# POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: A CONCEPTUAL-THEORETICAL APPROACH. TOWARDS A PLURALIST POLITICAL CULTURE

CZU: 316.74:32 + 321.7
https://doi.org/10.59295/eiqd.17

*Valentin Quintus NICOLESCU*[*]
*Alexandru DRĂGULIN*

***Abstract.*** *This study explores the concept of democratic resilience through the lens of civic-political culture, analyzing how it can contribute to maintaining and strengthening democracy in the face of contemporary challenges. Authoritarian populism and radical transformations in the information ecosystem affect the stability of democratic regimes, highlighting the need for a theoretical redefinition of political culture. The study critiques Almond's normative model of political culture and reconceptualizes it from the perspective of democratic resilience, drawing on Sartori's theory of pluralism. In this sense, pluralist political culture is seen as a central element of democracy, capable of tempering polarization and enhancing the capacity of democratic institutions to withstand authoritarian regression. Democratic resilience is analyzed both as a process and as an outcome, influenced by structural, functional, and actor-based factors. Within this framework, civic agency and political participation become essential, both through bottom-up actions and public policies aimed at strengthening citizens' democratic engagement. The research emphasizes the importance of educational and institutional policies that promote political socialization in a pluralist spirit. The final proposal is an integrated approach to political culture that transcends rigid modernization perspectives and focuses on diversity, constructive dissent, and democratic inclusion.*

***Keywords****: democratic resilience; quality of democracy; civic-political culture; pluralistic political culture.*

The rise of authoritarian-populist movements and the simultaneous vulnerability of elites and society due to the demassification and democratization of online information are factors shaping the current global context (Guess & Lyons, 2020; Jee et al., 2022). The contemporary wave of autocratization (Angiolillo et al., 2024) thus represents a major challenge to preserving the quality of democracy and, more

[*]PhD, Romanian Diplomatic Institute; FSP, SNSPA; FJSC, University of Bucharest. Email: valentin.nicolescu@idr.ro
PhD, Romanian Diplomatic Institute. Email: alexandru.dragulin@idr.ro

importantly, ensuring the survival of democratic regimes themselves. In this context, the relatively new concept of democratic resilience—understood as the ability to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic practices and institutions (Boese et al., 2021; Crum & Oleart, 2023)—gains particular importance for both analysts and policymakers.

However, as a substantive alternative to the established concept of democratic consolidation, democratic resilience requires further conceptual refinement and clarification to enhance its explanatory power.

Our study aims to contribute to this debate through an exploratory investigation of how civic-political culture can become a constitutive element of the research agenda on democratic resilience. To this end, we seek to decouple the concept from its roots in modernization theories (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), specifically from their normative dimension, and attempt a reconceptualization from the perspective of the emerging approach to democratic resilience.

## Introduction

The 2008-09 economic crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis represented two foundational moments for a phenomenon that has intensified over the past decade—democratic backsliding. The vectors driving this process are both diverse and contentious, whether referring to right-wing populist movements that have surged through Western democracies or to the vast and still insufficiently understood impact of the demassification and globalization of political communication, resulting from the revolution triggered by new communication technologies such as the internet, smartphones, social media, and so forth.

During this period, liberal democracies have witnessed the transformation of independent media and so-called "citizen journalism," empowered by the emergence of social media, into "echo chambers" and "polarized media ecosystems," which favor misinformation and disinformation at the expense of fact-based media. These phenomena have amplified and radicalized pre-existing trends, reflecting both longstanding and newly emerging discontent with liberal democratic systems. This discontent has been further fueled by poor crisis management, lack of transparency, ineffective communication, and the underrepresentation of citizens, exacerbated by the influence (some would argue dominance) of major economic players over political processes and their outcomes.

Analysts and policymakers alike are striving to understand and find ways to manage the illiberal backlash that has engulfed Western democracies over the past 15 years. Through this paper, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse by suggesting a distinct approach that involves rethinking the concept of political culture through the lens of democratic resilience theory, considering it a constitutive element of political culture. In doing so, we hope to not only revive interest in political culture but also to clarify the concept of democratic resilience.

