

Erschienen in:

Dean, Rikki, Jonathan Rinne, and Brigitte Geissel. "Systematizing Democratic Systems Approaches",
Democratic Theory 6, 2 (2019): 41-57,
<https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2019.060205>

Systematizing Democratic Systems Approaches: Seven Conceptual Building Blocks

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Abstract

The notion that democracy is a system is ever present in democratic theory. However, what it means to think systemically about democracy (as opposed to what it means for a political system to be democratic) is under-elaborated. This article sets out a meta-level framework for thinking systemically about democracy, built upon seven conceptual building blocks, which we term: (1) functions, (2) norms, (3) practices, (4) actors, (5) arenas, (6) levels, and (7) interactions. This enables us to systematically structure the debate on democratic systems, highlighting the commonalities and differences between systems approaches, their omissions, and the key questions that remain to be answered. It also enables us to push the debate forward both by demonstrating how a full consideration of all seven building blocks would address issues with existing approaches and by introducing new conceptual clarifications within those building blocks.

Keywords: democratic system; democratic theory; deliberative democracy; deliberative system; systems theory

The notion that democracy is a system is ever present in democratic theory. It can be found in Aristotle's *Politics* (Bk II.6 16), as well as seminal texts by Robert Dahl (1956, 1989). It is also prevalent in applied democratic theory for classifying existing political regimes (Lijphart 1968) or measuring democratic qualityⁱ. Yet, until recently, what it means to think systemically about democracy (as opposed to what it means for a political system to be democratic) was untheorized. This changed with the systems turn in deliberative democratic theory.

A systems approach now predominates within deliberative democracy. This began with a variety of different specifications of the approach (most prominently: Dryzek 2010; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Neblo 2015; Parkinson 2006), which continue to be critiqued and expanded (e.g. Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Curato, Hammond, and Min 2019; Elstub, Ercan, and Mendonça 2018). The development of this approach produced two important conceptual innovations. Using the central insight of systems theory, it reconceptualised deliberative democracy as an interconnected and interacting set of democratic “parts” (Dryzek 2010; Habermas 1996; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Neblo 2015; Parkinson 2006), rather than a specific set of institutional arrangements, such as competitive elections and political liberties (most influentially: Dahl 1989). In addition, it coupled systems theory with normative democratic theory. Whereas systems theory had primarily focused upon how systems stabilise and functionally reproduce themselves (Parsons 1937, 1991; Luhmann 1995), deliberative systems theory imagines how the interconnected, interacting parts realise a set of functions informed by deliberative ideals (see especially: Mansbridge et al. 2012). These conceptual innovations are transforming both deliberative democratic theory and its application. They have generated new approaches to normative evaluation of real-world

democratic interventions and practice (see: Curato and Böker 2016; Felicetti, Niemeyer, and Curato 2016; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Knops 2016; MacKenzie and Warren 2012; Niemeyer 2014; O’Flynn and Curato 2015), and increasingly influence the design of participatory democratic innovations (Dean, Boswell, and Smith 2019). Nevertheless the systems approach is yet to have a big impact beyond the deliberative model. There are a few instances where a similar systems approach is employed to develop broader theories of democratic systems (Warren 2017) and participatory systems (Dean 2016, 2017), but these remain isolated examples. The conceptual groundwork for a *democratic systems* approach is in its infancy.

This article provides a broad starting point for a discussion of the conceptual foundations for democratic systems approaches. The goal is to systematically structure the debate on democratic systems, highlighting the commonalities and differences between different systems approaches, their omissions, and the key questions that remain to be answered. We reconstruct seven key conceptual ‘building blocks’ implicit or explicit in current literature on deliberative and democratic systems in order to develop a meta-level framework for systems approaches. We term these seven building blocks: (1) functions, (2) norms, (3) practices, (4) actors, (5) arenas, (6) levels, and (7) interactions. The process of their elaboration brings into conversation a range of different systems specifications that were previously developed in isolation and failed to thoroughly engage with one another. It enables us to push the debate forward by demonstrating how a full consideration of all seven building blocks would address the omissions and oversimplifications of existing approaches. Moreover, we build on existing approaches by introducing new conceptual clarifications within building blocks, for example; we introduce a differentiation between the individual and the collective dimension of norms, functions, practices and actors, as well as identifying the variety of potential interactions between different building blocks.

