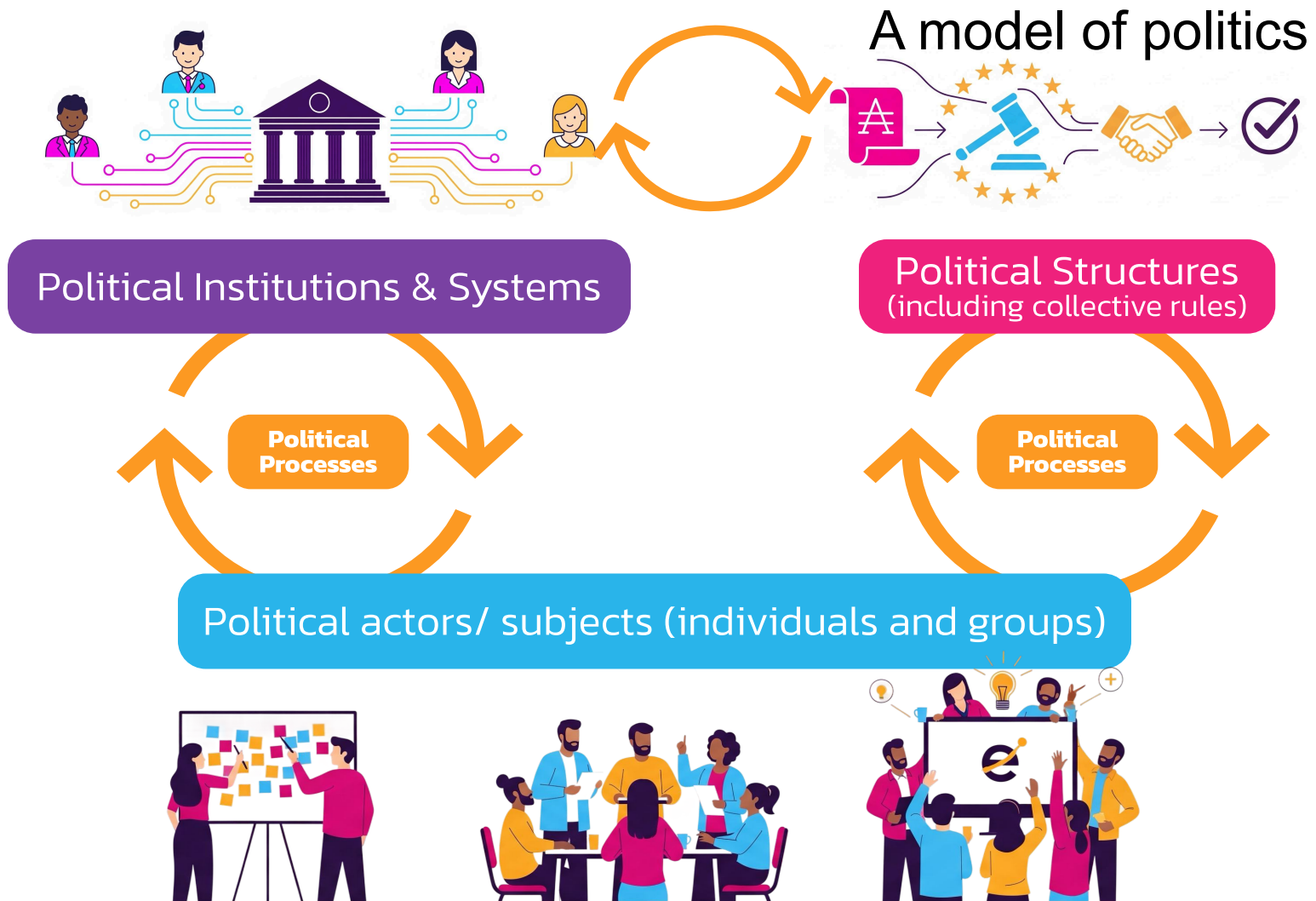
Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.

2. Models of Democracy

A model of society with a special focus on the political system and civil society



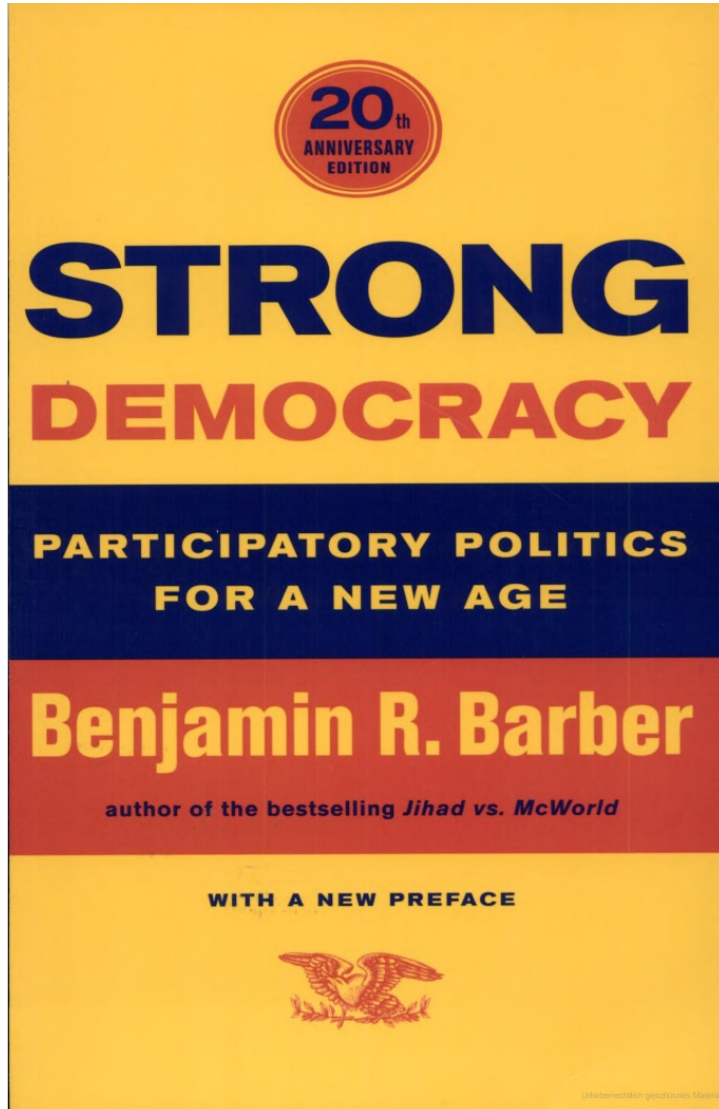
2. Models of Democracy



Political subjects, institutions, structures, and processes

2. Models of Democracy

Benjamin Barber – Strong Democracy:



Barber, Benjamin R. 2003.
Strong Democracy.
Participatory Politics for a New
Age. Berkeley, CA: University of
California Press.

2. Models of Democracy

“Strong democracy is defined by **politics in the participatory mode**: literally, it is **self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens**. Active citizens govern themselves directly here, not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is being deployed. Self-government is carried on through institutions designed to facilitate ongoing **civic participation in agenda-setting, deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation** (in the form of "common work"). (151).

2. Models of Democracy

“The crucial terms in this strong formulation of democracy are *activity, process, self-legislation, creation, and transformation*” (151).

“And the ideal ground of strong democracy is ***creative consensus*** – an agreement that arises out of **common talk, common decision, and common work**” (224).