Our perspective draws from the concept of pluralism proposed in the late 1990s by Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori (Sartori 1997; 2000). Through this framework, we attempt to reconceptualize political culture in the context of democratic resilience. What distinguishes our endeavor is the understanding of the rethinking of

political culture not merely as a research project but also as a civic-political action program. The current context necessitates out-of-the-box thinking—mere engagement in theoretical and methodological debates on political culture from the perspective of democratic resilience is necessary but insufficient for contributing to the survival of democratic regimes. From this standpoint, we believe it is essential to write from a dual perspective—that of the political analyst and that of the citizen with a direct stake in the survival of the democratic model, thereby considering political culture both as a research program and as a policy-oriented endeavor. In our view, rethinking the concept of political culture should not have an impact limited to political science research but should also be reflected in concrete sets of public policies aimed at enhancing democratic resilience.

Our paper is structured into three parts. First, we found it necessary to conduct a critical reevaluation of the concept of political culture, attempting to synthesize the main criticisms it has faced over time. Next, we focus on the emerging theory of democratic resilience to identify the foundations upon which we will attempt to reconceptualize political culture. Finally, we propose the concept of pluralist culture as a potential endpoint of our endeavor.

Undoubtedly, this is an exploratory effort, with no ambition of being definitive, but rather a starting point.

## What Is and What Is Not Political Culture? A Critical Approach.

The concept of political culture is a contested one, and this has been the case since its introduction into political science approximately 70 years ago. It involves a dual contestation—one concerning its very definition (Formisano 2001, 394) and another regarding its use as part of a particular explanatory approach that fundamentally prioritizes certain historical experiences and values to construct a general framework for understanding democratic mechanisms and phenomena.

The idea of political culture has a long presence, at least in the philosophy and history of political ideas. We find it in the works of ancient thinkers such as Aristotle, who links civic virtues to education and participation (Miller 2020), complemented by aesthetics and high culture as models of critical thinking suitable for civic life (Carnes 1982; Collins 2006, 41-5), or in Plato, who noted in *The Republic* that "it is necessary that there also be as many forms of human characters as there are forms of regimes? Or do you suppose that the regimes arise 'from an oak or rocks' and not from the dispositions of the men in the cities, which, tipping the scale as it were, draw the rest along with them?" (Bloom 1968, 222). Similarly, other authors, both classical and modern, introduce similar ideas and concepts, focusing either on the educational aspects implied by citizenship or on a more complex approach—as in the case of Montesquieu, who connects geo-climatic characteristics with cultural ones to construct what he considered the ethical-moral profile of nations (Singer 2013, Ch. 4; Keohane 1980, Ch. 14). And the list of examples could continue.

Nevertheless, the modern history of the term begins in the mid-20th century with the publication of Gabriel Almond's article on comparative political systems (Almond 1956). The theorization proposed and later developed by Almond has remained—despite sustained criticisms and repeated contestations—the dominant and widely accepted view

within the scientific community concerned with the comparative investigation of political systems. From this perspective, the critical investigation of political culture must necessarily focus on examining Gabriel Almond's foundational vision.

Almond notes that "every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action" (Almond 1956, 396), which he calls political culture. Fundamentally, this can be reduced to a set of meanings and purposes, including attitudes, values, ideologies, as well as more intangible and difficult-to-define aspects such as "national character" or "cultural ethos" (Almond idem). Political culture would have at least two major characteristics. First, it does not overlap with the generic concept of culture, although certain filiations can be established between the two. Almond sees political culture as a subdivision of culture in general, based more on cognitive and evaluative factors. Second, it does not overlap with a specific political system or society (Almond 1956, 397) but has a broader spread that transcends the boundaries of state institutions. Both characteristics give rise to substantial critiques that ultimately question both the definition and the explanatory utility of the concept.

Firstly, Almond operates with the generic concept of culture, which he does not define, assuming it to be self-evident or to have a generally accepted meaning shared by potential readers, an aspect that requires further explanation/investigation.

It should be noted here that Almond operates within the structural-functionalist theoretical framework conceived by American political sociologist Talcott Parsons (Parsons and Shils 1962), an approach also reflected in his subsequent research. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that when discussing culture as a generic concept, he relies on Parsons' definition, a fact Almond himself confirms in a later writing (Almond and Verba 1980, 26-7). In Parsons' view, therefore, culture is understood as being constituted by "ways of orienting and acting" (Parsons 1962, 159), and in *The Social System* (first published in 1951), he adds that "Cultural objects are symbolic elements of the cultural tradition, ideas or beliefs, expressive symbols or value patterns so far as they are treated as situational objects by ego and are not ‘internalized’ as constitutive elements of the structure of his personality." (Parsons 1991, 2). Parsons' approach, centered on the analytical differentiation between personality, social, and cultural systems to facilitate data organization and theorization (Lehman 1972, 361), views culture from a static perspective, as a form of tradition that by definition aspires to self-preservation and resistance to change (see Parsons 2005, 53).

