European Commission

CORDIS Results Pack on
challenges to democracy in Europe

A thematic collection of innovative EU-funded research results

Insights into a complex and turbulent political climate

Research and Innovation

SECOND EDITION

Contents

Editorial

Insights into a complex and turbulent political climate

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our democratic societies, posing unprecedented challenges to globalisation, personal freedoms, the reliability of information and, ultimately, the ability of democratic institutions to cope with the rapidly changing societal demands. This adds up to a tumultuous decade for European democracy, that saw the rise of populist movements, anti-European sentiments fuelling disintegration pulsions, and growing grassroots protests over a number of issues, ranging from racism to economic disparity. This comprehensively updated CORDIS Results Pack, including nine entirely new projects, features some of the innovative EU-funded research that helps us to better understand the major political issues of the day and provide recommendations for policymakers, citizens and other organisations to better respond to the threats facing European democracy.

The list of challenges faced by European democracy is a long one. The lingering impact of the 2008 financial crisis, with widespread economic distress and austerity, led to growing public discontent over inequality, stagnant living standards and social injustice.

The migration crisis of 2015 following the Syrian civil war, which led to the highest levels of displacement ever recorded, exacerbated discontent among European citizens over issues of fairness and cultural integration. A feeling of dislocation from the national discourse intertwined with pre-existing economic anxieties and fuelled both left- and right-wing populist movements.

Rapid technological change, particularly the growth of social media, has radically altered democratic participation over the past few years. Citizens are now just as likely to receive their news from Facebook or Twitter as from traditional print and broadcast media. This has boosted opportunities for citizen engagement on digital platforms and also fostered transparency, but nevertheless contributed to the spread of disinformation and 'fake news' that undermine informed debate, and thus the very foundations of liberal democracy.

COVID-19: The latest ingredient

The arrival of COVID-19 in Europe caused unprecedented hardship for citizens, with restrictions on freedom of movement and the right to assemble and demonstrate, as well as the postponement of electoral processes. These profound changes to how we live, work, study, socialise and travel, will have lasting impacts in our society.

However, with vaccination programmes underway, a return to normality is in sight. An EU recovery package that promotes the green and digital transitions encourages innovative developments that will reinvigorate European democracy. How EU, national and local leaders respond to the economic and social distress left in the wake of COVID-19 will ultimately determine the course of European liberal democracy in the 21st century.

Lighting the way forward

These challenges have been met with innovative responses to strengthen democracy all over Europe. Take for example the Conference on the Future of Europe. With its multilingual digital platform (launched in April 2021) and the citizens' panels and plenary meetings that are taking place over several months, the Conference gives European citizens a greater say on what the EU does and how it works for them. It is a unique opportunity for the EU to display how it can further evolve through constructive engagement with its citizens, making European democracy more vibrant, interactive and relevant.

Innovative, evidence-based research is vital to respond to the challenges faced by European democracy. Policymakers do not act in a vacuum, but rely on robust data to make informed decisions. The EU's Horizon 2020 programme (and its successor, Horizon Europe) actively support social sciences and humanities researchers who are passionate about understanding the causes of, and finding solutions to, the aforementioned challenges.

The research featured in this Pack covers many diverse issues including economic insecurity, cultural and social integration, European identity, youth issues, radicalisation, technology, misinformation and 'fake news', and even how the EU defends and promotes its values in the international diplomatic arena.

There are no simple solutions to any of the challenges currently facing European democracy. Yet the EU can and will rise to the task of defending and enriching its fundamental values and democratic systems. The road ahead in a post-pandemic world will not be easy – but the fantastic research highlighted here promises to shine a light towards a better future for all European citizens.

Who are EU? Forging a cultural identity that reflects modern Europe

Real cultural diversity is within reach in Europe, but there is still much work ahead to completely move away from ethnonationalism. The CHIEF project provides a set of recommendations to ensure that no form of cultural heritage is unaccounted for.

Europe prides itself on its cultural diversity. Yet, forms of nationalism growing in many Member States call the effectiveness of its approach into question. 'Othering' is far from gone, cultural minorities thirst for recognition, and our vision of culture, cultural literacy and heritage is still profoundly ethnonationalist.

The EU-funded CHIEF (Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future) project has been shedding new light on this reality. By working with young people experiencing exclusion across nine different countries (Croatia, Georgia, Germany, India, Latvia, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom), it hopes to

enable a more encompassing definition of 'cultural literacy' – our understanding of the traditions, activities and history of our culture.

Post-ethnic culture

"There are different factors challenging cultural diversity and inclusion," says Anton Popov, coordinator of the project and senior lecturer in Sociology at Aston University. "First, migrants are often treated as subjects of integration policies. Then, different cultures might be introduced through the medium of religion, or even a colonialist perspective of history."

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He adds: "We also have very different meanings of diversity across countries, and a post-ethnic foundation of national culture. The latter has the adverse consequence of considering minorities and migrants as 'in need of education'."

The project's findings reveal the distance separating culturally dominant groups from migrants and minorities. The project team demonstrated that young people often reproduce the status quo in terms of socio-economic positions, and that young people tend to reproduce dichotomies and hierarchies that result in othering and exclusion. Even in organisations with culturally inclusive agendas, homogeneity of membership might result in lack of recognition of such groups' real needs.

Europe has become obsessed with memory and history.

To break this vicious circle, CHIEF has been focusing on young people as the 'future in the making', looking at them from the angles of educational settings and informal human interactions. Even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the team organised intervention events helping young people express their identities. These included the likes of street-art murals in Georgia, anti-racism workshops in Germany and an intercultural rap song and photobook in the United Kingdom.

CHIEF's first and perhaps most radical recommendation is to move away from our ethnonational understanding of culture and diversity. "We could create a more diverse and inclusive curriculum accounting for mixed culture and foregrounding the decolonisation of knowledge. The idea is that we all do culture, and that national educational policies should move away from deficiency models," Popov explains.

The challenges of European values

Beyond rethinking national identities, the project also acknowledges the fact that European identity also faces challenges of its own. In all nine countries, identification with Europe in cultural terms was found to be weak and subordinated to national and/or ethnic/regional identities.

Overall, the EU's values of openness and freedom tend to clash with narratives that oppose it to national and ethnic identity,

mostly among older citizens. The EU is also politically loaded and therefore very divisive, particularly since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. As Popov puts it: "Europe has become obsessed with memory and history, to the point where cosmopolitan discourses about its difficult past have now become part of new forms of mainstream nationalisms."

Here, an important recommendation of the project team is to engage young people. Beyond providing recommendations for each country in the CHIEF consortium, the project team has recently released a set of international policy recommendations. These suggest that educational policies should extend the scope of cultural learning to present culture in different ways and link it with everyday experiences, education and art. Meanwhile, heritage conceptions need to move beyond inclusion towards infusion.

In the EU, this means developing more meaningful and relatable concepts of European belonging, such as the idea of Europe as a source of cultural identity championing liberal values. Popov believes such values need to be linked to cultural references beyond Europe while giving prominence to silenced and marginalised groups worldwide. With all this highly valuable input, there is little doubt that CHIEF will contribute to a new vision of cultural literacy in Europe and beyond.

PROJECT
CHIEF – Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future

COORDINATED BY
Aston University in the United Kingdom

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-SOCIETY

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/770464

**PROJECT WEBSITE**
chiefprojecteu.com

The secret robot armies fighting to undermine democracy

Governments and special interest groups are using networks of automated accounts on social media to sow dissent, spread disinformation and subvert their opponents.

Funded through a European Research Council (ERC) grant, the COMPROP (Computational Propaganda: Investigating the Impact of Algorithms and Bots on Political Discourse in Europe) project set out to investigate networks of automated social media accounts, and their role in shaping public opinion.

Researchers led by principal investigator Philip Howard produced a codified definition of 'junk news' that referred to deliberately produced misleading, deceptive and incorrect propaganda purporting to be real news. The team examined millions of posts on social media to see how these messages were produced and disseminated.

