

What do we mean by democracy in management and organization studies?

Sébastien Mena (University of Fribourg)

**Johanna Mair (European University Institute, Florence School of Transnational
Governance)**

Ignas M. Bruder (Technische Universität Dresden)

Contact information for the corresponding author: Sébastien Mena, Faculté des sciences économiques et sociales et du management, Université de Fribourg, Bd. de Pérolles 90, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland, +41 26 300 82 97, sebastien.mena@unifr.ch

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Abstract: Democracy is a key concept in management and organization studies (MOS), but it is often not explicitly theorized. In this article, we draw on political theory to show how democracy can be clearly integrated in MOS and how this integration opens up a new and important research agenda. We provide an overview of different MOS literatures that include the idea of democracy, such as democratic organizing, corporate political activity or political corporate social responsibility. We distinguish among three research areas based on unique conceptual and analytical foci: (a) democracy within the organization, and democracy as part of the organization's environment that (b) affects it and/or (c) is influenced by it. We develop a comprehensive framework across these research foci, leveraging four canonical perspectives on democracy (liberal, republican, deliberative, and agonistic). This framework helps organize diverse MOS research on democracy, improves conceptual clarity, and highlights key future research avenues. We discuss how our framework impacts MOS research, emphasize the importance of recognizing different perspectival assumptions in democracy research in MOS, and explore how studying interactions between these areas can advance such research.

Keywords: agonism, business & politics, corporate political activity (CPA), deliberative democracy, democracy, democratic organizing, liberal democracy, republicanism

“To take democracy seriously, we must know what we are talking about” (Tilly, 2007, p. 7)

In 2024, more than half of the world’s population went to the polls to elect their leaders. Yet despite this unprecedented global display of democratic practice, countries classified as full democracies are no longer in the majority (Nord et al., 2025). Democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies are spreading even in countries that continue to claim democratic legitimacy, such as Hungary. Established democracies like Germany and the United States face deep polarization and a resurgence of the far right. McCoy et al. (2018) called these trends a global crisis of democracy. These developments call into question what democracy is and what it is meant to achieve (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014)—issues that reverberate not only through political institutions but also through the economy and its organizations.

Notwithstanding these recent developments, democracy has long been a central, if often implicit, concern in management and organization studies (MOS), relevant to areas of research as diverse as democratic organizing (Bass & Shackleton, 1979) or corporate political activity (Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004), to name just two examples. Yet, despite this breadth, democracy remains often undertheorized in MOS, as researchers use the term in different ways, thereby limiting the accumulation of knowledge. Constructs such as participation, voice, and institutions are sometimes mobilized without a shared, clear conceptual foundation. Indeed, the underlying theory of democracy in MOS research is often implicit. On the one hand, research tends to treat liberal democracy as a taken-for-granted environment in which organizations are supposed to thrive (Hillman & Hitt, 1999; Mair, Marti, & Ventresca, 2012). On the other hand, research on democracy in organizations has mainly focused on internal governance (Battilana, Beckman, & Yen, 2025), overlooking how organizations are both shaped by and shape democratic conditions in their external environments.

To address these problems and promote dialogue between democracy studies and MOS, we propose that these internal and external dimensions of democracy are deeply interconnected. We build a framework that connects theories of democracy with organizational analysis across three domains or foci of research: (a) democracy within organizations, as opposed to democracy as a feature of organizational environments that (b) shape organizations and/or (c) serve as a target of organizational efforts. We do so by drawing on four major traditions in political theory: liberal, republican, deliberative, and agonistic. Connecting democratic and organizational theory matters because the global crisis of democracy manifests inside organizations as well. Polarization visible in society strains relationships between managers and employees, and among employees themselves (Edelman, 2025). Rising authoritarianism creates uncertainty for firms and industries (Sallai, Schnyder, Kinderman, & Nölke, 2024), as seen in recent trade conflicts, and for civil society organizations (Toepler et al., 2020), resulting in shrinking spaces for their activities. Such developments highlight that democracy is not merely a political concern but also a managerial and organizational one.

We define democracy broadly, following Held (2006), as a collective form of governance in which the people rule. To examine democracy in the economic and organizational realms, we must also clarify what we mean by “organization” and “organizing.” An organization can be understood as a group of people working together toward a common goal (Scott & Davis, 2015). Organizing refers to the formal and informal processes that structure this collective action, both internally and in relation to other actors, organizations, and environmental features. This view encompasses corporations, nonprofits, cooperatives, and other so-called alternative organizations (Mair & Rathert, 2021; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014) when their exchanges and interactions are mediated at least partially by market institutions (Baron, 1995). We thus focus on organizations and organizing

in the economy. Such a framing allows us to extend concepts of democratic governance beyond the political sphere to the practices, routines, and institutional contexts of economic organizing.

Our framework contributes to the resurging interest in the organization–democracy nexus (Battilana et al., 2025; Battilana, Yen, Ferreras, & Ramarajan, 2022; Lee, Reuer, Adomako, Lyles, & Sarala, 2025). By strengthening conceptual clarity, we make MOS scholarship more responsive to contemporary democratic challenges—moving beyond unexamined reliance on liberal democracy as the normative baseline (Banerjee, 2023). By scrutinizing assumptions underlying democratic perspectives and making them explicit, we encourage MOS scholars to question their own assumptions and clarify their theorizing (Suddaby, 2024). For example, when exploring workplace democracy, who qualifies as the people (or demos; Koenig-Archibugi, 2022): employees, a larger set of organizational members and/or stakeholders, or a broader demos? By systematically linking democracy theories from political thought with organizational foci of analysis, our framework enables MOS scholars to identify where their own work sits conceptually, and to develop rich and fruitful avenues for future research that also engage with democracy studies.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first take stock of how democracy has been conceived of in key MOS research streams. We provide an overview of these and other literatures that allows us to capture three different conceptual and analytical foci of research on democracy in MOS: internal, outside-in, and inside-out. Next, we revisit four canonical perspectives on democracy from political theory. We then develop a comprehensive framework across the research foci, leveraging these four perspectives, to systematize the diversity of MOS research on democracy, provide greater conceptual clarity and surface key future research avenues. We then discuss the implications of our framework for MOS research, highlight the importance of bringing perspectival assumptions in democracy

research to the surface in MOS, and show how attention to cross-foci dynamics can further such research.

A Brief Overview of Democracy in MOS

Democracy is important to many streams of research in MOS. In this section, we offer a stylized overview of four main MOS literatures with links to democracy: democratic organizing, corporate political activity and nonmarket strategy (CPA/NMS), international business (IB), and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Our objective is to showcase the variety in which MOS has portrayed the relationship between organizations in the economy (firms) and democracy, even if we do not offer a comprehensive review. More specifically, we seek to uncover three main aspects of the firm in relation to democracy: as a repository of democratic values and principles, as a vehicle shaped by political systems, and as a tool for transforming democracy. At the end of this section, we thus analyze these three aspects as foci of research on democracy in MOS: inside the organization, outside-in, and inside-out. This stylized overview we offer here helps to reveal the different analytical and conceptual foci within MOS and specify linkages to canonical perspectives on democracy in democratic theory, which we examine in the next section.

Democratic Organizing

Research on democratic organizing is interested in how democracy can be embedded within organizational structures and governance processes, either by reforming the corporation (Battilana et al., 2022) or through alternative forms of organizing that deviate from the dominant organizational model of the hierarchical corporation in terms of purpose, participation, and ownership (Luyckx et al., 2022; Mair & Rathert, 2021; Parker et al., 2014). Research on democratic organizing thus tends to view democracy as a set of principles

infused in organizing and governing. Democracy here is the benchmark for how organizations should behave and make decisions.