Accepting, therefore, that Almond operates within the broader framework of Parsonian sociological theory, we observe that he understands culture in general and, implicitly, political culture in particular as data, that is, as more or less immutable, consequently eluding dynamism as a constitutive dimension of the cultural phenomenon (even in works explicitly dedicated to studying social change). This assumption is crucial in our opinion because it fundamentally alters the knowledge obtained from using political culture as an analytical tool in the comparative investigation of political systems.

Secondly, Almond's understanding of the concept of political culture proves to be normatively biased and teleological through its association with modernization, particularly political modernization, making the concept implicitly an expression of path dependence, thereby undermining its explanatory and analytical potential. Already in the

1956 article dedicated to comparative politics, Almond suggests the existence of Western models of political culture (e.g., Anglo-Saxon and continental European), and his subsequent works (some specifically dedicated to the post-colonial space) confirm that the value infrastructure of the concept of political culture is inextricably linked to the implicit determinism of modernization theories. In other words, the ideal-types of political culture later found in the research conducted with Sidney Verba or G. Bingham Powell are fundamentally indebted to a normative vision that hierarchizes political cultures based on their proximity to or distance from the models existing in the advanced democracies of the industrialized Anglo-Saxon West.

Thus, in *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*, written with Powell (Almond and Powell 1966), Almond insists on defining the concept of political culture, which he projects as assuming a position on an essentially normative and hierarchical axis, with "primitive" (undesirable) cultures at one end and modern, "advanced" (desirable) cultures at the other. In this context, the way the two authors choose to define political culture as a psychological element of a political system is extremely important. Thus, political culture consists of attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills present at the population level, as well as "propensities and tendencies" present at the local or regional level within ethnic groups or social classes, which they categorize as subcultures, both originating from the process of political socialization (Almond and Powell 1966, 23-4).

In our opinion, the origin of the normative position manifested by the two authors lies in the concept of secularization as an eminently modernizing process, which they understand as "the process whereby men become increasingly rational, analytical, and empirical in their political action" (Almond and Powell 1966, 24), a definition immediately followed by an example contrasting "a political leader in a modern democracy with a political leader in a traditional or primitive African political system" (idem), therefore suggesting the existence of various degrees of rationality in humans depending on ethnicity, race, or belonging to one civilization or another. Later, Almond and Verba will reveal that they conceived political culture starting from the dichotomy of involvement, political activity, and rationality/passivity, traditionality, and commitment to parochial values (Almond and Verba 1980, 24-5), thus illustrating their attachment to the modernist program and the bias underlying their approach to the comparative study of political systems.

This involves translating into the space of comparative politics W.W. Rostow's theses concerning the stages of modernization. These, elaborated during the peak of the Cold War, programmatically had a strong ideological charge, asserting the superiority of the Western development model, which necessarily leads politically to liberal democracy and economically to the free market system, as opposed to an ideologically opposite vision, that of real socialism. In his Eurocentric perspective, the only real way to overcome the development problems faced by non-modern societies is to reproduce the Western model, which implies a path-dependent transition from the "inferior," traditional society (agrarian, non-scientific, and economically unproductive) to the "superior," modern one (industrial, scientific, capitalist, and consumerist), with the main strategy consisting of mobilizing internal and international economies to invest in economic growth (Rostow, 1971, 4-16). Rostow's development strategy thus briefly entailed replacing "traditional," "primitive," and "irrational" values with modern ones

originating from Western historical experience (Webster, 1990, 49). Rostow's model, perhaps due to the specific context in which it emerged, had a major influence on multiple explanatory models in social-political sciences, with comparative politics or political development studies being just a part of them.

The consequences of the two critiques briefly explored above are extremely important, particularly because they were uncritically adopted by a series of researchers who built their explanatory models using an analytical toolkit compromised by assumptions based on ideological biases and stereotypes, resulting in the multiplication of potential methodological errors and subsequently in research findings and predictions.

## The emerging theory of democratic resilience.

a) The concept of resilience in political science

The actual instability and unpredictability of the international system create a durable impact on the capacity of democracies to remain functional and to prevent authoritarian backsliding even in advanced free political regimes. In this article, we decouple the concept of democracy resilience from democratic consolidation to explain the correlations between citizens' civic-political culture transformations (input) and the degradation of democratic regimes (output).

