In recent years, we have witnessed a considerable number of populist mobilizations across Europe with populist parties of the left and right achieving electoral success. The rise of these political forces is a result of the impact of globalization and mediatization on national politics. The NCCR Democracy aims to shed light on the links between these developments.

By Werner Wirth & Frank Esser

Although populism has a long history in Europe, the success of populist parties during the last two decades has been striking. What are the reasons for this rise of populist parties and movements throughout the continent? The NCCR Democracy assumes that it is related to two current challenges to democracy: globalization and mediatization—the growing influence of the media on politics.

Globalization has set in motion a process of “de-nationalization” in which political decisions are increasingly being taken by institutions on the international, transnational, regional, or local level and less and less by nation states. As a result, governments find their autonomy more and more constrained. This is why, when in government, parties are limited in terms of how much they can heed their voters’ demands. Voters, in turn, find it difficult to perceive or understand the rationale behind certain decisions made by their preferred parties once in government. The gap between what citizens might like governments to do and what governments are obliged to do is growing. As a consequence, voters are increasingly alienated from the political process.

Moreover, policy making has become more complex, technocratic, and dependent on the collaboration between actors on many different levels. Quite often, important decisions are taken “backstage”, in arenas that have little public visibility. At the same time, the publicly visible “frontstage” is characterized by polarization, personalization, and dramatization, as political actors seek to mobilize the support of voters via the mass media. Journalists contribute to this state of affairs as they tend to focus on the political contest to the detriment of political substance. This leads to an increase in the scale and the number of actors involved in the political decision-making process, as well as a decrease in the transparency and accountability of political institutions.

Globalization, mediatization, and populism in Europe

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Supporters of the UK Independence Party and party leader Nigel Farage protesting for a referendum on Britain’s membership in the EU.
The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Mediatization as a driving force of populism

Populist mobilization is further facilitated by mediatization. Modern mass media constitute the main communication channel through which politics presents itself to the public. Popular demands to make politics more inclusive and transparent and the pressure on policy makers to be more responsive to public opinion have increased the role of the mass media in many ways.

Politicians have grown to rely on the mass media for gauging public opinion — using media coverage as a proxy for public sentiments — and for generating attention to, and acceptance and legitimation of, their actions. The pressure to “perform” in a mediatized society, to appear authentic and empathic, is likely to privilege those actors and organizations who adapt to the media logic. This is particularly true of populist leaders and movements, potentially resulting in a rise of populism. In a heavily media-
tized democracy, populism does benefit from a media complicity according to which the news media prefer rather popular—that is, dramatized and emotion- alized—messages, as conveyed by populist political leaders, over a more neutral but less arousing style of political reporting. Both populist politicians and commercial media are anti-elitist in that they appeal to the masses and supposedly speak in the name of the people.

However, it is not only politicians that are becoming susceptible to populist strategies; the media are too. Under pressure to sell politics to a dwindling audience, the media emphasize especially those issues that resonate well with majority sentiments—such as nationalist feelings, immigration and labor issues—or with what ordinary people find interesting and compelling. In particular, populist leaders are attractive to the media because of their news value: they tend to have charisma, are typically outsiders to the traditional political elites, dare to spell out publicly what the “common man” himself has always thought, and often make effective use of the media’s hunger for controversial performances. Furthermore, politicians in general feel more pressure to address voters in a popular idiom and court popular support assiduously. Both trends occur at the expense of hard news and substantial policy debate. Rational analysis may increasingly be replaced by emotions, extremes, and false moral panics.

The NCCR Democracy believes that European democracies will be challenged further by populism in the future. The NCCR’s goal is to shed light on the links between globalization, mediatization, and populism and to understand the conditions that give rise to the presence or absence of populist ideology. In a comparative study of 11 countries—with different types of democracies, media systems, market economies, and party systems—four research projects investigate to what extent political actors reveal populist ideologies and communication strategies, how their populism varies across different political and media contexts, and how it affects citizens’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions.

Werner Wirth and Frank Esser are leading the NCCR Democracy’s research module “The appeal of populist ideas and messages—Understanding populism in the context of de-nationalization and mediatization.” www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/research/module2

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Editorial

For more than ten years now, political and communication scientists in the NCCR Democracy have been analyzing what they consider the key challenges to democracy today: First, globalization or, more precisely, “de-nationalization”—meaning that political decisions are more and more often taken by international, regional or local institutions rather than by nation states. And, second, “mediatization”—that is, the growing interdependence of media and politics and the increasingly important role the media play in politics.

In our final NCCR research phase, which started in October 2013 and will end in September 2017, the focus is on how these challenges of globalization and mediatization link to the increasing populism evident in established democracies.

This issue of our newsletter presents, in its first article, an overview of how these three developments are linked to each other. The second piece shows the gaps in populism research that the NCCR Democracy aims to address in its final phase. Furthermore, we have contributions on the topic of technocracy and populism and on the German anti-Islam movement PEGIDA.

Finally, this issue also contains an article on secession movements and democracy—the result of a round table discussion the NCCR organized on the topic—and portraits of our new Assistant Professor of Political Communication, Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw, and two NCCR alumni.

