

Abstract

This thesis examines how democratic decline is conceptualized and studied in European Union (EU) funded research, analysing the alignment between EU policy priorities and academic knowledge production on this critical issue. Through a mixed-methods analysis of EU policy documents and Horizon 2020 research projects from 2014-2020, it reveals a predominant neoliberal orientation shaping both policy and research agendas. The study finds that funded the research agenda is largely focussed on issues like populism, extremism, and citizen engagement while paying less attention to structural economic factors undermining democracy. The thesis argues for expanding research to encompass more substantive conceptions of democracy that address economic inequalities and challenge prevailing ideological paradigm. It contributes to debates on the politics of research funding, the role of social sciences in European integration, and theoretical discussions on democracy and neoliberalism.

Keywords: neoliberalism; democracy; democratic decline; European Union; research funding.