The article should not be mistaken for a new systems account. As a meta-level framework it focuses on naming the crucial building blocks for any system theory of democracy. This means, for example, we outline the conceptual building block of ‘functions’, with sub-categories for the individual and the collective dimensions, but do not specify which functions a particular systems account should adopt. This enables us to exploit the conceptual innovations of deliberative systems theory, whilst isolating them from a specifically deliberative account of democracy. Our approach thus provides a framework that is compatible with the development of a range of different specific accounts of the democratic system. The seven conceptual building blocks provide a systematic basis for beginning the theoretical development of democratic systems theory. Nevertheless, as highlighted throughout this short article, there is significant scope for further development.

1. Functions

A common feature of the various systems approaches has been to produce a set of ‘functions’ by which a system can be defined as operating democratically or deliberatively. These functions often come in threes; Mansbridge et al. (2012) have epistemic, democratic and ethical functions, whereas Warren (2017) has empowered inclusion, collective agenda and will-formation, and collective decision-making. For these authors functions are at the very core of their systems approach, whilst for others (e.g. Dryzek 2010; Neblo 2015) functions take second place to mapping the system’s arenas. This shift to a functional approach is a significant theoretical development, replacing the two predominant definitions of democracy in the democratic theory and democracy measurement literatures – namely, as a set of specific institutional arrangements (free and fair elections, independent judiciary, etc.), or as a model based on a specific democratic practice (e.g. direct democracy, representative

democracy, participatory democracy, etc.). Despite this, there is little clarity regarding the definition of a function and how they should be identified.

The lack of clarity regarding definitions is indicated both by a variety in terminology and inconsistency vis-à-vis the nature of functions, for example, whether they are normative or not. We adopt the term ‘function’, following Mansbridge et al. (2012) and Warren (2017), but Dryzek (2010) employs ‘deliberative capacities’ and Neblo (2015) ‘normative criteria’ for similar ideas. There are not only terminological differences between different accounts, but often the set of functions proposed by a single account encompasses functions of a seemingly different nature. So, whilst Warren argues that functions are normative, and provides a purely normative basis for his ‘empowered inclusion’ and ‘collective agenda-setting and will-formation’ functions, the ‘collective decision-making’ function is also justified on the basis of output legitimacy (2017, 43–45). Similarly, Mansbridge et al., have two functions that are clearly normative in orientation, but a third (their epistemic function) concerns output quality (2012, 11). This inconsistency highlights the need to fully elaborate what this key building block of democratic systems theory is.

There is a further question concerning how the set of relevant functions should be arrived at. Each systems account presents a different set of functions. There is undoubtedly overlap between them, and it is natural that there may be differences in opinion regarding the right set. Nevertheless, it is surprising how little engagement there is between the different accounts, which often simply state their functions without explaining how and why they diverge from previous accounts. This provokes questions even where there is overlap – for example, Dryzek’s ‘inclusion’, Mansbridge et al.’s ‘democratic’ function and Warren’s ‘empowered inclusion’ all seem to capture the same substantive idea. Still, if it is the same idea, why do they call it different things – how does empowered inclusion differ from inclusion, for instance? In addition, the lack of systematic elaboration of the sets of functions

raises questions about the implications of the overlap. Is it because the concept of inclusion is more universalizable than the other functions that do not appear in all three accounts, or is it simply a coincidence?

It is also questionable whether the existing sets of functions are complete. The individual dimension of functions has not been fully conceptualised. A long tradition in democratic scholarship roots the value of democracy in its capacity to produce democratic individuals (Barber 1984; Mill 1861; Mayne and Geissel 2016; Newton 2012; Pateman 1970). Yet the functions of current systems accounts emphasise the properties of the system, not the individuals that inhabit those systems. As such they omit what a number of democratic theorists, particularly participatory democratic theorists, consider a core function of democracy. In summary, a functional account of democracy is at the heart of a democratic systems theory, and this entails a better definition what a function is, and a more systematic method for elaborating the appropriate set of individual and collective functions.

