Taking stock of the empirical results of our research, we can now address two final questions. First, what are the specific and more general perspectives of the democracies we studied in terms of implementation of the two democratic values, especially when coping with crisis and protracted stagnation? Second, what could we do to promote a better, doable, reasonable implementation of the two values?

If considering the analysis of the previous Chapter 8, while Germany is on solid ground and the UK can pursue a virtuous path once it overcomes the profoundly negative impact of Brexit, both Italy and Poland are going down two difficult and uncertain tracks. On the one hand, the kind of party-channelled protest that has been characterizing Italian democracy cannot be protracted indefinitely. At some point, it has to be translated into policies. However, when there is such a translation in a radicalized context, there also will be new occasions of political conflict. This means again entering a phase of prolonged uncertainty that can only have detrimental results in terms of redressing inequalities and guaranteeing freedoms, including the economic one. Poland has embarked on an even more dangerous path by heavily constraining interinstitutional accountability and limiting freedoms. Its position almost on the threshold between a democratic regime and a hybrid one opens the way to a possible additional deterioration or to a reaction of protest to re-establish a more liberal democracy.

The two other cases lie between balanced and protest democracy, with their different problems. With success, however limited, of Sanchez and the Socialists in the April 2019 elections, democracy in Spain might appear to be on the way towards a balanced democracy. However, the highly radicalized Catalan demand for secession may put that democracy in a tragic stalemate with possibly unexpected and unacceptable results. In this situation, there is no doubt that the institutional forbearance discussed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (see 2018 and Chapter 8) would be enormously helpful. However, the political self-restraint that characterized the phase of democratic transition and consolidation in Spain (Morlino, 1998) has also been abandoned because of the generational turnover. The highly painful
memories of civil war, still present in the 1970s and 1980s, have almost totally disappeared forty to fifty years on, and the related socialization process has been dramatically weakened by the profound and rapid advances and changes of new technological communication. In this situation, Spanish democracy could swing between stalemate and unexpected dramatic events if a stroke of genius by Sanchez does not miraculously solve the conflict.

French democracy is also in between and shows the problems and limits of a hyper majoritarian constitutional arrangement. On the one hand, such an arrangement leaves street protest as the only way out if demands go unheard. On the other hand, it gains from the recognition of the executive as the pivot of democratic quality, a type of legitimation that enables the executive itself to keep going with a hyper majoritarian method (see Vauchez, 2016). Here, there are the additional difficulties of institutionalizing the protest, not only due to internal ideological and policy fragmentation but also because of the high current threshold for entering the formal political arena; the extreme weakness of parliament; and relatively low constitutional accountability. Again, uncertainty is the characterizing feature of this democracy too. At the same time, it should be remembered that France remains a peculiar case in terms of policy implementation. The high cohesiveness of the public institutions and the low degree of discontinuity in the elite created reasonable conditions for responding to the crisis, especially concerning public sector reforms.