Yvonne Rosteck, Editor
Great opportunities and potential in populism research—
Gaps the NCCR Democracy plans to address

Despite various research activities and publications in the field of populism research, there is still uncharted territory that has thus far not been systematically covered or has been covered to an insufficient degree. This is what has motivated the NCCR Democracy to focus on this research area. We would like to take this opportunity to discuss some of the gaps in the literature that we wish to address via our own research.

By Frank Eser and Florin Büchel

No common understanding of populism

In light of the many efforts to arrive at a theoretical conceptualization of populism, a newcomer can get easily confused. Populism has been conceptualized as “thin” or “thick ideology”, as “strategy”, or as “style”. Unfortunately, these terms are not always used homogeneously in a wide variety of publications. We don’t believe that any of these concepts are wrong, but feel that they lack uniform and widely supported definitions. In addition, there is no superordinate theoretical framework that allows for the integration of these individual concepts and with it for an overall multi-perspectival understanding of populism. Such a framework should combine three perspectives—populism as ideology, as strategy, and as style—and clarify their interrelationships.

It should also take into account another point: There are three constitutive elements of political populism—the people, elites, and a leader. Since these three elements are connected to each other in a distinctive way, a framework of populism should allow for an understanding of how precisely these elements relate to each other. In other words, it must be theorized as a relational concept and its empirical analysis must also account for that.

Additionally to these three core elements, further related aspects should be considered such as “outgroups” and the mass media. Furthermore, we believe that populism should be conceptualized as a gradual phenomenon: every politician tends to be “populist” to a degree; the important question is how populist they are. This can be determined by looking at their statements. Finally, there should not be an a priori determined list of populist actors, but instead all relevant political actors should be examined with regard to their use of populist means.

Unclear role of mass media

Various populism studies have tried, applying great effort and expensive content analyses, to include the role of the media in their considerations. But they have treated the media only in terms of its function as a neutral and passive disseminator. And this does not do justice to the political conditions of communication in many countries. In fact, the media often gets actively involved in the political process, through the selection of topics and statements, through the type of presentation and prioritization adopted, and through interpretation and framing as well as explicit and implicit evaluations. A more adequate understanding can be found in recent mediatization research—to which the NCCR Democracy has contributed substantially; see, for example, the volume edited by Eser & Strömbäck (publication box on page 6).

Mediatization research sees the media on the one hand as an institutional context and on the other as an active participant in the political process. Accordingly, populism researchers also need to keep in mind the self-interest of individual journalists, collective newsrooms, and entire media enterprises. To account for journalists’ own motivations, media organizations can be classified according to their political affiliation and world view, their degree of commercial profit orientation, and their journalistic quality standards. Furthermore, one needs to consider that these different media types are embedded in a variety of media system types. National media systems can be classified in terms of various journalistic and political cultures, varying media–politics relationships, and their degree of journalistic autonomy and media freedom. Many of the influential factors stated here have potential implications for the extent and the form of populism observable in a country’s political communication. However, a systematic examination of these influential factors is practically non-existent in the current populism research literature. This is another research gap that
the NCCR Democracy is addressing in an internationally comparative manner across 11 Western countries.

Political or media-specific populism?

Another peculiar aspect of previous populism research is that studies address either political populism or media populism, but almost never consider both variants. Therefore, these two perspectives remain strangely unconnected. What is lacking is a systematic re-examination of their connection and a consideration of the potentially active contribution of the media. This active contribution made by the media to the spread of populist messages can have various causes and can be reflected in media content in many different ways, but little is known about it thus far. In fact, the entire concept of media populism is even more unclear than the shallow concept of political populism — there is still much to be done.

Overlooked dynamics

Processes of social change are never caused by only one factor, and so an explanation of populist political communication must also take into account the interaction between media-specific and political factors. But even within media systems, consideration must be given to the interaction between individual media organizations. Within the inter-media-agenda-setting context, there are opinion leaders and opinion-followers; there are herd effects and contagion effects with regard to reporting (particularly with cases of scandalization); there are media organizations that support or criticize certain populist politicians. In order to illustrate the resulting dynamics, studies are needed that use large media samples and long investigation periods; in the currently available research literature, one often searches in vain for such studies.

But there are also reciprocal relationships among political actors that are, for example, reflected in continuous issue competition. Interesting effects can be found with mainstream parties that compete with right-wing, populist parties. One previous study found that a tendency exists toward the adoption of right-wing topics by non-right-wing parties. In Germany in the 1990s, this transformed some of the demands of right-wing parties into government policies because these positions were adopted by parties in government, particularly with regards to policies concerning immigration and crime. Another study found that such adoption of positions can also be detected in left-wing government parties. Although there are signs of spillover effects from extreme to mainstream parties, this adoption of populist strategies and styles has so far not been sufficiently examined in order to reach an adequate understanding of these processes.

Taking a broad view

From the foregoing discussion, it can easily be understood that studies with an insufficient media sample or a far-too-narrow spectrum of political actors hardly permit meaningful conclusions about populist political communication to be drawn. It is, rather, necessary to consider many different media types (with various ownership forms and edi-
Systems matter
It has already been mentioned that the macro-conditions of national media systems influence the media’s political reporting. The intensity and sharpness of the discourse is most likely caused by the historically developed relationship between media and politics, political communication cultures, and the commercially motivated audience orientation in media and politics, to name just a few factors. For this reason, the institutional and cultural opportunity structures need to be considered in a broad sample of countries so that those conditions supportive of or detrimental to populist communication can be examined systematically. This requires an internationally comparative research methodology, which can seldom be found to a good quality in the currently available research literature.