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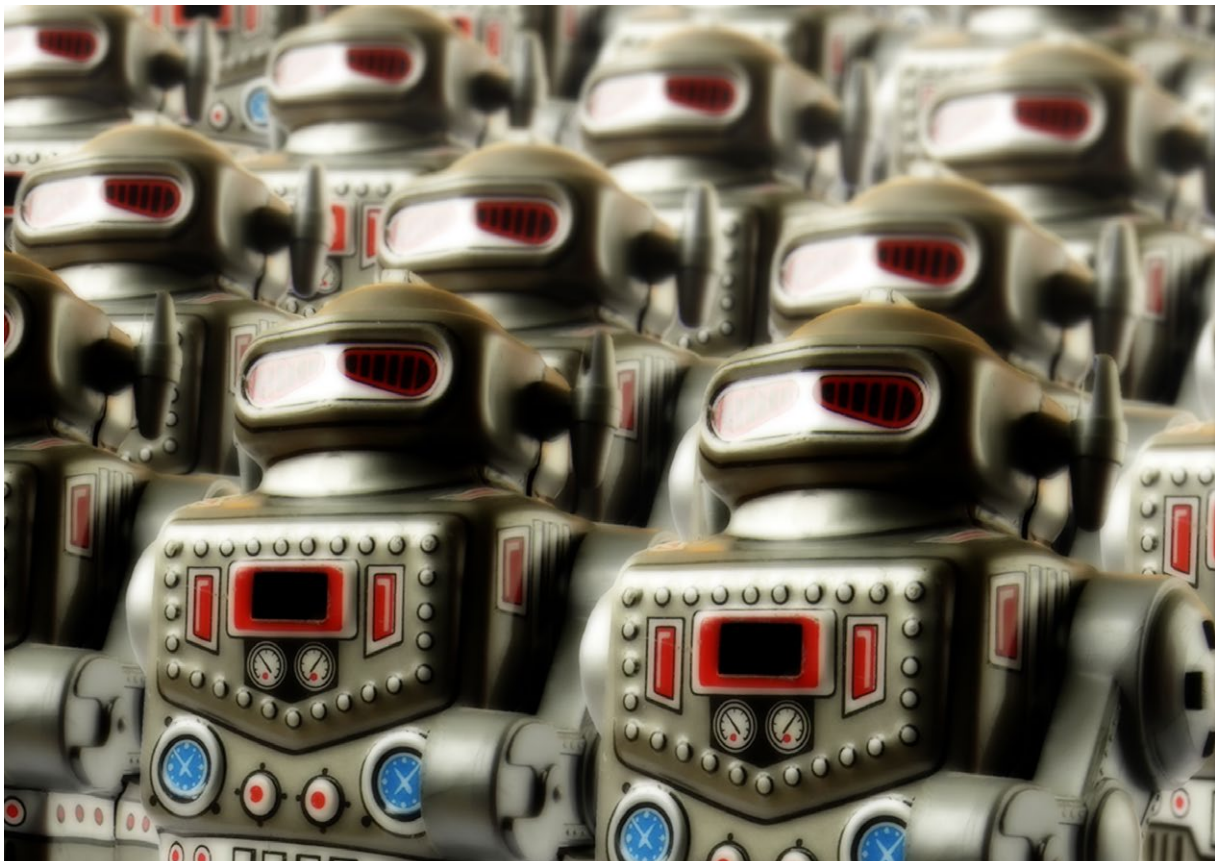
Though initially focused on Twitter, the team at the University of Oxford's Programme on Democracy and Technology found computational propaganda – algorithms put to work for a political agenda – on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, and even dating app Tinder.

"We didn't expect over the course of the project the problem would grow as bad as it did," notes Howard. "We can see how some governments, lobbyists, the far right and white supremacists all use these to manipulate democracies."

The COMPROP project focused heavily on COVID misinformation, which Howard notes came chiefly from three sources: Russian media, Chinese media, and American president Donald Trump. While Trump's disinformation was tied to domestic American politics, Russia and China pushed three broad themes intended for foreign audiences.

"The first was that democracy can't help us, elected leaders are too weak to make decisions," says Howard. "The second message was that Russian or Chinese scientists were going to get the vaccine first, and the third was that Russia or China was leading on humanitarian assistance efforts."

Under the influence

These misinformation campaigns predate the COVID-19 pandemic, however. "When Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over Ukraine, there were multiple ridiculous stories of what transpired – that democracy advocates shot it down, that American troops shot it down, that a lost tank from WWII came out of the forest and shot it down," adds Howard. By laying out multiple conflicting stories, authoritarian regimes prevent their citizens from knowing which narrative to respond to.

We didn't expect over the course of the project the problem would grow as bad as it did.

This strategy was eventually turned outward, to undermine social movements and destabilise foreign nations. "Sometimes campaigns are about a specific crisis or person, but often the goal is to undermine trust in courts, police, journalism, science, or government at large," explains Howard.

He adds that the target audience for these bots is perhaps only 10-20 % of the population, typically disaffected, conservative-leaning adults who are politically active. In a highly polarised country, swaying 10 % of the electorate can have a resounding impact.

Howard explains that these campaigns are particularly bad for the role of women and minorities in public life: "Feminists, female journalists, and female politicians get a nasty form of attack and disinformation on social media. It's much easier to drive a woman out of public life than a man."

Government intervention

Howard says more effort is needed to contain these propaganda networks. "We're past the point of self-regulation by industry. If tech firms stepped up, and governments imposed fines on politicians who commission these programmes, that set of initiatives would go a long way."

Yet even identifying which social media accounts are automated has proven difficult. "One bot writer in Germany said his team would read our methodology papers and adjust their algorithms to just below our catchment," remarks Howard. "We were in a sort of dialogue with these programmers."

The group were also awarded a proof of concept grant to develop the Junk News Aggregator, a tool which interactively displays articles from unreliable sources as they spread on Facebook.

Howard and his team are now focused on how machine learning technology will power a new generation of computational propaganda. "If someone can take your social media feed and behavioural data, and come up with political messages you'll respond to, they'll do that," he concludes. "This is the next great threat."

PROJECT

COMPROP – Computational Propaganda: Investigating the Impact of Algorithms and Bots on Political Discourse in Europe

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HOSTED BY
University of Oxford in the United Kingdom

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/648311

PROJECT WEBSITE
demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk

Football, fatwas, fascism: the surprising truth about what drives extremism in Europe

What does the breeding ground for radicalisation look like? How do young people react to these influences? How do Islamism and extreme right movements influence each other? The DARE project is investigating these and many other questions.

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Radicalisation has been a major political issue over the last two decades. In Europe, it is essentially divided into two main forms. The first is Islamism and the second – which has become more prevalent in the last five years – is pernicious extreme right movements threatening the very foundations of our multicultural and open societies. These two groups are often opposed, although they are assumed to share the same tendency for violence.

There is still much we don't know, or we misconceive, about the breeding grounds of these two forms of radicalisation. "We're facing a lack of empirical research into radicalisation environments, and a lack of knowledge of why, within these environments, most young people do not radicalise," explains Hilary Pilkington, professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester and coordinator of the DARE (Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality) project. "We wanted to close these gaps as well as influence the debate on how radicalisation processes interact to produce cumulative effects."

To do so, the project team conducted ethnographic studies of Islamist and right-wing extremist environments. "Our 19 completed studies generated just under 400 semi-structured interviews with a total of 369 young people from 12 countries. The milieus selected varied significantly – from a French prison to a self-proclaimed 'football fanatics' milieu in Poland – and findings in each case study report are rich and complex in their own right," says Pilkington.

The project demonstrates that socio-economic inequality does not consistently predict radicalisation. It depends on the country, the ideological type of radicalisation and the form of radicalisation (cognitive or behavioural).

Violence as an exception to the rule

The interviewed actors rarely see themselves as extremists. They do, however, identify both other groups and some people within their own milieu as too extreme, which confirms the relational nature of extremism.