If from the empirical cases, we switch back to the three theoretical patterns—namely balanced democracy, protest democracy, and unaccountable democracy—a few additional considerations are in order. First, the three patterns cover almost all the existing empirical possibilities in Europe. The balanced democracies include all those well-established democracies which, with great basic traditions and political structures, managed to overcome the Great Recession that only hit all these countries in 2009. Consequently, they had limited problems which, however, are present with higher percentages of dissatisfaction and small protest parties. This is even if there are still reasonably solid partisan and public institutions complemented by strong inter-institutional accountability. Among the protest democracies, in addition to Italy, we can include Greece, which is on its way to recovery and has seen the transformation of Syriza from a widely supported protest party that won the 2015 elections to an incumbent party. Despite all the difficulties, Tsipras is leading the country out of a perfect storm and possible shipwreck through to economic recovery (see Morlino and Raniolo, 2017). Among the unaccountable democracies, in addition to Poland, there is Hungary, which is in a slightly worse situation than Poland, as is also shown by Mainwaring and Bizzarro (2020, esp. Table 2) in their analysis of ‘democratic erosion with no breakdown’ in new democracies. What is probably more significant concerning the three patterns is that they also seem to give a complete analytic map of the contemporary possibilities of both erosion and good democracy, which are the adverse outcomes and the positive ones.
Reflecting on the theoretical patterns only, protest democracy and unaccountable democracy may additionally be irresponsible to different extent. We are, however, considering two different kinds of irresponsibility. Within the first pattern, the incumbent populist actor exploits the citizen’s disaffection and demands to push the responsiveness beyond what could be done taking into account the interests of those same citizens in the middle run, or the sustainability of expenditures or also, as recalled by Mair (2009), the commitment towards other countries, if included into the European Union. This is an economic or international irresponsibility. When analysing the second pattern, unaccountable democracy, the irresponsibility that can be carried out is the political irresponsibility. The incumbent authorities achieve such a result by undermining profoundly the checking, oversight role of other institutions. This is carried out through the revision of constitutional rules, through new laws or manipulating existing laws, such as the age retirement of constitutional justices, as happened in Poland. In this pattern, the media may acquire a really determining role, as also happened in Poland as they become the only constraint that can avoid the sliding into a hybrid regime.

Moreover, setting aside the empirical analysis that was giving the critical information to shape the three patterns, illustrated in Chapter 8, the additional, possible pattern we should consider for the high possible meaningfulness is the one where participative protest is compounded by policies to undermine interinstitutional accountability. This would be the most dangerous pattern, the radicalized democracy, as the protest could become more radicalized and even violent with a fragmented leadership and, at the same time, the weakening of oversight institutions would affect freedoms. If protracted in the time, in a context of economic crisis or stagnation, the basis for a profound crisis of democracy and change toward a hybrid regime would be laid down.

Second, the external challenges faced by democracies in the early twenty-first century directly affect not only the goods to be delivered (possibly a mix of freedoms and equalities) but also resilience and de-consolidation. We are referring here to the sustainability of economic development concerning the environment, to the demographic transformations of advanced societies and mass migrations, to changes in the geopolitical and international framework (including the risk of terrorism), to the impact of the digital technology revolution on our daily lives and our institutions (Harari, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Reynié, 2013).

Third, within the patterns we proposed, what kind of protest can we accept while remaining within the democratic realm and not crossing the threshold into a hybrid regime? Even if, as in Chapter 8, we discard the notion of protest formulated by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, pp. 218–9), an action in defence of rights and

---

1 We cannot discuss here the ‘space of attribute’ behind those patterns. They implicitly came out in Chapter 8 (see esp. Figure 8.3) but were not openly analysed.

2 On this notion see Morlino (2011, chapter 3).
institutions, the issue of how many protests can be tolerated, and in what shape and form, is a crucial problem. For example, can the sorts of demonstrations and riots characterizing the Yellow Vests movement be accepted? When do democratically elected authorities have the right and even the duty to intervene? This is only partially a new issue as it was very much in evidence at the time of the breakdown of democracy in Italy and Weimar Germany in the second and third decade of the last century (see, e.g. Capoccia, 2005) and during the wave of terrorism in the 1970s. Reflecting on these past events suggests a basic reply to the question: even non-conventional protest, on the very edge of legality, can be allowed as a guarantee of the right of citizens to freely express their demands if it is not violent and aimed at subverting the existing democratic institutions. From a different perspective, the limits of protest lie in the fact that the related actions cannot violate existing laws. In this sense, the last defence of democracy is respect for the rule of law, which as a consequence becomes a burning issue in all protest democracies as it gives the magistracy a stronger and also a political role.

