

Chapter 3

Saving Democracy: Populism, Deception, and E-Participation

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ABSTRACT

The recent rise of populism around the world, often accompanied by nationalism and isolationism, is a trend that presents a serious threat not only to liberal democracies but also to global peace and security. Populist forces have already shown their influence through the British referendum on membership withdrawal from the European Union and the election of Donald J. Trump as the U.S. President in 2016. These two events alone had ripple effects and were felt by the international community. The causes of populism are being currently revisited. It appears that socioeconomic and cultural aspects are key contributors. Even though the persistent existence of populist elements within societies comes from the very core of the democratic experiment, the current trend in social media technologies allowed demagogues to utilize viral deception on a considerable scale. The authors argue that social media technologies could be employed through e-participation to inhibit populism by bolstering civic empowerment, transparency, progressive inclusiveness, fact-based analysis, and informed decision making.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5326-7.ch003

“THE CROOKED TIMBER OF HUMANITY”

To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. -Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

Large sections of Western societies fell prey to a particularly malignant version of populism that is often nationalistic and isolationistic in nature. This worldwide trend presents a serious threat not only to liberal democracies but also to global peace and security. Forces that fuel these tendencies are multifaceted. The sections of the population susceptible to populism often experience economic scarcity, largely due to globalization and inevitable automation. Additionally, they also frequently experience cultural exclusion and sense of disconnect from prominent progressive lifestyles. This might be accompanied by limited access to factual information, lack of cultural capital, and training to process information critically. Thus, they may display anti-intellectual and traditionalist attitudes, sometimes with racist undertones. On the other hand, even populations with a rising solid middle-class turn to demagogues driven by, both real and perceived, external fears and cultural insecurity.

The frequent resurgence of populism is not particularly rare in Western democracies. What is worth noting, however, is that the proliferation of social media technologies allowed political demagogues to mobilize the “silent majority” to advance their agenda through viral deceptive campaigns. These actions are not only employed to spread confusion, deceit, and mistrust of government but also to activate deep emotional need for symbolic identification with the demagogue. Among the wide repertoire of tactics at the populists’ disposal, one strategy is supremely pernicious and poses a grave threat to liberal democracies by ushering in tyranny. This strategy could be described as a deliberate effort to dismantle the notion of objective reality and verifiable knowledge.

We argue that a strategy involving social media technologies could be employed by the e-participation to inhibit populism by bolstering civic empowerment, transparency, progressive inclusiveness, fact-based analysis, and rational decision-making. In order to promote such a process, creating a nonpartisan e-participation platforms is essential. These platforms would support a collective voice by engaging communities into a deliberative, fact-based, rational, and transparent decision-making process. An effective e-participation on the local community level could be gradually expanded all the way to the regional and, eventually, to federal levels. Nonpartisan e-participation has the potential to prevent the further disintegration of trust in the political process and the further erosion of high ideals of objective truth and reason. Especially the latter process is sending us back into the pre-Enlightenment epistemic murk. We make a case that civic empowerment through e-participation has the potential to mitigate the effect of populism, and consequently, prevent tyranny.

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