2. Models of Democracy

A classification of some definitions of democracy provided by influential political thinkers

Definition	Subjects	Institutions	Structures	Processes	Type of Approach
Fukuyama	People, elected representatives	Government, party system		Elections,	Liberal, Representative Democracy
Schumpeter	People, elected representatives	Government	Political decisions, the common good	Elections and voting as competition and political struggle	Liberal, Representative Democracy
Mouffe, Laclau	Adversaries, people		Power relations, pluralism of parties, ideas, and values	Democratic struggles between diverse and plural adversaries for the victory of their respective political positions and for equality and liberty	Pluralist Democracy

Definition	Subjects	Institutions	Structures	Processes	Type of Approach
Rawls	Citizens organised as a public	Constitution, public sphere, deliberative legislative bodies, media that inform and do not disinform the public	Laws, independence of debates from organised interests, democratic skills and education, public reason	Political debates, public use of reason	Deliberative Democracy
Altman	Citizens	Institutions of direct voting	Laws, opinions, political issues	Voting	Direct democracy

Definition	Subjects	Institutions	Structures	Processes	Type of Approach
Pateman, Macpherson, Barber	Individuals, organisations	Participatory organisations and participatory institutions in society, democracy in society, including the workplace and civil society, beyond the political electoral system	Decisions, enabling structures and resources (time, skills, etc.)	Participation in decision-making, expansion of democracy from the electoral system into society	Participatory democracy
Bobbio	The broadest possible and feasible set of the members of society	Democratic constitution that guarantees democracy without bloodshed, government, the rule of law	Collective decisions	Democratic constitution that guarantees the rule of law without bloodshed, procedures of political participation	Constitutional democracy
Marx	The people	Democratic constitution, the state	Laws	Self-determination	Constitutional democracy

2. Models of Democracy

C. B. Macpherson (1977) introduced the notion of models of democracy: four models

Building on Macpherson, for **David Held** a model of democracy is “a theoretical construction designed to reveal and explain **the chief elements of a democratic form** and its underlying structure of relations” (Held 2006, 6),

A model of democracy identifies key features of a certain type of democracy.

Models of democracy have **multiple features**. Often these **features overlap**. They differ in respect to what feature or features they see as central.

2. Models of Democracy

Habermas (1998): three models of democracy (liberalism, republicanism, deliberative democracy)

Macpherson (1977): four models of democracy

Held (2006): 9 models

Gabardi (2001, 548): 12 models

Gabardi, Wayne. 2001. "Contemporary Models of Democracy." *Polity* 33 (4): 547–68.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *The Inclusion of the Other. Studies in Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Held, David. 2006. *Models of Democracy. 3rd Edition*. Cambridge: Polity.

Macpherson, C. B. 1977. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

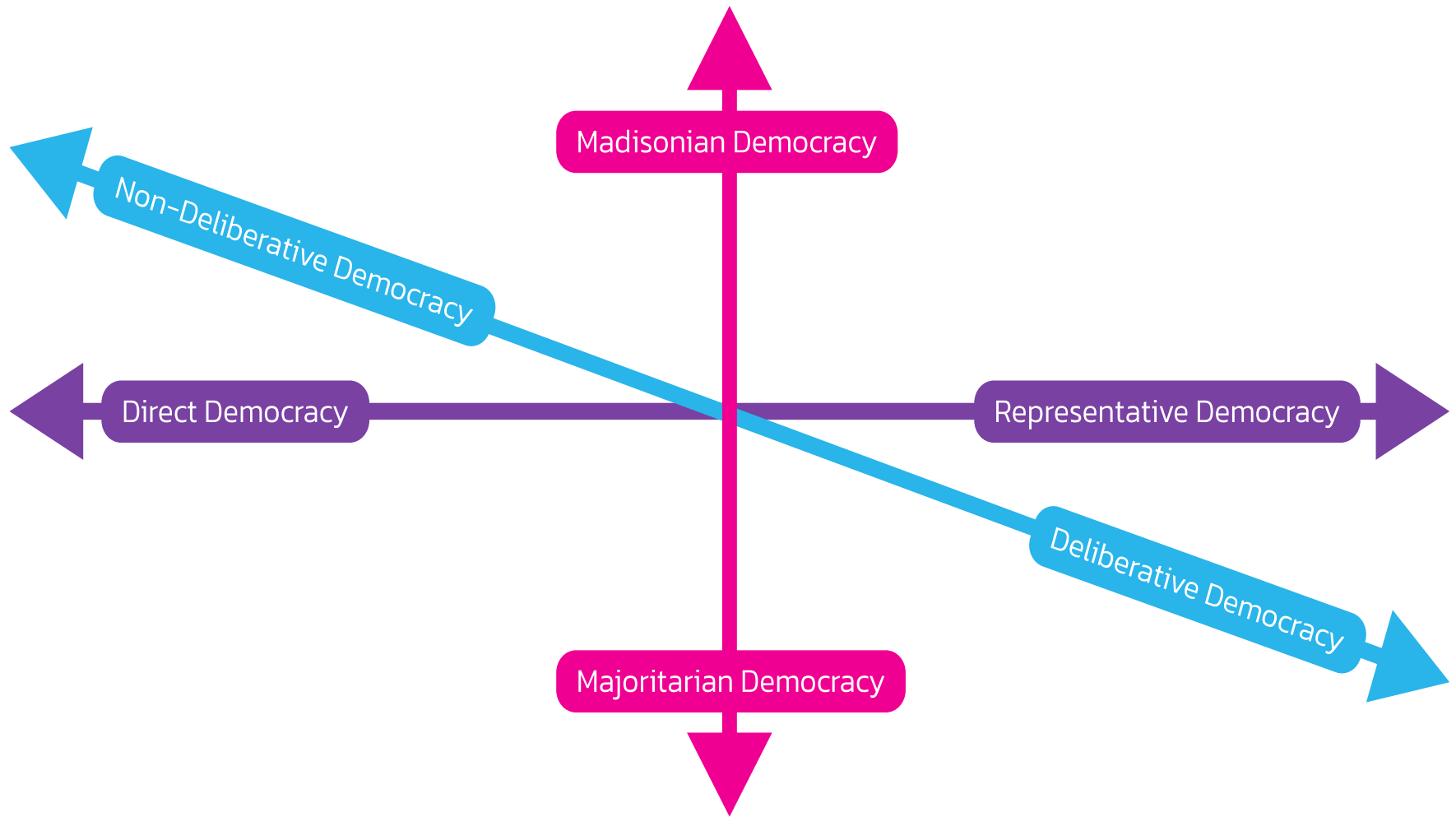
2. Models of Democracy

These authors list models but do not set out theoretically grounded typologies of democracy models and theories.

James S. Fishkin's (1991, 43) introduces a model of classifying democracies

Fishkin, James S. 1991. *Democracy and Deliberation. New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

2. Models of Democracy



Fishkin's typology does not take into account participatory democracy.

2. Models of Democracy

James **Madison** (1751-1836) was the USA's fourth president.

He opposed **the tyranny of the majority** that disrespects minority interests and argued in favour of majority rule that cares about minority interests and realises **minority rights**.

2. Models of Democracy

Democratic (formalised, partly formalised, or informal) constitutions are part of all democracies

“the system of basic rights is the prerequisite for democracy” (Abendroth 1966, 73)