2. Norms

Democratic norms, such as political equality, which were previously often the starting point for democratic theories, have been eclipsed in democratic systems accounts by the focus on functions. They are often implied in the description of functions – for example, the inclusion function is commonly justified with reference to the norm of political equality (see, Mansbridge et al. 2012, 12; Warren 2017, 44) – but remain in the background. Since the systems approach largely emerged from a deliberative democratic project where an extensive literature on the normative foundations for deliberative democracy already existed, this is perhaps not so surprising. However, if functions are normative, then a clear specification of relevant democratic norms upon which they should be based is necessary in order to

comprehensively identify functions. This is particularly true for a broad democratic systems approach, which has no pre-existing cohesive normative project to draw on, and must account for the contestation around norms that characterises the history of ideas of democracy.

Moreover, even deliberative democrats disagree with each other on normative foundations, and thus greater clarity about the norms implied within deliberative systems accounts would illuminate exactly which form of deliberative democracy is being invoked, as well as help to address concerns that deliberative systems have lost their normative moorings (e.g. Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018; Owen and Smith 2015).

Bringing norms back into the foreground as a key building block of a democratic systems approach would have a number of benefits. It would highlight the difference between norms and functions, which in many instances remains unclear (Asenbaum 2018). It would also enable an analysis of whether a function is based on general democratic norms that are broadly accepted by a range of competing conceptions of democracy or on a specific norm related to a singular conception of democracy. Take, for instance, the inclusion function, which Dryzek says “applies to the range of interests and discourses present in a political setting. Without inclusiveness, there may be deliberation but not deliberative democracy” (2009, 1382). It is a general democratic norm rather than a specifically deliberative norm. Whereas, Dryzek’s ‘authenticity’ function – based on the notion that “deliberation must induce reflection noncoercively, connect claims to more general principles, and exhibit reciprocity” (2009, 1382) – is based on deliberative norms and is less likely to be endorsed by supporters of, for example, economic theories of democracy (e.g. Downs 1957) or agonistic democracy (e.g. Mouffe 2000). A clear statement of the norms invoked by a systems account and their relations to proposed functions would therefore help to understand the comprehensiveness and generalizability of these functions.

Foregrounding norms, in the process elaborating their individual and collective dimensions, would also help to identify any missing functions. Our above injunction to consider individual functions, for instance, emerged from an appreciation of the importance to democracy of the norm of individual autonomy. Norms therefore remain a key building block for thinking systematically about democratic systems.

3. Practices

Mark Warren's (2017) problem-based approach is the most practice-oriented systems theory. He gives practices a central place in the democratic system, specifying a broad list of seven relevant practices that contribute to realising democratic functions: recognizing, resisting, deliberating, representing, voting, joining and exiting. Identifying these generic practices and their functional correlates is an important step for developing a democratic systems approach, and we agree that they should constitute a core building block. Nevertheless, there are aspects of Warren's account that require further elaboration.

One key missing element is the specification of collective practices, such as sortition, aggregation and competition. Warren's seven practices all refer to actions carried out by single individual or collective actors. However, democracies also incorporate a range of collective practices that are applied to multiple actors and regulate the relationships between them. Some of these collective practices are institutional, others not. Warren is concerned to avoid the institutional approach to defining and evaluating democracy – where democracy is associated, for instance, with the presence of competitive elections (2017, 45)– but this means that he misses the extent to which collective institutional practices (such as the separation of powers) can themselves contribute to realising democratic functions.

Collective practices not only make an important contribution to realising functions in their own right, they also have significant effects on individual practices. Take, for example, Warren's discussion of the functional strengths of the individual practice of voting, and it becomes clear that voting only realises its empowered inclusion and collective decision-making functions when it is practiced in concert with collective practices of aggregation and competition. Moreover, the functional effects of voting are sensitive to alterations in the type of aggregation and competition practices. As such, it is far from simple to draw one-to-one connections between practices and functions.

In summary, to fully understand practices as a building block of a democratic systems approach requires an enumeration of the collective practices that contribute to realising democratic functions in order to supplement the individual practices Warren has already identified, as well as further elaboration of how practices are bundled together to produce functions.

4. Actors

Practices require individual and collective actors to enact them (Mayne and Geissel 2016).