The concept of workplace democracy is key to this stream of research, as it emphasizes employee inclusion and participatory practices. This concept focuses on the divergent interests of owners and employees in corporations and theorizes how employees can be systematically integrated into corporate governance (Young-Hyman et al., 2023). Measures discussed in this literature include, for instance, the representation of employees in decision-making bodies (Ferrerias, 2017) and participatory practices of employee involvement in corporations (Frega, 2021). Yet, this literature also recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the democratization of corporations (Frega, 2024) and that wider institutional reforms are necessary to enable such transitions on the organizational level (Battilana et al., 2022). Longstanding research on democratic spillover examines how experiences of democracy at the workplace can foster civic and political participation by its members, thereby strengthening democratic institutions (Pateman, 1970).

Research on alternative forms of organizing (Luyckx et al., 2022; Mair & Rathert, 2021; Parker et al., 2014) investigates how more democratic approaches prefigure a new mode of economic organizing distinct from the existing capitalist economy in many parts of the world today (Schiller-Merkens, 2024). A seminal work in this regard was Rothschild-Whitt's (1979) study of collectivist organizations in the United States, which delineated the structures, principles, and underpinning values of collectivist-democratic organizations, not only with regard to the core democratic aspects but also organizational aspects deriving from those, such as low division of labor due to egalitarian values.

Corporate Political Activity and Nonmarket Strategy

Research on corporate political activity and nonmarket strategy (CPA/NMS) explores how firms engage with their environment to influence regulations, policies, and public opinion, thereby shaping their competitive landscape. Democracy plays a key role in these interactions, as it is often understood as a political system that shapes firms' behavior. Firms intentionally intervene in political systems to further their interests. In particular, CPA/NMS research builds on the assumption that democracies offer avenues for firms to participate in the political process through lobbying, campaign contributions, and advocacy, influencing policy outcomes and regulatory frameworks (Baron, 1995; Hillman & Hitt, 1999). In addition, firms often adapt their CPA approaches in response to shifts in democratic governance, anticipating and influencing policy changes proactively (McGuire et al., 1988). Yet, research shows that stronger democracy typically entails greater transparency, such that corporations face scrutiny and pressure to align their political activities with societal values and expectations (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2012). Engaging with multiple stakeholders, including civil society groups and communities, then becomes crucial for legitimizing corporate actions in the political sphere (Campbell, 2007). Such engagement has, however, been criticized for granting corporations too much power in a democratic system, likening CPA to corruption (Nyberg, 2021).

International Business (IB)

Democracy plays a crucial role in shaping international business (IB), from investment decisions and trade relations to global business strategies. In this stream of research, democracy is usually understood as a political system that intersects with the economic system and hence affects firms' decisions, behaviors, and performance. Studies in IB have explored the link between political institutions and foreign direct investment (FDI). Research suggests that democracies generally attract higher levels of FDI due to more stable political

environments, provide stronger protection of property rights, and reduce risks for investors (Filippaios et al., 2019; Lipsey, 2003). Beyond FDI, other studies highlight that democratic countries foster a conducive environment for international business operations. This is accomplished through better regulatory frameworks, lower corruption levels, and more transparent legal systems, among other measures. In this respect, a country's democratic nature influences the formulation of international business strategies. Research discusses how companies need to adapt their strategies to the political landscape of democratic nations, taking into account policy changes, public opinion, and specific stakeholder attitudes toward politics (Rugman & Verbeke, 2004).

Perhaps the most important and well-developed use of democracy in IB can be found in research on varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001), which examines how different institutional arrangements in capitalist economies impact corporate behavior and outcomes. This research typically shows that in coordinated, social-democratic, market economies, where societal actors cooperate (e.g., active social dialogue, collective bargaining, inclusive policies), institutions support coordination among firms, whereas in liberal market economies, coordination is less pronounced but market competition is greater (Amable, 2003; Whitley, 1999).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) also addresses democracy in various ways. To start with, as in IB and CPA/NMS, democracy can be understood as a political system that influences firms, particularly their CSR behaviors. A seminal contribution by Matten and Moon (2008) underscored the role of democratic governments in shaping CSR through regulatory frameworks and policy interventions. Democracies often enact laws that incentivize or mandate CSR activities, reflecting societal values and concerns. Democracies

that tend to codify social rules more extensively (e.g., around labor) will lead to CSR activities that are more implicit, “reflect wider policy arrangements, and that are not articulated as reflecting these companies’ own discretion and initiative” (Matten & Moon, 2008, p. 408). Democracies that are less interventionist and leave more to markets (e.g., Anglo-Saxon countries) will see corporations engaging in CSR more explicitly and providing for their employees and stakeholders in a way that underlines the voluntary nature of their activities. The underlying argument is that corporations operating in democracies must align their CSR initiatives with societal expectations to maintain legitimacy and reputation (Maignan & Ralston, 2002).

Yet, other areas of CSR research tend to build on democracy as an ideal that corporations and/or the governance of their activities should strive toward, thereby introducing an explicit normative stance. For instance, some research has elaborated the notion of corporate citizenship. In this regard, “the dominant understanding of citizenship in most industrialized societies is located in the liberal tradition, where citizenship is defined as a set of individual rights” (Matten & Crane, 2005, p. 170). According to this view, corporations have a social role in administering citizenship rights; they are providers of social rights, enablers of civil rights, and channels for political rights (Matten & Crane, 2005).

Corporations are thought to have such a role, particularly beyond the national context, where the protection and provision of these rights and other public goods may be weak or lacking (Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer et al., 2006). In this respect, CSR research has focused on global business activities and how they can be democratically governed in the absence of a global state. This is the main focus of research on so-called political CSR, which is based on the theory of deliberative democracy, and particularly its Habermasian version (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011). Building on Habermas’s ideas and adapting them to the transnational context, political CSR theorists argue that corporations should engage with

affected stakeholders in order to deliberatively and consensually devise rules for how to solve governance gaps in areas where governmental rule is missing or nondemocratic (e.g., authoritarian state, areas of limited statehood).

Several other areas of CSR research have also built on democratic theory. For instance, research examining corporate governance and how it can better reflect non-shareholding interests has built on deliberative democracy, among others (Scherer et al., 2013). Research discussing firm–stakeholder relationships and interactions has relied on agonism, a democratic theory emphasizing the importance of recognizing dissent in society (e.g., Mouffe, 2013), and has adapted it to firm–stakeholder interactions (e.g., Brand, Blok, & Verweij, 2020; Burchell & Cook, 2013; Fougère & Solitander, 2020). As an example, Dawkins (2015) developed a framework of stakeholder engagement based on agonistic pluralism, recognizing that firm–stakeholder relations are often so conflicted that consensus is hard to attain.