It is our goal to alleviate some of these weaknesses with our ongoing research. We tackle these issues by first developing a coherent and exhaustive understanding of political and media populism and then translating these concepts into categories for our media content analyses and representative surveys. We will content-analyze a wide variety of political texts and media stories (party manifestos, politicians’ press releases, print and audiovisual news reports, social media postings, etc.) and connect them to effects in the general public (gauged through surveys). By combining the contributions of political actors, mass media, and public opinion we aim at gaining a comprehensive understanding of populism as a phenomenon that currently receives the utmost attention in many circles.

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Publications
People’s will or technocratic expertise?

Populists claim to embody the will of the people. Technocrats claim to solve society’s problems rationally. Each see each other as the devil but they have a lot in common, not least their distrust of representative institutions and political parties.

By Daniele Caramani

We live in populist times. This seems to be the conclusion of the exploding number of academic studies analyzing the impact of globalization and the financial crisis. It is certainly the verdict of many observers in the media and the general public. Yet this is only half of the story of our time. If one holds a mirror in the face of populism one sees its opposite. The assessment by academics and the public is similar. We also live in technocratic times.

It is no accident that the NCCR “Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century” considers both challenges intersecting supra-national jurisdictions in complex, multi-level governance structures and citizens’ feelings of disempowerment, distance from politics, and distrust amplified by ever more assertive media. Only that technocracy and populism are not exactly each other’s opposite. There is a great deal of commonality between the two ideologies, especially regarding their critique of representative democracy and its core actors: political parties.

Between a rock and a hard place

Populism claims that politics must be guided by the unconstrained will of the people, and that there should be no limitations to it in the form of checks-and-balances, procedures or international law. The accusation is that politics has moved beyond the control of the people and that parties have lost touch with society. For populists, responsiveness must be restored. And the “rock” has indeed hit the parties as they are all playing the card of being close to, and part of, the people and have adapted their styles of communication accordingly.

Technocracy, on the other hand, stresses the prominence of expertise in the identification and implementation of objective solutions to societal problems. No simple answers; the world is complicated. The accusation is that politics has moved too close to the people with political parties running like obedient puppy dogs behind the moods of the crowd discerned using increasingly sophisticated monitoring instruments. For technocracy, responsibility must be restored. The “hard place”, too, has hit the parties as they have delegated unpopular decisions to technocrats in order to focus on the electoral cycle instead.

Caught between appeals for more responsiveness and others for more responsibility, political parties do not know which way to turn like rabbits trapped in the headlights of two cars approaching from opposite directions. For representative democracy this is bad news.

Your enemy is also my enemy …

The effectiveness of populist and technocratic challenges is that they are similar on many points. Both see themselves as anti-politics and external to (or even above) politics. Representation and political parties are seen as catering for particular interests rather than caring about the common good. In both there is the idea of an organic unity of society with policies that are either good or bad for the whole. Solutions to problems are manifest and indisputable. Neither view is pluralistic and therefore no “mediation” is necessary between social groups, values, and interests. The link between society and politics must be unmediated. Finally, accountability is absent in both. In populism the leader is the people. Holding the leader to account is thus contradictory. In technocracy, people do not have the skills necessary to evaluate experts’ performance.

In their critique of representative democracy as the caterer of particular interests and as being focussed on subjective, self-serving competition between “parts” of society, populism and technocracy concur — this agreement makes their respective messages even more resonant.

… but we are still not friends

Yet populism and technocracy cannot be reconciled. Too different are their alternative visions. How does one identify the comprehensive and objective interest
of society? For populism, through the people’s will. That will is a mandate and politics must respond to it. This is anathema for technocrats. People have neither the knowledge nor the time to devote to complex decisions. People cannot mandate anything and politics must not be responsive if it aims to be responsible. The model of representation is trusteeship. For populists, society is divided into us and them (the people and those against the people). For technocrats, the division is rather one between right and wrong.

In populism, responsiveness and trust are enhanced by leaders who look and speak like the people. On the contrary, one trusts technocrats precisely because they are not like the common man: they should be better educated and more knowledgeable. Populist leaders need the support of the people and therefore need a constant plebiscite-like mobilization of consent. Technocratic leaders prefer people not to meddle with complex matters of governance. Participation is intermittent. The legitimacy of action in populism is the claim to act in the name of the people’s will, usually defined by the leaders themselves. The legitimacy of action in technocracy is the claim to act based on informed rational speculation, also defined by the leaders themselves. When the circle is completed they thus meet again, both being similarly undemocratic.

So what is the answer to the question “people’s will or technocratic expertise”? It is, of course, that we need both. We need responsiveness and responsibility, and combining them is what parties do at their best. Political parties, in a plural society and pluralist polity, fulfil this role of simultaneously being responsive to the people and acting responsibly as experts. Only when experts are in touch with the people can responsible but sometimes unpopular policies be passed with people’s support.