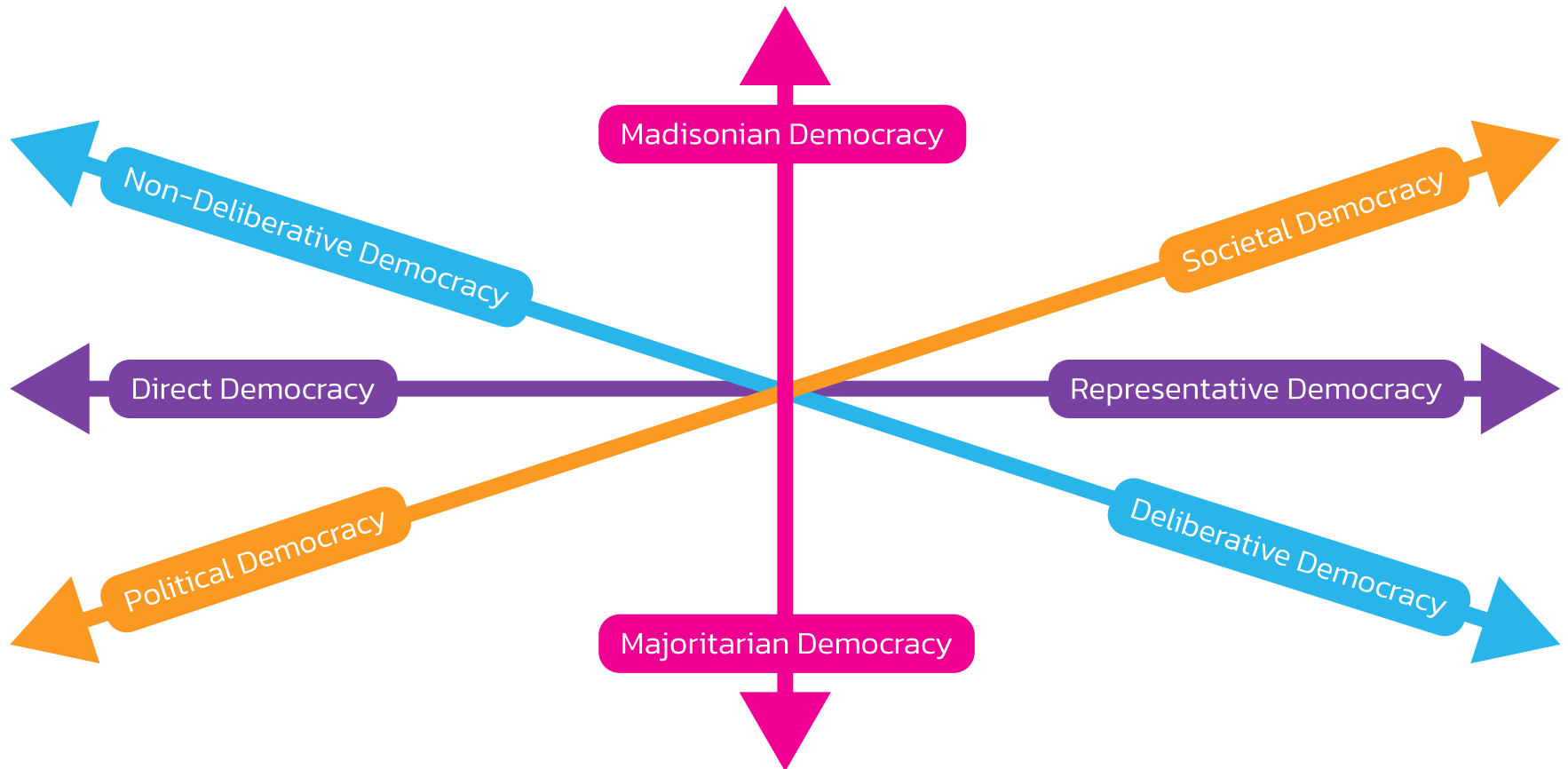
Abendroth stresses that there is no democracy without basic rights and vice versa.

Basic rights underpin all democracies => constitutionalism is part of all democracies and all typologies of democracies

Abendroth, Wolfgang. 1966. *Das Grundgesetz*. Pfullingen: Neske.

2. Models of Democracy

A four-dimensional typology of democracy and models of democracy



2. Models of Democracy

x-axis: the mode of political decision-making, distinguishing between direct citizen votes (direct democracy) and the indirect, competitive election of representatives (liberal representative democracy).

y-axis: the question of what role the protection of minority interests has (pluralist democracy).

z1-axis: describes the role of political deliberation in the political system (deliberative democracy). Z

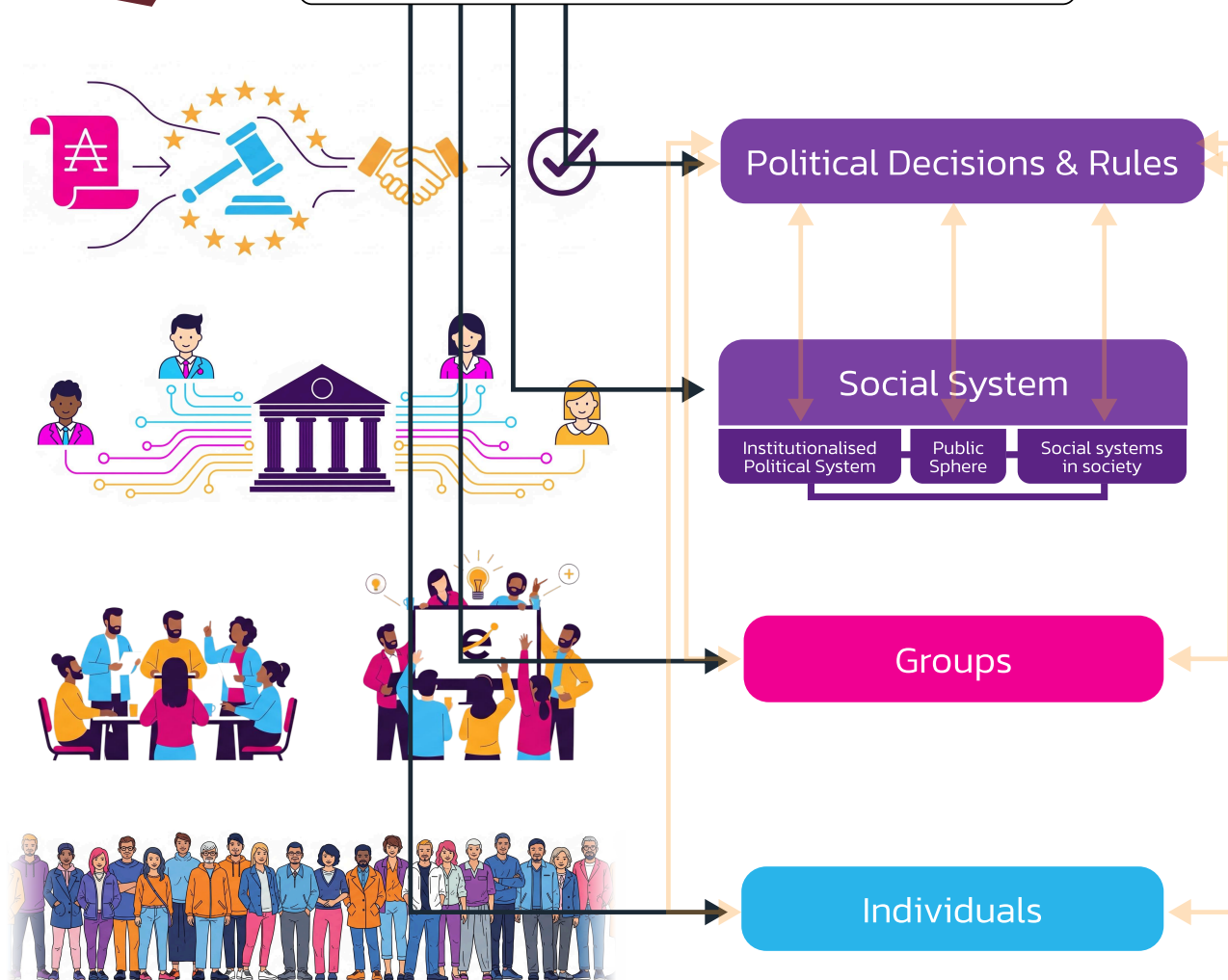
z2-axis: citizen participation's role in the political system and society at large (participatory democracy).



CONSTITUTIONALISM

Democratic constitution, rule of law, human rights, civil liberties.

