INSIGHTS

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Public opinion alone won't save democracy

New research offers public-focused solutions, but elites and institutions cannot be ignored

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How can liberal democracies be prevented from descending into illiberalism and autocracy? Scholars hope to use the tools of science and technology not only to prevent democratic backsliding but also to strengthen support for democratic norms and practices. This issue of *Science* features three studies that provide important new insights and offer reason for optimism. On pages 291, 290, and 289 of this issue, Chu *et al.* (*1*), Voelkel *et al.* (*2*), and Tessler *et al.* (*3*), respectively, collectively depict a public that agrees on democratic principles, responds to interventions aimed at reducing partisan animosity, and values technology-aided deliberation. However, strategies that focus on public messaging and technological solutions face important limitations. Efforts to promote democracy and facilitate deliberation among the public, though promising, must be paired with institutions that encourage elites to respect democratic norms and practices, not undermine them.

Questions around backsliding have grown in prominence since 2016 as the United States and Brazil have faced serious

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Demonstrators promote voting rights outside the US Capitol on 19 January 2022. Across countries, civil liberties and free and fair elections are cited as being key to democracy.

threats of democratic erosion under populist leaders. Meanwhile, India, previously the world's most populous democracy, continues to trend toward autocratic rule, and far-right parties are edging closer to power in France and Germany. Debate continues about whether these events are part of a global trend toward democratic erosion (*4*, *5*), but the salience of the threats to leading democracies is unprecedented in the contemporary era.

Since Donald Trump's election, these questions, previously studied largely by political scientists, have become a leading general science research topic. Now, Chu *et al*. show that most people understand democracy similarly despite living in different societies, which suggests that the public could identify when key democratic norms are violated. Voelkel *et al*. find that simple interventions such as correcting stereotypes or misperceptions of supporters of opposing political parties can reduce partisan animosity and antidemocratic attitudes. Finally, Tessler *et al*. show that artificial intelligence (AI) tools can aid in reaching deliberative consensus by more effectively summarizing the collective opinion of a group than human mediators, producing statements that convey the majority opinion while incorporating the minority's perspective.

PUBLIC VALUATION OF DEMOCRACY IS LIMITED

Chu *et al*. surveyed citizens in six countries—Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, Thailand, and the United States—to determine whether understandings of democracy differ across societies. Respondents were presented with pairs of hypothetical countries that differed along nine attributes and were asked to choose which one was more democratic. Democracy was shown to be understood similarly in different cultures and environments. In deciding whether a country was democratic, the factors most frequently cited by respondents across countries were free and fair elections and civil liberties.

These similarities in the understanding of democracy across diverse societies suggest an important line of defense against democratic erosion. Citizens who agree on the central role of elections and civil liberties in democracy might collectively recognize and punish violations of these norms by elites, helping to deter antidemocratic behavior from taking place.

What the authors do not consider, however, is the relative weight that people place on democracy, including legitimate elections and civil liberties, versus other considerations. In previous research, when respondents in Brazil, France, and the United States were asked to trade off democracy against individual income in different hypothetical societies, most indicated that their income would have to increase substantially for them to prefer living in a nondemocracy (*6*). However, real elections frequently present stark differences between parties and candidates on policy that can overwhelm democratic considerations. Though studies show that voters punish candidates for democratic norm violations, the magnitude of these effects on vote choice is much smaller than the effects of partisanship or policy (*7*, *8*). Most Americans, for instance, will still back a copartisan even if that candidate solicits electoral support from abroad (*9*). As a result, even though voters typically express support for democratic norms in the abstract, they will often support candidates who violate those norms.

ELITES AND INSTITUTIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Voelkel *et al*. conducted a large, randomized experiment that tested 25 treatments submitted to the Strengthening Democracy Challenge that were designed to reduce partisan animosity and antidemocratic attitudes. The results showed that these interventions can be effective at reducing partisan animosity and, to a lesser extent, support for undemocratic practices and political violence. However, the outcomes are only moderately correlated. As a result, the interventions that best reduce animosity against opposition partisans do not always reduce support for undemocratic practices and political violence, which suggests that these concepts do not share some single cause (e.g., partisan hatred).