"An important research finding is that this self-dissociation of research participants from extremism is not just empty rhetoric. Milieu actors, with only a few exceptions, rejected the use of violence to achieve political goals," Pilkington adds. "While they strongly defended the right to hold and express any opinion, they believed that the imposition of views on others was where extremism began."

In practice, few actors had reached the level of violent extremism. Pilkington explains that radical actions emerge "when the concerns underpinning grievances such as perceived injustice, persecution or the feeling of being silenced are felt to present

We're facing a lack of empirical research into radicalisation environments, and a lack of knowledge of why, within these environments, most young people do not radicalise.

some kind of existential threat to one's group, requiring action to defend that group." Other factors include the feelings of isolation, disconnect and marginalisation as soon as it appears that there are no alternative ways to seek redress.

Perhaps the most surprising project outcome is the degree of openness to dialogue demonstrated by interviewees. Pilkington believes this raises important questions for future research, such as whether political radicalism and extremism are as clearly associated with a 'close-minded' disposition and a resistance to dialogic engagement as current literature suggests.

Over the next few months, DARE will focus on the development of two educational toolkits, as well as research briefings and an edited volume. Pilkington hopes these will feed into the growing recognition of radicalisation as a societal rather than purely security-related phenomenon. Eventually, she says young people should be provided with the means to play a meaningful role in community-led initiatives to challenge hate and prejudice, from wherever it originates.

PROJECT
DARE – Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality

COORDINATED BY
University of Manchester in the United Kingdom

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-SOCIETY

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/725349

PROJECT WEBSITE
dare-h2020.org

Civil rights and wrongs: how data and democracy interact

Long subject to invasive and even oppressive applications of big data, citizens are now turning these tools on governments and big business. By tracing the fine line between useful data and abusive surveillance, the DATACTIVE project depicts under-the-radar conflicts that could reshape society as we know it.

Literature tells us that 'data is the new oil'. Businesses need it to know more about our tastes and purchasing habits, politicians want it to win elections, and governments count on it – most often – for the greater good. But how about civil society?

For the past decade, data journalism and human rights investigations using online data have demonstrated the value of big data for non-governmental and non-market actors. Yet,

from a research perspective, the connection between citizenship, political participation and big data remained relatively unexplored before the ERC-funded DATACTIVE (Data activism: The politics of big data according to civil society) project kicked off.

"DATACTIVE combined in-depth interviews with 250 activists, human rights defenders and digital rights advocates with field observations in both real life and cyberspace, as well as data

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mining techniques. The idea was to capture what people think and say about data and data infrastructure, what they do with them, and how algorithms mediate both," says principal investigator Stefania Milan, associate professor of New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam.

The project focused on three knowledge gaps: the lack of understanding of civil society engagement with data, the link between resistance to and advocacy for big data, and the collective and software dimension of activism involving the use of data.

COVID-19 techno-solutionism

The project team exposed the role of data as a mediator in digital activism. It can either be a 'stake' – an object of political struggle – or be mobilised as part of 'repertoires' or modular tools for political struggle. In this sense, several interesting trends have been identified.

The project took a close look at societal trends such as open data, resistance to surveillance, open-source intelligence, 5G, and the effects of Facebook personalisation algorithms on the Dutch national election in March 2021. Milan's team identified a widening divide between those who are visible in official records, and the 'data poor' who are not.

This was acutely manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, as marginalised communities such as unregistered people and undocumented migrants struggled to access care. "We created a multilingual blog that investigates how the virus is experienced by individuals and communities on the margins, while criticising what we call the 'techno-solutionism' which characterised the response to the pandemic," explains Milan.

DATACTIVE investigated how COVID-19 contributed to 'lowering the guard' with respect to privacy risks. The diffusion of a new mode of governance where contact tracing apps, thermal facial recognition cameras and educational platforms have progressively taken over functions usually reserved for administrations and governmental entities is particularly worrying, according to Milan.

"It negatively impacts citizen sovereignty over their own data while increasing inequality and discrimination. The EU vaccination certificate is the culmination of this trend: it legitimises inequalities between countries and people by formalising ways to distinguish between the vaccinated and unvaccinated, and eventually excluding the latter. This is particularly visible in the southern hemisphere where access to vaccines is very limited."

Citizen action

Meanwhile, DATACTIVE could observe how data transparency and open data have become a currency in the fight against the pandemic. Citizens in countries like Brazil use it to develop counter-narratives in the face of government inaction, while some grassroots actors and NGOs increasingly resist the diffusion of facial recognition in society. The 'Reclaim your face' petition in the EU is the culmination of these efforts.

"Eventually, we hope our project will encourage more people to 'play with data'. We would like different data activist initiatives to explore complementarities and to spread awareness of the problems and opportunities of datafication. This might help leverage good civil society practices for knowledge and public policy agendas," Milan says.

Whilst DATACTIVE has come to an end, research will continue under various other projects. These include plans to develop technology standards for 5G networks that respect human rights by design, development of software to study personalisation algorithms, as well as further research on technological innovations increasing discrimination and injustice.

We created a multilingual blog that investigates how the virus is experienced by individuals and communities on the margins.

PROJECT
DATACTIVE – Data activism: The politics of big data according to civil society

HOSTED BY
University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/639379

PROJECT WEBSITE
data-activism.net

Studying Hong Kong's demand for democracy

Pro-democracy movements have been a constant in global politics over the past two decades, from 'colour revolutions' in former Soviet republics to the Arab Spring of the early 2010s. EU-funded researchers watched it evolve in real time in the Chinese territory.

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The EU-funded DemandDemoc (Demand for Democracy) project fundamentally seeks to understand the role of personal preferences, beliefs and social interactions in spurring an individual to take part in a pro-democracy movement.

Hong Kong proved to be the perfect case study. "At the beginning of our project in 2017, Hong Kong was experiencing an almost unique political tension," explains the project's principal investigator, Davide Cantoni from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.

The Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution, stipulated that elections would take place through 'universal suffrage', but it never specified when universal suffrage should be achieved. Since 1997, citizens of Hong Kong have protested every 1 July to remind their government and Beijing about the unfulfilled promises of the Basic Law.

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Our initial intuition proved to be correct: that Hong Kong would prove a fruitful testing ground for theories about how the demand for democracy is articulated and organised.

Despite the unfulfilled pledge for full democratic participation in elections, the people of Hong Kong have enjoyed many other key civil, social and economic rights, such as freedom of expression, an independent judiciary and a free press. "This again has added to Hong Kong's uniqueness because it's normally the case that states without universal suffrage are much more autocratic," states Cantoni.

Some unexpected insights

The ERC-supported DemandDemoc project halted their direct work in Hong Kong at the outset of the 2019 mass protests but had already arrived at some interesting and unexpected insights into what influenced an individual's decision to engage in a pro-democracy movement.

"We find that individuals consistently tend to act as 'substitutes': they are more likely to attend a protest march when they expect attendance to be low and are less likely to attend if they expect a high turnout," Cantoni says. "This finding is particularly surprising because a large class of collective behaviour models would predict the exact opposite."

Additionally, DemandDemoc saw that attendance at a protest event in itself does not fundamentally modify the beliefs or political preferences of individuals. "However, individuals attending a protest are more likely to take part in future protests as well. The reason for this sustained political engagement lies in the formation of new networks with politically active friends," he adds.

From Hong Kong to pastures new

Due to the 2020 National Security Law, DemandDemoc has been unable to continue its research in Hong Kong. "But I am happy and proud that our initial intuition proved to be correct: that Hong Kong would prove a fruitful testing ground for theories about how the demand for democracy is articulated and organised," says Cantoni.

He and his team are interested to test their findings in other settings. "DemandDemoc also highlighted how important it is for us to study 'critical junctures' such as revolutions and protests in real time through surveys and fieldwork," he concludes. "Doing so allows us to not only understand our contemporary world better, but also better inform our reading of history."