Three Foci of Current Democracy Scholarship in MOS

Across the four research streams described heretofore, democracy in MOS has been referred to in a variety of ways, with different degrees of explicit definition, operationalization of what democracy is, and zooming in on different objects of research (e.g., firms, governance, environment), among many others. In this paper, we build on the three mandates of organization theory (Mair & Seelos, 2021; Stern & Barley, 1996) to bring order to this disparate state of the art. Building on Parsons (1956), among others, these three mandates are to study (a) structures and processes internal to the organization; (b) the organization as it adapts to its external environment; and (c), in turn, the influence of the organization on its external environment, the broader social systems in which the organization operates—which “can for most purposes be assumed to be a society” (Parsons, 1956, p. 67). We build on these

three mandates and on research that is based on them (e.g., Mair & Seelos, 2021; Schembera et al., 2024) to distinguish among three foci of research on democracy in management and organization studies. As such, the focus of research on democracy—where the analysis or use of democracy is mostly located—can be succinctly stated as (a) internal to the organization, (b) outside-in with societal democracy influencing the organization, and (c) inside-out with the organization influencing societal democracy.

Internal focus. Research with an internal focus investigates the structures, processes or mechanisms within the organization, including organizational members and groups. Research with such a focus sees organizations as a potential democratic space, an arena for democratic processes. Democracy is thus a metaphor for understanding organizational processes, and is adapted from the nation-state to the organizational level. Many valuable insights regarding this focus are found in research on democratic organizing (e.g., Ferreras, 2023; Frega, 2021) as well as in research in CSR that focuses on more democratic modes of governance (Maak et al., 2016; Scherer et al., 2013) or firm–stakeholder interactions (Arenas et al., 2020; Mena & Palazzo, 2012).

Outside-in focus. An outside-in focus implies that research examines how democracy (and its corollaries, such as institutions, processes, or principles) influences organizations from the outside. Research in this area sees organizations as having to adapt to their external environment. From this view, organizations are affected by and adapt to democracy as a key feature of their external environment, including reactions to key democratic actors such as the government. Research in IB has contributed deep insights into how different democratic regimes, or the state of their institutions, influence the economy and firms' strategies (e.g., Jackson & Deeg, 2008; Pankaj, 2001). Similarly, research on implicit and explicit CSR has

contributed to understanding how democracy influences organizational CSR practices (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Matten & Moon, 2008).

Inside-out focus. A contrasting approach comes from research with an inside-out focus, which examines the influence and effects of organizations on democracy in their external environments (Barley, 2007). This focus may also refer to scholarship that seeks to understand how organized system change comes about (Mair & Seelos, 2021)—for instance, toward democratic reforms in hybrid or authoritarian regimes (Crane et al., 2025). This research provides insights in two different directions. Whereas research on CPA increases our knowledge of how corporations (mostly in liberal democratic regimes) try to influence public policy to their advantage (e.g., Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004; Lawton, McGuire, & Rajwani, 2013), research on democratic organizing highlights how alternative organizations try to prefigure new, often more democratic, ways of organizing and doing business (Bhatt et al., 2024; Schiller-Merkens, 2024; Vijay et al., 2025). Yet this is about not only changing democratic institutions but also infusing communities or sectors of the economy with a more democratic mindset.

As this brief, non-exhaustive overview highlights, research on democracy in MOS spans a wide and varied territory of topics and entails three different foci that situate democracy differently vis-à-vis the organization. For instance, research in CSR is wide-ranging and covers each of the three foci, but not necessarily from the same theoretical perspective on democracy. The picture is further complicated by the fact that the theoretical understanding of democracy often remains implicit in MOS. We argue that integrating explicit theoretical perspectives on democracy into MOS is a promising remedy in this regard.

Broadening the Perspective(s) of Research on Democracy

Our overview of research streams and foci shows the breadth and potential of MOS taking democracy into account. To fully realize this potential, more explicit knowledge exchange between MOS and democratic theory is needed. In this section, we review canonical perspectives on democracy (liberal, republican, deliberative, and agonistic) from political theory. In the following section, we return to the foci in MOS research to outline a comprehensive framework for organizing MOS research on democracy and elaborating a comprehensive future research agenda from these canonical perspectives.

Perspectives on Democracy

Democracy, in political theory, is an essentially contested concept (Cunningham, 2002; Ercan & Gagnon, 2014). Yet, a classic definition refers to democracy as a collective form of governance by the people—the *demos* (Held, 2006). Nevertheless, there are many theories or models with different meanings of, and prescriptions for, democracy. Although these theories or models often have strong explicitly normative elements (what should democracy entail?), other conceptions or perspectives are more descriptive; these typically focus on the process of democratization (Tilly, 2007) or the degree of democracy in a specific country or context (He & Warren, 2011), among other approaches.

Acknowledging the diversity and richness of the source material for democracy, we focus on four important perspectives on democracy in political theory that are most often included in overviews of the field (e.g., Cunningham, 2002; Held, 2006): the liberal, republican, deliberative, and agonistic perspectives. These four perspectives align on some aspects, while sometimes diverging quite radically on others (e.g., the best way to make decisions). Our intention in choosing these four perspectives is not to be comprehensive, but rather to highlight how applying different perspectives from political theory to MOS leads to

different implications. Our work can thus be expanded by leveraging other perspectives not covered here, or even other theories or conceptions of democracy altogether. For instance, Held (2006) discussed direct democracy among different models of democracy, which we do not discuss here. Merkel (2004) delineated different types and sub-types of *liberal* democracy, distinguishing between embedded (or full) and defective democracies. The classics, from ancient Greece to de Tocqueville, have valuable theories of democracy as well. Dewey and other pragmatists also have offered interesting insights into democracy, understood as continuous engagement and how it unfolds in organizations through worker engagement (see, e.g., Simpson & den Hond, 2022). Table 1 offers an overview of the four perspectives we elaborate on and how they see key concepts related to democracy. We now briefly outline each of these four perspectives and their core assumptions.

Table 1. Summary of four democratic perspectives

Democratic perspective	Key characteristics, assumptions, and constructs
Liberal	Emphasizes individual rights and legal protections, viewing democracy as aggregative decision-making through competitive elections and majority-elected representation, with legitimacy derived from protecting individual liberties through constitutional guarantees and institutional transparency. <i>Key constructs:</i> representation, transparency, autonomy/protection of individual rights.
Republican	Emphasizes collective solidarity and civic engagement, defining democracy as a communal practice aimed at securing freedom from domination through active citizen participation in political will formation. <i>Key constructs:</i> freedom from domination, civic engagement, solidarity.
Deliberative	Focuses on the quality of public reasoning, emphasizing inclusive, reasoned discourse where citizens can transform their preferences through deliberation, with legitimacy depending on communicative conditions that enable coercion-free debate in the public sphere. <i>Key constructs:</i> deliberation, inclusion, consensus.
Agonistic	Treats pluralism and conflict as constitutive of democracy, accepting disagreement as inherent and focusing on creating institutional channels for ongoing contestation while transforming enemies into legitimate adversaries. <i>Key constructs:</i> plurality, contestation, dissensus.

Liberal perspective on democracy. This perspective emphasizes individual rights and the role of law in securing them. It is rooted in classical liberalism (Fukuyama, 2022), building on the works of Locke, John Stuart Mill, and, more recently, Rawls. The demos—the people who constitute the democratic community with the right to rule (Koenig-Archibugi, 2022)—is assumed to consist of individuals with different preferences who are in market-like relations with each other. Accordingly, the citizen is primarily defined in terms of their negative rights toward other citizens and the state; that is, how citizens should not infringe on the rights of others, and how these rights should be protected, while guaranteeing the autonomy of each citizen (e.g., the notion of property rights). The liberal perspective emphasizes the outcomes of aggregative decision-making mechanisms, such as competitive elections or government formation, which ultimately crystallize citizens’ will. Representation of citizens by majority-elected representatives is central to the liberal perspective, as well as the transparency of this process. Transparency is also key to how government should function and be accountable to citizens. Liberal democracy is primarily concerned with ensuring citizens’ autonomy and rights through constitutional and legal guarantees and institutional stability. The legitimacy of democratic authority thus hinges on its ability to protect individual liberties.

