

Analysis of the cause, harm and optimization of “too much democracy”

Sijia Ye

1 Chengdu Jinjiang Jiexiang Foreign Languages Senior High School, Chengdu, 610011, China;

Abstract:

“Too much democracy” refers to an excess of political procedures, institutions, and information. It has a historical background, but it actually leads to worse governance and poses significant challenges to global democratic systems. The reasons for excessive democracy include the inherent nature of democracy itself and the impure political motives of politicians participating in democratic activities. While excessive democracy can improve transparency and accountability, it can lead to inefficient decision-making, political gridlock and economic losses. Political apathy, which contributes to populism and political polarization, can also be attributed to excessive democracy. Deliberate democracy, as a new trend in numerous democratic countries, does not address the core problems of “too much democracy” and is not a long-term solution. This paper believes that the direction of efforts should be to continuously improve the clarity and efficiency of democratic principles.

Keywords: excessive democracy; causes; inefficiency; political apathy; deliberate democracy

1. Introduction

Democracy, commonly regarded as the beacon of liberty and hope, can occasionally cast shadows of over-complexity, inefficiency, conflicts, and apathy. Back in 2015, with the outburst of the European refugee crisis, over 1.3 million migrants rushed into European Union countries, causing humanitarian crises and revealing the low efficiency of democratic countries under complex procedures and referendums (Peters et al., 2023). Admittedly, the primary reason for the refugee crisis is the massive influx of refugees. However, the multi-layered decision-making mechanism of the European Union significantly magnified the crisis. When faced with the pressing need to settle millions of stranded migrants, the EU member countries relied on frequent voting and unanimous agreements, which exacerbated the challenge (Boin et al., 2016). In 2016, the German government allocated 21.7 billion Euros to refugee-related expenditures (Schüring, 2017). Scholars believe protracted negotiations and debates restrained governments from making swift responses, resulting in refugees becoming heavily reliant on social welfare and public expenditure, intensifying the impact on the European Economy. Apart from the European Refugee case, other examples show that the mechanisms for citizen involvement, transparency, and accountability hindered effective decision-making (Crouch, 2015).

This paper asserts that “too much democracy” could pro-

duce undesired effects. It will define “too much democracy” and elaborate on its historical context, causes, and consequences. It will also discuss potential solutions for “too much democracy” and explain why the current solutions (deliberate democracy) fail to address the fundamental issue.

2. The History Context of “Too Much Democracy”

“Too much democracy” refers to an excess of political procedures, institutions, and information. Such excess has posed significant challenges to global democratic systems (Welch, 2013), bringing consequences like government inefficiencies, decision-making gridlocks, propaganda overload, and discouraging public participation, stimulating political apathy and polarization. It is essential to examine the historical context of such excess in democracies and review the trajectory of its evolvement in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

19th & 20th century: Democracies were not born complex. In the 19th century, democratic mechanisms were primitive (Herbert Donald, 1956). Improvements in governance emerged in the early 20th century, such as expanding suffrage (Blackburn, 2011) and readjusting the power balance among representatives (Altman, 1998). The League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles signalled that democracies had established international institutional mechanisms. After World War II, democratic institutions

and mechanisms rose exponentially. From 1945 to 1970, there were 56 national public elections in democratic countries, but from 2000 to 2010, the number rose to over 300; international democratic governance institutions also rose from 50 to over 300 from 1950 to 2010 (Kuyper, 2014; Alter & Meunier, 2009; Keohane & Victor, 2011).

As more democratic countries evolved into more intricate forms, scholars doubted whether such complexities improved democratic performance. In 1975, political theorist Huntington discussed the concept in “The Crisis of Democracy,” arguing that excess in democratic processes could lead to poorer governance, causing legislative and governmental inefficiencies in the US during the 1960s (Huntington & Crozier, 1975).