PROJECT
DemandDemoc – Demand for Democracy

HOSTED BY
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in Germany

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/716837

Set to private? The political challenges posed by social media

Policymakers must answer to the electorate and at the same time handle delicate closed-door negotiations among themselves. The DIPLOFACE project aims to investigate how the growth in online communication has impacted these competing aspects of political life, especially in the context of COVID-19.

When talking about the 'new normal' of post-pandemic life, we generally refer to working from home and using social media and videoconferencing software to keep in touch with the wider world.

But the truth is this transition has been a long time in the making, and it also affects diplomats and policymakers. Long before 2020, digital tools had begun challenging the old diplomatic ways.
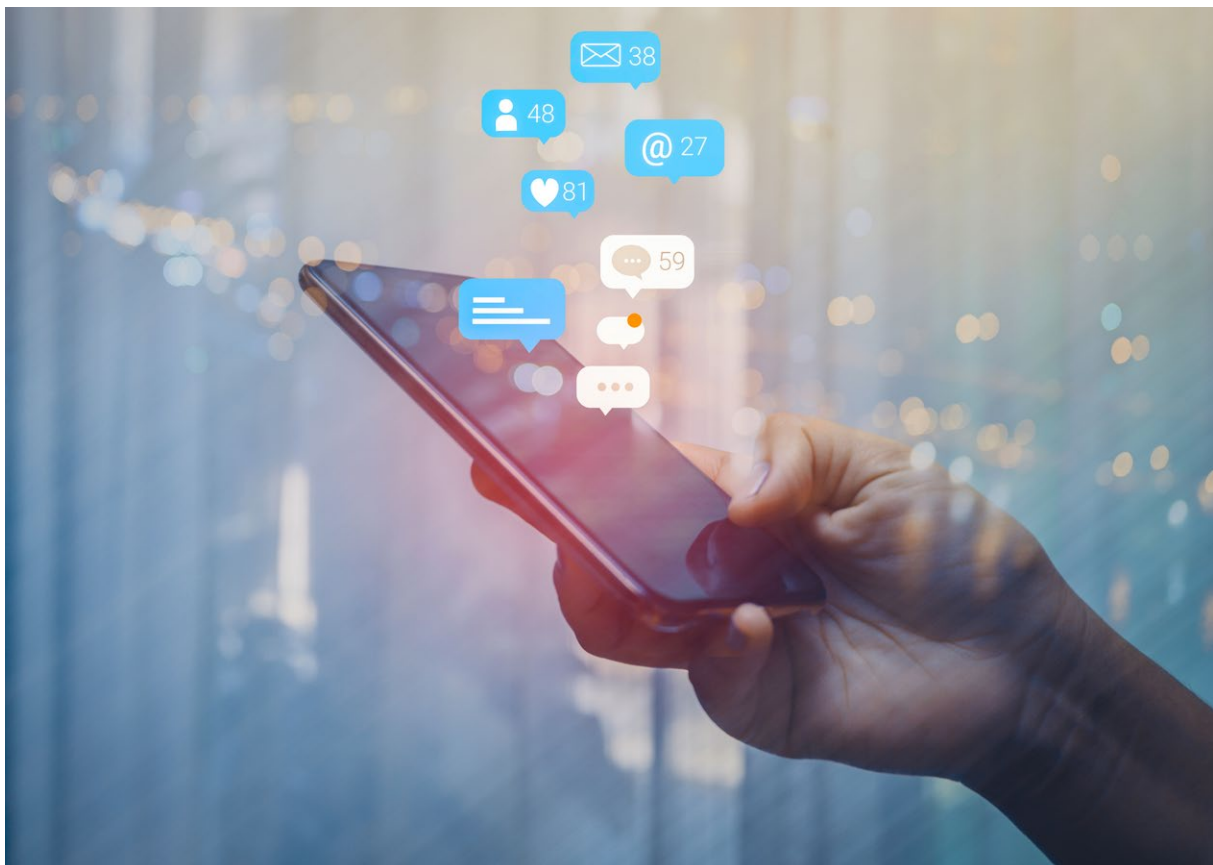
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The use of social media is a struggle not only to present national selves, but also to define the ideals of the diplomatic profession.

The DIPLOFACE (Diplomatic Face-Work – between confidential negotiations and public display) project, funded by the ERC, focuses on this game-changing evolution. How did social media impact traditional politics? Do efforts from policymakers to present themselves proactively in tweets interfere with closed-door negotiations and their culture of restraint and secrecy? What about the digitalisation of Brussels' diplomacy before and after COVID-19?

It would be tempting to answer the second question in the affirmative. In the United States, president Donald Trump became infamous for his tweets, often catching international partners off guard. But Rebecca Adler-Nissen, DIPLOFACE principal investigator, depicts a much more subtle reality.

"Trump's tweets are symptomatic of some aspects of online political behaviour, but the online political world is as multifaceted as its offline counterpart. Diplomatic protocol and self-restraint are not suddenly replaced by aggressive posts in caps lock: they continue to play their role also online," the University of Copenhagen professor explains.

Striking a balance

What social media politics does is to challenge the balance between effective international cooperation and public legitimacy. Rolling 24/7 live media coverage and the mass adoption of emails, videos and updates, coupled with demands for more transparency in world politics, means policymakers have to walk an increasingly thin line between both aspects of politics.

COVID-19 is a great example in this regard. DIPLOFACE studied how the pandemic has affected diplomacy throughout restrictions, social distancing and the sudden turn to online meetings and videoconferences. They found that the change wasn't so sudden after all. "Sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina calls this the 'synthetic situation'. We show that most diplomatic meetings were already digitally mediated (or synthetic) pre-COVID. What's interesting is to see how technological change affects diplomacy by creating both professional tensions and personal resistance in synthetic situations," Adler-Nissen explains.

Surprisingly, this relationship is still poorly understood. Closing this gap requires observation of the negotiation process 'live' inside the engine room of diplomacy, while accounting for all external actors. "Our research investigates for the first time how leaders and diplomats handle the sudden and unforeseen entanglement between private diplomatic negotiations and the public. We do this by combining various methods and gathering different kinds of empirical data: field work, direct observations, interviews and analysis of millions of social media updates," Adler-Nissen notes.

Information overflow

In practice, social media and video meetings hardly deliver on their promise of more accessibility and transparency. The team has also found that local interpretations and use patterns of social media platforms differ considerably.

While some practitioners embrace new communication tools to build up their profiles as competent negotiators, others grow tired of the constant communication, information overflow and breaches of confidentiality. "More fundamentally, the digital revolution questions the norms and standards of the diplomatic profession. The use of social media is a struggle not only to present national selves, but also to define the ideals of the diplomatic profession," Adler-Nissen notes.

Adler-Nissen's work now continues with a focus on how international political life responds to the digital transition, and whether this transition creates inequalities between countries. "I think I will never leave this project, even when it formally ends. DIPLOFACE is the most intellectually stimulating and challenging academic experience I have had so far and there are still many aspects of diplomacy left to explore and explain," she concludes.

PROJECT

DIPLOFACE – Diplomatic Face-Work – between confidential negotiations and public display

HOSTED BY
University of Copenhagen in Denmark

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/680102

PROJECT WEBSITE
politicalscience.ku.dk/research/projects/diploface

Understanding political choice in Europe, post-war to pandemic

Choice lies at the heart of what distinguishes democratic systems from non-democratic ones. The EUDEMOS project, funded by the ERC, examined the evolution of political choice in Europe and the implications today for citizen engagement.

The last two decades have seen increasing political fragmentation and polarisation, dropping levels of citizen satisfaction in democracy and the rise of parties that have challenged – in some countries quite successfully – the established order.

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"Like disruptive entrepreneurs, these challenger parties offer new policies and defy the dominance of established party brands," says Sara Hobolt, the principal investigator of the project and professor of Government at the London School of Economics (LSE).