Fourth, within the unaccountable democracy pattern, a parallel question is how much the repeal of constraints, legal or of another sort, on the incumbent authorities can be pushed. Like the previous question, this one is also a procedural one, but with the most severe consequences for democratic contents. If we consider the Polish case, we can take it for granted that the incumbent party leaders of the PiS will promote social rights and consequently economic and social equalities. However, without adequate checks on executive power, only possible with effective inter-institutional accountability, we do not know if that political commitment will be kept. Furthermore, however, we are sure that freedoms will be violated. On this matter, the most meaningful lesson comes from Venezuela. In the first years of his rule, Chavez promoted a set of policies that were effectively bringing stronger economic equality, recorded by the improvement of the Gini index in the first decade of the century. At the same time, however, there was a growth of corruption and, above all, a fundamental undermining of inter-institutional accountability (see Morlino, 2016). When the price of oil fell, that was the end of the equality policies. A new roaring inequality reared its head, with the result that at the end of 2018, almost 80% of the entire population was living in poverty. This was a real tragedy, and one with no apparent way out due to the role of the army in supporting the new authoritarian leader, Maduro. With this and other examples in mind, the boundaries on the repealing of constraints on political power are set not only in keeping an independent high court and an equally independent ordinary magistracy but above all in keeping an active political opposition in parliament and a free media. Interventions in these two domains change the essential aspects of democracy and make the effective implementation of the two values a matter of chance. Eventually, some leader will inevitably be tempted to cross the threshold of democracy, as Chavez did.
Fifth, the emphasis we are placing on interinstitutional accountability as the necessary cornerstone of a working democracy is intended to reaffirm that every policy decision risks remaining just on paper without this crucial, decisive control of political action. However, why has that democratic quality been becoming more and more critical in contemporary democracies? As also discussed in chapters 6 and 8, the revolution of technological communication and the crucial role of social media increased the possibility of manipulating the formation of political opinion to an enormous degree. This was indirectly evident and presented in morally acceptable ways in the analysis by Sunstein (2019). The consequence is that in contemporary democracies there has been a weakening of classic electoral accountability, that is, of the possibility for the well-informed, educated citizen to analyse and assess the political actions of incumbent authorities and to be in a condition to reward or punish them.

Liberal thought has nourished an immense faith in the rationality of individuals. [...] democracy is based on the assumption that voters know who it is best to vote for, free-market capitalism assumes that the client is always right, and liberal education teaches students to think for themselves (Harari, 2018, p. 217). However, ‘behavioural economics experts and evolutionary psychologists have shown that most human decisions are based on emotional reactions and heuristic shortcuts rather than on rational analysis’ (ibid., p. 218). This state of affairs in the era of the digital revolution has favoured what is called post-truth, based on misinformation, false news, and propaganda. This is an institutional evolution, all the challenges and consequences of which are not fully grasped by the public or by the audience democracy mentioned by Manin (1997).

The consequence of all this has been a gradual switching of the burden of controlling power on other institutionalized powers. In other words, in contemporary democracy, there has been an actual switching of key democratic control from citizens to other powers, as O’Donnell (1994) had already seen about the recently established Latin American democracies. Of course, the one discussed by O’Donnell was a mostly different context with other characteristics and legacies. However, can the quality of our democracies only be entrusted to non-majority and guarantee institutions? It is no coincidence that post-truth populism has found strength in the delegitimization of technocratic decisions and epistemocracy. From this point of view, we can understand the attempts to revitalize the deliberative forms of democracies. They include, for example, the communicative rationality of Habermas (1981), or to strengthen the possibilities for, and the skillfulness of, control by the citizen—the monitoring democracy of Keane.

3 In a very timely book, D’Agostini and Ferrera (2019) propose a citizen’s set of ‘right to the truth’ or ‘aletic rights’, which also imply a critical approach to the reality to be understood, in our case, the political reality, without being fooled by governing authorities.
(2009)—or simply to use ‘counter-democratic’ solutions that institutionalize the ‘non-trust’ of citizens towards elites through more or less direct oversight, veto powers and the judicialization of politics (Rosanvallon, 2008).