Republican perspective on democracy. In contrast, a republican perspective emphasizes the collective and solidarity. It gives more value to the inputs, through civic engagement by citizens, than to the outputs of the decision-making process, such as electoral results. Here, the demos is assumed to be an ethical community with a common goal. The republican perspective thus emphasizes citizens’ participation in political life, as the citizen is viewed in terms of their positive rights. This perspective can be traced back to ancient Greece, through modern writers like Arendt, and elaborated contemporarily by scholars like Pettit. One of republicanism’s central concerns is with freedom: that citizens are free from domination

(Pettit, 1997). For republicans, true freedom requires not just the absence of interference but also the absence of arbitrary power that could impede one's participation in the political process, rendering social justice a primary concern of democracy. As such, republicanism emphasizes civic engagement, public virtue, and institutions and mechanisms that prevent such arbitrary power. Democracy, from this perspective, is a communal political practice aimed at securing a just polity. The republican perspective thus views freedom not as a negative right (freedom from others), but as a positive right to shape and engage in political will-formation (freedom to influence laws, policies, governmental life, etc.).

Deliberative perspective on democracy. A deliberative perspective focuses on the process of political decisions: the quality of public reasoning among free and equal citizens. Building on Kant, among others, and contemporarily on Habermas, deliberative theorists emphasize that legitimate decisions emerge through inclusive, reasoned public discourse in which all affected parties can participate as equals in dialogue aimed at reaching mutual understanding. This perspective assumes the demos to be plural and de-centered, with the need of discursive bridging between these different lifeworlds. Thus, democracy should enable citizens not only to express their preferences but also to be open to transforming these preferences through engagement in political deliberations (Habermas, 1996). From this perspective, democratic legitimacy depends on the communicative conditions that enable inclusive, rational, coercion-free deliberation in the public sphere. The ideal is not consensus at all costs, but a process through which political norms can be justified for all affected participants through a reasoned debate.

Agonistic perspective on democracy. Agonism critiques other perspectives, particularly the deliberative one, for idealizing communicative processes in society and downplaying conflict

and power in political life. It assumes the demos to be pluralistic and fundamentally fragmented. Building on Gramsci, and more recently developed by Mouffe, agonistic democracy holds that pluralism is key to postmodern societies and that we need to accept disagreement (Mouffe, 2013). But rather than imposing one view over others in a conflictual way, we need to approach other citizens or political groups not as enemies but as adversaries who respect each other's position while fundamentally disagreeing on substantial issues. Rather than eliminating antagonism through consensus or supposedly neutral procedures (e.g., majority rule in elections), agonistic democracy treats pluralism and struggle as constitutive of democracy. Conflict and dissent are inherent and legitimate features of democratic life rather than problems to be resolved through consensus. Agonistic democracy recognizes the persistence of disagreement, as it focuses on creating institutional channels that allow for ongoing contestation while transforming antagonistic enemies into legitimate adversaries. Legitimacy, from this perspective, hinges on the capacity of democratic institutions to provide a space where diverse and conflicting projects can be contested, yet without violence or exclusion.

It should be noted that the different perspectives do not all address the same aspects of democracy, nor do they necessarily build on the same constructs (e.g., constitution or property rights). They can even be antithetical; for example, deliberative democracy emphasizes consensus, whereas agonistic democracy values dissensus. Yet, despite this fact, some see both perspectives as compatible, simply highlighting different sides of the same democracy coin (Scudder & White, 2023). Thus, the perspectives we develop here are commensurable rather than mutually exclusive, yet they most often foreground different aspects of democracy. By the same token, they also often obscure other aspects.

Mobilizing Perspectives on Democracy in MOS

As mentioned previously, when engaging with democracy, MOS research often implicitly takes a liberal perspective, as seen in research on IB or CPA/NMS. This is the case partly because we tend to associate democracy with liberal democracy, given that this perspective serves as the model, or the ideal type, for most actual democracies worldwide. Compared to the liberal perspective, the republican perspective has seen much less uptake in MOS, being limited to a few studies on workplace democracy and freedom from domination at work.

Deliberative democracy is more explicitly leveraged in MOS. Research across different areas has examined organizational issues and processes over the last twenty years, leveraging key concepts in deliberative democracy such as deliberation, inclusion, and consensus. Research drawing on the deliberative perspective, as stated above, has particularly examined the role of business in society and how firms interact with their stakeholders. Finally, the agonistic perspective has also been relied upon in MOS to some extent, and often explicitly so. This is particularly the case in critical management studies that have used agonism to emphasize that organizational processes are inherently conflictual and that incorporating various and diverse groups and their interests is key.

In the next section, we show how the four perspectives on democracy can be used to elaborate each of the three foci in MOS research. This framework helps structure the literature by making the underlying perspectives explicit, commensurating them, and indicating underdeveloped areas of research that warrant further pursuit.

Internal Focus

Liberal internal focus. A liberal perspective with an internal focus examines the representation of organizational members and its fairness in the organization's decision-making structures and processes. This parallels the involvement of citizens in free and fair

elections in liberal democracies (Dahl, 2020). The inclusion of various types of organizational members (e.g., not only managers, but also rank-and-file employees) in organizational decision-making is center stage, as a contrast to mainstream organizations such as limited liability companies, which usually have little employee involvement in decision-making. As a result, research in this area is interested in governance solutions. These solutions can be structural, such as alternative legal forms, works councils, or employee quotas on supervisory boards, as is the case in Germany (Fauver & Fuerst, 2006). For instance, Paraque and Willmott (2014) examined the UK retailer John Lewis, legally incorporated as a partnership, in which employees are partners and thus play a large role in decision-making. The way members can have more participation in the organization and its decision-making can also relate to procedures rather than structures, such as ballots or open consultations. For instance, Pek (2021) showed how the practice of sortition—randomly selecting employees to participate in a given organizational process that can inform decision-making—could be useful to meaningfully improve member participation. Both structures and procedures aim to increase representation, improve fairness, and ultimately ensure employees' rights, in line with one of the key constructs of the liberal perspective: protecting individual rights. As an example, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies serve to uplift and protect the rights of minorities, bearing out the liberal perspective.

Future research from an internal liberal perspective could further explore how increased and improved representation of all members could work in organizations. The notions of transparency and accountability, which are important to the liberal perspective, might also be further researched, particularly regarding how decision-making can be made more transparent to all members, how transparent information can support well-informed decisions, and how decision-makers can be accountable to all members. Finally, determining the rights of organizational members in a liberal democratic organization, as well as how

these rights can be ensured and protected, also requires further research that takes an explicit liberal perspective.

Republican internal focus. Applied to organizational contexts, the republican perspective focuses on how managerial authority and hierarchical structures create forms of domination that undermine workers' freedom and autonomy, even when authority is not actively exercised. An internal republican lens thus tackles the core problem of ensuring freedom at work despite managerial and hierarchical domination, especially in traditional, mainstream command-and-control organizations. This lens focuses on processes, procedures, or structures that foster freedom and participation at work, thereby securing workers' non-domination by managers or certain majorities in workplaces. The focus is on empowering workers to exercise meaningful control over their work environment and decisions that affect them.

