

Panel Title :

Democraticwashing: When Democracy Justifies Its Own Erosion

In an era of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism (Waldner & Lust, 2018; Hellmeier et al., 2021; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023), the language of democracy has become a central arena of political struggle. Across regimes and regions, political leaders, institutions, and civil-society actors invoke ideals such as freedom, equality, or popular will to justify measures that erode these very principles. This paradox exposes a broader process of discursive instrumentalization, conceptualized as *democraticwashing* (Perelman-Becker, 2024), whereby democratic ideals are turned into tools for legitimizing, masking, and rationalizing illiberal and exclusionary practices.

Inspired by notions such as *whitewashing* and *greenwashing*, the concept refers to a form of decoupling - namely, the gap between symbolic commitment and concrete behavior (Bromley & Powell 2012). Just as corporations advertise ecological responsibility while pursuing environmentally harmful practices (Phyper & MacLean, 2009), political actors may publicly perform adherence to democracy, particularly to its liberal dimension, while promoting initiatives that erode it and consolidate colonial, racial, and/or (ethno-)nationalist domination. These practices seek above all to sustain legitimacy: internationally, by aligning with liberal norms as markers of global credibility (Martinez & Haiphong, 2022); and nationally, by invoking participation, equality, and individual freedom to secure public consent (Bellina, 2010).

Such strategies do not merely disguise authoritarian dynamics; they actively enable them. By appropriating democracy's moral vocabulary, actors transform it into a tool of governance that blurs the line between democratic and non-democratic rule. When the weakening of checks and balances is framed as popular sovereignty, when restrictions on rights are justified in the name of democracy, or when exclusionary policies are articulated through the rhetoric of equality, democracy's own language becomes complicit in its erosion.

This panel invites contributions that analyze *democraticwashing* across different contexts and historical moments, from consolidated liberal democracies to hybrid and authoritarian regimes, as well as within civil society and supranational bodies such as the United Nations or the European Union. Bringing together diverse disciplinary and methodological perspectives, it aims to foster a comparative conversation on how democratic discourse is instrumentalized and on the definitional struggles it entails (Gorman, 2016), while also

interrogating its limits in a moment when illiberal practices gain legitimacy and liberal democracy is openly contested.

References

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Submission Instructions

Please submit a 500-word abstract and five keywords (in PDF or Word format) in English to nitzan.perelman@gmail.com by 10 December 2025. All methodological and disciplinary approaches are welcome. Authors will be notified of acceptance by 15 December or earlier.