21st century: The increasing complexity of democratic mechanisms has raised concerns about their effectiveness and the overall performance of global democracies. As indicated in the Freedom House report (Freedom House, 2024), the global democracies index has been decreasing for 18 consecutive years, while the level of satisfaction with government performance is increasing. According to a Gallup 2023 report, only 28% of United States citizens are satisfied with their government, marking the lowest level ever recorded in history (“Gallup Poll Social Survey,” 2023). While other factors also contribute to the global decline of democratic performance, this essay contends that “too much democracy” is one of the leading causes and will discuss the causes for such redundancies.

3. The Causes of More Complex Democracies

Democracy has become increasingly complex due to its intrinsic nature and because the actors involved in democratic activities are motivated to make it more complicated. First, the inherent nature of democracy relies on extensive procedures to engage a wider audience and respond to new, challenging issues. The initial aim of such democratic mechanisms was to enhance public participation

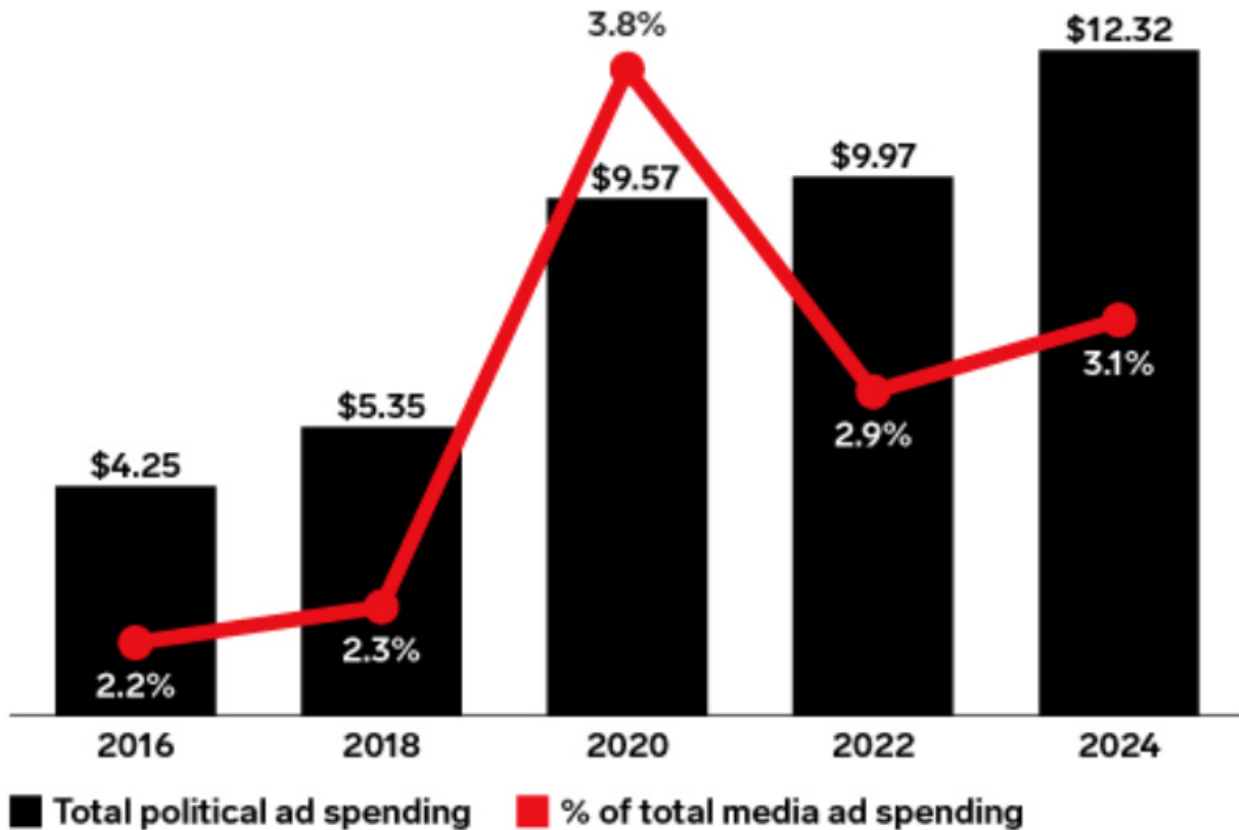
and restrict oligarchies, providing safeguards for minority rights and encouraging public involvement (Mukand & Rodrik, 2020). A substantial amount of complicated democratic mechanisms are relevant to expanding suffrage. Also, as democratic regimes encounter various challenges, they evolve new mechanisms in response and develop regulatory and legal frameworks that aim to balance, check, and improve transparency and accountability. Democracies need more mechanisms to effectively respond to new issues, such as global warming, rising inequalities, weak growth, and increasing deficits (Babbitt, 2012; Strömbäck et al., 2014).