The paradox of political choice

The decline of mainstream parties means Europeans have more choice than ever when it comes to the menu of party options offered by their national political system. In the last 15 years Germany has evolved from being dominated by four 'traditional' parties to six, and at one point the radical right Alternative für Deutschland was the third largest party in the Bundestag.

"On top of this, there has also been a rise in the number and variety of issues on the public agenda, such as immigration and the environment," continues Hobolt. "Citizens also have many more opportunities to express their political voice, for example in referendums. Challenger parties have in particular been very innovative in mobilising these issues to obtain electoral success."

Paradoxically, political choice has become more constrained as nations have become increasingly interdependent. "Integration has given citizens more democratic opportunities, such as European Parliament elections. Yet it also implies that national governments in Europe operate under the growing constraints of European integration that limit the choices they can offer citizens and the policy instruments they can use," she adds.

The politics of COVID-19

EUDEMOS (Constrained Democracy: Citizens' Responses to Limited Political Choice in the European Union) has documented that European voters increasingly resemble critical consumers rather than party loyalists. "The political sphere has become more market-like," continues Hobolt. "And this can also provide some interesting insights about political choice and the current COVID-19 crisis."

When the pandemic first swept through Europe in March 2020, dominant mainstream parties were gifted an opportunity to showcase their competence and long experience in governance, and this boosted their popularity, at least in the short term.

"European citizens rallied around their political leaders and institutions, at the expense of the populist challenger parties," Hobolt explains. These groups failed to excite electorates with their usual policy staples, such as immigration, because citizens were now prioritising a competent response to the health crisis.

So, will the pandemic be the death knell of the populist political phenomena that we've experienced over the last decade? "Don't be so sure," Hobolt says. "It seems highly unlikely that the demand for these parties will simply dry up, especially as the pandemic has triggered a deep global recession that populist challengers could eventually exploit."

Punishing misdemeanours

Some of her most recent work includes a large-scale survey that tested whether citizens punish 'bad' politicians, and especially illiberal behaviour, such as lack of respect for political opponents, opposition to freedom of the press, and opposition to an independent judiciary.

Voters punish bad behaviour, but do not distinguish between 'illiberal' tendencies and more general misdemeanours, such as not answering constituents' emails.

"We found that voters do indeed punish such behaviours, but do not distinguish between 'illiberal' tendencies and more general misdemeanours, such as not answering constituents' emails or claiming too much in expenses," Hobolt says.

The team also investigated the impact of criticism from other politicians. Hobolt notes that voters responded much more

strongly if the criticism came from politicians belonging to the same party as the wrongdoer, rather than the opposition.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, EUDEMOS was extended by a further 6 months. "Conducting research during the pandemic has been very difficult, especially when it comes to research that involves direct contact with participants," Hobolt explains. "This allowed me to transform the final major aspect of the project – a comprehensive laboratory experiment on how political attitudes are formed – from an in-person to an online setting."

Overall, it's clear that EUDEMOS has been a joy to work on for Hobolt. "It has been an immense privilege to work on such an important research project with such excellent young scholars, especially alongside such monumental real-time events, such as Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and now of course the COVID-19 crisis," she concludes. "I have many plans to continue this line of research in the years to come!"

PROJECT
EUDEMOS – Constrained Democracy: Citizens' Responses to Limited Political Choice in the European Union

HOSTED BY
London School of Economics and Political Science in the United Kingdom

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-ERC

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/647835

PROJECT WEBSITE
lse.ac.uk/european-institute/research/eudemos

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A toolbox for integration: making differentiation work for the EU

The complexity of the EU project necessitates a degree of flexibility in Member States' cooperation. The EU IDEA team is examining whether the response to crises such as Brexit should be more freedom, or greater commitment.
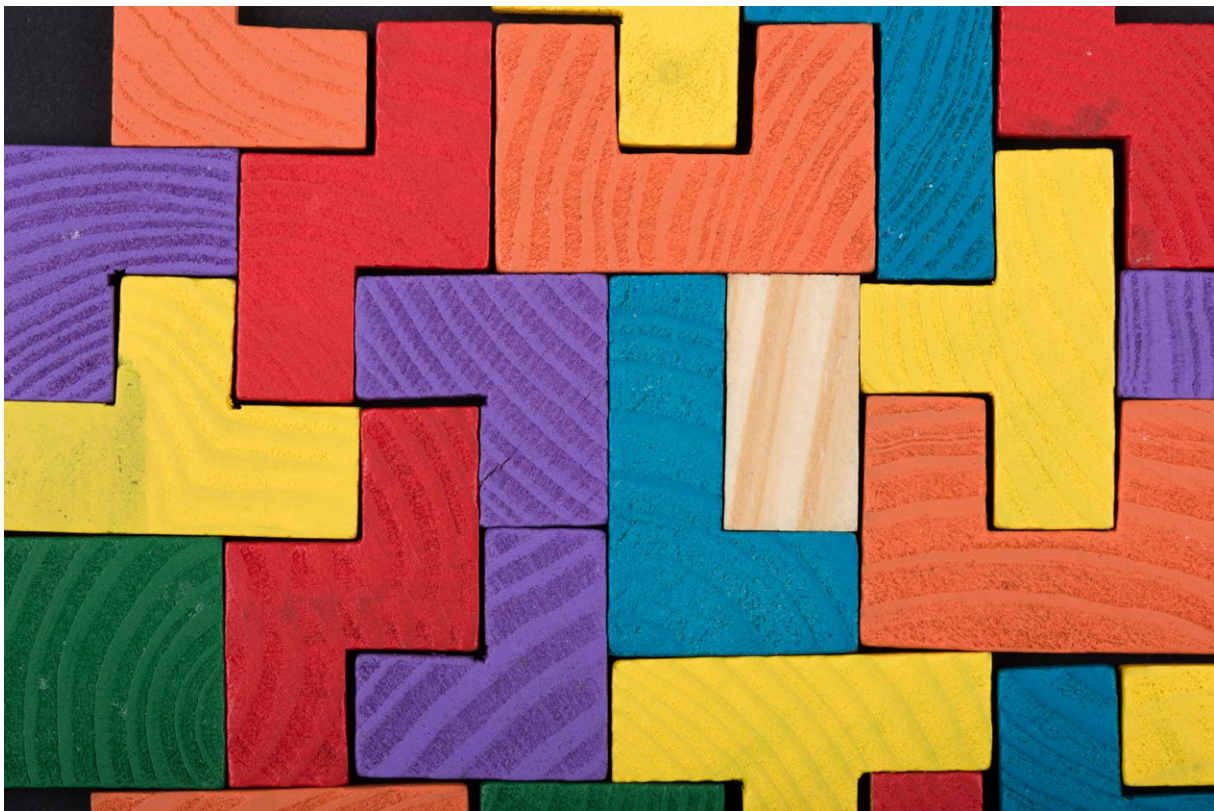
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Differentiated integration grants Member States flexibility in the speed and extent to which they adopt some EU policies, smoothing their transition into the bloc. Referred to as variable geometry, multi-speed Europe or Europe à la carte, differentiation can take on many forms, and has often proven controversial. Does differentiation really drive further integration, or does it fail to sufficiently challenge recalcitrant states?

To bring insight to this polarised debate, the EU-funded EU IDEA (EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability) project is assessing how differentiation can best contribute to making the EU more effective, cohesive and democratic.

"Differentiation has been viewed either as a poison or as a panacea for the EU. As a matter of fact, it is neither," says Nicoletta Pirozzi, head of the EU, Politics and Institutions Programme at the Institute of International Affairs (IAI) in Italy, which leads the project.

The reality of Brexit suggests a more hard-line approach towards member and non-member countries.

"It is more helpful to look at differentiation as a toolbox for accommodating diversity, whether through major long-term projects like the Economic and Monetary Union or as a flexible means to cope with crises and political divergence."