Research from an internal republican perspective can address these problems in several ways—for instance, by investigating grievance mechanisms, rights to decision-making, and formal veto rights over decisions. Such structures and mechanisms would sustain the key republican construct of freedom from domination by management. For example, in a rare study from this lens (in political science), Breen (2017) showed that some republican scholars see state-sponsored measures such as universal basic income and the securing of some rights to exit employment relationships as sufficient to ensure non-domination in the workplace. Yet, Breen questioned this and demonstrated the need for democratic control by workers (e.g., decision-making rights, seats on the board) and the institutionalization of worker voice (e.g., regular consultations, whistleblowing channels) in order to ensure non-domination in neoliberal workplaces. In that sense, DEI processes and equal-opportunity mechanisms could be understood as republican safeguards against the domination of the majority.

Future research explicitly taking a republican stance on such mechanisms and measures is needed and could address questions such as: Do DEI measures reduce managerial authority over minorities? Do they increase solidarity among the workforce? Do they lead to increased employee engagement in the governance of their organization?

Another direction for future research could be geared toward governance structures. Novel organizational structures such as decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) could be analyzed from an explicit republican perspective. In DAOs, decision-making is decentralized and—while models vary—organizational members usually have equal control (Li & Chen, 2024). They also usually govern themselves with minimal arbitrary power and domination from a managerial class, in line with a republican perspective. Key questions from such a lens could be: How do novel organizational governance structures prevent the type of hierarchical and managerial authority that is prevalent in traditional organizational structures, such as bureaucracies? Do they increase solidarity, active participation, and engagement in collective processes among the workforce? Or can they also lead to forms of domination and authority from a class of workers other than managers (e.g., professions)?

Deliberative internal focus. Deliberative internal research focuses on fostering inclusion and meaningful deliberation through reasoned debate aimed at consensus to improve organizational processes, such as the legitimacy of organizational decisions. This includes implementing deliberative mechanisms; an example is deliberative mini-publics (assemblies of randomly selected members who engage in structured deliberation on specific issues, such as Citizens' Assemblies) that enable genuine participation from diverse organizational members. For instance, research by Pek (2023) shows that member participation in cooperatives can be improved through the use of deliberative mini-publics, moving beyond participation by elected representatives. Existing DEI measures such as equal-opportunity

policies would not be sufficient from a deliberative perspective because they focus too much on outcomes (e.g., number of minority candidates hired, as opposed to number of minority candidates applying).

This stream of research is interested in the way deliberative arenas in organizations need to be structured and facilitated to improve the democratic quality of organizational processes. It points to, for instance, role rotations, facilitator sortition, or meeting rules that serve to empower participants and level the deliberative playing field. Krüger (2023) addressed the specific question of whether democratic deliberation is possible within business firms. He studied self-organized teams and how they can create spaces for inclusive and authentic deliberation that bracket out authoritarian managerial control, potentially working as islands of deliberative capacity in hierarchical organizations. Yet, research has also pointed to the limitations of deliberation in organizations, particularly when it comes to for-profits, and questioned the legitimacy of managerially supported deliberation (Sabadoz & Singer, 2017).

Although great strides have been made, research through an internal deliberative lens has so far mostly focused on mechanisms and procedures. In the future, it can further examine the structure(s) needed to enhance inclusion and meaningful, reasoned deliberation in organizations. Moreover, it needs to move beyond normative ideals and explore descriptive ways to enhance inclusion and deliberation in organizations. Finally, more inquiry into the preconditions of consensus is required, as well as consideration regarding when sub-optimal (or non-consensual) decisions can be sufficient without hindering organizational democracy.

Agonistic internal focus. This lens considers dissent within the organization as a critical source of democratic vitality. An internal agonistic lens recognizes that conflict and dissent are inherent to organizational life, much as they are in other areas of social and political life.

Acknowledging the existence and persistence of such conflict is key, while recognizing that dissent can be beneficial to organizational democracy. For instance, Olsen and van Buren (2024) discussed how workplace employer–employee relationships ought to acknowledge and respect ongoing conflict. In line with agonism, they conceived of employers and employees not as antagonists, but rather as democratic participants whose conflicts reflect differences in interests, values, and power that cannot always be reconciled. These authors called for recognizing that friction can serve as a driver of democratic engagement, and for protecting employees expressing disagreement and dissent. This example highlights the need to ensure that minority voices and interests maintain a space for expression and influence rather than being suppressed or co-opted.

Research under such a lens would study ways to empower various groups in the organization, especially minoritarian ones, to enhance their voice. DEI measures, especially those that promote minority voices (e.g., quotas, minority-targeted mentoring and support), would fit such an agonistic perspective, with an eye to how such voices can remain critical rather than be co-opted. Research from an internal agonistic perspective would also recognize how dissent can be used productively. The emphasis is on creating organizational structures and processes that legitimize conflict and provide channels for ongoing contestation. For example, Rhodes and Harvey (2012) called for HRM to recognize the value of dissent and the ongoing presence of contestation in firms—particularly in hierarchical employment relationships. The authors discussed how to protect employees’ dissenting views by encouraging disagreement, formalizing dissent channels, and supporting marginalized voices.

Future research should explore how disagreement, contestation, and dissent can be harnessed productively in different ways. While we know that some degree of diversity can be beneficial to organizational outcomes, we know less about whether this also applies to deep-seated differences in attitudes, values, or interests. How can we ensure that dissent

remains continuously productive and does not become destructive, for example, by deepening fractures among organizational members or even leading to organizational death?

Outside-in Focus

Liberal outside-in focus. Research from an outside-in liberal perspective examines how organizations adapt to liberal democratic institutions and processes, such as policy changes or the level of protection for property rights. Research through this lens is mostly interested in the adaptive mechanisms organizations use to align with characteristics of their external environment. It is interested in organizational survival, performance, strategy, or structure in response to a given environment, be it liberal or illiberal. For example, studies examine mechanisms that can take the form of strategies, such as entry strategies in foreign countries (da Silva et al., 2024) or specific CSR activities that result from a country's existing labor protections (Campbell, 2007; Matten & Moon, 2008).

Future research from an outside-in liberal perspective should further explore the differences and similarities between citizen rights and those of organizational members. What are their connections and interactions? How do they intersect, overlap, and sometimes potentially contradict themselves? How should an organization deal with such contradictions? For example, although freedom to associate is a citizen right (e.g., in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), some organizations can limit the right of association to better achieve their objectives. As representation is a key concept in liberal democracy, further research into this notion at a societal level in relation to organizations and how it affects them is important. For example, though we are familiar with revolving doors between government and organizations (e.g., Tyllström, 2021), we should strive to better understand how political representation (e.g., number of seats attributed to different political parties in government or parliament) shapes organizations. Finally, more work is needed on how transparency in

societal democratic processes (e.g., making lobbying more transparent) influences corporations by reducing their privileges.

Republican outside-in focus. Under this lens, one would examine how democratic institutions and rules in their environment shape organizations to prevent or enhance domination, mostly internally, as well as organizational responses to such shaping. One example is co-determination laws in Germany, which enshrine workers' representation on supervisory boards of limited liability companies. This is in contrast to liberalism, which would assume such laws are redundant if the constitution ensures the protection of individual and property rights. Yet, from a republican perspective, laws and rules can also foster domination by giving outside power and discretion to managers. This lens examines how organizations respond and adapt to external pressures, for instance with legal challenges, selective compliance, or the elaboration of self-governance rules. For instance, research on industry self-regulation typically examines how firms, individually or collectively, can set up private rules that work to prevent governmental regulation (King & Lenox, 2000; Short & Toffel, 2010). From a republican perspective, these efforts could be understood as organizations seeking to free themselves from the arbitrary power of the regulatory state through self-governance.