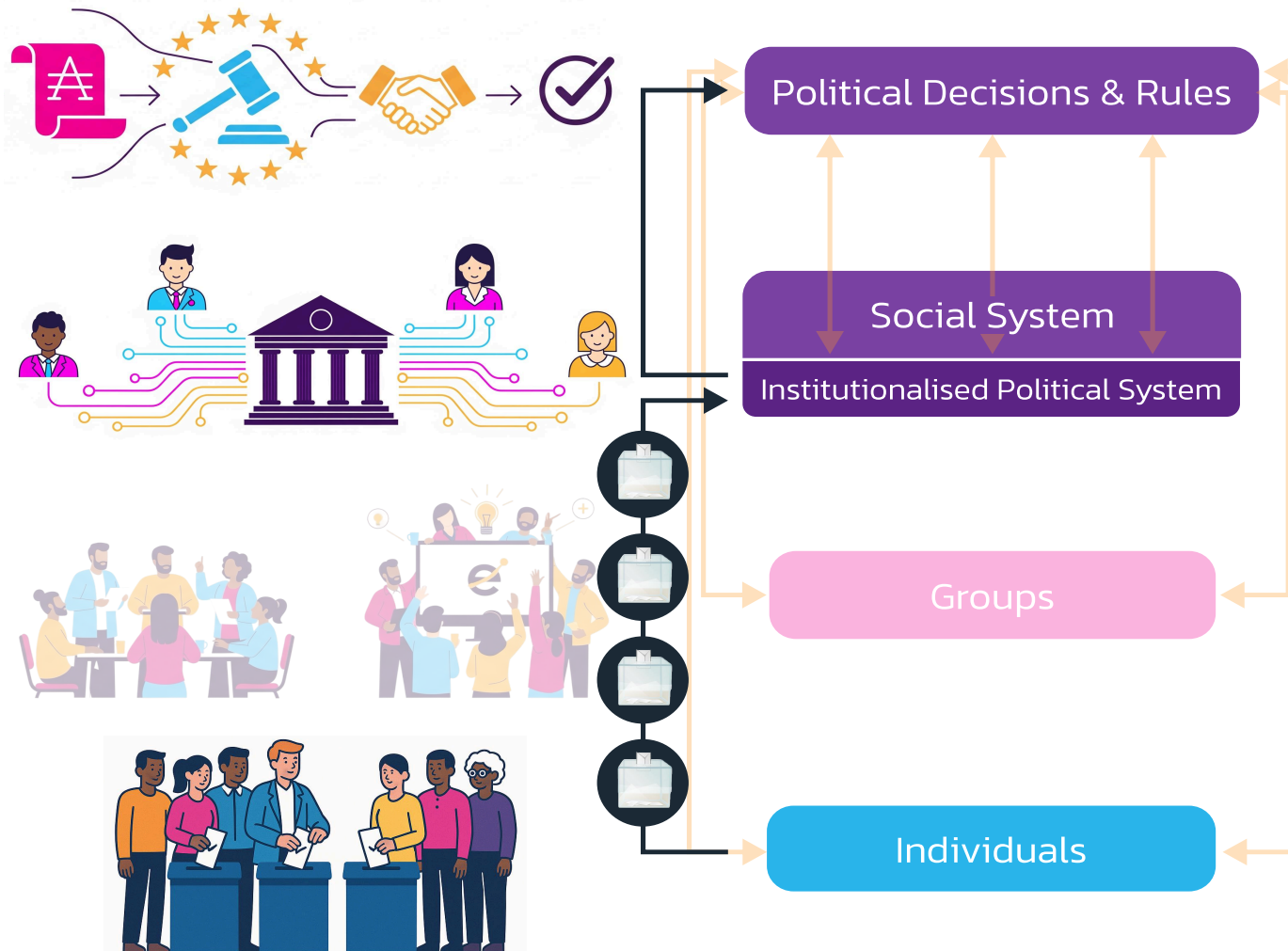
Model 1: Constitutional Democracy



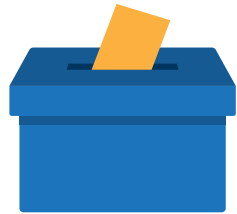


LIBERAL, REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Model 2: Representative Democracy