These actors have, however, largely remained implicit within the deliberative and democratic systems literature. Warren (2017), for example, alludes to how practices imply different roles for individual actors, but goes no further than this. Dryzek is concerned with the deliberative capacities of individual and collective actors but does not sufficiently distinguish between these different types of actors. This has led to the criticism that the deliberative system has forgotten the importance of individual deliberators and their different capacities (Owen and Smith 2015), as well as neglected particular sets of democratic actors, such as public administrators (Dean 2016; Green, Kingzette, and Neblo 2019).

A democratic system entails a division of labour between different actors – different types of actors carry out different types of practices. Yet, as Rummens has cautioned, actors should not be “regarded as abstract and essentially identical persons” (2012, 27; drawing on Benhabib 1992). We must pay attention to their concreteness, because actors are not simply interchangeable: it matters which actors are doing what, where and when (cf. Hendriks 2006). This is both normatively and pragmatically true. To understand, for example, whether a democratic system is realising the inclusion function, we must know exactly who is engaging in certain practices, for instance; declines in electoral turnout are troubling in and of themselves, but they are particularly problematic for inclusion because they are disproportionately concentrated in certain social groups. In addition, it is normatively undesirable for certain actors to carry out certain practices - such as when special interest groups draft model legislation to be adopted by elected legislators as if it is their own work (Cooper et al. 2016). It is pragmatically important to consider which practices can be carried out by which actors, as well as the demands made upon actors by combining practices, for instance; Dean (2018) has highlighted the difficulties actors encounter when they are required to simultaneously engage in agonistic and solidaristic practices. Actors are therefore a necessary building block of democratic systems theory.

Democratic systems theory is in need of a clear account of relevant democratic actors. This should take account of important differences between individual and collective actors, since collective actors are more than individual actors aggregated. They have their own particular characteristics, for example political parties provide continuity by establishing an institutional memory of policy decisions, allowing ‘defeated interests’ to be reinserted into the policy process (Rummens 2012). A typology of individual and collective actors, linking them to the practices and arenas legitimate for the different kinds of actor to engage in, would be an important step in developing the field.

5. Arenas

Practices are not only enacted by actors but also located in what we term ‘arenas’. Spatial metaphors have been a feature of systems approaches, dating back to Habermas’ (1996) two-track conception of a political system divided into an informal public sphere and formal administrative sphere. This core concept again has no common terminology in the systems literature – with Habermas they are ‘spheres’, but the range of terms includes ‘sites’ (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Neblo 2015; Rummens 2012), ‘spaces’ (Dryzek 2009), and ‘arenas’ (Mansbridge et al. 2012). Despite the different terms, a central tenet of all these accounts is that the functional labour of the democratic system can be divided between different spheres/sites/spaces/arenas. Nevertheless, there has been little discussion of how an arena should be defined. The concept thus hides a complex array of phenomena. Arenas are both offline and online. They range from one-off, small-scale micro-deliberative forums to permanent, complex decision-making institutions such as parliaments. They encompass everything from tightly bound constitutional courts to the diffuse and multifaceted macro public sphere.

The deliberative systems literature that has mapped these arenas has, quite reasonably, been predominantly concerned with communication flows between them. Taking up Habermas’ original impetus, they attempt to understand how opinion- and will-formation is translated into binding collective decisions by the state, so Dryzek adds private space to public space and empowered space. The four arenas of Mansbridge et al. also encapsulate this theme, encompassing: “the binding decisions of the state (both in the law itself and its implementation); activities directly related to preparing for those binding decisions; informal talk related to those binding decisions; and arenas of formal or informal talk related to decisions on issues of common concern that are not intended for binding decisions by the

state” (2012, 9). Similarly, Neblo groups his sites into broad categories of civil society and state (2015, 18). This deliberative focus has obscured other potential bases for differentiating between arenas – for example, the bundling of the different branches of government into the “formal sphere” (Habermas 1996), “empowered space” (Dryzek 2009) or “formal government” (Neblo 2015), occludes the traditional functional differentiation between executive, legislature and judiciary. A parliament and a constitutional court, are both formal, empowered arenas, but they contribute differently to democratic functions. The democratic systems approach needs a much more fine-grained elaboration of the different kinds of arenas that constitute the system. These could be classified according to their appropriate functional labours, but this is not the only criterion on which a typology of arenas could be developed. A typology that clarified the relations between arenas and practices would also add to the conceptual toolbox.