Moreover, political elites with strategic and partisan purposes may contribute to the complexity of contemporary democratic systems. Political elites may intentionally alter or complicate political issues by disseminating biased information or misinformation to reach maximum results and manipulate elections and public standings. Research shows that during the Brexit public voting, British political parties and politicians strategically intervened to influence critical cities and the overall voting results, aiming to protect their interests and secure a long-term advantage in Parliament (Bromley-Davenport et al., 2018).

The competition between political parties and candidates leads to the rat race for more political information to capture attention and stimulate voter turnout, aggravating the complexity of democracies. Since the 21st century, with the proliferation of social media and developed mechanisms to pinpoint political advertising, dumping political ads has become unprecedentedly effective in boosting short-term political engagement. The US total political ad spending almost tripled from 2016 to 2024, and political ads and information composed a more significant part of total media ads, as Figure 1.1 shows. Political ads successfully stimulated short-term voter turnout, but such a proliferation damaged long-term political confidence and future engagement (Mutz et al., 2005).

US Total Political Ad Spending, 2016-2024

billions and % of total media ad spending



Note: 2020-2024 growth=28.7%; includes advertising related to federal, state, or local politics, including elections and lobbying activities; includes advertising directly related to legislative and regulatory issues

Source: Insider Intelligence | eMarketer Forecast, Dec 2023

284786

Insider Intelligence | eMarketer

Fig. 1 US Political Ad Spending Tripled in 8 Years (Verna, 2024)

4. Excessive Democracies: Benefits and Consequences

The increasing complexity of democratic procedures results in both benefits and drawbacks. Despite extensive mechanisms that improve transparency and accountability (Schmidhuber et al., 2020), they frequently cause inefficiencies, gridlocks, and financial loss. The proliferation of divergent opinions and interests may impede policies and hinder enforcement. For instance, in 2012, Greece failed to form a stable government after consecutive elections,

leading to a severe political deadlock and significantly delaying the austerity measures needed to address the debt crisis. The political paralysis resulted in a significant decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contraction by 6.5%. Additionally, the unemployment rate experienced a sharp increase to 24%, while the youth unemployment rate reached a staggering 55% (McBride, 2017). Frequent political impasses and democratic fragmentation directly exacerbated the crisis, and the excessive democratic rules and procedures severely postponed proper crisis management.

Another case was the 35-day shutdown of the US government in 2018, which was a direct result of party politics and filibusters. It was triggered by the disagreement between Democrats and Republicans on a budget for the US-Mexico border wall. It caused a financial loss of 11 billion dollars and a decline in GDP growth rate of 0.3%, demonstrating the low efficiency and fragility of democratic politics (Pramuk, 2019). The rules initially designed to protect minority opinions have transformed into tools for strategic obstruction for partisan purposes and caused governance paralysis.