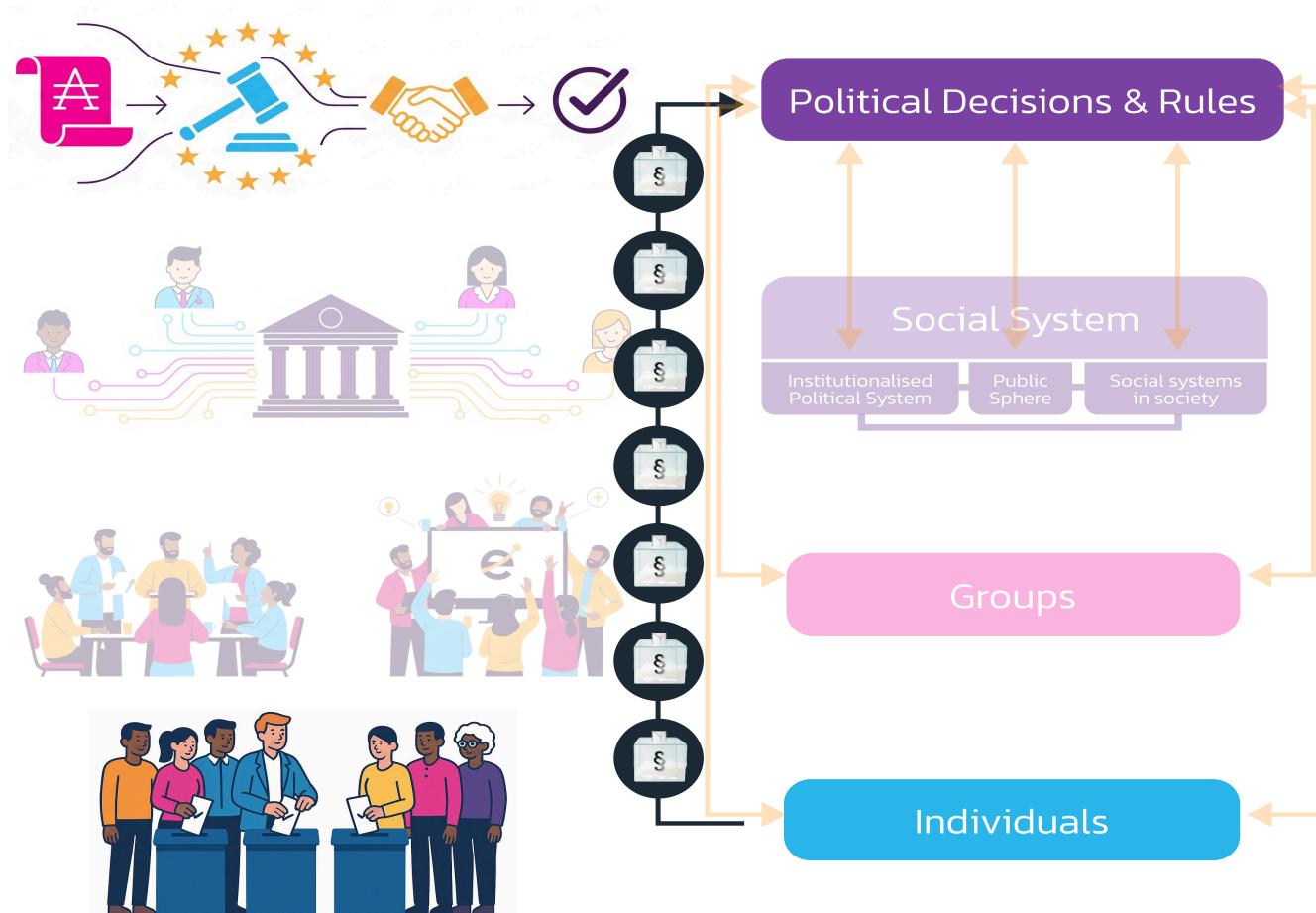


2. Models of Democracy



DIRECT DEMOCRACY

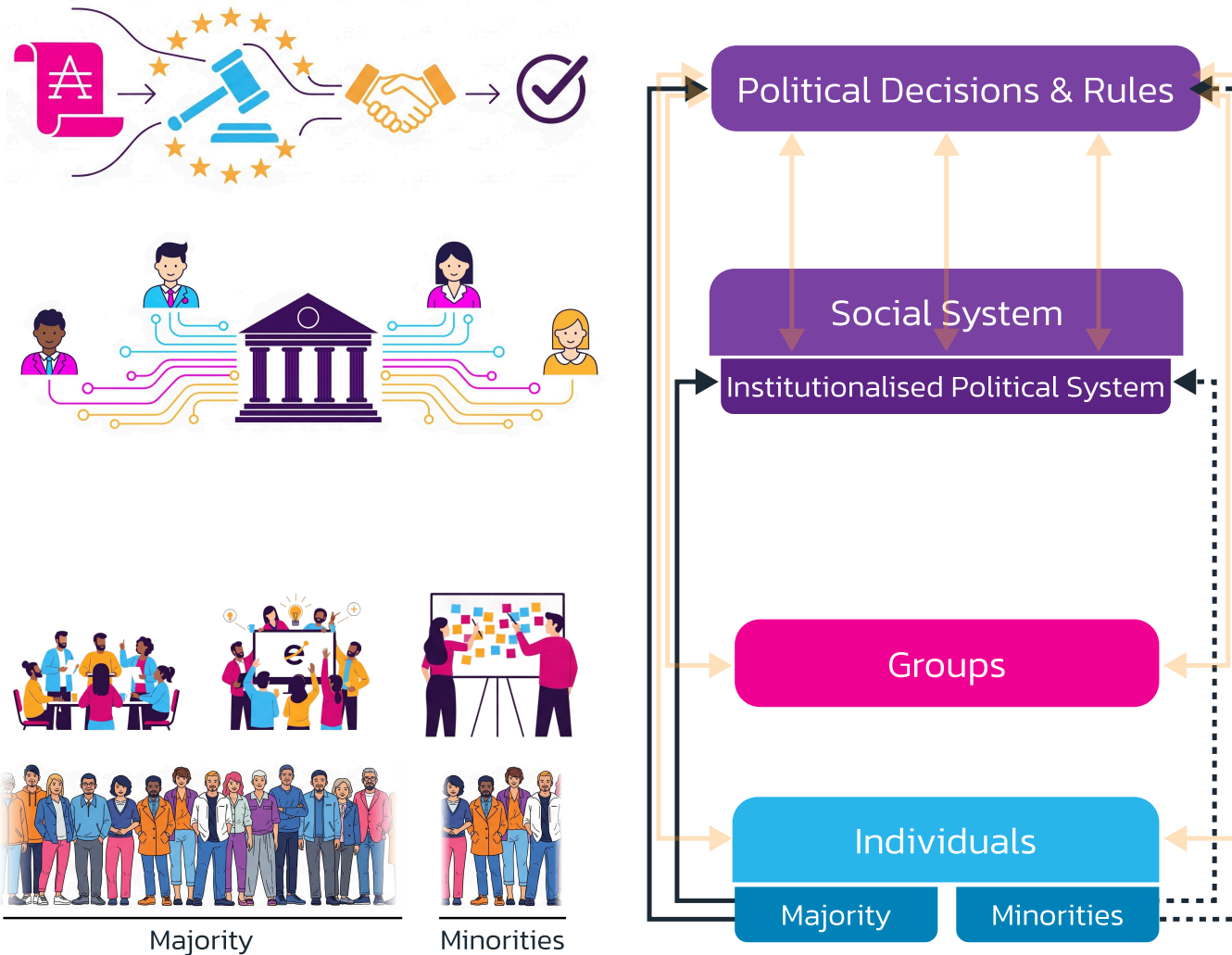
Model 3:
Direct
Democracy





PLURALIST DEMOCRACY

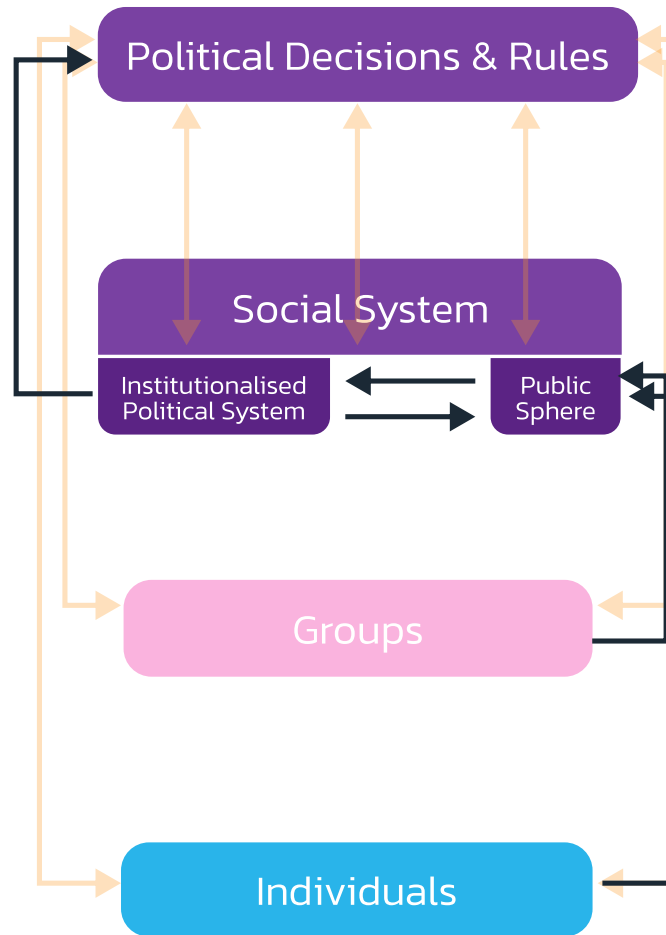
Model 4: Pluralist Democracy

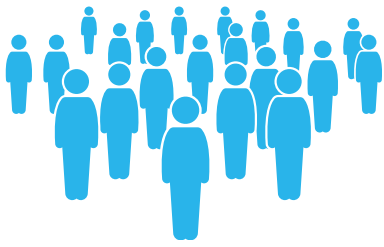




DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

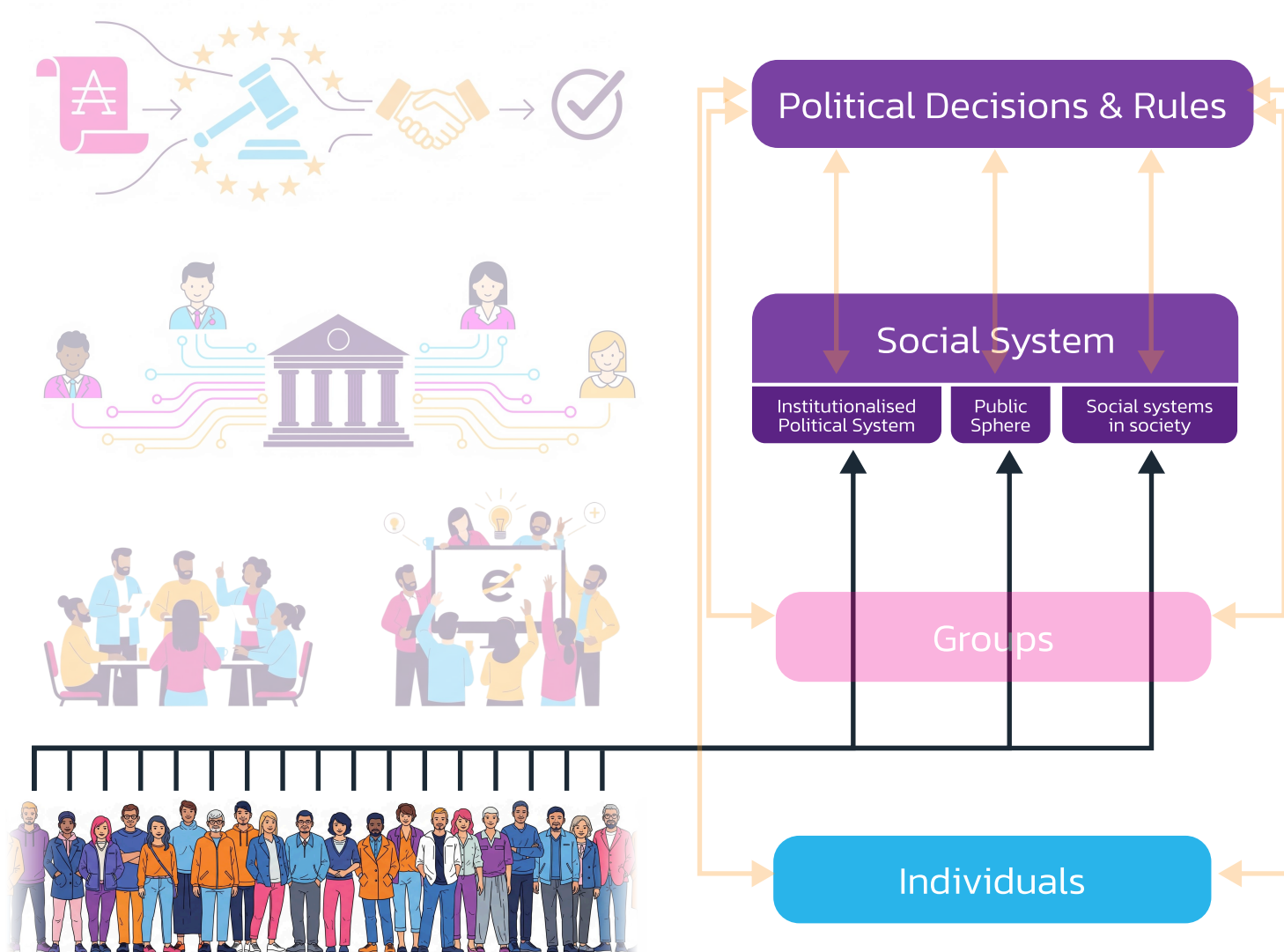
Model 5: Deliberative Democracy





PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Model 6: Participatory Democracy



2. Models of Democracy

Models of digital democracy:

- 1) Constitutional digital democracy
- 2) Representative digital democracy
- 3) Direct digital democracy
- 4) Pluralist digital democracy
- 5) Deliberative digital democracy
- 6) Participatory digital democracy

3. Models of Digital Democracy



3. Models of Digital Democracy

Digital democracy approaches, technologies, definitions, discussions, analyses, innovations, and practices draw “mainly on the **concepts of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy**” (Lindner & Aichholzer 2020, 20; see also Elstub & Escobar 2019, 16; Hennen et al. 2020).

“deliberative turn in democratic theory” that took place in the 1990s (Dryzek 2000, 1)

Many definitions of digital democracy define it as deliberative and participatory digital democracy. Digital democracy studies have certainly been influenced by the “deliberative turn”.

3. Models of Digital Democracy

“Digital democracy is the use of information and communication technology (**ICT**) and **computer-mediated communication** (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g. the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of **enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication**” (Hacker & van Dijk 2000, 1).

Hacker and van Dijk particularly **foreground participation and political communication**, which means that they **privilege participatory democracy and deliberative democracy** in their definition.