6. Levels

A significant strength of a systems approach is that it enables an analysis of democracy as a multi-level governance system, rather than reifying nation-state democracy as the only relevant unit of analysis (which is common with the institutional accounts of democracy that characterise the democracy measurement literature). Though some specifications of the democratic system are undoubtedly focused on the nation-state (e.g. Habermas 1996; Neblo 2015; Parkinson 2006), Dryzek argues his approach can be applied to a range of different levels, from the “local to the global” (2010, 10–11). Mansbridge et al. see their systems approach as applying beyond the nation-state to encompass “supranational states, international decision-making bodies, and the international institutions” (2012, 8), and Warren’s (2017) functions and practices are sufficiently abstract that they could be applied to any form of collective self-rule. The systems approach can therefore be a powerful tool for

understanding the democratic character of increasingly complex multi-level governance systems; but as yet there has been no thorough-going exploration of what it means to conceive of the systems approach in multi-level terms.

This raises two difficult sets of questions. The first set relate to the implications of conceiving of and analysing democracy as a multi-level system. Is each level in itself an independent system, or is the system conceived at the highest (i.e. global) level with the other levels as nested sub-systems, analogous to world-systems theory for economic development (Wallerstein 1974)? This has important implications for understanding the democratic character of multi-level governance developments – from the relation of the transnational-level EU to its national-level member states, to how to interpret increased local-level deliberation and election in China whilst the national-level remains a one-party authoritarian state. Can each level be analysed separately from another or are they so intimately related that one level must be analysed in the context of the other levels?

The second set of questions concern how to conceive of the other conceptual building blocks as multi-level phenomena. Do all functions apply to all levels – namely, do we expect neighbourhood democracy, nation-state democracy and global democracy to all realise the same functions? Or are some functions relatively more important at some levels than others? Arenas are particularly complex in this regard. Many arenas do not exist only on one level, but cut across levels. Consider, for instance, second chambers of parliaments that represent sub-national levels in federal states. Similarly, should the public sphere be conceived of as one arena that exists across multiple levels, or should it be divided up according to levels, so there is a local public sphere, a national public sphere, a global public sphere and so on. As yet, systems accounts have not theorised the building blocks of the approach in multi-level terms.

7. Interactions

The seventh and final conceptual building block is ‘interactions’. The division of functional labour between arenas, which is a central idea of systems approaches, presupposes interaction – for example, that a lack in one arena can be compensated for in another. Though these interactions are under-explored in the initial specifications of systems approaches (Parkinson 2006 is an exception), they have been pursued in greater detail in recent literature (e.g. Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Boswell, Hendriks, and Ercan 2016; Curato, Hammond, and Min 2019; Hendriks 2016; Mendonça 2016). This literature has developed a sophisticated understanding of how the products of one arena may beneficially influence another. Authors have examined how communication in one arena is transmitted to or transformed by another arena, as well as who or what can serve as a transmission mechanism between arenas (Boswell, Hendriks, and Ercan 2016; Curato, Hammond, and Min 2019; Mendonça 2016). In addition, they have theorised how arenas should be arranged in ways that stimulate uptake between one arena and another – for instance, how they should be sequenced (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Goodin 2005; Parkinson 2006) or how tightly they should be coupled (Hendriks 2016). Nevertheless, a rich variety of interactions beyond arenas’ creation of combined products pervade the democratic system and remain in need of theoretical and empirical exploration.

One form of interaction that has received less attention is the extent to which one arena affects the operation of another. There has also been some concern in the literature regarding whether one arena can displace another (e.g. Mansbridge et al. 2012). Nevertheless, how the presence of one type of arena can alter the nature of another has not been a major focus. These indirect effects are already well established in the political science literature, for instance; research on referenda in Switzerland, which provides evidence that the

institutionalization of the facultative referendum transformed representative institutions from majoritarian to consensual (Linder 1999). There are a range of potential interactions between arenas beyond simple addition and displacement. We also need to know how they can intensify, reinforce, underpin, constrain, compete with, nullify, undermine, or duplicate each other.

