The French Revolution—as a “paradigm shift” to more modern notions of nationhood and sovereignty and as the starting point of numerous ideological confrontations—also affected the history of the concept of democracy in many ways. John Dunn, a leading scholar of the history of democracy in the Anglophone world, emphasizes the unexpected rise of the concept of democracy during the French Revolution. Building on older research, Dunn argues that the popularity of the word “democracy” emerged only in the course of the Revolution. The rising new concept was not based on any idea of the restoration of an age of democracy in ancient Greece. Rather it took on an entirely new, future-oriented content, referring to what democracy was able to accomplish. Viewed in the context of the previously analysed British parliamentary debates of the 1780s, however, the rise of democracy in a positive and future-oriented sense in the early 1790s was not quite as unprecedented and unexpected as Dunn suggests. The concept obviously has a pre-revolutionary history in the debate on the relative roles of the different elements in a mixed government. This has previously escaped the attention of many scholars, particularly in works where the focus has been on leading theorists rather than on debating politicians or on the structures rather than linguistic content of politics.

In the francophone academic world, Pierre Rosanvallon has likewise argued that democracy retained its classical connotations of the direct exercise of legislative and executive power—and consequent political instability—until the days of the French Revolution. The survival of this classical sense of the concept was also a major reason for its not being adopted by the revolutionaries in 1789. Rosanvallon is certainly

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2 Dunn 2005, 39.
3 Rosanvallon 1995, 143.
right in that no fundamental redefinition of democracy had taken place before the French Revolution. Even so, the re-evaluation of the democratic element by British parliamentary speakers in the course of the 1780s described in the previous chapter deserves attention, as do related redefinitions in French Enlightenment literature and the Dutch Patriot debate on representative democracy. The evolving British concept remained relevant in the 1790s and was then contrasted with the French revolutionary alternative, as a result of which it was modified and thus further ‘modernised’.

Dunn and Rosanvallon agree in that as soon as the word “democracy” was adopted more widely after 1791, like much of the revolutionary vocabulary, it began to be increasingly applied in new senses with connotations of the future possibilities that it opened up. The French revolutionary concept of democracy thus initiated a debate for and against a prospective democratic system. This meant that democracy was no longer just one of the three classical theoretical forms of government or one of the elements of a mixed constitution but was turning into a concept that could be used to describe and define the political community and its goals more widely.

Even if it is evident that this rise of a future-oriented conception of democracy as an ideal form of government was connected with the French Revolution, we would benefit from a longer-term perspective that includes earlier attempts to re-evaluate and redefine democracy within traditional representative institutions. This means that we interpret conceptual change as a gradual process involving mutual debate between various political thinkers and actors rather than as a sudden and unexpected change introduced by innovative ideologists. While there were not yet really any revolutionary redefinitions in Sweden at the turn of the 1760s and 1770s, the rise of language referring to the people in Britain after the late 1760s and particularly in the 1770s, together with the American War of Independence, led to the first distinct revaluations of democracy as part of the mixed constitution of Britain in the early 1780s. These revaluations turned democracy into an inalienable characteristic of the political system to be actively defended and developed to answer future expectations. This was not yet a conceptual revolution of the French kind; it was rather a conceptual transformation taking place through transnational public discussion and parliamentary debates related to practical decision-making. The long-term significance of such conceptual revisions should not be overshadowed by the more dramatic revolutionary conceptual change