5. Political Apathy and Populism

Excessive democratic procedures and information lead to another consequence: democratic apathy. This refers to the gradual loss of confidence and interest among regular participants in engaging with political issues, often attributed to poor democratic performance (Rosenberg, 1954). Democratic apathy serves as both a reflection of and a catalyst for the challenges associated with excessive democracies. Political apathy severely challenges contemporary democratic governance by reducing voter turnout in developed and developing countries. In Canada, voter turnout decreased by 20% from 1958 to 2000, and political apathy was the main factor causing the decline (H. Pammett & LeDuc, 2003); in South Africa, political apathy also caused a striking voter turnout decrease of 30% from 1999 to 2019 (Nweke & Etido-Inyang, 2020). Global democracies face similar challenges. Research indicates that due to dissatisfaction with democratic performance, an overload of political information, and a sense of political fatigue toward democratic engagement, global average voter turnout decreased by 20% from 1945 to 2015 (Solijonov, 2016).

Such disenchantment with traditional democratic mechanisms contributes to populism and political polarization (Guriev et al., 2020) and undermines the foundation of global democracies. Populists express their political pursuits in unorthodox ways and bypass complex democratic mechanisms. Sarcastically, the complexities designed to foster engagement, in turn, gave rise to political apathy and division. For instance, Italy has demonstrated the process of an overly complex democracy that led to political apathy, a widespread commitment to populism, and subsequent social divisions. Since the end of World War II in 1945, Italy has experienced 69 governments, averaging one change every 1.11 years (Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Governo Italiano, 2022)). Despite Italy's attempts to create a more robust political system, Italian politics has reached multiple deadlocks amidst complex rules and multiple motions, leading to anti-estab-

lishment sentiments and populist parties coming to power for a time, which in turn further deepened Italy's social divisions (Vampa, 2023).

6. Deliberate democracy as the solution: Will it work?

Recent political science scholars have proposed deliberate democracy to solve the inefficiencies, polarization, and public apathy caused by excessive democracies. Deliberate democracy refers to governments gathering opinions and voting among small, randomly chosen groups of citizens. Such mechanisms could significantly improve political engagement, stimulate discussions, and address the pitfalls in democratic execution (Grönlund et al., 2014). This essay questions the feasibility of deliberate democracy on a large scale, arguing that it fails to point to the core issue of "too much democracy."

Deliberate democracy is a new trend in numerous democratic countries since the 21st century (Saward, 2000; Smith, 2009; Harris, 2019). In the Irish Constitutional Reforms and Iceland's Constitution Revision, deliberate democracy played an essential role and improved citizen engagement (Courant, 2021). With successful precedents, more democratic governments are adopting such mechanisms to improve extensive participation and to counter the drawbacks of traditional democracies (Gastil & Wright, 2019).

However, deliberate democracy does not challenge the core mechanisms of "too much democracy" and leads to similar adverse outcomes. In short, it is essentially solving "too much democracy" with "even more democracy." Deliberate democracy leads to several potential drawbacks.

First, because deliberate democracy relies on selecting groups of citizens in the decision-making process, it essentially entices nepotism for lack of supervision. During the 2019-2020 French Citizen Convention on Climate, a few selected participants produced policy recommendations for the many, which led to controversies, suspicion, and tensions (Giraudet et al., 2022). Second, deliberate democracy is characterized by a higher complexity level than traditional democracy and is even less efficient in reaching a consensus. The Electoral Reform in Canada adopted deliberate democracy mechanisms and failed to reach an agreement after extended referendums (Fournier, 2011). Third, public participation in deliberate democracy plummets after the public curiosity is gone. In Germany and Australia, public involvement in deliberate democracy initiatives eventually declined to only 30%-40% of the initial engagement levels over time (Geissel et al., 2016; Carson et al., 2013). The fundamental mindset of deliberate democracy is to motivate minor groups of citizens with

more frequent discussions and tangible feedback. Such a mindset does not alleviate but exacerbates the governance pressure caused by excessive democracies. Despite some of the minor successful practices of deliberate democracy, these attempts are unlikely to be successful in the long run on more extensive occasions.

7. Conclusion

This paper explains the historical context of “too much democracy” and its causes and outcomes. Excessive democracy causes governance inefficiency, suppresses public trust, and results in political apathy, which undermines the foundations of democracy. Furthermore, it highlights that deliberate democracy may not be an efficacious remedy.