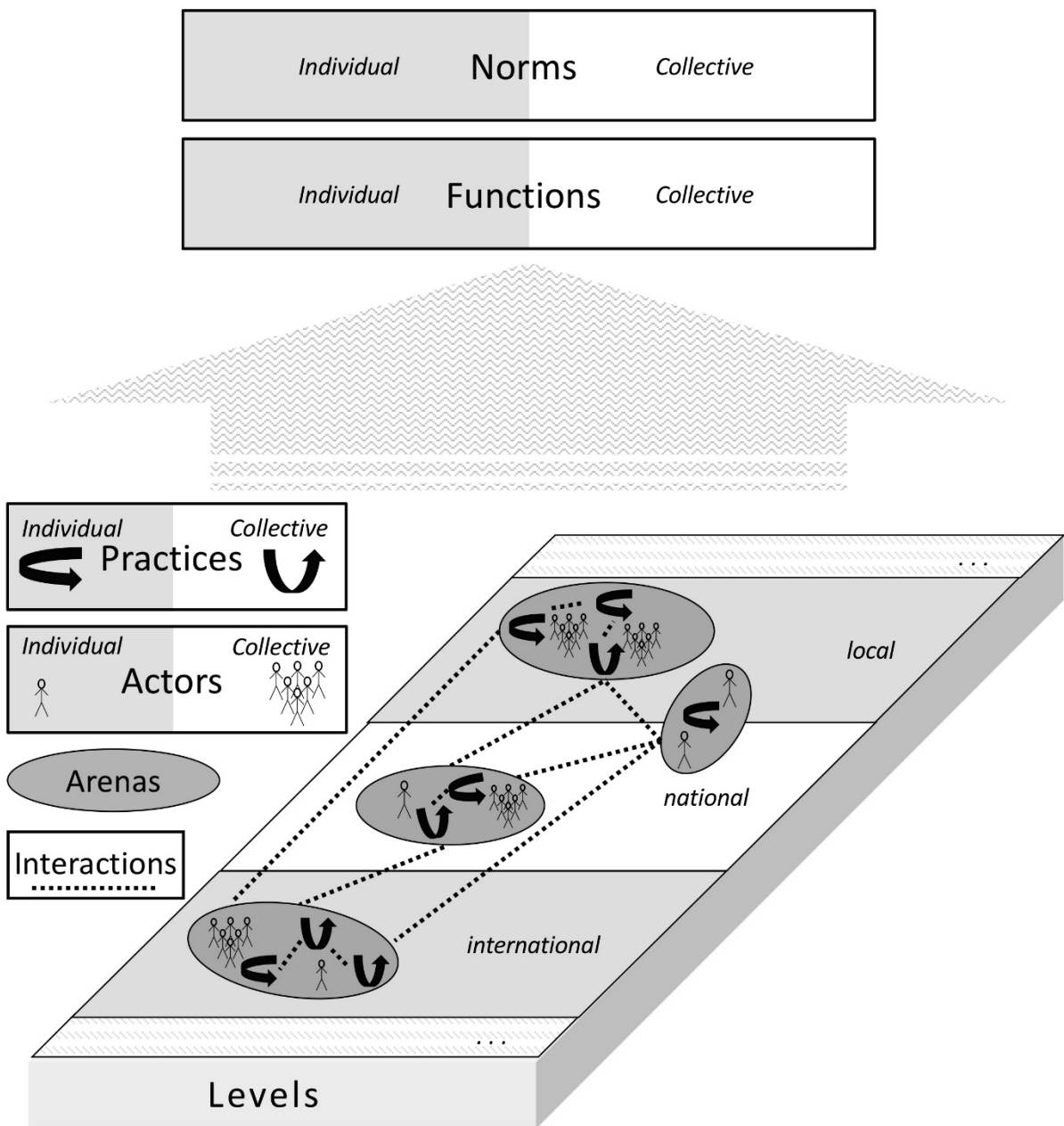
It is also not only arenas that interact. We discussed above how collective practices can underpin or nullify individual practices, thus it is important to consider which other building blocks of the system interact. The literature has begun to explore some of the interactions between practices – for example how deliberation can support voting (Goodin 2005), and how representation can constrain deliberation (Warren 2017), but this has been far from systematic. It is also possible that interactions might cut across the different building blocks, for instance, that the type of actor supports or undermines their ability to engage in certain practices. To understand the functional capacity of a democratic system we cannot assume a simple one-to-one relationship between the different building blocks, for instance; that introducing more of a certain practice would necessarily lead to a better realisation of a certain function. We must also take into account the potential interactions with other elements of the system.