Political science uses the concept of democratic resilience in a transdisciplinary manner. It comes from the physics and biological sciences of the 19$^{th}$ century, but it was adopted by the social and political sciences in the second part of the 20$^{th}$ century. There are different explanations for the genealogy of resilience: while an important paradigm of interpretation is focused on the assertion that resilience is a product of the neoliberal governances (Walker & Cooper 2011, Reid 2012, Joseph 2013), another line of analysis affirms it is necessary to investigate the pathways through which resilience has percolated into world politics and shape the international relations (Cavelty, Kaufmann, and Kristensen 2015; Walsh-Dilley and Wolford 2015; Wagner & Anholt 2016, Bourbeau 2018).

The term "resilience" was redefined and expanded to the "heuristic, metaphoric and normative dimensions" as some scholars claim (Holling 2001, Pickett et al. 2004, Hughes et al. 2005). The reason for this transdisciplinary move is the need for experts from social and political areas to adequately respond to the increasing variety of global threats such as economic crises, climate changes and transitions to undemocratic regimes.

The essential part of the definition of resilience in physics, actually used in political science, is the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and return to its original state. Concerning democracies, it is about the ability of these regimes to pass across crises and maintain the initial configuration. It is also useful to analyze democratic resilience as a process or a result. We consider resilience rather a quality of democracy that encapsulates both the process and the final result.

We assume the resilience concept is dominated by vagueness and malleability. It is a "boundary object" and can admit a variety of definitions (Brand & Jax 2007). Concerning social and political sciences, the two authors define resilience as "the ability of the system to maintain its identity in the face of internal change and external shocks and disturbances" and also "the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political, and environmental change".

Henrik Thoren (2014) analyses resilience as a unifying concept and argues that "the various uses of the resilience concept are more closely related" and that resilience has the "potential to bridge, integrate, and unify disciplines." This way of interpretation increases the transdisciplinary feature and permits more facile assimilation with democratic regimes.

b) Theoretical explorations of democratic resilience

Democratic resilience is a hybrid concept that does not have a standardized definition. However, academic literature shares a common theoretical view on this kind of regime, which is to preserve the attributes recognized by society (politically legitimate) and established constitutionally.

Democracy is now under a synergy of challenges and threats. According to data provided by Varieties of Democracy (2024), the level of democracy enjoyed by the average person in the world in 2023 is down to 1985-levels; by country-based averages, it is back to 1998, amounting to a "third wave" of autocratization. Since 1992, 36 democratic regimes have broken down. 71% of the world's population – 5.7 billion people – live in autocracies – an increase from 48% ten years ago. According to Freedom House, the majority of the world population live under "partly free" or "not free" conditions, signifying that living in fully free democracies is the privilege of a minority. From a perspective of the duality of individual versus society, and the collective security versus individual autonomy, Norris and Inglehart (2019) view authoritarianism "as a cluster of values prioritizing collective security for the group at the expense of liberal autonomy for the individual."

Little attention has been given to the issue of democratic resilience in the current era of uncertainty. However, this concept will become an important criterion for the quality of democracy and its capacity to survive. While there is plenty of literature on the "erosion", "decline", "de-democratization", and "de-consolidation" of democracy and the associated processes, a limited number of studies have analyzed the resilience of democracy before the beginning of the 2000s.

Defining democracy by referring to values and principles is useful for assessing the qualitative aspects by decoupling from the classical approach of the theories of modernization. One of the minimalist and clear definitions of democracy was given by Joseph Schumpeter (1942), who emphasizes the electoral process. In his view, democracy is "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote". However, democracy cannot be reduced to a sterile electoral process and needs to promote a set of values to be largely accepted by communities.

Democratic resilience is often conceptualized in opposition to a corrupted electoral process, which leads to autocratization. Election integrity has become an issue due to the citizens' lack of information, reflecting the degradation of their political culture. Disinformation campaigns and the global proliferation of authoritarian government principles are only two causes of lowering political culture standards. In this context, democratic resilience is conceived by scholars and governmental counsellors as a solution to the external and internal threats to election integrity.

Another over-researched line of democratic resilience is related to a major internal source of democratic backsliding – namely, the rise of illiberalism – and an external

global threat constituted by the expansion of authoritarianism. Merkel and Lührmann (2021) remark that these academics "make one common observation: the main contemporary challenge to democracy is its gradual demise after illiberal or authoritarian-leaning political leaders come to power in elections and aggrandize their prerogatives at the cost of parliaments and independent judiciaries."