This is what both populists and technocrats do not grasp in their critique of representative democracy. Parties are not simply articulating particular interests to win elections. Parties are not factions or lobbies. They make proposals in order to aggregate the diverse interests of social groups, joining them together in a vision for the whole of society. This is trusteeship, where responsibility lies. But democracy requires that people choose between alternative proposals for aggregation. In this mandate lies responsiveness.

More party government, not less, is required if responsiveness and responsibility are to be reconciled. The financial crisis and the populist and technocratic challenges that derive from it are testing the ability of parties to recover a role they have lost—not least largely by their own doing.

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Publications
PEGIDA: the big picture matters

After initial success, Germany’s PEGIDA anti-Islam movement now seems to be on the decline. What lasting difference will it have made? PEGIDA has already managed to make populist rhetoric publicly acceptable. If it succeeds in influencing the agendas of established political parties, its mission will be accomplished.

By Luca Manucci

Before answering crucial questions about the future of PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West), it may be useful to take a look at the movement’s historical background. It is not by chance that—of all German cities—PEGIDA was formed in Dresden, a city characterized by a combination of popular discontent and the former East Germany’s sentiment of being a marginalized region. In fact, at the time of the German Democratic Republic—when Dresden was cut off from West Germany broadcasts—the city was referred to as “das Tal der Ahnungslosen” (the valley of the clueless).

The process of Germany absorbing most of the shame and blame for the Shoah and World War II has made it, for several decades, impossible to constitute a credible alternative positioned to the right of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany). The two far right parties—Die Republikaner and the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands—both failed. But PEGIDA seems more successful, possibly because in East Germany any sense of guilt has been mitigated as history has placed all responsibility on the shoulders of West Germany. This element is often omitted from any analysis of PEGIDA. The political, cultural, and socio-economic opportunity structures inherited from East Germany seem to open a space for right-wing populism, making it less shocking and unacceptable than in the West.

The role of the movement’s leaders

The role of PEGIDA’s leaders has been overestimated in analyses of the movement’s success and failure. PEGIDA co-founder and front man Lutz Bachmann temporarily resigned his position in January 2015 when a picture of him posing as Hitler began circulating on social media. At the end of January 2015, five PEGIDA leaders resigned because they feared that their movement was irremediably compromised by the extreme right, launching Direkte Demokratie für Europa (Direct Democracy for Europe). Even Kathrin Oertel—who became the public face of the movement following Bachmann’s departure—resigned, leaving the movement without a strong, charismatic leader. Shortly after Bachmann returned, but it was probably too late to retrieve the initial momentum and the movement’s leadership had already been greatly weakened.

What should be stressed is that PEGIDA effectively exploited a political opportunity that had not existed before. It gave voice to a popular disenchantment with German democracy and its immigration policies in particular—a combination of populism and xenophobia that has moved the national political spectrum to the right. Even if we may already be witnessing its decline, PEGIDA has successfully made viable a certain type of speech and populist rhetoric that previously would not have been possible.

AfD (Alternative for PEGIDA?)

What will happen to the political space to the right of the CDU that PEGIDA has opened up? Even if PEGIDA attracted harsh criticism from all political forces, it found in Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) a potential ally. AfD, populist and anti-euro, opposes rescue packages and financial aid to eurozone countries. It won seven seats in the last European parliamentary elections and has succeeded in positioning itself as a respectable party to the right of the CDU.

Maybe PEGIDA will not manage to keep assembling thousands of people at its weekly rallies, and it must be said that, so far, attendees at the anti-fascist and anti-racist counter demonstrations organized almost always outnumber those at PEGIDA events. However, whatever the outcome will be matters only to a certain extent. If the movement succeeds in influencing the agendas of established political parties, placing at the center of the political battleground the fake issue of sharia in Europe, its mission will be accomplished.
Pegida demonstration in Dresden in March 2015. © blu-news.org

Distracting public attention from real problems by presenting the public with a scapegoat forces all other parties to engage on terrain more suited to PEGIDA, and thus brings the political debate to exactly where PEGIDA wants it to be. Delegitimizing representative democracy and calling for popular sovereignty is a strategy that easily achieves consensus in times of social, cultural, and economic crisis.

PEGIDA has become a brand for political protest across Europe, with local branches activated via Facebook from Austria via Spain to the UK, and even Australia. In April, the most popular anti-Islam politician of the old continent, the Dutch Geert Wilders, gave a speech in Dresden to around 15000 PEGIDA supporters.

Do not forget the big picture

In fact, PEGIDA justifies its existence by reference to the bloody atrocities of terrorist groups like Islamic State, which in turn react radicalizing the nature of the fight taking place on European territory and thus increasing the public’s feeling of vulnerability. PEGIDA creates a toxic narrative of a threat that hangs over Europe—that of Islamization—exploiting the terrorist attacks perpetrated by a small minority as proof that its discrimination against Islam as a whole is justified.

In the history of German politics, there will be a “before” and an “after” PEGIDA, regardless of the movement’s potential electoral success. If Germany is ready to accept xenophobic populism based on discrimination and fear in spite of the lesson it learned the hard way after World War II, Europe should hear the alarm bells ringing out loud and clear. When lacking a positive and cohesive European identity, the easiest strategy always consists in finding an external enemy whose identity is perceived as alien and threatening.