This essay provides a long-term perspective that requires initiative and analysis to check the proliferating excessive democratic procedures and institutions. Finally, it is possible to conclude that a balanced democracy implies constant work on enhancing the clarity and efficiency of democratic principles.

References

- [1]. Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A. (2013). How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comparative Political Studies*, 47(9), 1324–1353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013512600>
- [2]. Alter, K. J., & Meunier, S. (2009). The politics of international regime complexity. *Perspectives on Politics*, 7(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592709090033>
- [3]. Altman, M. (1998). Traditional Districting Principles: Judicial Myths vs. Reality. *Social Science History*, 22(2), 159–200. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0145553200023257>
- [4]. Babbitt, P. (2012). Complexity and Democracy: Pathologies of Modern Governance. Social Science Research Network. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID2125468_code1618801.pdf?abstractid=2104781&mirid=1
- [5]. Blackburn, R. (2011). Laying the foundations of the modern voting system: The Representation of the People Act 1918. *Parliamentary History*, 30(1), 33–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-0206.2010.00237.x>
- [6]. Boin, A., Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2016). The politics of crisis management. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
- [7]. Bromley-Davenport, H., MacLeavy, J., & Manley, D. (2018). Brexit in Sunderland: The production of difference and division in the UK referendum on European Union membership. *Environment and Planning. C, Politics and Space*, 37(5), 795–812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263774x18804225>
- [8]. Courant, D. (2021). Citizens’ assemblies for referendums and constitutional reforms: Is there an “Irish model” for deliberative democracy? *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.591983>
- [9]. Carson, L., Gastil, J., Hartz-Karp, J., & Lubensky, R. (2013). The Australian Citizens’ Parliament and the future of deliberative democracy. <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctt32b9zd>
- [10]. Crouch, C. (2015). The march towards Post-Democracy, ten years on. *Political Quarterly*, 87(1), 71–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.12210>
- [11]. Fournier, P., Van Der Kolk, H., Carty, R. K., Blais, A., & Rose, J. (2011). When Citizens Decide: Lessons from Citizen Assemblies on Electoral Reform. https://ris.utwente.nl/ws/files/22449038/6612_cours7.pdf
- [12]. Freedom House. (2024). The mounting damage of flawed elections and armed conflict. In Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict>
- [13]. Gallup Poll Social Survey. (2023). Gallup News. <https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/548240/240105Democracy.pdf>
- [14]. Gastil, J., & Wright, E. O. (2019). *Legislature by lot: Transformative Designs for Deliberative Governance*. Verso Books.
- [15]. Geissel, B., & Gherghina, S. (2016). Constitutional deliberative democracy and democratic innovations. Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2736464>
- [16]. Giraudet, L., Apouey, B., Arab, H., Baeckelandt, S., Begout, P., Berghmans, N., Blanc, N., Boulin, J., Buge, E., Courant, D., Dahan, A., Fabre, A., Fourniau, J., Gaborit, M., Granchamp, L., Guillemot, H., Jeanpierre, L., Landemore, H., Laslier, J., Tournus, S. (2022). “Co-construction” in deliberative democracy: lessons from the French Citizens’ Convention for Climate. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01212-6>
- [17]. Governo Italiano. (2022, October 29). I Governi nelle Legislature. [www.governo.it. https://www.governo.it/it/i-governi-dal-1943-ad-oggi/i-governi-nelle-legislature/192](http://www.governo.it/it/i-governi-dal-1943-ad-oggi/i-governi-nelle-legislature/192)
- [18]. Grönlund, K., Bächtiger, A., & Setälä, M. (2014). Deliberative mini-publics : involving citizens in the democratic process. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB16930272>
- [19]. Guriev, S., Papaioannou, E., Alberto Alesina, Bruno Capertini, Ben Enke, Spyros Kosmidis, Kostas Matakos, Moises Naim, Thorsten Persson, Andrei Shleifer, Jeff Frieden, Maxim Chupilkina, Nicolo Dalvit, & Kuljeetsinh Nimbalkar. (2020). The political economy of populism (Steven Durlauf, Ed.). https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/mrcbg/programs/senior.fellows/20-21/populism_oct2020.pdf
- [20]. Harris, C. (2019). Mini-publics: design choices and legitimacy. In Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786433862.00011>
- [21]. Herbert Donald, D. (1956). Political and institutional origins of the sectional conflict: An excess of democracy: the American Civil War and the social process. https://onlinecampus.fcps.edu/media2/Social_Studies/USVA_2010/Topic11/