Future research in management and organization could rekindle its links with the industrial relations literature to examine, for instance, how and under which conditions labor laws and regulations can strengthen workers' rights. From an outside-in republican perspective, this would mean explicitly examining workers' right to non-domination and how these laws and regulations enable and empower them. In the same vein, future research could elaborate in more depth the notion of civic engagement that is central to republicanism. Reversing the direction of the spillover thesis (Pateman, 1970)—which advances that the

more democratic the organization, the more civically engaged the workers from this organization in their non-organizational lives—an outside-in republican view could ask whether and how civic engagement in their personal lives could lead organizational members to engage in the civic life of their organizations.

Deliberative outside-in focus. Research emphasizing how the external environment influences firms from a deliberative perspective recognizes the need to involve and deliberate with external stakeholders (as opposed to the internal stakeholders—members—examined from an internal focus) who affect or are affected by organizational processes. As with an internal focus, the inclusion of affected stakeholders, as well as meaningful deliberation with them, is key from a deliberative perspective. This can be achieved through stakeholder engagement and dialogue procedures. Ferraro and Beunza (2018) illustrated how shareholder activists and firms can find common ground through meaningful engagement on specific issues, such as climate change. The authors revealed how deliberative engagement mechanisms that emphasize reflection and persuasion can be more effective than traditional confrontational approaches in achieving both external stakeholder and organizational objectives. From a deliberative perspective, such mechanisms must meaningfully include these stakeholders and focus on authentic deliberation and consensus-building rather than mere consultation. Stakeholders should be able to genuinely influence decision-making through the force of better arguments rather than power or strategic manipulation (what Habermas called strategic action; see Habermas, 1984).

Future research should examine how deliberative aspects of societal democracy shape the organization. Does public sphere deliberation significantly influence the organization, and if so, how? How do new technologies, such as social media and AI, shape deliberations outside and, in turn, within organizations? Beyond deliberative aspects, one of the key issues

from this perspective is how to foster consensus-based organizational decisions with actors external to the organization, arrived at relatively free from coercion and broadly inclusive. A corollary concerns the consequences of such decisions and whether they lead to mostly symbolic compliance and adoption of deliberative tools which ultimately do not substantially enhance stakeholder inclusion.

Agonistic outside-in focus. This lens, as with the deliberative perspective, examines external stakeholders' influence on the organization, particularly the need to incorporate external dissenting opinions. However, in contrast to the deliberative perspective, Brand et al. (2020) underlined that pursuing consensus obscures power imbalances and provides a framework for understanding when agonistic deliberation may be more suited than consensus-based deliberation between firms and stakeholders. Agonistic outside-in research thus recognizes the persistence of disagreement and conflict as legitimate aspects of stakeholder engagement, and embraces dissent and conflict. The goal is meaningful engagement that acknowledges and works with ongoing disagreements rather than resolving them. For example, Burchell and Cook (2013) proposed an agonistic model of engagement between firms and civil society actors through CSR activities, in which structured conflict and critique are institutionalized. By embedding mechanisms such as arbitration panels and formal grievance procedures, these initiatives allow marginalized stakeholders to voice dissent and influence CSR strategies without being co-opted.

Future research needs to move beyond a focus on firm–stakeholder relationships and CSR. For instance, how do national-level agonistic institutions and behaviors influence organizations? How do adversarial and agonistic interactions between political parties and other political actors shape organizations and their behaviors? Going beyond the national level, we already have a good understanding of how global social movements can shape

organizations (e.g., Briscoe & Safford, 2008; Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005), notably CEO behaviors and activism (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Yet, we have little understanding of such processes and outcomes from an explicit agonistic lens. Research could explore, for example, how ongoing contestation between different social groups on the global stage can shape organizational behavior.

Inside-out Focus

Liberal inside-out focus. Since the liberal perspective assumes that the democratic process takes on market-like characteristics (Habermas, 1998), organizations can advance their preferences and uphold their rights, or those of others, by influencing decision-making institutions. Yet, such influence can either strengthen or undermine democratic institutions and processes. Research with this lens typically examines such influence mechanisms. The literature on CPA examines how firms influence policy-making, for instance, by financially supporting a political party (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). The literature examining CEO activism also studies organizational influence on the democratic system by looking at how it affects policy and which of the advocated issues are taken up by the polity (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). The literature on self-regulation mentioned above typically examines how firms, individually or collectively, may work to establish private rules in an effort to prevent governmental regulation (King & Lenox, 2000; Short & Toffel, 2010). Yet, it has also been shown that setting up these private rules, or soft law, sometimes paves the way for public intervention and hard law (Djelic & Quack, 2018). Some other research criticizes such corporate involvement in democracy and likens it to corruption (Nyberg, 2021).

Most of this research assumes a liberal democracy rather than explicitly adopting a liberal perspective. Future research needs to remedy this problem by addressing how organizations can more transparently engage in democratic processes. It is also important to

understand how organizations influence representative politics (e.g., in terms of which candidates or political parties they may support) from an explicit liberal perspective. A liberal perspective especially sensitizes researchers to the question of whether organizational influence strengthens or weakens transparency and fair representation, crucial qualities for a liberal democracy to function properly. Other areas of future research include a better understanding of how organizations shape (i.e., protect or undermine) the individual rights of citizens in a liberal democracy.

Republican inside-out focus. This lens examines how organizations can influence democratic institutions and processes in their external environment in ways that are civically engaging, do not undermine others' freedom, and contribute to social justice. This could take the form of public advocacy, constructive lobbying, or, more generally, transparent political engagement. For instance, Feix and Wernicke (2024) examined CEO sociopolitical activism from a republican perspective, defining civic-minded CEO activism as public engagement that is transparent, accountable, and deliberative. Organizations could also work to strengthen solidarity among citizens, which, according to republicanism, will lead to a stronger democracy.

Future research from an inside-out republican lens could further explore the impact of organizations on citizens' civic engagement and solidarity. To echo the aforementioned point on the spillover thesis (see *Republican outside-in focus*), future research with an inside-out focus could examine how organizations can strengthen their employees', as well as their customers', civic engagement. Another area of future research from an inside-out republican perspective concerns how organizations can contribute to social justice in society.

One of the key points that research from such a lens will need to address is how organizations, particularly large and powerful ones, can engage to strengthen civic

engagement and solidarity without exerting domination and infringing on citizens' freedom. Research, especially in critical management studies, has long shown how powerful corporations exert their influence on workers and beyond, thereby dominating and curtailing their freedom. In particular, future research could examine how organizations can strengthen civic engagement and solidarity in contexts that are not fully democratic, in which democratic backsliding is occurring, or where the regime is hybrid or altogether nondemocratic (Al-Esiah et al., 2023). How organizations can do so without dominating and limiting the freedom of some citizens, such as minority groups, is even more important in these cases from a republican perspective.