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A Swiss take on secession and democracy

For the Swiss, taking democracy seriously meant holding a vote on their own territorial make-up when a community demanded it. A lesson, Jofre Rocabert argues, Spain has yet to learn.

By Jofre Rocabert

In his book Swiss Watching travel writer Diccon Bewes describes Switzerland as a landlocked island, because although it lies in the heart of Europe, its society seems to constitute an exception to almost everything that surrounds it. The Swiss political system is perhaps the best example of an odd yet functional exceptionality. Which other country could combine extraordinary constitutional flexibility with rock-solid political stability? The true merit of this system is that it relies on universal suffrage to take decisions that are elsewhere the reserve of parties in parliament or, more often, small groups operating behind closed doors. The most important of these decisions are those that concern the very nature of the community that is asked to choose. But even then, the Swiss have decided many times to take into account the opinions of those affected and act in consequence.

The Swiss Jura — A model for Catalonia?

When dealing with fundamental questions of self-government or secession, the resolution of the “Jura question” is often held up as a model. Jura is a French-speaking region in northwestern Switzerland. From the 1950s on, following 150 years of Bernese rule, a separatist movement mobilized around the objective of constituting Jura as a separate canton (Swiss federated state). In 1974, relatively rapidly in historical terms, a referendum was held and part of the region set off to establish itself as a canton, which was accepted into the confederation four years later. The ability to reach compromise solutions based on the express will of the affected communities is the reason why others facing challenges of their own might look to the Swiss “island” and try to emulate its methods.

In February, the NCCR Democracy hosted a public debate to discuss — examining the Swiss experience — how Spain might address its own constitutional choices. The round table was composed of Spanish constitutionalist Eva Sáenz, Catalan government representative Manuel Manonelles, and Swiss experts Antoinette Scherz and Nicolas Aubert.

Of the few such cases to be found in Europe today, the Iberian country is now challenged by the biggest and best organized separatist movement in the continent. In its northeastern corner, Catalonia, civil organizations and political parties are determined to hold a sovereignty referendum as soon as possible; a move that Madrid opposes head on. The panel made clear that a direct comparison with Jura is a poor fit because of the distinct historical development of the two regions, respectively, and also because of Jura’s position within Switzerland in demographic and economic terms. Yet there are elements that can — to some extent — be compared.

It is fair to require, the panel agreed, that when part of a society feels systematically discriminated against by the majority, it only takes up secession as its last recourse. What is more, not only should the causes of its secession be fair, but also its objectives. A society that aspires to self-rule should also aspire to design a system that is freer, more democratic, and more just than the one it leaves behind. The debate revolved, of course, around whether Catalonia has already tried out enough alternatives, and to what extent secession is not only justified, but also a viable option. Contrasting Eva Sáenz’s view that Catalonia has not exhausted its possibilities within the current constitutional setting, Manuel Manonelles presented a list of autonomist political initiatives from different parliamentary configurations, all rejected by Madrid during the last three decades. Through political negotiations, Catalonia has recovered for itself a high degree of autonomy; which in Spain’s eyes should be sufficient for the region to accommodate itself in a system many deem to be more decentralized than de jure federal countries.

A flexible constitutionalism is required

In Switzerland, like in Spain, the constitutional regime does not foresee divisions of the established territory; but unlike Spain, the Swiss have devised a po-
political mechanism for working around their constitutional limitations. Parties in Spain hold that, because territorial unity is explicit in the fundamental text, central authorities cannot authorize a referendum without previously undertaking a thorough re-writing of the constitution, which implies a nationwide vote.

The question rests, then, on to what extent legal flexibility to fit de facto political situations is acceptable. If a legal framework offers no possibility of accommodation to a community with long-standing political demands, and the majority makes no compromise to amend it, the system corrupts into a “tyranny of the majority”, which writers on democracy, from Mill to Kymlicka, have already warned us about.

Here Spain could benefit from the position taken by the Bernese authorities, which after years of facing a secessionist Jurassic movement opted to take the lead in the negotiations, on the basis that this would facilitate a less traumatic solution and minimize territorial loss. Consequently, a referendum was held, with some Jura communities voting to leave the Canton of Bern, while others voted to remain within it.

Long history of sovereignty referendums

Even though using referendums to decide borders or boundaries is often presented as impossible, sovereignty referendums are not something that democracy is entirely alien to. There have been 193 such referendums since the end of the 19th century, according to research carried out by the Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA). Of course, sovereignty is a broad concept, but even if we count only those referendums that took place on secession, there are enough cases to merit that they be recognized as part of democracy, and not an eccentric addition to it. The problems of voter eligibility and the setup of post-referendum negotiations are real, but solutions have—until now—been found, without trauma, based on pre-existing conditions. In 1974, only the people of Jura had the right to vote, while the whole of Switzerland decided on whether the region was admitted to the confederation as a canton in its own right four years later. Similarly, in September 2014 only people residing in Scotland were allowed to decide.