Apart from these interpretation paradigms, we analyze the dimension of values and principles associated with the contemporary democratic theoretical model. It is useful to consider the highly abstract versions of the definition of resilience to create an accurate image of how democracies can maintain their integrity after facing an internal crisis or external threats (conventional or hybrid). Burnell and Calvert (1999) consider democratic resilience to be an "attachment to democratic ideals (…), in spite of hostility from the officially prescribed values and norms and apparent indifference from many elements in society." As they remarked in that period, "such resilience is of special interest where considerable propaganda and other resources are invested by the state in discrediting democratic goals, and even more so if the people have no historical memory of sustained and successful democratic politics." This ascertainment is applied entirely to the present context.

Resilience is also a hybrid concept with a descriptive and a normative dimension (Hughes et al. 2005). The descriptive component explains the attributes of a high-quality democracy and includes its principles and values agreed upon by the entire community. The normative aspect encompasses the "what to do" elements such as rules, laws, institutions and procedures to prevent backsliding into authoritarianism. This interpretation "refers more to the interplay of disturbance and reorganization within a system as well as to transformability, learning and innovation" (Brand & Jax 2007). We follow primarily the descriptive dimension in our research because the normative aspect is already studied within institutional theories and comparative constitutionalism.

High-quality democracies aim at the conservation of their values. However, the international context forces democracies to re-evaluate their legitimacy and rethink their functioning principles, even the social contract between the state and its citizens. The accelerating changes in the international system require more adaptation abilities from individuals and institutions to ensure democratic resilience. Bouchard (2013) classifies adaptability and transformation into three positions: "a) resilience as successful opposition and resistance to external shocks and a return to the former state; b) resilience as successful adaptation to a new situation involving adjustment, negotiation and compromise and c) resilience as the opportunity to creatively respond to new challenges showing innovation and thriving in the face of in adversity." In a similar assumption, Humbert and Joseph (2019) conclude that "being resilient is to expect subjects to adapt and transform their habits or behavior in light of a crisis or transformative event."

Using the same criteria of adaptability and flexibility, Merkel and Lührmann (2021) consider three perspectives in defining democratic resilience: functionalist, structural and actor-centered perspective. These can work only together and transform democracy into a durable and qualitative regime. In our research, the most important is the actor-centered perspective, including political parties, civic culture and civil society. Civic culture is a niche domain in political science, but Sidney and Verba's theory needs

to be criticized because the international context changed, and human societies have evolved under the influence of factors such as fragmentation and digitalization.

Citizens' attitudes and behaviors are very relevant to democratic resilience. The more widespread and rooted democratic values and attitudes are in a society, and the more vital and active civil society is, the more immune democracy is to external shocks and threats. In his fundamental work "Democracy in America", Tocqueville argues that the internalization of democratic norms into the collective mentality of people can serve as a barrier against non-democratic tendencies. This assumption can be easily adapted to contemporary realities. Democracy must be linked to a solid tradition of values to have resilience. The deeper democratic principles are rooted in the political traditions of a society, the better they translate into open, participatory and effective institutions. A democratic regime will be more resilient as the more stable the consensus among elites to play by the basic democratic rules of the political game and the fairer the policy output and outcomes of political decisions are perceived by the citizens.

Maintaining citizens' trust in democratic institutions and general satisfaction with democracy are the core of the civic-political culture of these regimes. To explain the road to autocratization, Anna Lührmann (2021) argues that there are three stages initiated by authoritarian actors: mounting citizens' discontent with democratic parties and institutions, anti-pluralists rising to power, and finally autocratizers dismantle democratic institutions. Countries with a history of autocratization are more vulnerable to the process of backsliding because of a lack of rooting the democratic values in the political culture. In the first stage, paradoxically, autocratic leaders come to power through popular vote, and citizens have a decisive role. Consequently, the digitalization of politics comes with disinformation campaigns used by autocrats, which negatively impacts the community's adhesion to democracy.

In sum, democratic resilience is characterized by three combined capabilities: persistence, adaptability and transformability. These are not mutually exclusive. Democratic resilience describes the ability of communities to internalize and share democratic principles, attitudes and processes. In our research, we project an organic (from society to elites) concept development: it starts from the political socialization of individuals, proliferates into civil society and aggregates political preferences.