9.2 What Could We Do to Promote the Two Values?

What possible conclusion can be drawn from the reflections just proposed about the possibility of implementing and even improving equalities and freedoms in our democracies? When thinking about the attitudes of dissatisfaction we analysed in Chapter 4, and all the consequences we analysed in the subsequent chapters, there is no doubt that contemporary democracies must deliver the requested goods to citizens. Democracy can no longer be taken for granted just because of the past victories over totalitarianism. The conclusion Diamond (2008) reached years ago is even more appropriate today. On the side of freedoms, not openly questioned by anyone but also often not openly requested, the difficulties lie in the limits of the effective implementation of the rule of law in the countries we analysed, but also in all other countries. To these, we have to add (see Chapter 6) the constraints set by the external conditions we discussed regarding the paradoxical effects of more information and more rules but less freedom. In this perspective, we must acknowledge, as we did in Chapter 7, the role of the European Union in promoting several freedoms.

On the side of equality, two points can be immediately stressed. First, citizens and parties do not always set redressing inequalities as a priority. This by itself undermines any programme in favour of promoting equalities. If equality is understood as social equality, we have to make two considerations that may sound ironic. On the one hand, the moderate leftist parties watered down their proposals to redress inequalities and, on the other hand, social rights entered the programme of rightist parties, identitarian populists included. To consider this change seriously, we should think that social rights have become a constitutive part of the contemporary European notion of democracy. Moreover, as already said, although analytically distinct the programmes for contrasting poverty are closely related to the welfare state and on this matter, there is greater sensitiveness and attention from parties of different ideologies. At the same time, however, beyond the recognition of welfare, there is no strong, relevant voice for redistributive policies. Even with the Great Recession, which brought about a change of priorities in favour of egalitarian policies, or just more considerable attention to equality in some countries, leftist parties with serious redistributive programmes never took centre stage in the political arena, as they gained only limited success among radicalized leftist voters.

4 Of course, except for the tiny, highly minoritarian radical left of the different countries.
Accordingly, can we affirm that we should rethink democracy in terms of the capability of delivering the two praised goods? Of course, economic crisis and protracted stagnation leave no room for majorities in favour of equality and, as seen, the request for freedoms is not vocal as several freedoms are taken for granted. Moreover, we cannot ignore the key conclusions reached by Bertoldi and Salvati (2020) on the sustainability of contemporary Western democracies. They effectively recall that after the Second World War, there were three sets of related factors. They were international aspects (notably, the economic and military hegemony of the United States), cognitive and cultural beliefs, which pushed political elite of Anglo-Saxon and other countries to support Keynesian liberalism, and structural-economic factors, such as technological and organizational revolution, growth of income and productivity, labour demand for semi-skilled workers and wage increase complemented by the expansion of welfare states within a relatively homogeneous population. All of them have now basically disappeared. Consequently, democracies with the implementation of the two values that we have been experiencing in Western countries are no longer possible.

Even if we accept this conclusion, we cannot allow ourselves to make statements about post-democracy or the end of the implementation of those values. The key feature of democracy, which has been allowing this kind of regime to prevail over all others, works in this situation as well. This is its flexibility and capacity for self-adaptation to external conditions. Consequently, democracy will deliver freedom and equality to the new conditions and actors that are present in the coming years. There is no reason for optimism, but there are also no reasons for pessimism and cynicism.

Our analysis proves that political agency can play a decisive role in cases of crisis, within the public institutions and between them and society. This statement is fully consistent with conclusions reached in previous research (see, e.g. Morlino, 2011), where it was showed that in different regions of the world actors that engage into the processes of rule implementation are vital in ensuring the continuity of the functioning of the public institutions. This holds with greater importance than ever before in the countries that are coping with conditions of budget restriction or flawed legitimacy.