The establishment of political self-rule in Jura was not decided in a single day. Multiple referendums were held at municipal, cantonal, and national levels. This illustrates an approach missing in today’s Spain—an approach recognizing that a crisis of such complexity can only be channeled through a process that identifies the legitimacy of the other’s claims, gives voice to those affected, and reaches a sustainable compromise. Ultimately, Swiss flexible constitutionalism tells us that democracy will fit all these complexities if only we can understand that legal schemes evolve along the values and aims of their societies, with human rights as their only limit.

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The Catalan independence movement has been able to organize some of the largest demonstrations in Europe’s history. © Irene López
NCCR Democracy Alumni

The alumni interviews have become a regular feature of our newsletter. This time around, we talked to Nino Landerer who completed his PhD dissertation in July 2014. He now works as a business analyst at the Swiss National Bank. Our second interview partner is Andrea Umbricht—project leader at the market & social research institute gfs-zürich.

**Dr. Nino Landerer**  
Business analyst, Swiss National Bank

What topics are you currently working on in your position at the Swiss National Bank?

I’m part of a small team of analysts in the banking operations unit. The banking operations of the SNB include managing the major payment system, which is not only an infrastructure crucial to the SNB’s monetary activities but also matters in our everyday lives, for example when we carry out card payments or use online banking facilities. In order to make these electronic systems safe, they have to comply with national and international regulatory standards. These standards and rules are evolving constantly and constantly being adapted to technological developments. One part of my job is to translate such international standards and rules into concrete measures and policy guidelines when they are to be implemented at the domestic level. Many of these activities are barely visible in our day-to-day lives. However, as the end of the euro cap showed, monetary decisions sometimes have a major social impact. Being directly involved in the implementation process is interesting both from a scientific and a societal perspective.

What was your dissertation about exactly and what did you find out?

Conceptually, the thesis draws on the recent literature on mediatization and suggests an original framework for analyzing the mediatization of politics. Empirically, the mediatization of media coverage itself is investigated by means of a content analysis of six Swiss daily newspapers, and MPs’ strategies and perceptions are assessed in face-to-face interviews. With respect to political actors’ strategies and perceptions, the thesis finds that MPs of the “pole parties” (the Swiss People’s Party [UDC/SVP], Social Democrats, and Green Party) are more mediatized than MPs of the center-right parties (Liberals, Christian Democrats, Green Liberals, Conservative Democrats [BDP/PBD]): “Pole parties” are not only covered significantly more often by the press than are center-right parties, they also display a more audience-oriented strategy in the interviews. The analysis of MPs’ perceptions also provides new insights into how political actors may “self-mediatize” in a context of globalization and the polarisation of political parties.

How does someone who did a PhD in politics and mass media end up working for the Swiss National Bank?

When I applied for my current position I knew that it was a long shot. However, in my dissertation I analyzed legislative decision-making processes in Switzerland and two of them were related to Swiss banking policy. Moreover, I had written my master thesis on the political debates about Swiss banking secrecy. I was therefore confident that the position was not completely out of my league. I furthermore argued that a political scientist with a fair knowledge of the national and international political processes in this field might also be an asset to a political institution predominantly populated by economists. Central banks and the political dimensions of their activities have interested me since my Master’s in Political Economy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This was at the peak of the financial and debt crises and monetary policy started to become (again) a more politically debated issue. To get an insight into the very core of the monetary system seemed—and still seems—to be a thrilling experience in the current environment.

What are the greatest challenges in your current work?

Nino Landerer
I was familiar with major theories of banking and monetary policy, but grasping the complexity of the actual processes at the operational level was quite challenging at the beginning: It is one thing to understand how monetary policy works in theory, but the actual implementation of policy decisions at the operational level requires a perfect interlock of business processes and information technology, especially in a highly dynamic environment. This complexity challenges me time and again and I still perceive my job very much as a learning process.

How would you describe your experience at the NCCR Democracy? What did you learn most while you were there?

Being part of the NCCR Democracy enabled me to meet great people and learn the methodological skills necessary for my research. More than anything else, writing a PhD—hopefully—provides you with the experience and skills necessary for carrying out analytical research in an independent manner and also the confidence to trust your own judgment that you are asking the right questions.

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Dr. Andrea Umbricht
project leader, gfs-zürich—market & social research

What has been your career path since leaving the NCCR Democracy?

After leaving the NCCR Democracy and having completed my dissertation, I conducted a media analysis as a freelancer for an independent research and consulting organization in Zurich. This analysis was on human rights and—from a methodological perspective—was very close to my dissertation. After concluding this mandate, I started work at the market and social research institute gfs-zürich, where I’ve been working as project leader since January 2015.

How would you describe your experiences at the NCCR Democracy? What did you learn most while you were there?

I’m grateful that being part of the NCCR Democracy has given me the opportunity to acquire important skills in a rather protected environment. Thanks to the financial support of the NCCR, I was able to choose—from a variety of educational training opportunities—the most promising courses for my individual needs. During my doctorate I learned to manage a project from the beginning to the end. I was taught to coordinate working processes and supervise a dozen student project collaborators. I learned how to explore research questions with greater persistence, I gained confidence in presenting my work to the academic community, and the NCCR enabled me to exchange and network with people who proved vital for the completion of my doctorate.

What was the topic of your dissertation and what did you discover?