3. Models of Digital Democracy

Asenbaum (2022; 2025) writes that the notion of **democratic innovations should not be purely associated with deliberative and participatory democracy.**

He argues for a “***kaleidoscope of democratic theory***” (Asenbaum 2025, 2) that is **multiperspectival.**

Asenbaum, Hans. 2022. “Rethinking Democratic Innovations: A Look Through the Kaleidoscope of Democratic Theory.” *Political Studies Review* 20 (4): 680–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957251320041>

Asenbaum, Hans. 2025. “A Multiperspectival Approach to Democratic Theory: Five Lessons for Democratic Innovations.” *Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957251320041>

3. Models of Digital Democracy

The same argument can be applied to digital democracy. **Defining digital democracy solely as participatory and/or deliberative digital democracy is too restrictive.**

Deliberation and participation are important but not the only democratic processes.

it is better to start with a **broad, multi-perspectival, multidimensional understanding of digital democracy that includes the whole range of models of democracy and not just single models.**

In reality, **digital democracy, as it is practised, often does not rely on a single model of democracy but combines several models.**

3. Models of Digital Democracy

Digital democracy is the use of digital media in the practice of democracy. It refers to the digital mediation of democracy.

Mediation means that human actions are supported by specific structures or technologies, so-called 'media' that stand in the middle of, support, enable, condition, and constrain human actions.

3. Models of Digital Democracy

Action is a process of information, communication, and (co-)production.

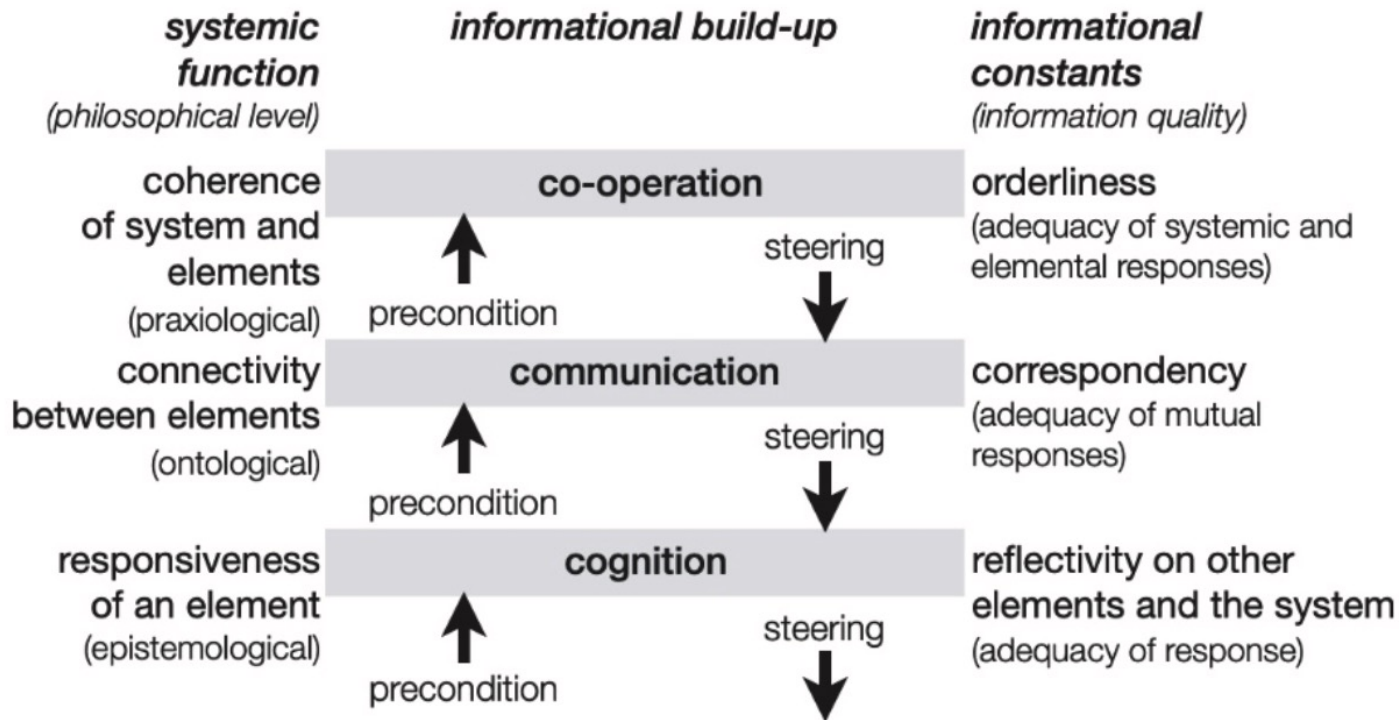
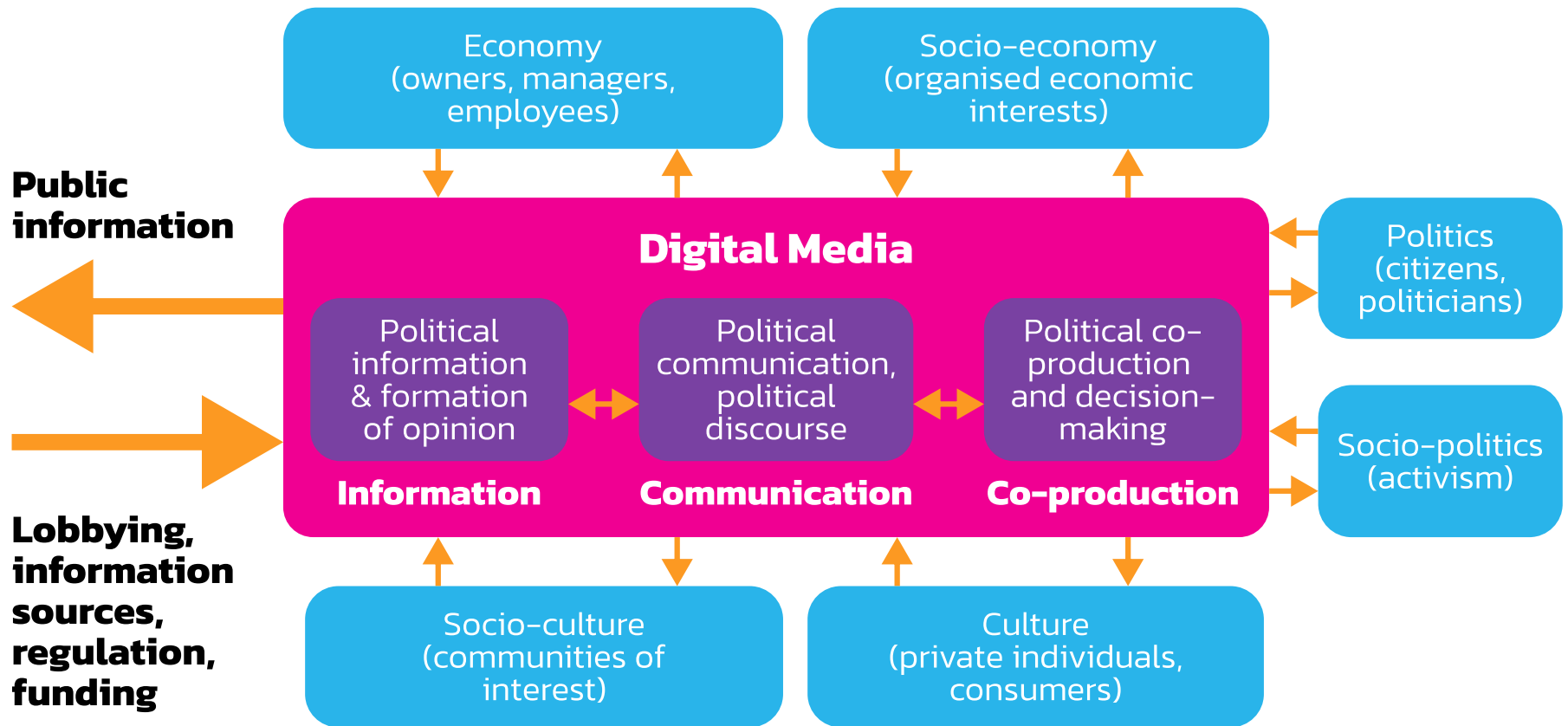