Differentiation is neither inherently integrative nor inherently disintegrative, Pirozzi explains: "It is what Member States and EU bodies make of it. Thus, it entails opportunities as well as risks, which EU IDEA aims to uncover and assess." To do so, EU IDEA focuses on the politics and the organisational forms of differentiation, examining the processes leading to different modalities of differentiation, as well as on their implementation.

In the field of foreign and security policy, EU countries have long been engaging in a range of informal practices of differentiation, such as regional groupings, contact and lead groups, as well as various defence initiatives.

"When it has adhered to common EU values and positions, differentiated cooperation has had largely positive outcomes," Pirozzi notes, citing the nuclear negotiations with Iran as a case in point.

Staying relevant post-Brexit

Differentiation also has an external dimension: the extension of EU rules, policies and modes of cooperation to third countries. Brexit represents an entirely new phenomenon in this context. "Brexit clearly impacts existing modes of differentiation. We found, through a dedicated Observatory on Brexit, that the reality of Brexit suggests a more hard-line approach towards member and non-member countries, sending them both the message that membership matters," Pirozzi remarks.

The project's findings suggest that the EU needs to highlight its role as a relevant framework for dealing with global challenges that cannot be addressed effectively at the national level, she concludes.

Common values

The project team is seeking to identify how much and what form of differentiation is conducive to European integration, and when differentiation should be avoided to prevent incoherence, political tensions and disintegration. This exercise will enable them to set out clear objectives and criteria for countries' participation in differentiated integration projects. They will also review the role of EU institutions in this context and suggest strategies for improving citizens' participation.

Differentiation has been a part of the EU's modes of action since the bloc's early days. One of the most recent examples is the Banking Union, initiated in 2012 in response to the financial crisis. Initially limited to the euro area, the single supervision mechanism has since been extended to non-euro area countries Bulgaria and Croatia, on their request.

PROJECT
EU IDEA – EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability

COORDINATED BY
Institute of International Affairs in Italy

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-SOCIETY

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/822622

PROJECT WEBSITE
euidea.eu

From victim to suspect: an ethical perspective on DNA data sharing

The transnational exchange of DNA data between EU countries is generally considered key to solving crime. Researchers fear it could lead to new forms of suspicion and discrimination.

The depiction of crime in movies and TV shows assigns a singularly simple and efficient role to DNA evidence: it helps the police put criminals behind bars and frees innocent citizens from suspicion by infallibly producing reliable matches from a database.

The reality, as often, is a lot more complex. The use of forensic genetics in law enforcement has far-reaching ethical implications due to the nature of DNA data and the way this data is collected, exchanged and analysed.

The EXCHANGE (Forensic Geneticists and the Transnational Exchange of DNA data in the EU: Engaging Science with Social Control, Citizenship and Democracy) research project studied how these uses could effectively drive genetic surveillance – the systematic monitoring of individuals or groups based on their genetic specificities in order to detect or reconstruct crimes. The project delivered tools and data to improve our understanding of these mechanisms, and outlined concrete solutions for addressing the challenges to democratic societies they create.

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Opt-in consent

The starting point for the EXCHANGE project, which received funding from the ERC, is the so-called Prüm framework. The technological system enables the automated exchange of DNA profiles between EU countries.

These exchanges raise questions with regard to privacy, equality before justice and the presumption of innocence, explains Helena Machado, dean of the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Minho in Portugal and principal investigator of the EXCHANGE project.

"The transnational exchange of DNA is not only concerned with data related to potential criminals such as convicted persons, suspects, and crime stains, but also includes data associated with civil identification purposes – missing persons, their relatives, or unidentified remains," she says. "The inclusion of victims in criminal DNA databases can generate matches with other unsolved crimes, in which case the victim becomes a suspect. Therefore, victims who are alive, like other volunteers, should be informed and asked to give their consent."

Victims, like other volunteers, should be informed and asked to give their consent.

Another issue is related to the differences between EU countries in the way data is collected, categorised and shared. For instance, data on convicted offenders will cover very different realities in different countries: "While Germany also stores and exchanges DNA data on offenders convicted for crimes such as burglary, Portugal only exchanges data on offenders convicted for more serious crimes such as homicide and robbery with violence."

CSI effect

In addition to these concerns, efforts to clarify the role and limitations of DNA evidence are hampered by its depiction in the media. "Members of the criminal justice system, and the general public, confuse the idealised portrayal of DNA evidence on television with the actual capabilities of forensic genetics," Machado points out.

"This so-called 'CSI effect', together with a lack of literacy on what is involved in the interpretation of DNA evidence, is considered by many forensic geneticists to be the major obstacle in their task of communicating on the results of DNA analysis."

Objectively assessing the success and efficiency of the Prüm system is made difficult by a lack of transparency, she notes. While the transnational exchanges under the Prüm framework are generally regarded as instrumental to solving crimes in the EU, the lack of publicly accessible information makes it difficult to assess these claims.

To achieve greater accountability, the project team suggests developing oversight bodies which actively engage with citizens and other stakeholders outside the forensic arena. They also call for an ethically informed debate addressing the reliability, utility and legitimacy of the system.

Charting the many paths to integration with the EU

A process that allows Member States to adopt EU rules at their own speed has produced a complex and evolving state of regulatory alignment. A pioneering data set captures this multifaceted progress to integration, including which policies proved the most difficult to embrace.

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For a variety of reasons, nations joining the EU may decide to integrate more slowly in certain areas. The concept of differentiated integration (DI) covers formal and informal arrangements for policy opt-outs as well as the differences, or discretionary aspects, associated with putting EU policy into practice.

To help policymakers get a handle on what differentiation exists and how it has evolved, the EU-supported InDivEU (Integrating Diversity in the European Union) project has created a comprehensive data set tracking all instances of DI in EU treaties and EU legislation from the Treaty of Rome in 1958 to 2020.

"The European Union today is characterised by diversities that run deep and it must find ways of managing and governing that. One way to addressing diversity is DI, as it enables the EU to integrate further," says Brigid Laffan, one of the co-directors of the InDivEU project based at the European University Institute in Italy.

Economy and identity

There are two forms of DI: internal differentiation, which is where Member States do not participate in all EU policy regimes, and external differentiation, which involves third countries participating selectively. It's a complex area with a range of differentiation types and durations.

The application of DI falls into two main categories: economic limitations that may render Member States unable to participate in all policy regimes, and ideological differences that may make them unwilling to participate in all EU policy regimes.

The project's data set shows that Denmark has the largest number of opt-outs, and that France and Germany, the two big, 'core' countries of the EU, tend not to resort to DI.

"Willing new Member States that were excluded from several EU policies initially have been able to join the EU 'core' in a reasonable period," explains Frank Schimmelfennig, who also co-directed the project.

The InDivEU also gathered policymakers, civil servants, academics, journalists and other representatives from seven EU Member States for a series of Stakeholder Forums in selected EU capitals. These workshops generated key insights on the challenges and opportunities of DI.

The data set is an authoritative one-stop source on the development of differentiated integration over 50 years.

The information collected by InDivEU provides important insights into the governance of the EU. The project's message for policymakers is that internal DI works best for new Member States who may be adjusting to their accession, or at the launch of new policies. It is less suitable when applied to European values or financial redistribution across Member States. These last are of course the key challenges the EU faces.

Mapping integration

"The data set is an authoritative one-stop source on the development of DI over 50 years and thus invaluable to policymakers as it captures absolute numbers of DI and trends," Laffan adds.

It shows that the instances of DI in EU treaties and legislation grew significantly after the 2004 enlargement, when 10 new Member States joined. The data set also shows that internal DI is multi-speed: two thirds of examples have already expired, while others persist.

This is important as it means that most instances of DI are time-bound, and that Member States eventually come on board. However, the remaining one third relates to major policy fields, such as the adoption of the euro. "In this case the differentiation has become entrenched in response to the euro area crisis," Laffan explains. The data suggest that DI has contributed to European integration by making it easier for key sticking points to be forestalled.