## Towards a Pluralist Political Culture

From the discussions above, we observe that political culture is not a static element of the political sphere; on the contrary, it is a dynamic phenomenon characterized, among other things, by the fluidity of shared meanings produced and reproduced within society. This has a potentially strong effect on the core values that underpin liberal democratic regimes and, consequently, on their resilience and stability. From this perspective, democratic resilience must also address how the network of political values on which the institutional structure of the liberal democratic regime is built is itself resilient. In our view, this resilience can be ensured through the existence of a pluralist political culture. This represents, in fact, the final point of our critical investigation and conceptual reconfiguration of political culture.

Unlike the classical concept of political culture as employed by Gabriel Almond and his successors—which is constructed based on hidden normative, value-driven, and

teleological theoretical assumptions—the concept of pluralist political culture is explicitly normative, teleological, and value-driven. Reconfigured from the perspective of democratic resilience, the concept of pluralist political culture necessarily encompasses these elements because liberal democratic regimes are themselves built upon them. Democracies are not value-neutral; they are paradigmatically normative (see Frega 2017; Bowman 2022) and fundamentally constructed with specific goals considered desirable for society. These defining characteristics of democracies are also essential elements of democratic resilience. For the formal democratic political system (comprising various structures, collections of laws and regulations, organizations, and procedures) to be resilient and capable of facing authoritarian and illiberal challenges, it must presuppose the existence of a pluralist political culture, with which it maintains a dynamic, mutually reinforcing relationship.

What, then, are the main directions in which we rethink political culture from the perspective of democratic resilience? Firstly, we challenge the dominant taxonomic model that distinguishes the political sphere from other socio-economic spheres of human societies. We believe that politics should be understood as a constitutive and interrelated space within the social realm, intimately connected to the social, cultural, economic, or religious life of human communities. Secondly, we reject categories built on normative bias, which classify political cultures based on subjective cultural attributes, implying path dependency and condemning comparative political system investigations to produce knowledge that is at least epistemologically questionable.

Therefore, we will start from Giovanni Sartori's concept of pluralism (Sartori 1997) and the aspects discussed above regarding democratic resilience in the current context of anti-democratic backlash to outline an operational definition of political culture and identify its main dimensions.

Sartori proposes a conceptual clarification of pluralism as a central element of democracy, noting that the term's excessive use in varied contexts risks emptying it of meaning and reducing it to an empty signifier. According to Sartori, pluralism can be approached at three different levels of analysis: cultural, societal, and political. Pluralist culture presupposes difference, dissent, and change as its main characteristics. At the societal level, we must clearly distinguish between societal pluralism and societal differentiation, as it is essential to avoid the easy confusion between pluralism and structural complexity. Finally, Sartori associates political pluralism with the diversification of power characteristic of R. Dahl's open polyarchy, which presupposes the existence of a plural diversity of groups that are both independent and non-exclusive (Sartori 1997, 61-63). Speaking about democracy, Sartori dismisses the belief that political conflict is the foundation of democracies, asserting that the pluralistic worldview's central characteristic is dissent, not consensus or conflict (Sartori 1997, 63). The central indicator of a pluralist society is the existence of cross-cutting cleavages, which are also widely discussed in democratic resilience literature (see Lee in Lieberman et al. 2022, 95-117), considering that "pluralism fares well when cleavages are tempered by multiple affiliations (or even multiple loyalties), but may fare poorly when the lines of cleavage are cumulative and mutually reinforcing" (Sartori 1997, 64).

We choose to define pluralist political culture here as a specific pattern of collective meaning-making regarding the political sphere in all its manifestations.

Political culture is both a way of feeling and a way of thinking about the political phenomenon, as rationally based human agency. It refers to a multitude of political cultures reflecting the diversity present in any pluralist multi-group society, cultures that are, however, united by a set of common values—diversity, dissent, and a shared pluralistic understanding and aspiration towards a good life and well-being (see also Kneer and Haybron 2024).

The concept of pluralist political culture should be understood both as a Weberian ideal type and as a political project, in terms of a public policy objective or institutional reform. Only in this way can it substantially contribute to enhancing democratic resilience. This second aspect arises from the fact that this type of culture can be both strong and vulnerable. It is strong because it can prove to be one of the central pillars of a functional democracy, and vulnerable because it can fall victim to political and/or economic power. As Peter Dahlgren notes, "it can be shaped by citizens, but can also shape them, since various 'technologies of citizenship' (...) such as government and education—and I would add the media—can serve to empower or disempower citizens via the civic culture" (Dahlgren 2000, 335).