An explicit theme in Voelkel *et al*. is that democratic erosion can be limited by the public. "Public opinion influences democratic stability," they write, "serving as a deterrent against elites' undemocratic behaviors." To the extent that the messages they test reduce partisan animosity and antidemocratic attitudes, elites should be less likely to violate democratic norms. Chu *et al*. similarly emphasize the role of the public, saying that "democracy is more likely to survive when more citizens are willing to defend it." Because people broadly agree on the centrality of free and fair elections and civil liberties to democratic governance, they argue, visible attempts by political leaders to subvert these principles are more likely to be recognized as antidemocratic.

In short, when the public recognizes and opposes violations of democratic norms, it can threaten incumbents' reelection prospects and help mobilize opposition to them by other elites as well as protest movements. These risks can encourage politicians to avoid violating democratic norms in the first place.

However, resting the defense of democracy on public messaging campaigns alone is risky. First, the effects of public messaging are likely to dissipate, particularly when facing competing messages. Voelkel *et al*. found that only 1 in 10 of the previously successful interventions whose durability they tested continued to reduce antidemocratic attitudes approximately 2 weeks later (though 6 in 10 of the interventions that were tested durably reduced partisan animosity). Similarly, another study found that the effects

Pro-democracy demonstrators gathered in Rio de Janeiro on 8 January 2024.

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of one of the most promising interventions from Voelkel *et al.* were blunted by exposure to contrary information (*10*). Creating lasting changes in public opinion requires sustained exposure to unchallenged messages, which is unlikely to be feasible in the long term. Even the surges in denunciations of political violence after the 6 January 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol and the 13 July 2024 assassination attempt against Donald Trump quickly faded. Second, democratic erosion itself is often driven by elites, not public opinion, and takes place once would-be authoritarians hold office (*11*). In those circumstances, the public may not recognize the steps being taken or struggle to mobilize opposition against them. As Chu *et al.* note, "institutional constraints on the leader"—the types of limitations on power that aspiring authoritarians first target—"have a smaller effect on democratic evaluations compared with elections and liberties."

In practice, the most effective way to shape the stream of messages that people receive about democracy and democratic norms—and, more broadly, to protect the stability of democratic societies—is for political parties to prevent people who would subvert democracy from reaching power (*12*). However, parties may have electoral incentives to support candidates who violate democratic norms, such as when those candidates are especially appealing or charismatic (*13*). The extent to which parties will defend democracy, or turn against it, depends largely on the incentives created by electoral systems and political institutions. In recent years, we have observed how the United States' combination of a two-party system and counter-majoritarian electoral and legislative institutions has made it more vulnerable to authoritarianism than its European counterparts (*14*).

TECHNOLOGICAL FIXES REMAIN TENTATIVE

Finally, Tessler *et al.* evaluated the effectiveness of AI to improve the process of deliberation. Their United Kingdom–based study tested whether AI can help people who disagree find common ground. After small groups of participants completed opinion-writing tasks, group statements were written by a human mediator and by an AI mediator created by the researchers. The AI mediator's statements were preferred by participants, and those statements increased agreement within the group, in part by representing minority viewpoints.

Given the difficulty of changing electoral systems and institutional rules, using technology to facilitate deliberation and help groups reach consensus is an exciting application of new technology to a real-world problem. Future research should further explore how AI can strengthen democracy.

At the same time, we should recall hopes about how past technologies would improve democracy, by better informing the public (television, the internet) and facilitating deliberation on a scale never before possible (electronic town halls, social media). Every effort to broaden access to information and increase participation in politics confronts the reality that most people are not interested. A world in which people have more control over the news and information they encounter is a world where political knowledge and participation are more, not less, unequal (*15*). No one has yet shown how technology could reverse this dynamic in a free society.

Even more worryingly, technologies like AI can be misused by malicious actors and opponents of democracy to produce false and extremist content and undermine trust in political institutions and legitimate sources of information. So far, the evidence of such harms is limited, but future abuse remains a concern.

THE SCIENCE OF PROTECTING DEMOCRACY

The articles by Chu *et al.*, Voelkel *et al.*, and Tessler *et al.* show that online surveys, experiments, and AI-assisted deliberation can help to improve democratic attitudes and build consensus among the public. We welcome the development and refinement of such tools but also caution against focusing too narrowly on public opinion. Understanding and preventing democratic erosion requires an equal focus on political institutions, electoral rules, and the behavior of elites, the study of which is less amenable to experimentation and is often based on observational research designs and historical data. Still, we hope that tools and approaches such as these inspire us to develop new ways to protect democracy and to deter those who would aspire to subvert it. ■

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