



Jan-Werner Müller

**Liberal Democracy's Critical Infrastructure.
How to think about Intermediary Powers**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author

Abstract

1	Introduction	3
2	The Dual Character of Democracy and the Structure of Conflicts	5
3	External and Internal Pluralism	8
4	The Rhythms of Democracy	12
5	Criteria	13
6	Conclusion	21

References

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Jan-Werner Müller

ABSTRACT

Ever since the nineteenth century, political parties and free media have been considered crucial for the functioning of liberal democracy. They constituted what this paper calls the critical infrastructure of democracy, an infrastructure which enabled citizens to use their basic communicative democratic rights effectively; they helped them to reach each other (and be reached). Both intermediary institutions are undergoing major structural transformations today (or might possibly disappear altogether if processes of “disintermediation” continue). It has proven difficult to judge these changes, partly because we lack a proper account of the distinctive normative roles of intermediary institutions. The paper argues that intermediary powers remain indispensable in staging political conflict, in providing external and internal pluralism, and in providing a proper rhythm for liberal democracy. It finally also suggests a number of criteria for judging the state of intermediary powers.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

There is a widespread sense that the core institutions which made representative democracy function properly ever since the nineteenth century – political parties and free media – are undergoing a profound structural transformation.² These insti-

tutions were typically associated with liberalism, which is understood as a body of thinking broadly skeptical of both unfettered monarchical power and unmediated popular power. Some observers would argue that these institutions are today experiencing a terminal crisis; if so, “dis-intermediation” has been seen by some as a step towards more democracy (and somehow “less liberalism”); while others have worried that precisely this direct relationship between the people and a leader is the hallmark of a populism which imperils democracy (and not just liberalism).³

Critics of liberalism have long argued that intermediary powers entrench or even exacerbate inequalities. In fact, intermediaries have sometimes been interpreted as inherently conservative, if not outright aristocratic. The call for *corps intermédiaires* – familiar from nineteenth-century liberals like Tocqueville who lauded their moderating effect – seems to be a polite attempt to *reduce* political equality: these institutions appear to *divide* the people and to create *distance* between the people and the state, also making a power difference between the governed and the governors permanent. And most damning of all perhaps, they are accused of altering the people's

1 This paper draws on “Democracy's critical infrastructure” (Müller 2021b) and “A Theory of Standards for Intermediary Powers” (Müller 2021a), as well as “Democracy Rules” (Müller 2021c). For critical help with thinking about intermediary powers, I am especially grateful to Corey Brettschneider, Jamal Greene, Carlo Invernizzi, Anna Kaiser, Erika A. Kiss, Kim Lane Scheppele, John Morijn, Cas Mudde, Jay Rosen, and Nadia Urbinati. Excellent research assistance by Peter Giraudó is also gratefully acknowledged.

2 One might ask why the discussion is limited to parties and media and not include other institutions that are usually seen as intermediaries, such as NGOs, trade unions, and employer associa-

tions. I don't mean to deny the importance of the latter; but, to put it bluntly: one can imagine a representative democracy without them, whereas one cannot conceive of democracy without parties and media. I thank Dan Kelemen for pressing me on this point.

3 I am not going to enter the discussion about the relationship of democracy and liberalism on this occasion. My views as to why “illiberal democracy” as often described (and prescribed today) is fundamentally undemocratic have been laid out in *Furcht und Freiheit: Für einen anderen Liberalismus* (Müller 2019).

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