From this perspective, we believe that political culture should be viewed as a dynamic process involving at least two dimensions: on the one hand, bottom-up civic action, and on the other hand, top-down action from the political class. Undoubtedly, at least in its early stages, it is a fragile process that can be interrupted or derailed. However, once consolidated, it can ensure stability and resilience for a democratic regime, with potentially significant effects, the most important of which, in our opinion, is the reduction of political polarization that generates anti-democratic extremism.

From a bottom-up perspective, the pluralist political culture should be understood as an empowering environment for citizens, in which their civic agency is the most important indicator of the empowering process. At the same time, as Peter Dahlgren notes, a cultural turn is necessary in understanding civic agency, one that would shed light on meaning, practices, communication, and identities in their intersections with citizenship (Dahlgren 2000; 2006). Here we can see the potential of political culture as a research agenda, investigating how political meanings and practices are constructed at the grassroots level and how they shape the performance of everyday citizenship.

On the other hand, from a top-down perspective, we speak about civic agency from the perspective of political elites. This involves various sets of public policies, such as encouraging associative life, local and national civic education programs that facilitate the political socialization of citizens in a pluralist sense, as well as institutional and procedural political reforms aimed at empowering citizens in problem-solving and decision-making, increasing transparency and simplifying political processes, bringing political decisions closer to the citizen, and so forth. Of course, in this perspective, we operate with the assumption that there is a will and propensity among political elites towards maintaining and consolidating democracy, without which the entire discussion becomes meaningless.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the journey towards understanding and strengthening democratic resilience necessitates a profound reevaluation of political culture. We must move beyond static, normatively biased conceptions of culture, recognizing instead its dynamic and fluid nature. By embracing a pluralistic approach, we acknowledge the inherent diversity within societies and the importance of dissent and difference as drivers of democratic vitality. This paradigm shift requires that we consider political culture as a space intertwined with social, economic, and cultural dimensions, not as a separate sphere. Furthermore, the concept of a pluralist political culture must serve as a guide for action, informing public policies and institutional reforms aimed at empowering citizens and reinforcing the foundations of democracy. We are thus proposing that a focus on civic agency, both from the bottom-up and the top-down, is crucial. This dual approach, combined with the understanding that political culture is a dynamic process capable of shaping and being shaped by citizens, provides a pathway toward enhanced democratic resilience in the face of contemporary threats. Ultimately, the goal is not simply to preserve democracy, but to cultivate a vibrant, participatory, and adaptable political culture that ensures its endurance.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sartori Giovanni .1997." Understanding Pluralism". *Journal of Democracy*, 8 (4), 58-69;

Sartori Giovanni .2000. *Pluralismo, multiculturalismo e estranei: saggio sulla società multietnica*. Rizzoli;

Carnes Lord .1982. *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*. Cornell University Press;

Collins Susan D. .2006. *Aristotle and the rediscovery of Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press;

Allan Bloom .1968. *The Republic of Plato*. 2nd ed, Basic Books;

Miller, Benjamin.2020." Aristotle on Citizenship and Civic Education: The Central Role of Political Participation". In *The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education*, edited by Peterson Andrew, Stahl Garth, Soong Hannah. Palgrave Macmillan;

Almond Gabriel A., Powell Bingham G. .1966. *Comparative Politics. A Developmental Approach*. Little, Brown and Company;

Keohane Nannerl O. .1980. *Philosophy and the State in France. The Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. Princeton Unoversity Press;

Almond Gabriel A., Verba Sidney .1963. *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton University Press;

Almond, Gabriel.1956." Comparative Political Systems", *The Journal of Politics*, 18, (3): 391-409;

Parsons Talcott, Shils Edward A. (Eds.) .1962. *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Harvard University Press (Fifth Printing);

Almond Gabriel A., Verba Sidney (eds.) .1980. *The Civic Culture Revisited*. Sage Publications;

Lehman Edward W. .1972." On the Concept of Political Culture: A Theoretical Reassessment", *Social Forces*, 50, (3), 361-370;

Rostow W.W. .1971. *The Stages of Economic Growth. A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed;

Webster A. .1990. *Introduction to the Sociology of Development*. Palgrave, 2nd ed;

Walker, J., & M. Cooper (2011). "Genealogies of resilience: From systems ecology to the political economy of crisis adaptation." *Security Dialogue* 42(2):143-160.

