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REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-59857

Title: La démocratie occidentale à l'épreuve des défis contemporains.

Recommendation: Minor revision required

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		✓		
Techn. Quality		✔		
Clarity			✓	
Significance		✓		

Reviewer Name: Faheem Abdul Muneeb

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The manuscript examines the contemporary challenges confronting Western liberal democracies through the concept of **"dissociation fonctionnelle"**, which refers to the growing gap between the preservation of formal democratic institutions and the weakening of their participatory, deliberative and egalitarian functions. This is a relevant and worthwhile subject, particularly given the continuing debate over democratic backsliding, political polarisation, economic inequalities and the transformation of the public sphere. The central argument that the existence of regular elections and institutional continuity does not necessarily guarantee the effective exercise of democratic citizenship provides a useful perspective for understanding contemporary democratic transformations.

One of the manuscript's strengths is its attempt to bring together different theoretical approaches rather than explaining democratic decline through a single factor. The discussion of gradual autocratisation, drawing on Staffan Lindberg and Anna Lührmann, is complemented by Levitsky and Ziblatt's emphasis on mutual toleration and institutional restraint. The engagement with Colin Crouch's concept of post-democracy, Thomas Piketty's analysis of inequality and Robert Dahl's understanding of political equality further develops the argument concerning the unequal distribution of political influence. Similarly, the discussion of Habermas, Sunstein, Castells, Rawls and Dewey provides a useful theoretical basis for examining the transformation of the public sphere and the conditions of democratic deliberation. This

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combination of institutional, socio-economic and deliberative perspectives is appropriate to the paper's central concern.

The use of V-Dem and Freedom House data is another positive feature. The manuscript correctly recognises that the two sources assess different dimensions of democracy and should therefore be treated as complementary rather than interchangeable. The comparisons presented for the United States, France, Germany, Italy and Belgium illustrate the possibility that electoral institutions may remain relatively strong while other dimensions, such as political equality, participation and deliberation, experience weaknesses. The distinction between electoral continuity and the broader quality of democratic functioning is central to the article and deserves to be retained.

A few revisions would nevertheless strengthen the manuscript. First, the research approach requires a clearer explanation. Although the introduction identifies V-Dem and Freedom House as its principal sources, the article does not contain a distinct methodological section explaining how the data have been selected and analysed. The authors should briefly clarify the period covered, the criteria for selecting the five countries, the specific indices used and the basis for comparing their scores. It would also be useful to identify the relevant V-Dem report and Freedom House editions consistently. Since the article relies on secondary institutional data, a concise methodological explanation would be sufficient; a new empirical investigation is not necessary.

Second, the concept of functional dissociation is the manuscript's principal analytical contribution, but it needs somewhat greater conceptual development. The article defines it as the gap between the preservation of democratic institutional forms and the weakening of substantive democratic functions. However, the concept is sometimes used interchangeably with democratic erosion, post-democracy and autocratisation. These concepts are related, but they do not necessarily describe the same process. The authors should explain more explicitly what functional dissociation adds to the existing literature and how it differs from the established concept of post-democracy developed by Colin Crouch. A short explanation of the relationship between electoral, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian dimensions would make the proposed concept more analytically precise.

Third, the geographical scope of the argument requires some qualification. The manuscript refers broadly to Western democracies, but the country-level discussion focuses mainly on five cases, with the United States receiving considerably more attention than the European examples. The authors should clarify that these countries serve as illustrative cases rather than as a comprehensive representation of all Western democracies. A brief justification of their selection and a more consistent comparative treatment of the European cases would improve the coherence of the analysis. The article should also avoid generalising

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from individual country indicators to the condition of Western democracy as a whole without appropriate qualification.

The interpretation of the statistical indicators would benefit from additional precision. For example, the manuscript reports a decline in the deliberative democracy index from 0.82 in 2006 to 0.71 in 2024. It also presents differences between electoral and egalitarian or participatory components in several countries. These figures are important to the central argument, but the authors should specify the precise indicator names, the geographical or analytical level to which the figures refer, and the source location within the V-Dem report. A small table summarising the selected countries and their relevant indicators would make the comparisons easier to follow. The authors should also maintain the distinction between observed differences in index scores and explanations for those differences. The manuscript generally exercises caution on this point, and that qualification should be preserved.

The theoretical discussion of digital media is balanced in several respects. In particular, the authors recognise that digital platforms can expand political participation and provide visibility to groups that are underrepresented in traditional media, while also contributing to fragmentation and the circulation of misleading information. This is an important distinction. However, the discussion occasionally moves from the possibility of echo chambers and algorithmic fragmentation to broader conclusions about the weakening of deliberation. The authors should maintain a clear distinction between the theoretical risks identified by Sunstein and Castells and the empirical evidence provided by V-Dem and Freedom House. The decline in a deliberative index, for example, does not by itself establish that digital platforms are its direct cause. The manuscript acknowledges this limitation in parts of the discussion, and a consistent application of this caution would strengthen the argument.

The conclusion effectively brings together the three main dimensions of the analysis: gradual institutional erosion, unequal political influence and the transformation of the public sphere. However, the final summary contains a few citation and wording problems that should be corrected. In particular, the reference to institutional restraint and mutual toleration ends with an incomplete citation "(, 2018)"; the citation to Crouch appears as "Crouche, 2024", although the bibliography lists Crouch's 2004 publication; and the spelling of several authors' names is inconsistent in the main text. These should be checked against the bibliography. The final discussion would also benefit from a slightly clearer statement of the theoretical contribution made by the concept of functional dissociation.

Finally, the manuscript requires a general editorial revision. There are several typographical and spacing errors, including joined words, inconsistent accents and punctuation, and variations in authors' names. Examples include "Stafan" instead of "Staffan", "Zibblatt" instead of "Ziblatt", and "Crouche" instead of "Crouch". The bibliography is generally relevant, but the in-text citations and publication details should

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be checked for consistency. The formatting of institutional reports, particularly the V-Dem and Freedom House references, should also be standardised.

Final Recommendation

The manuscript addresses an important question in contemporary political theory and comparative politics. Its main strength lies in bringing together theories of autocratisation, post-democracy, political inequality and deliberative democracy to explain why the continued existence of electoral institutions does not necessarily indicate the full vitality of democratic systems. The concept of functional dissociation offers a useful organising framework, while the use of V-Dem and Freedom House data gives the discussion a relevant comparative dimension. The revisions suggested above mainly concern conceptual clarification, a more transparent explanation of the research approach, careful interpretation of the indicators and editorial consistency. These improvements can be made without changing the article's central argument.

Decision: Accept with minor revisions.