PROJECT
InDivEU – Integrating Diversity in the European Union

COORDINATED BY
European University Institute in Italy

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CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/822304

PROJECT WEBSITE
indiveu.eui.eu

Strengthening democracy in a time of populism

The rise of populist movements has been a key political trend in Europe since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. The EU-funded PaCE project has been working to better understand the negative tendencies of populist movements, as well why voters are attracted to them in the first place.

Through an ambitious programme that took in historical and comparative analysis, the utilisation of machine learning and direct democracy labs with individual groups of citizens, the project PaCE (Populism And Civic Engagement – a

fine-grained, dynamic, context-sensitive and forward-looking response to negative populist tendencies) was able to arrive at what project coordinator Bruce Edmonds considers its most important result.

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"There are significant differences between what constitutes a 'populist' party and what constitutes a 'nativist' party," begins the director of the Centre for Policy Modelling at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. "On the surface they look and sound extremely similar, but they work in different ways."

Divide and conquer

In short, nativist beliefs can be summarised as the story of the homeland versus outsiders/'others', whilst populist parties focus on the notion of a small, out-of-touch elite versus 'ordinary people'.

But it doesn't stop at these core beliefs. Edmonds points out how the two tend to have very different experiences once they achieve political power. "Populists (for example La Lega in Italy) are much more successful and adaptive in government," he says. "On the other hand, nativists (such as Austria's Freedom Party) tend not to last long, often implode quickly and/or get mired in scandal."

Whilst getting to the heart of this distinction was important for PaCE, they also wanted to showcase examples of where a populist route could have been taken but was ultimately avoided. "Iceland is a great example of this," Edmonds explains. "Following their major financial crisis (as part of the wider global financial crisis), Icelandic voters could have easily taken a populist route. Instead, they elected a very liberal government that worked hard to put the public finances back in shape and return the economy to positive growth."

Studying populism through AI

Alongside getting to the bottom of defining exactly what populist movements are, are not, and their alternatives, PaCE was also very interested in using digital tools to study, monitor and track populist movements in the online realm, especially on social media.

"We did a comprehensive manual analysis of many political parties, specifically texts they use to promote their ideas and ideologies, and then this was passed to our Icelandic partners," says Edmonds. "They then developed machine learning algorithms by using hundreds of keywords taken from this analysis and trained them to recognise these ideas."

There are significant differences between what constitutes a 'populist' party and what constitutes a 'nativist' party.

This analysis is publicly available via the PaCE dashboard, a tool that allows users to easily follow the stories and narrative topics being discussed by populist movements online. The code that performed the filtering and analysis is freely available for others to use.

Democracy labs in the COVID era

The final piece of the PaCE puzzle was a series of interactive 'democracy labs' that were planned to take place in person across several European countries to ascertain how voters truly feel about many of the issues championed by populists and why they may be inclined to vote for populist parties.

"COVID-19 forced us to move these online, but we still managed to adapt and carry out some really fruitful public engagement which I'm very proud of," Edmonds concludes. "Right now, we're looking at the results of these and summarising them in a way that will be useful for policymakers."

Algorithms are reshaping our newsreading habits. Should we worry?

Personalising digital media by customising ads and content to a user's interests can boost reader engagement and income streams for content providers. But what impact does such selective provision of information have on democracy?

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Most of us are familiar with information overload. But in an increasingly polarised society, is the ability to read only what interests us, from pre-selected sources, fanning the flames of selective bias and shutting down our ability to see both sides?

The project PersoNews (Profiling and targeting news readers – implications for the democratic role of the digital media, user rights and public information policy), supported by the ERC, investigated the impact the trend for personalisation has on the role of digital media in society and how that can be assessed.

Who controls the algorithms behind the content we see? What rights do users have? And how does personalisation impact on trust? The project's principal investigator, Natali Helberger, is the distinguished university professor of Law and Digital Technology, with a special focus on artificial intelligence, at the University of Amsterdam.

A double-edged sword

"The public is keen to be better informed, both in terms of news quality and relevance, and also because they are interested in the diversity of recommendations," notes Helberger.

Many existing news recommender systems are designed to show content that matches the user's preferences and to keep them on the site for longer to create the opportunity for targeted advertising.

"These are legitimate goals of a news recommendation algorithm, but are short term, often informed by economic interests and not by a societal perspective. In other words, they are not embracing the role that recommenders could play in a diverse and healthy media landscape," says Helberger.

She explains that news recommendation algorithms which do not simply serve up more of 'the same', or try to increase clicks and advertising sells only, have great potential.

The project brought together scholars from law, communication science, journalism studies and artificial intelligence to create a comprehensive view of news personalisation from the perspective of users, newsrooms, society and the law.

The team devised surveys and focus group research to understand how users perceive and experience news personalisation, and what their concerns and expectations are. To gain an insight into the providers' priorities, PersoNews designed interviews with newsroom professionals.

"The insights from that research informed our work on defining emerging journalistic algorithmic ethics," Helberger adds. "Empirical insights into users' attitudes informed our legal exploration into the role of the law to address the concerns that users have, for example, issues surrounding personal data and privacy. We also conceptualised ways of realising more diversity in recommendations."

Media manifesto

Throughout the project the team worked with journalists, editors and data scientists from organisations such as the United Kingdom's BBC, Europe's RTL Group, the VRT in Belgium, the German ZDF, along with newspapers, such as the Dutch Volkskrant and Het Financieele Dagblad.

"Through our legal and policy research on user rights and media regulation the project sought to contribute to ongoing debates on responsible use of AI in the media. We have shared our insights with policymakers, such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe and national governments in Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom," says Helberger.

Among other outcomes, PersoNews has published an award-winning paper describing the democratic role of news recommenders. This has led to invitations to do follow-up research and has been the basis for several projects looking into the 'diverse recommender' model. It has also served as the basis for a Schloss Dagstuhl manifesto by a worldwide group of experts in the field.

The public is keen to be better informed, both in terms of news quality and relevance, and also because they are interested in the diversity of recommendations.

Populism's threat to democracy in the EU

A wide-ranging investigation into populism finds that it hybridises with local culture and politics to produce markedly different forms, informing the different strategies needed to combat it.

Populist politicians have taken power in Czechia, Hungary and Poland in recent years, and right-wing populist movements have gained momentum in France, Spain, the United Kingdom and elsewhere. In Hungary and Poland, this has been accompanied by an erosion in the rule of law, and an increase in the persecution of minorities, greater authoritarianism and democratic backsliding.

"The threat is deadly," says principal investigator Jan Kubik from Rutgers University in the United States and University College London. Contrary to what Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán

seeks to achieve, he adds: "There is no such thing as illiberal democracy."

The EU-funded POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism) project seeks to investigate this phenomenon. University College London in the United Kingdom leads a consortium of six other institutions across Europe, and involves more than 30 sub-projects examining the political, economic, social and cultural aspects of populism.

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Popular rebellion

"Populism promises democracy to a specific group of people," explains co-investigator Richard Mole, professor of Political Sociology at University College London. "Populist leaders are not seeking to represent or act in the best interests of all citizens."

The pair say that the rise of populism can be attributed to a combination of social and economic factors. "The universal factor is related to dramatic changes in culture, society and politics, and the move away from traditional ways of understanding sexual roles and family models," says Kubik. The resentment of people hit by this cultural shift was then ignited by the 2008 economic crisis.

POPREBEL found populist tendencies interact with local politics and culture to produce different systems. The pair describe Hungary under Orbán as a prime example of the neo-feudal system, in which economic activity is tightly intertwined with politics.

Populism in Poland is strongly influenced by a nationalist Catholic identity, while in Czechia, there exists technocratic populism, which is less myth-loaded and symbolically overcharged as other forms.

The combative rhetoric surrounding populism also lends itself to violence against institutions, as evidenced by the 2021 attack on the United States Capitol, warns Kubik. "Seeing your political competitors as mortal enemies produces the belief that one's whole existence is in danger. We are sliding into what was happening in Europe in the late 20s and early 30s."