Deliberative inside-out focus. Research from this perspective examines how organizations can support democracy at the system level by promoting and engaging in public deliberation. Organizations can promote democracy by refraining from impeding public deliberation processes and by promoting and providing opportunities when public deliberation is lacking. Research on political CSR typically takes such a stance. Scherer and Palazzo (2007) illustrated this approach, focusing on how organizations can contribute to democratic deliberation beyond their organizational boundaries through multi-stakeholder initiatives; these are deliberative governance mechanisms that include firms and other actors. Furthering research in this stream, other advances show that these multi-stakeholder initiatives contribute to the democracy of global governance more broadly (Apffelstaedt et al., 2024; Mena & Palazzo, 2012). Overall, such promotion of deliberation beyond the bounds of the organization, or focused on stakeholder inclusion, involves organizational participation in deliberative mechanisms that are inclusive of affected actors and structured to enable the emergence of a reasoned consensus, such as in multilateral institutions (e.g., the United Nations). Yet, research also points to the uneven effect—at different levels—of the

supposedly democracy-thickening role of corporations through deliberation (Goodman & Mäkinen, 2023), and to potential de-responsibilization and democracy-undermining effects over time (Hamann, 2019).

Future research could further examine organizational involvement and its impact on public deliberation, such as how it fosters or undermines inclusion and consensus-building in the societal sphere. Certain types of organizations, such as social media companies and online platforms, will have more impact on public deliberations than others. Future research could thus identify key characteristics and mechanisms whereby specific types of organizations shape deliberative democracy. Future research can also imagine new ways for organizations to be included and participate in public deliberations, such as through Citizens' Assemblies or other deliberative fora.

Agonistic inside-out focus. This lens sees organizations as engines of public contestation. It examines how organizations can contribute to democratic systems by legitimizing and supporting ongoing contestation and dissent in broader society—or, conversely, by working against dissenting voices, reproducing the existing hegemonic order. For instance, Fougère and Solitander (2020) examined two multi-stakeholder initiatives (the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety) that were thought to work democratically according to consensus. The authors showed that genuine democracy depends on accepting conflict among diverse actors in global value chains, making agonistic dissensus the true marker of democracy at a global level, a marker undermined by these two initiatives that claim to be working according to consensus. An inside-out agonistic lens would also examine how organizations themselves shape democratic processes through contested influence. This can be examined through agonistic advocacy—campaigns, coalition-building, or protest organizing—that seeks to bring to the fore the

diversity of groups in society that may be marginalized in politics, notwithstanding the risk of astroturfing (e.g., Kraemer, Whiteman, & Banerjee, 2013).

Existing research shows how some organizations, and corporations in particular, reproduce the capitalist hegemonic order and help reinforce the status quo (e.g., in terms of corporate environmental inaction; Levy, 1997). From an explicit agonistic perspective, it would be interesting to examine the opposite process: how organizations challenge the hegemonic status quo, for instance through CEO sociopolitical activism. With an explicit inside-out agonistic lens, future research can address how such activism could help institutionalize dissent on some contested social topics and reinforce democracy from an agonistic point of view. Moreover, research could examine alternative organizations that challenge the hegemonic capitalist economic system and profit-oriented corporate organizing by prefiguring viable alternative practices (e.g., Parker & Parker, 2017). As such, it could address more explicitly these organizations' effect on their societal environment's democratic structures and processes.

Table 2. Summary of framework

Perspective Focus	Liberal	Republican	Deliberative	Agonistic
Internal	Examines representation of organizational members and its fairness in decision-making structures, mimicking citizen involvement in liberal democratic elections. Emphasizes structural solutions (alternative legal forms, work councils, employee boards) and procedural mechanisms (ballots, consultations) to protect individual rights and ensure fair representation.	Addresses how managerial authority and hierarchical structures create domination that undermines workers' freedom, focusing on processes and structures that secure workers' freedom from domination by empowering meaningful control over work environments and decisions.	Examines how to foster both inclusion and meaningful deliberation, usually through reasoned debate aimed at consensus, to improve organizational processes and decision-making legitimacy. It usually relies on mechanisms like deliberative mini-publics and structured deliberative arenas to do so.	Examines dissent within organizations as a source of democratic vitality, recognizing that conflict is inherent to organizational life. This lens studies the creation of structures that provide channels for contestation, and that empower minority groups to express dissent productively.
Outside-in	Looks at how organizations adapt to liberal democratic institutions and policy changes, focusing on organizational survival, performance, and strategy in response to varying levels of liberal democratization and property rights protection.	Examines how democratic institutions and rules shape organizations to prevent or enhance domination, analyzing organizational responses through legal challenges, selective compliance, or self-governance rules in response to external pressures.	Studies how external stakeholders deliberatively engage with a focal organization, and how meaningful engagement can be fostered, usually through dialogue that focuses on authentic deliberation and consensus-building rather than consultation.	Examines external stakeholders' influence by incorporating dissenting opinions and embracing disagreements as legitimate aspects of engagement, working with ongoing disagreements rather than resolving them through consensus.
Inside-out	Examines how organizations advance their preferences and uphold rights through market-like influence mechanisms (lobbying, CEO activism, self-regulation) that can either strengthen or undermine democratic institutions.	Explores how organizations can affect democratic institutions civically without undermining others' freedom, through transparent political engagement, public advocacy, and strengthening solidarity among citizens.	Examines how organizations can support democratic systems by promoting and engaging in public deliberation, participating in deliberative mechanisms that are inclusive of affected actors and structured to enable reasoned consensus.	Studies organizations as engines of public contestation that can contribute to democratic systems by legitimizing ongoing contestation and dissent in broader society—or, conversely, by reproducing hegemonic orders.

Discussion and Implications

In this paper, we have developed a comprehensive framework for understanding how different democratic perspectives can inform organizational research across three distinct foci. Table 2 summarizes our framework, which distinguishes between internal organizational democracy, outside-in adaptation of organizations to democracy in their environment, and inside-out organizational influence on societal democracy. For each of these three foci, our framework compares four canonical democratic perspectives (liberal, republican, deliberative, and agonistic) and how they highlight various aspects important to MOS research, given their assumptions and key arguments. We thus show how being explicit about one's theory of democracy promotes consistency, addresses key theoretical problems in line with one's assumptions, brings underexplored questions to the surface, and encourages epistemic dialogue and knowledge exchange with other disciplines. Furthermore, our framework as a whole highlights the need for more theoretical and coordinated efforts in research on democracy in MOS, rather than efforts that engage with the concept of democracy in isolated ways. We elaborate on these implications and others in this discussion.

Theoretical Consistency and Coherence

Our framework demonstrates that meaningful research on democracy and organizations requires theoretical—perspectival—consistency across different foci of research, and calls for making one's underlying perspective on democracy explicit in organizational research. Some of the underlying assumptions of the different perspectives, for example about human nature and behavior, conflict, or democratic participation, can differ fundamentally across the perspectives, making such theoretical mixing conceptually incoherent. If one is not explicit about the theory of democracy they leverage, it will likely be hard to be consistent across foci. Most often, even when explicit about their perspectives on democracy, scholars will be

unable to combine theoretical perspectives in a coherent manner. For instance, studying democratic organizing from a liberal perspective while expecting agonistic spillovers in civic participation (e.g., contestation, protests) at the country level would lead to confusion. As research in MOS on democracy is burgeoning, our framework calls for more explicit and coherent discussion.