My dissertation investigates how context (I studied five European countries and the US), time (1960–2007), and newspaper type (quality, regional, weekly) influences public affairs coverage. First, the dissertation reveals an increase in highlighting the negative, sensationalist, and emotional facets of the news; hunting for scandals or emphasizing the private lives of politicians in order to attract large audiences. This “popular style” raises legitimate democratic concerns when one considers that this approach may make the public cynical. Second, the results show that interpretative journalism has largely supplanted descriptive reporting. This growing contextualization and critical analysis of complex issues
may indeed help citizens gain a better understanding of politics. Third, my dissertation drafts its own typology and provides evidence for the emergence of three different approaches to news-making: the American, the Italian, and the Corporatist-Germanic prototypes. Although journalism may be confronted with similar technological and economic changes around the world, the dissertation finds no trend toward a convergence of news content since the 1960s.

What topics are you currently working on in your position as project leader at gfs-zürich?

The areas in which gfs-zürich plays an active role are exceptionally broad including, for example, education, the environment, finance, health care, media, opinion research, and public management, as well as the non-profit sector. My responsibilities as project leader are multi-faceted: acquiring mandates, elaborating concepts, constructing questionnaires, coordinating our studies with the gfs interview service, analyzing data, interpreting and reporting results, presenting findings to our clients, composing media releases, and teaching at educational institutions that are interested in the applied sciences.

What are the greatest challenges in your current work?

gfs-zürich is a competent partner for face-to-face, telephone, and written interviews; for online surveys, expert surveys, or mystery shopping; for in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analyses, or a combination of multiple methodological approaches. Gaining an overview of this broad range of methodologies—but also of topics—is probably the biggest challenge in my current position. I see it as challenging to find tailored solutions and appropriate methods that best suit the respective needs of our clients and their particular studies. Working for gfs-zürich, and thus contributing to different projects at the same time—including diverse target groups—is demanding but also fascinating.

Contact

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Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw
New Assistant Professor in Political Communication

NCCR Democracy welcomes Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw as new Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the University of Zurich. Bringing with her a rich background in interdisciplinary research, she aims to further strengthen the collaboration between communication sciences and political science. At the NCCR, Katharina will conduct a project on whether Swiss citizens still consider it their civic duty to “stay informed” and how this affects their use of news media, particularly of online news.

Coming from the University of Vienna where she had worked as a PostDoc since 2010, Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw joined the Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research at the University of Zurich in February 2015. Her appointment was made in accordance with the grant of a tenure-track assistant professorship by the university to the department—a measure aimed at institutionalizing the NCCR Democracy’s research topics beyond the NCCR’s termination in 2017.

Changes in political communication

In her research, she focuses on three types of changes in political communication in the digital era: transnationalization, fragmentation, and entertainization. Currently, together with colleagues Mike S. Schäfer and Senja Post, Katharina is conducting a project on the transnationalization of public spheres with regard to climate policy—research financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The aim is to describe and explain different levels of transnationalization in newspaper reporting and online debates on climate policy: which national or international institutions, which countries or groups of countries are attributed with responsibility and legitimacy in the debate on climate policy? This project continues her previous work on the Europeanization of public spheres, carried out as part of the Collaborative Research Center “Transformations of the State” at Jacobs University Bremen, where she was awarded her doctoral degree in 2010.

Regarding the fragmentation of political communication, Katharina’s research interest is twofold: “On the one hand, I look at disconnected or precariously connected citizens who avoid traditional news media and whose access to the political public sphere depends on their social media news feed, the news aggregation of their e-mail provider, or search engines. On the other hand, I analyze whether citizens increasingly turn to different and at times politically polarized (online) news sources during political campaigns and whether this has an impact on their political attitudes and preferences, drawing on my work as leader of the MediaSide project in the Austrian National Election Study (AU-TNES) at the University of Vienna.”

Finally, in her research on entertainization, she investigates the political content of entertainment programs such as the popular German TV news satire “Heute Show” and the mixture of entertaining and informative news in the social media news feeds of young adults. For the latter, she also assesses how reliance on these news feeds affects political knowledge, political attitudes, and political participation.

The effects of mediated political communication

When asked about the motivation for her research, she explains: “For a very long time political communication research has focused too much on elite news media and elite political discourse, mostly ignoring how a large—if not the major—part of the citizenry nowadays experiences politics: through tabloid, free, and regional newspapers, news aggregators, and social media news streams; as part of soft news and entertainment programs; or in the form of news satire. This may sometimes be very far from how democratic theory envisions political information, let alone political discourse, to be. But we simply
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cannot afford to ignore it if we want to understand why people are losing faith in political actors and traditional news media.” As a consequence, Katharina’s empirical research—while focusing on the micro-level of political communication—is driven by a normative, macro-level perspective on the role of mediated political communication in a political community.

Nowadays, everybody comes into contact with media multiple times throughout the day, and people even write their own share of daily “news”. Katharina thinks that one of the big challenges as a communication scholar is to help people to understand that their personal knowledge and experience of media cannot necessarily be generalized to the rest of the world. Systematic empirical research is required in order to draw any substantial conclusions regarding the content of mediated communication and its effects.