The researchers say that more education is needed to instil in citizens a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities in liberal democracy. "I hate to say this, being born under communism, but when the collapse of liberal democracy becomes a real possibility, we may need to censor more radical voices, as happened with Trump in the United States," remarks Kubik.

However, Mole predicts that the tide will eventually turn on populist politicians. "Populism has been shown to be a vote winner, but eventually all populists have to make good on promises of sunlit uplands. When they don't, people will look elsewhere."

> *There is no such thing as illiberal democracy.*

LGBT persecution

The rise in populism has led to increased persecution of women, migrants and LGBT citizens. Because of the majoritarian understanding of democracy, "The voices of minorities are not heard, and they are presented as enemies of the people," notes Mole. "This legitimises violence against people who are different."

The duo adds that populism goes hand in hand with a discrediting of science. "Liberal democracy puts a lot of demands on its citizens, who need to learn how to think critically," adds Kubik. "It looks very bleak for democracy if a large number of people are talking about microchips in vaccines."

PROJECT
POPREBEL – Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism

COORDINATED BY
University College London in the United Kingdom

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CORDIS FACTSHEET
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Strengthening the democratic fibre of the EU

A wide-ranging group of researchers has found that a faltering belief in the rule of law and democratic practices reflects just two issues shaking citizens' trust in the European Union.

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The EU has suffered a multitude of overlapping crises in recent years, including COVID-19, increased migration, terrorist attacks, the spread of populism, Brexit, emerging authoritarianism, the sovereign debt crisis and trade issues. As a result, there is a disconnect between the Union and its citizens.

The EU-funded RECONNECT (Reconciling Europe with its Citizens through Democracy and Rule of Law) project is a 4-year,

multidisciplinary research project that sets out to identify measures which can be taken to address rule of law and democratic backsliding in Member States as well as citizens' concerns with the Union.

"We tried to look at things from the point of view of strengthening the democratic fibre of the EU, the rule of law, and the other foundational values that are enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty

on European Union," says project coordinator Jan Wouters. "The final objective is to find ways of better measuring what citizens expect from the EU, and to see how democratic legitimacy and the rule of law can be improved."

Seeds of doubt

Wouters, a Jean Monnet chair and professor of International Law at KU Leuven, led a team of researchers drawn from 18 institutions. Together, they explored democracy and the rule of law in the EU through both literary and empirical analyses, and conducted surveys on citizens' attitudes to the EU.

They found that a key hurdle was the limited understanding that many EU citizens have of the bloc and its capabilities. "A considerable number, up to 50 %, never even discuss the EU, and have no basic idea of what it can and can't do," remarks Wouters.

The EU has failed to reverse the trend in Member States like Hungary and Poland, and doing so is fundamental for the survival of the EU.

This is reflected in the steady decline of voter turnout for EU elections, and in how citizens vote, with many using EU ballots to signal their opinions on national issues.

The group also discovered a 'worrying' decline in the quality of public discourse. "If public discourse becomes too one-sided, shallow, and in the hands of government, we know it will cause problems with the functioning of democratic systems," explains Wouters.

Global challenge

To help citizens understand the EU and the current challenges related to democracy and the rule of law, the RECONNECT team created a massive open online course (MOOC), which has already reached over 2 500 learners from 90 different countries.

The project also makes a number of recommendations. "Closer attention should be given to the strengthening of channels of democratic participation, since surveys show widespread support for this," says Wouters. Compulsory voting, holding elections on weekends, and running concurrent elections can all increase voter turnout, he adds.

The group recommends that the EU establishes an independent expert commission to observe the quality of public discourse, and calls upon the European Commission to use its powers to translate shared values of democracy and the rule of law into practice. "The EU has failed to reverse the trend in Member States like Hungary and Poland, and doing so is fundamental for the survival of the EU," notes Wouters.

However, Wouters adds that the current challenges observed in the EU should be placed in a wider context: "This is not just an EU phenomenon. The global reality is far less aligned with its values than 15 years ago. It's not just a matter of doing things better internally – external policy is needed to face these global challenges."

PROJECT

RECONNECT – Reconciling Europe with its Citizens through Democracy and Rule of Law

COORDINATED BY
KU Leuven in Belgium

FUNDED UNDER
Horizon 2020-SOCIETY

CORDIS FACTSHEET
cordis.europa.eu/project/id/770142

PROJECT WEBSITE
reconnect-europe.eu

Building trust in politics through innovative technology

Given the growing mistrust of policymakers, engaging citizens in the democratic process has never been more critical. Over the past year, the EU-funded TROPICO project has produced new insights into how collaboration via ICT tools can improve public sector services and foster trust.

Technological advancements have resulted in the emergence of new innovative forms of democratic participation. These include digital platforms, through which citizens can be directly consulted on policymaking and raise issues that might otherwise be ignored.

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"Higher levels of participation can increase trust in government, accountability and the legitimacy of government decisions," notes TROPICO (Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments) project coordinator Lise H. Rykkja, professor of Administration and Organisation Theory at the University of Bergen in Norway.

This is still an emerging form of governance though, and uncertainty remains over how digital platforms can best be organised and administered. This is the challenge that the TROPICO project has sought to address.

Citizen-focused collaborations

The project team began by examining collaborations inside government to improve policy design. They also examined collaborations between the government and private sector partners, and how governments interact and involve citizens and users in their policymaking and service delivery.

TROPICO combined conceptual analyses, literature reviews, examinations of legislative codes and strategy documents. In-depth case studies, interviews and surveys were also carried out across 10 European countries, to investigate how policies are designed and services created in collaboration with non-governmental actors.

There should be incentives for ensuring that citizen feedback resonates within governments.

"We found that collaborations where citizens have a specific role can help to create a learning environment where they can openly share feedback and experiences," explains Rykkja. "It is important to establish a climate that stimulates learning, experimentation and the exploration of different knowledge."

To fully benefit from citizens' and users' involvement therefore, administrations need to work to ensure that their recommendations are incorporated into decisions. Digital platforms also offer a unique opportunity to user-test different solutions. Information and communication technologies (ICT) can also facilitate important feedback at the development stage.

"Our research has generated evidence of the crucial role of involving a diversity of different actors in both creating and implementing new digital service solutions," says Rykkja. "Citizens' experiences regarding the usefulness – or uselessness – of tools and services make them crucial stakeholders."

Challenges to overcome

While digital platforms clearly benefit from institutional and financial support, adequate public sector funding remains a barrier. Administrations also need to clearly explain the purpose of any platform to citizens.

"Collaboration with citizens does not always lead to better participation or more involvement," adds Rykkja. "Many e-participation platforms lack systems for providing systematic feedback to users, which means that citizens often do not know how their input is being dealt with. There should be incentives for ensuring that citizen feedback resonates within governments."

The collaborative involvement of citizens and other non-governmental actors also requires a balance between steering the collaborative innovation process, and letting it unfold without too much intervention. "Different groups of actors need to be carefully managed so that the collaboration can bring new, concrete solutions," explains Rykkja. "Carefully managed, a diverse range of actors can lead to more mutual learning and experimentation, resulting in new innovative ideas."

ICT, notes Rykkja, is critical for public service delivery, policy design and bureaucratic efficiency. When used consciously, embracing ICT can contribute to better working practices inside governments, and enhance interactions between governments, citizens and stakeholders outside the public sector.

Digital technologies are useful for visualising new ideas, connecting information and sharing data to ensure mutual learning. ICT can also facilitate important feedback from diverse groups of users and may offer an opportunity for users to test different service solutions.

Due for completion in November 2021, the TROPICO project will continue to deliver insights and recommendations on the drivers and barriers, as well as the possibilities and pitfalls of collaboration through digital platforms. "This project will hopefully make governments and institutions more aware that encouraging citizen participation via digital tools is crucial for democracy and democratic participation, and that involving users may help stimulate innovation and creativity," says Rykkja.

PROJECT

TROPICO – Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments

COORDINATED BY
University of Bergen in Norway

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