Resources/2019_Week11_Resources/Donald_D_H.pdf

[22]. H. Pammett, J., & LeDuc, L. (2003, March). Explaining the turnout decline in Canadian federal elections: a new survey of non-voters. Elections Canada. <https://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/tud/TurnoutDecline.pdf>

[23]. Huntington, S. P., & Crozier, M. (1975). *The crisis of democracy: On the governability of democracies*. New York University Press.

[24]. Keohane, R. O., & Victor, D. G. (2011). The regime complex for climate change. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592710004068>

[25]. Kuyper, J. W. (2013). Global democratization and international regime complexity. *European Journal of International Relations*, 20(3), 620–646. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113497492>

[26]. McBride, J. (2017, May 1). Greece's debt crisis timeline. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/greeces-debt-crisis-timeline>

[27]. Mukand, S. W., & Rodrik, D. (2020). The political economy of liberal democracy. *The Economic Journal/Economic Journal*, 130(627), 765–792. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueaa004>

[28]. Mutz, D. C., & Reeves, B. (2005). The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust. *The American Political Science Review*, 99(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055405051452>

[29]. Nweke, K., & Etido-Inyang, E. (2020). National Elections and Political apathy: A comparative study of voter turnout in the 2019 general elections of Nigeria and South Africa. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 5(12). <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.512.8003>

[30]. Peters, L., Engelen, P., & Cassimon, D. (2023). Explaining refugee flows. Understanding the 2015 European refugee crisis through a real options lens. *PloS One*, 18(4), e0284390. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284390>

[31]. Pramuk, J. (2019, January 26). Trump signed a bill to temporarily reopen the government after the longest shutdown in

history. CNBC. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/25/senate-votes-to-reopen-government-and-end-shutdown-without-border-wall.html>

[32]. Rosenberg, M. (1954). Some determinants of political apathy. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 18(4), 349. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266528>

[33]. Saward, M. (2000). *Democratic Innovation: Deliberation, Representation and Association*. Taylor & Francis US.

[34]. Schmidhuber, L., Ingrams, A., & Hilgers, D. (2020). Government openness and public trust: the mediating role of democratic capacity. *PAR. Public Administration Review/Public Administration Review*, 81(1), 91–109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13298>

[35]. Schüring, E., Kronenberg, V., & GVG (Gesellschaft für Versicherungswissenschaft und - Gestaltung E.V.). (2017). Social protection as an alternative to migration? In *SOCIAL PROTECTION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO MIGRATION?*

[36]. Smith, G. (2009). *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation - Theories of Institutional Design*. <https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1795662>

[37]. Solijonov, A. (2016). Voter Turnout Trends around the World. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>

[38]. Strömbäck, J., & Esser, F. (2014). Mediatization of Politics: Towards a theoretical framework. In Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks (pp. 3–28). https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275844_1

[39]. Vampa, D. (2023). The radical right and populism in Italy. In *Brothers of Italy* (pp. 1–14). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26132-9_1

[40]. Verna, P. (2024, February 23). US political ad spending forecast 2024. eMARKETER. <https://www.emarketer.com/content/us-political-ad-spending-forecast-2024>

[41]. Welch, S. (2013). *Hyperdemocracy*. In Palgrave Macmillan US eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137099174>