Building a bridge

At the NCCR, Katharina Kleinen-von Königslöw will work on a project investigating how the civic norm of “staying informed” explains the intensity of Swiss citizens’ news use, and whether they depend on traditional media outlets or alternative (online) news sources. The project aims to build a bridge between media psychology research on motivational factors for news use and political participation research on civic norms. Before moving to Zurich, Katharina already collaborated very successfully with a number of colleagues from the political sciences, both in the Collaborative Research Center Transformations of the State and in the Austrian National Election Study AUTNES. Her aim is to further strengthen the link between the two disciplines and she hopes that more opportunities for (interdisciplinary) collaboration will develop as she continues to get to know the different NCCR members, their projects, and their research interests.

Asked about what she does when she isn’t working, Katharina says: “One of the greatest benefits of being a communication scholar is that I can watch television “for research purposes”, preferably quality fictional series or (political) comedy. I also used to practice music (the viola) and a lot of sports (rock climbing, swimming, running). But nowadays my sports program is limited to toddler-lifting, monster-chasing, and kids’ hip hop.”

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Publications


New NCCR Publications


Böhmelt, Tobias; Thomas Bernauer & Vally Koubi. “The marginal impact of ENGOs in different types of democratic systems.” *European Political Science Review* 7(1), 2015, 93–118.


Democracy promotion by functional cooperation

Offering a cutting edge study of the European Union’s (EU) promotion of democratic governance in neighbouring countries, this new book makes an original contribution to the study of democracy promotion and of EU external relations by presenting a new governance model of democracy promotion.

Through robust analysis of the shortcomings of traditional ‘leverage’ and ‘linkage’ models of external democracy promotion in the EU’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, it presents a novel ‘governance model’ that fosters transparency, accountability, and participation standards through functional cooperation between policy officials from the EU and neighbouring states.

In particular, it examines the impact of democratic governance promotion in detailed case studies of EU sectoral cooperation with Moldova, Morocco, and Ukraine in the three policy fields of competition, environment, and migration.

Urban mobilizations and new media in contemporary China

Popular protests are on the rise in China. However, since protesters rely on existing channels of participation and on patronage by elite backers, the state has been able to stymie attempts to generalize resistance, and no large-scale political movements have significantly challenged party rule. Yet, the Chinese state is not monolithic. Decentralization has increased the power of local authorities, creating space for policy innovations and opening up the political opportunity structure. Popular protest in China—particularly in the urban realm—not only benefits from the political fragmentation of the state, but also from the political communications revolution. The question of how and to what extent the internet can be used for mobilizing popular resistance in China is hotly debated. This volume, edited by Chinese and Swiss political scientists, is the first of its kind to assess the ways new media influence the mobilization of popular resistance and its possible effects in China today.

Urban Mobilizations and New Media in Contemporary China.
Edited by Lisheng Dong, Hanspeter Kriesi and Daniel Kübler. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 212 pages

Democracy and crisis

Since its beginning in ancient Greece, the term democracy has been linked to the term crisis. In modern political science, “crisis of democracy” is one of the most common terms. Yet, paradoxically, it is rarely defined or specified. Is de-
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Democracy really facing a crisis, or is this popular judgement an invention of theorists and the media? In a new book edited by Wolfgang Merkel, democracy researchers from the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) attempt to answer this question from an empirical perspective. The joint publication also relies on data from the NCCR Democracy project “Democracy Barometer”. Based on a common understanding of democracy and crisis, the 16 contributions analyze the current state of established democracies in the three core democratic fields of participation, representation, and governance. The authors examine diverse topics such as human rights, terrorism, political parties, globalization, economic deregulation, and the role of the media. They contend that while crisis phenomena are complex and vary across institutions and countries, there is no general or existential crisis of democracy. Rather, democracy shifts from participatory, majoritarian institutions such as parties, parliaments, and government to non-majoritarian institutions such as courts, bureaucracies, and the police. Simultaneously, a third of society does not participate politically, while the middle and higher social classes are increasingly overrepresented. A “two-thirds democracy” with declining conventional participation confronts democracy with considerable new challenges.

Demokratie und Krise – Zum schwierigen Verhältnis von Theorie und Empirie.

European populism in the shadow of the great recession

This volume, covering twenty-five populist parties in seventeen European states, presents the first comparative study of the impact of the Great Recession on populism. Based on a common analytical framework, the eighteen chapters offer a highly differentiated view of how the interplay between economic and political crises helped produce patterns of populist development across Europe.

Populism grew strongly in Southern and Central-Eastern Europe, particularly where an economic crisis developed in tandem with a political one. Nordic populism went also on the rise, but this region’s populist parties have been surprisingly responsible. In Western Europe, populism actually contracted during the crisis—with the exception of France.

As for the two Anglo-Celtic countries, while the UK has experienced the rise of a strong anti-European populist force, Ireland stands out as a rare case in which no such a party has risen in spite of the severity of its economic and political crises.

European populism in the shadow of the great recession.

Upcoming Event

Populism and Democracy
Scientific conference organized by the NCCR Democracy in collaboration with the BMU Foundation for Migration, Population and Environment.
28–29 June 2016 in Zurich
Contact: infodesk@nccr-democracy.uzh.ch