Figure 2.8. Informational build-up of self-organising systems.

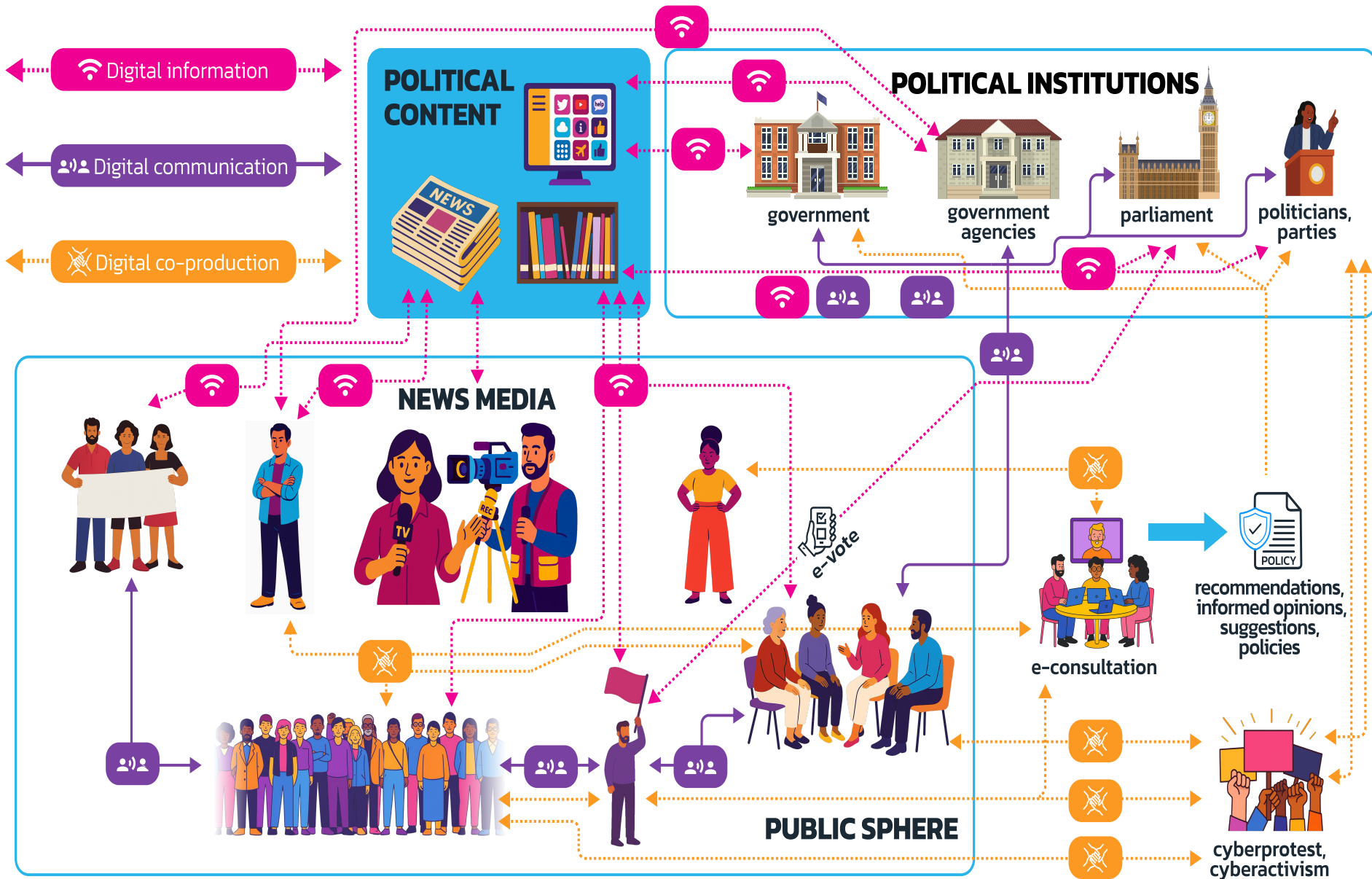
Hofkirchner (2023, 77): Hofkirchner, Wolfgang. 2023. *The Logic of the Third. A Paradigm Shift to a Shared Future for Humanity*. Singapore: World Scientific.

3. Models of Digital Democracy

Figure: Digital democracy's information processes



Digital media have two key features, 1) convergence and 2) prosumption.





Global community of visual media creatives

Platform co-operatives

Stocksy is an artist-owned creative media agency specializing in relevant and progressive visuals. We are a cooperative of creatives leveling up industry standards through an intentionally curated collection, platform, and community.

So, we started a co-op with all contributors, staff, and board members as co-owners. And it worked. Now, with 1,800 artists in over 80 countries, Stocksy continues to uplift creatives and provides visuals that represent and resonate with the modern world.