Despite being focused on the six biggest democracies of Europe, our research is also relevant for a broader global context. From a strictly empirical perspective, there is a mismatch in the advanced democracies between declared goals and actual trajectories undertaken concerning the most visible, comprehensive, and ambitious international platform: the 2030 UN agenda. In 2015 the 197 member States of the United Nations officially endorsed the sustainable development goals agenda, where freedoms and equalities—in the plural—play the role of the overarching principles expected to be shaping all policies adopted in the world. Ironically, the very democracies which were expected to act as templates to be imitated and transferred are today being challenged by the processes we described.
To conclude this book, we can address a final question that would merit a book, and we are just mentioning here. How in a democracy can we better implement the two critical democratic values? What can be done to redress inequalities and consolidate social rights? How can we overcome the external constraints limiting the effective exercise of some freedoms, while also protecting our dignity? We are of the view that anyone who praises democracy cannot ignore these questions.

Whether we can come up with an effective answer is a different story. However, here we can affirm the need to commit to four possible types of actions. First, a recurrent characteristic of contemporary democracies is political polarization. We can see this not only in our six democracies but also in several others in Europe and the Americas, the United States included. No effective, durable agreement can be found in most of those democracies if polarization and radicalization are not reduced. That is, if the high and growing level of conflict and distance between political parties on different issues, also concerning freedoms and equalities, is not tackled. Polarization often ends in decisional stalemate, or with different, more majoritarian constitutional arrangements, the repealing of the law that the previous government had approved and consequently another de facto stalemate in various domains when there is an alternation of different governments.

In their work, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, pp. 220–31) are also very worried about the negative effect of polarization on egalitarian policies. Their proposals are very much specific and related to the US party system, with the Democrats and Republicans, and what they should do. Here, with an eye on European democracies, radicalized polarization is the result of unsolved problems. Consequently, on the one hand, the citizen should see very explicitly how the government is addressing their grievances and government should make an effort to solve their problems by referring to and underlining the common good and attention for all citizens, not just some specific stronger and more active groups only. The formula of pursuing broader social cooperation would recall neo-corporatist past solutions, today unfeasible, but still appears as the right social recipe that has not yet been overcome.

Second, based on our analysis, the salience of inter-institutional accountability appears strongly as a central aspect of our democracies. Consequently, every political party, every organized group, every citizen should care about reinforcing that accountability. We can reconsider it by including a richer set of dimensions. In other words, it is not just parliamentary opposition and the role of all the media that are important. We should also consider, first, the crucial role of the high courts, in preserving and keeping alive fundamental constitutional tenets, and guaranteeing a set of entitlements and protections for all citizens who praise equality and freedom in every democracy. Second, when active, the role of other courts in controlling public expenditure and of all the other independent authorities, such as the ombudsman, is essential. Even an institutionalized control by
Peripheral authorities of central authorities, and vice versa, would help to enrich a fabric of checks and balances that structure that accountability. In a nutshell, as seen in Chapter 8, we have to restate that there is a close connection between interinstitutional accountability and protection of freedoms, and although indirectly of equalities. The first is eventually the necessary condition of those protections.

Third, among the rights, the most important one in a democracy is the right to vote, which is grounded in other freedoms that concur to form the voter’s own political opinion. As said above, this right has been weakened by too much information and the manipulation of it. In addition to many international think-tanks, the European Union, through different institutions, and governments and parliaments, especially those of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, have been taking several initiatives, law and regulations included, to combat different forms of disinformation. This commitment needs to continue in the attempt to provide further meaningfulness to the right to vote.

Finally, as we have said, it is challenging to craft solid majorities in favour of the strengthening of the welfare state beyond the protection of poverty. Sound and feasible domestic solutions are not easy to carry out, especially in a situation where, except for Germany, there is low economic growth or even stagnation in other countries. Thus, with different purposes, we could adopt the proposal made by Ferrera (2017) on the promotion and establishment of a European Union able to complement domestic and European solidarities. The reason why Ferrera is supporting this proposal is that he rightly envisages such a policy is a way to make the European Union more legitimate and to more effectively turn it into a working, recognized polity. From our perspective, except for the UK, which left the Union in 2020, all the other countries, and especially Italy, Poland, and Spain, would greatly benefit from the implementation of these policies.

Will some of these proposals, or others, be taken into consideration by citizens, parties, and governments? This is a question we cannot answer here.