Indeed, current research in management and organization studies that explicitly leverages a democratic perspective tends to do so with a single focus. For example, research on political CSR that explicitly builds on the deliberative democratic perspective usually focuses on inside-out processes: how firms can make up for a lack of democracy in global value chains (Scherer et al., 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Yet, this view lacks a comprehensive, internally focused theory of the firm grounded in the deliberative perspective. As this example highlights, our framework suggests that robust theories of organizations and democracy should maintain coherence across internal, outside-in, and inside-out foci in terms of the perspective they leverage. A fully fleshed-out theory of organizational democracy from a deliberative perspective would examine how consensus-building within organizations relates to stakeholder engagement processes and broader contributions to public deliberation, while also acknowledging the role of broader deliberative democratic processes and how they shape deliberations within the organization.

Cross-Focal Dynamics and Spillover Effects

Beyond consistency, our framework reveals important dynamics that occur across foci. This is not new. As mentioned previously, existing research demonstrates that democratic governance (internal focus) within organizations can spill over into broader civic engagement (inside-out focus). Our research underlines that these spillover effects tend to operate bidirectionally, opening up many avenues for future research that we have not yet explicitly

mentioned. For instance, from a republican perspective, civic engagement in employees' personal lives may enhance their propensity for democratic participation within organizations, in turn enhancing democracy in the organization. Similarly, deliberative cultures can develop recursively, as deliberative practices within organizations may strengthen broader deliberative capacity in some industries, regions, or countries (Apffelstaedt et al., 2024); at the same time, exposure to broader, public deliberation may enhance internal organizational deliberation. From a liberal standpoint, research shows that workplace democracy correlates with reduced extreme right-wing political sentiments among employees (Kiess & Schmidt, 2025). Future research could disentangle the different processes involved in this likely bidirectional relationship: How do right-wing tendencies at the country level shape democracy within organizations in this country, and how might organizational democracy influence such right-wing take-up?

In general, our framework illuminates how organizations simultaneously influence and respond to their democratic environments (inside-out and outside-in foci). Again, this is not new: Research on CPA has typically examined this dynamic interaction, where firms both shape and adapt to political processes. Yet, our framework highlights that future research will be more productive when it is not only explicit about the democracy perspective taken, but also consistent in these cross-focal examinations. For instance, research on multi-stakeholder initiatives tends to adopt a deliberative perspective, usually explicitly (e.g., Pek, Mena, & Lyons, 2023). What this research demonstrates so far is that, from a deliberative view, it creates democratic governance mechanisms at the organizational (initiative) level where national democracy is absent (e.g., in authoritarian regimes) while being simultaneously influenced by these external democratic deficits (i.e., these initiatives would not exist without these deficits). Research in this area has thus made great strides in analyzing how

deliberations unfold in organizations like multi-stakeholder initiatives (internal focus) when democracy is lacking (outside-in focus).

Comparative Analysis Across Perspectives

Our framework, rather than stifling future research by limiting it to one democratic perspective, enables important comparative analysis across democratic perspectives. As noted previously, the canonical perspectives we develop here sometimes overlap on some dimensions, while at other times they may be contradictory or have different implications. This means the perspectives are certainly not always mutually exclusive. In fact, democracy studies sometimes seek to foster dialogue and even integration among these perspectives (e.g., Scudder & White, 2023).

Each perspective on democracy—whether developed here or elsewhere—implies different organizational structures and processes, such as decision-making, stakeholder relationships, or environmental fit. These differences have implications for our understanding of organizations and democracy that can be further explored by leveraging different perspectives comparatively, yet with the same focus. For instance, when it comes to organizational design, each perspective highlights different key aspects when internally focused. Whereas liberal democratic organizations might implement employee representation through elected boards, democracy in organizations building on a republican perspective would emphasize direct worker control and solidarity-building mechanisms. Deliberative organizations would promote structured dialogue processes that feed into decision-making, while agonistic organizations would create formal and informal channels for expressing dissent and challenging decisions once taken.

Furthermore, different perspectives may point toward similar practices or outcomes, but with different justifications. Take employee participation in decision-making, for

instance. A republican (internal) perspective would emphasize being free from the tyranny of management to justify more employee engagement, while a liberal perspective would rather justify employee participation as a way of protecting one's rights as an individual. It should also be noted that some of these perspectives would give greater weight to these justifications (e.g., the deliberative perspective) while others would regard the outcomes as more important (e.g., the liberal perspective).

Thus, our framework reveals productive tensions between perspectives that suggest opportunities for theoretical refinement. Existing research has begun exploring boundary conditions of some of these perspectives, in particular in relation to where one perspective's limitations require supplementation by another. Deliberative democracy scholarship, for example, increasingly acknowledges that dissensus may be more appropriate than consensus, incorporating agonistic insights about the legitimacy of ongoing disagreement (e.g., Arenas et al., 2020). Such integration efforts must navigate carefully between theoretical coherence and practical complexity. Although applications of a single perspective provide greater theoretical clarity, organizational realities may require hybrid approaches that specify more clearly the boundary conditions of ideal-typical theoretical perspectives. For instance, future research from an internal deliberative perspective could think of specific types of (organizational) decisions or issues for which consensus is of only minor importance. And from an internal agonistic perspective, a similar reverse question could be asked: Under what conditions may dissensus be nonessential, and for what types of outcomes?

Advancing Epistemic Dialogue Between MOS and Other Disciplines

We think our framework can foster increased epistemic dialogue between MOS and other disciplines, such as political theory. As our framework demonstrates, MOS has a lot to learn from canonical and other democratic perspectives in other disciplines. At the same time,

organizations often serve as sites of democratic experimentation that can inform democratic theory and practice. Unlike political science, which primarily examines liberal democratic nation-states, MOS can contribute novel insights to political theory by empirically examining democracy in less likely spaces: not only hierarchical organizations, but also more alternative forms of organizing and governing (e.g., cooperatives or social enterprises rather than limited liability or publicly traded companies).

This experimental dimension that MOS can offer becomes particularly significant given the seemingly asymmetrical relationship between liberal democracy and capitalism. It can be argued that no liberal democratic country exists without capitalism, but capitalist systems can function under non-democratic regimes. Moreover, capitalism's tendency to increase inequality may be detrimental to democracy, which requires some measure of equality among participants. By investigating alternative organizations that practice non-liberal democratic perspectives and prefigure post-capitalist economic arrangements, MOS scholars can contribute empirically grounded insights to broader debates about democracy's compatibility with different economic systems and managerial logics.

Similarly, although country-level liberal democracy is typically associated with bureaucratic governance, organizational research can explore post-bureaucratic democratic arrangements. By drawing on republican, deliberative, or agonistic perspectives, scholars can investigate how democratic organizing functions beyond traditional bureaucratic structures, such as in self-managing organizations (Lee, 2024), and assess the scalability of such arrangements.

Furthermore, the framework highlights how organizational democratic innovations can contribute to broader democratic renewal. As traditional liberal democratic institutions face various challenges, organizations experimenting with alternative democratic forms may provide practical insights for institutional reform. However, such contributions require

explicit theoretical grounding and systematic evaluation of how organizational-level democratic innovations scale to broader social and political contexts.

Conclusion

Our objectives with this paper are to systematize research on democracy in MOS and inform future research by dealing with a key issue we identified: the under-theorization of the key construct of democracy in MOS. To reach these objectives, we review existing research in MOS on democracy to demonstrate that it can be understood through three analytical and conceptual foci. We then illustrate how four existing perspectives from political theory can be applied to theorize democracy and their implications for each of these foci. Ultimately, we believe our framework will enable scholars to more consistently and coherently theorize democracy in MOS and generate important insights as to democratic governance across different levels of social organization.

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