Discussion

The elaboration of each of the seven building blocks demonstrated that no existing deliberative or democratic systems specification encompassed all seven, thus democratic systems approaches could improve their comprehensiveness by paying more attention to the full set. Nevertheless, all systems approaches do cut across a broad distinction between democratic ends and democratic means, as can be observed in Figure 1. Figure 1 provides a

schematic representation of the seven building blocks and the relationships between them. It shows them divided into normative building blocks (norms and functions) and operative building blocks (practices, actors, arenas, interactions and levels). The former pertain to *ought* questions, whilst the latter are more oriented to *is* questions. Democratic systems theory thus offers an opportunity to re-integrate an increasingly fragmented landscape of democratic theories, combining *ought* and *is* questions, as Sartori (1987) advocated.

Figure 1: Schematic system representation



The framework entails the strong claim that for democratic theory (as a field) to be comprehensive it must address all of the seven conceptual building blocks. However, there is no requirement that a single democratic theory must address all seven building blocks, for instance; some individual works may solely elaborate normative building blocks. The important place of democratic ends (as functions and norms) within the framework makes room for the kinds of democratic theorist usually sceptical of such systems building. The proposed framework is also relatively neutral between different approaches to conducting democratic theory. It stipulates, for instance, that we cannot theorise a democratic system without considering democratic norms, but it does not advocate a particular approach to elaborating those norms. They could be arrived at through ideal theory, comparative theory, or even empirical study of democratic actors. The framework could thus be employed to connect previously unrelated democratic theories, just as we have used it to bring different systems specifications into conversation with one another.

The framework provides fertile ground for connecting theoretical and empirical scholarship. Deliberative systems theory has already made strides in this regard by applying its precepts to evaluate real world practices. Our framework, with its broader set of concepts, can enrich these attempts. However, there are a range of other ways that it could be employed to guide combined theoretical and empirical scholarship. Since it is a meta-level framework, the substantive content of each building block remains to be elaborated. This provides opportunities for democratic systems theory to partner with other fields, for instance; the multi-level governance literature can help to theorise the levels of the democratic systems. Moreover, the complexity of some of these concepts calls for empirical observation to inform and test theory. The potential interactions within and between building blocks, for instance, are multifarious and unlikely to be captured by *a priori* theorising alone. Careful observation

of democracy in action will be necessary to understand the many ways that practices, arenas and actors interact to realise democratic functions.

Conclusion

A democratic systems theory that builds upon the deliberative systems turn has the capacity to connect a wide range of democratic theories; integrating ought and is questions, competing theoretical approaches, and theoretical and empirical scholarship. But this requires the conceptual tools to think systemically about democracy. This article developed a systematic foundation from which to tackle this challenge by proposing a meta-level framework built upon seven conceptual building blocks, which we term: (1) functions, (2) norms, (3) practices, (4) actors, (5) arenas, (6) levels, and (7) interactions. Our reconstructive approach means that all seven concepts are already in use in existing systems approaches, so we are confident they provide at least a minimum set. Still, this new framework is only the starting point, and throughout we pointed to important omissions that require addressing. This included the need to more systematically elaborate the relevant norms and functions of the democratic system and the relations between them, as well as the need for a typology of democratic arenas. In addition, we introduced new conceptual clarifications – for example between the individual and collective dimensions of norms, functions, practices and actors, and the different types of potential interactions. As such the article structures and deepens democratic systems theory. Moreover, it provides a framework for connecting disparate democratic theories with empirical social science to enrich our understanding of democracy.

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Note

ⁱ Both the Varieties of Democracy and Democracy Barometer describe democracy as a ‘system’. For the former see <https://www.v-dem.net/en/> (accessed 31.07.19); for the latter see (Bühlmann et al. 2012) or http://www.democracybarometer.org/concept_en.html (accessed 31.07.19)