Bourbeau, Philippe (2018). “A Genealogy of Resilience.” *International Political Sociology* 1-17.
Holling, C. S. (2001). “Understanding the complexity of economic, ecological, and social systems.” *Ecosystems* 4:390-405.
Brand, F. S., and K. Jax (2007). “Focusing the meaning(s) of resilience: resilience as a descriptive concept and a boundary object.” *Ecology and Society* 12(1).
Bowman Quinlan .2022.” Re-Engaging Normative and Empirical Democratic Theory: Or, Why Normative Democratic Theory Is Empirical All the Way Down”. *Critical Review*. 34(2). 159-201;
Lührmann, Anna (2021). “Disrupting the autocratization sequence: towards democratic resilience.” *Democratization* 28(5):1017-1039.
Burnell, Peter & Peter Calvert (1999). “The resilience of democracy: An introduction.” *Democratization* 6(1):1-32.
Cavelty, Dunn, M. Kaufmann, & Søby Kristensen, K. (2015). “Resilience and (in)security: Practices, subjects, temporalities.” *Security Dialogue* 46(1):3-14.
Dahlgren Peter .2000.” The Internet and the Democratization of Civic Culture”. *Political Communication*. 17. 335-340;
Dahlgren Peter .2006.” Doing Citizenship. The Cultural Origins of Civic Agency in the Public Sphere”. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 9(3). 267-286;
Dunn, Cavelty, Myriam Mareile Kaufmann, and Kristian Søby Kristensen (2015). “Resilience and (In)Security: Practices, Subjects, Temporalities.” *Security Dialogue* 46(1):3-14.
Freedom House (2024). “Freedom in the World 2024.” https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf
Frega Roberto .2017. ”The Normativity of Democracy”. *European Journal of Political Theory*. 1-22;
Hughes, T. P., D. R. Bellwood, C. Folke, R. S. Steneck, and J. Wilson (2005). “New paradigms for supporting the resilience of marine ecosystems.” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 20(7):380-386.
Humbert, Clemence & Jonathan Joseph (2019). “Introduction: the politics of resilience: problematising current approaches.” *Resilience*: 1-9.
Joseph, J. (2013). “Resilience as embedded neoliberalism: a governmentality approach.” *Resilience* 1(1):38–52.
Kneer Markus, Haybron Dan .2024.” The Folk Concept of the Good Life: Neither Happiness nor Well-Being”. *Philosophical Studies*. 181. 2525-2538;
Lieberman Robert C., Mettler Suzanne, Roberts Kenneth M. (eds) .2022. *Democratic Resilience. Can the United States Whitstand Rising Polarization?* Cambridge University Press;
Norris, Pippa & Ronald Inglehart (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge University Press.
Parsons Talcott .1991. *The Social System*. Routledge;
Parsons Talcott, Smelser Neil J. .2005. *Economy and Society. A Study in the Integration of Economic and Social Theory*. Routledge (first published in 1956);
Pickett, S. T. A., M. L. Cadenasso, and J. M. Grove (2004). “Resilient cities: meaning, models, and metaphor for integrating the ecological, socio-economic, and planning realms.” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 69:369-384.
Pye Lucien W., Verba Sidney .1965. *Political Culture and Political Development*. Princeton University Press;
Reid, Jonathan (2012). “The disastrous and politically debased subject of resilience.” *Development Dialogue* 58(58):67-80.
Schröder, A., L. Persson, and A. M. De Roos (2005). “Direct experimental evidence for alternative stable states: a review.” *Oikos* 110(1):3-19.
Singer Brian C.J. .2013. *Montesquieu and the Discovery of the Social*. Palgrave Macmillan;

Thorén, Henrik (2014). “Resilience as a Unifying Concept.” *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 28(3):303-324.
Varieties of Democracy (2024). “Democracy Report 2024. Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot.” https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf
Wagner, W., & R. Anholt (2016). “Resilience as the EU Global Strategy’s new leitmotif: pragmatic, problematic or promising?” *Contemporary Security Policy* 37(3):414-430.
Walsh-Dilley, Marygold, and Wendy Wolford (2015). “(Un)Defining Resilience: Subjective Understandings of ‘Resilience’ from the Field.” *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 3(3):173-82.
Wolfgang Merkel & Anna Lührmann (2021). “Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges.” *Democratization* 28(5):869-884.