Cooperative Value

We are an artist-owned cooperative which means we ensure that our empowered shareholder artists receive fair pay — 50%-75% of all licenses go directly into contributors' pockets. The sense of community and ownership felt by our members drives a greater level of passion into their work, resulting in inspired imagery of the highest quality.



photos, illustrations, i

Capitalist image platforms

Number of image licenses this calendar year	You earn
Up to 100	15%
101 to 250	20%
251 to 500	25%
501 to 2,500	30%
2,501 to 25,000	35%
Over 25,000	40%

Our artists earn 50% Royalty on Standard Licenses and 75% of Extended Licenses and Market Freezes. You can [see the pricing of each of our license types here](#).



Contributors also receive profit-sharing through [patronage returns](#) when the co-op has a surplus. Amounts are determined based on your contributions to the co-op through selling your content.

3. e-Participation: Examples: Civil Society Protest Tools



321K
Members

The 50501 Movement
@50501

50501 Official Substack
74K+ Abonnenten

**Digital
activism**

Mailing List

Sign up for occasional updates on events and other ways
to get involved.

Enter your email address to subscribe*

EMAIL

Du wurdest eingeladen, beizutreten:

50501 Movement

● 2.018 online ● 18.484 Mitglieder

Discord

Mattermost

FREE EDITION

Extinction Rebellion

Mattermost is an open source platform
for secure collaboration across the
entire software development lifecycle..

**50 protests.
50 states.
1 movement.**

Join us in the fight to **uphold
the Constitution** and **end
executive overreach.**



3. Models of Digital Democracy



decidim.
barcelona

**Digital participatory
budgeting**

Participatory budgets 2024 - 2027

30 million euros to carry out investment projects proposed and chosen directly by the city's residents.

**Decidim is a
digital platform
for citizen
participation**

Free/libre, open and safe technology.

With all democratic guarantees.

Reprogramming democracy is now possible
with Decidim.



**The most complete citizen
participation tool for an
open, transparent and
democratic government.**

The open source CONSUL DEMOCRACY software is free to use and modify.

3. Models of Digital Democracy



Rumble: Where Authentic Expression Thrives

We stand with individuals and businesses who have something meaningful to share—those who value freedom, creativity, and control over their own content.

At Rumble, we believe society flourishes when open dialogue, varied opinions, and new ideas are accessible to all.

As a publicly traded company on NASDAQ (\$RUM), we are driven by a mission to protect a free and open internet.

Join us. Together, we can champion authentic expression and innovation.

3. Models of Digital Democracy



One year in, the future of X is bright



From Twitter to X. We transformed Twitter into X, the everything app, where everyone is increasingly connected to everything they care about. This move enabled us to evolve past a legacy mindset and reimagine how users around the world consume, interact, watch and, soon, transact – all in one seamless interface. We have become the modern global town square.

3. Models of Digital Democracy

Top Contributors, federal election data for Donald Trump, 2024

SpaceX \$276,275,595

Andreessen Horowitz \$7,007,302

OpenSecrets. 2024. Presidential Elections: 2024: Donald Trump (R).
<https://www.opensecrets.org/2024-presidential-race/donald-trump/candidate?id=N00023864>



Reinstate former President Trump

Yes

No

15.085.458 Stimmen · Endergebnisse

1:47 vorm. · 19. Nov. 2022

187.985

266.666

743.191

8.233



187.985 Antworten lesen



Elon Musk   @elonmusk ·
Vox Populi, Vox Dei



Marc Andreessen   
@pmarca

Elon's proposed takeover of Twitter is a profound threat to unfree speech.

7:00 PM · Apr 14, 2022

48,2 %

Musk:
voice of the people
= voice of God

3. Models of Digital Democracy

“So from that point of view one of the inherent characteristics of the **Net – speed and rapidity – the ability to have quick plebiscites, is a problem for strong democracy or deliberative democracy or participatory democracy**” (Barber 2001b, 4).

Contemporary far-right politics are supported by the networked, decentralised, participatory, deliberative/communicative character of the Internet.

3. Models of Digital Democracy

Far-right parties and alt-right platforms often utilise the discourse and categories of participatory and deliberative (digital) democracy:

- Anti-elitism
- Direct citizen involvement
- Networked movement communication
- Counter-movements and counter-media

3. Models of Digital Democracy

=> eParticipation needs to ensure that it does not extend to undemocratic practices that violate basic rights.

Building on Habermas, we can say that digital democracy requires the combination of “communicative forms of democratic opinion- and will-formation” and institutionalised “constitutional principles” (Habermas 1996, 298).

participatory digital democracy + deliberative digital democracy
+ constitutional digital democracy

4. Conclusion



4. Conclusion

Six models of democracy:

constitutionalism, representative democracy, direct democracy, pluralist democracy, deliberative democracy, and participatory democracy.

=> Six models of digital democracy:

Constitutional digital democracy,
Representative digital democracy,
Direct digital democracy,
Pluralist digital democracy,
Deliberative digital democracy,
Participatory digital democracy (e-participation)

Deliberative and participatory digital democracy need to be combined with the model of constitutional democracy.

Table: Forms of digital democracy

Model of democracy	Example applications
Political information in the model of representative digital democracy	Websites of parties, politicians, parliaments, ministries and government agencies; online government information campaigns, state bureaucracy's and public authority's online applications, online forms, online channels; use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs by politicians and parties in election campaigns and everyday political life
Political information in the model of direct and plebiscitary digital democracy	Online voting , electronic elections, electronic referendums, online opinion polls, registering as a follower of a politician or party on social media, registering a political preference by clicking approval buttons on social media
Political information, communication, and co-production in the model of constitutional digital democracy	The use of online platforms for providing information about constitutional rights, democratically communicating about constitutional rights , and organising the safeguarding and advancement of constitutional rights

Table: Forms of digital democracy

Model of democracy	Example applications
Political information, communication, and co-production in the model of pluralist digital democracy	The use of online platforms for providing information about minority interests , democratically communicating about minority interests, and organising the safeguarding and advancement of minority rights
Political communication in the model of deliberative digital democracy	Online discussion forums , political e-mail discussion lists, political teleconferencing, electronic town halls, electronic meetings
Political co-production in the model of participatory digital democracy	Cyber-protest, online petitions, computer-mediated participatory budgeting ; application of computer-mediated decision-making systems in political, economic, and cultural contexts; wiki politics: participatory development of political information as well as political principles, demands, programmes and laws with the help of wikis and other computer-based collaboration systems.

4. Conclusion

(1) Constitutional digital democracy

Constitutional digital democracy is a meta-process involving digital information, communication, and co-production processes about democratic constitutional rights.

E.g. social movements that involve digital activism focused on criticising human rights violations (co-productive constitutional digital democracy).

(2) Representative democratic models of digital democracy emphasise how political institutions use digital media to inform humans politically.

4. Conclusion

(3) *Plebiscitary and direct democratic models of digital democracy* are primarily concerned with how humans can use digital media to register information and opinions with the state.

“the computerization of government could mean the end of meaningful public interest in representative government and its replacement by a plebiscitarian dictatorship under the guise of direct democracy” (Black 1998, xiv)

Black, Edwin R. 1998. Digital Democracy or Politics on a Microchip. In Cynthia J. Alexander & Leslie A. Pal (Eds.), *Digital Democracy: Policy and Politics in the Wired World*, xi–xv. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Conclusion

(4) *Pluralist digital democracy* uses digital media to provide information about minority interests, organise democratic communication about such interests, and co-produce structures that aim to advance and safeguard minority rights.

(5) *Deliberative digital democracy* emphasises, above all, the level of political communication that takes place with digital media's support.

(6) *Participatory digital democracy* is about, among other things, providing time, digital resources, and digital spaces that allow people to develop their skills and influence the social systems they live in.

4. Conclusion

It also involves people using digital media to organise social movements using digital media as macro-publics that try to create public attention for specific societal problems (digital activism, cyber-activism, Internet activism).