

# Rumors, Propaganda, and Conspiracies: New Insights on the Ideological Dimensions of Democratic Backsliding and Autocratization

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Which factors help to explain the global tide in democratic backsliding and autocratization? What sustains these trends, and can they be countered? For a long time, scholarship focused on formal governing institutions in dictatorships and authoritarians' modes of repression and control. Yet recent works—featured in this issue—also stress the importance of ideological factors, including the information environment. They discuss how rumors, propaganda, and conspiracies may prop up strongmen, returning scholarly attention to long-standing issues of ideology and legitimacy.

According to Kevin J. Elliott, it is citizens' busyness that limits their ability to closely follow political news, make sense of contrasting ideas and information, and recognize possible misinformation. In *Democracy for Busy People* (2023), he highlights the many temporal factors that prevent people from becoming informed and exercising democratic citizenship. Elliott calls this busyness the “currency of disadvantage,” which he argues should feature center stage in any discussion on the quality of democracy and how to strengthen it. The result is widespread citizen apathy and political instability, including the rise of authoritarians (see Taylor's review in this issue).

And yet, even in countries where citizens are engaged, democratic governance has come under threat and populists are in the ascendant globally. As David Art points out in a book review essay in this issue, 20 years ago about eighty million people lived under democracy governed by right-wing populists; by 2020 that figure had reached a staggering 2.5 billion. Alongside the rise of populists in democracies, the number of dictatorships is surging globally: nowadays, about three in four people live under nondemocratic rule (Papada et al. 2023), and most coups by authoritarians are carried out in democracies, not in preexisting dictatorships (Geddes 2024). This review issue draws attention to the ideological dimension of illiberal politics, including to issues of

rumors, propaganda, and conspiracies; how they relate; and their consequences.

## Citizens and Misinformation

In 2024, the World Economic Forum identified the rise in misinformation as the most pressing global risk, ahead of climate change (see the review by Wood for a discussion on this). Indeed, it is not just people's busyness that poses a challenge to being informed and engaged. Even those who are politically active are susceptible to—in fact, are prone to believe in—strongly biased information, if not outright falsehoods and conspiracies. In *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It* (2023), Adam Berinsky investigates why. He describes the process of being misinformed as deeply social and systematic, characterized by rumors spreading through the population like “waves following a disturbance in a pond” (see the review by Wood). One of the key contributions of Berinsky's book, the subject of a symposium in this issue, is its focus on the many well-intentioned citizens who do not, in fact, want to be misinformed, but are, according to Wood, “ill-equipped to test rumors' accuracy,” thus unwittingly bestowing on them their “social potency.”

Focusing on the United States, Berinsky shows that disengaged citizens are more likely to believe political rumors, a finding that helps to explain the link Kevin J. Elliott draws between political apathy and instability. Interestingly, Berinsky finds that the same is true for political dogmatists, who also tend to take in a lot of misinformation. In *The Power of Partisanship* (2023), reviewed by Wendy J. Schiller, scholars Joshua J. Dyck and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz further explore why even politically engaged Americans are susceptible to information bias and falsehoods, and with what effects. They demonstrate that voters “are rarely inclined to seek information outside partisan sources and ignore objective truths

doi:10.1017/S1537592724001932

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December 2024 | Vol. 22/No. 4 1271

if they conflict with their party's policies." Indeed, as has been shown elsewhere (Rosnow 1980; Wolf 2024), people are more likely to believe information that works for them and which they deem good. The result, according to Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz, is that politicians care more about "rhetorical partisan messaging" than their policies, including whether they are, indeed, effective.

Alongside rumors and misinformation, conspiracy theories are on the rise in democracies, and this issue's Critical Dialogue between Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen, on the one hand, and Matthew Rhodes-Purdy and Rachel Navarre, on the other, sheds new light on why. Masco and Wedeen's *Conspiracy/Theory* (2023), Rhodes-Purdy and Navarre note, challenges the common notion of "conspiracy theories as something abnormal, held only by deranged paranoiacs and anti-social malcontents." Like Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Stephen Utych in *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies* (2023), Masco and Wedeen highlight the relation between precarity and conspiratorial reasoning. From this perspective, conspiracy theories are "natural consequences of the inequalities and inefficiencies of neoliberal democracy," according to Rhodes-Purdy and Navarre. As irrational as many popular conspiracies seem, they are attempts to challenge perceived injustices and powerful elites. And given that elites sometimes do conspire and, more often, "act in ways that appear conspiratorial," these trends are unavoidable, and elites may even provide direct ammunition to the conspiracy minded.

## Populism and Elite Manipulation

The surge of populist actors in the West is a closely related consequence of popular disillusionment with the political establishment. In *The Politics of Memory in the Italian Populist Radical Right: From Mare Nostrum to Mare Vostrium* (2023), reviewed by Alessia Donà, Marianna Griffini further investigates the link between the rise of the populist radical right and long-standing legacies of colonialism and fascism. She shows how leading far-right parties resort to, but also reinterpret, colonial and fascist ideas to promote anti-immigrant nativism, a trend facilitated by the country's "lack of thorough appraisal of fascisms." The title of her monograph conveys this process of ideological refashioning and reappropriation: the notion of *mare nostrum* (our sea) was commonly used by colonial and fascist forces claiming ocean territory; nowadays, the Italian populist radical right uses *mare nostrum* (your sea) when discussing the idea of an anarchic space of uncontrolled migration, from which Italians need to protect themselves.

In his review essay "The Radical Right Goes Global (and Local)," David Art unpacks the variation in the ideological substance of right-wing populists. Echoing Griffini, he elaborates that nativism has long dominated the discourse of the populist radical right in the West; however, in Latin

America and other parts of the Global South, security is the central theme, with populists claiming to safeguard their nations from breakdown. In Germany, this nativism has taken the form of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) promoting historical revisionism, Islamophobia, anti-gender politics, and conspiracy theories. An illustrative example is the conspiracy theory of the "great replacement" (*Umvolkung*), a central theme of Ralf Havertz's *Radical Right Populism in Germany: AfD, Pegida, and the Identitarian Movement* (2021). This racialized narrative of demographic threat posits that political elites promote the immigration of Muslims, as they are "more supple" and easier to economically exploit, a trend that will eventually lead to a vast population replacement. According to David Art, the key impact of the radical right in Europe has been ideological, with such beliefs entering the public discourse. Politically, their role is still limited, especially at the national level, at least for the time being.

Not so in the United States, and scholars have extensively discussed president Donald Trump, his populism, and his attacks on democratic governance. In *The Republican Evolution: From Governing Party to Antigovernment Party* (2022), reviewed by Amy Fried, Kenneth Janda focuses on a key party-institutional pillar of this shift. He argues that today's Republican Party constitutes "a danger to American democracy." Scrutinizing its platforms from the party's inception until the 2020 election, he finds that its ideological underpinnings first shifted from nationalism to neoliberalism and, most recently, has taken the form of ethnocentrism. In parallel, the party's internal organization has changed from a tribe-like structure to something that today is closer to a cult, in large part owing to Trump's influence. *The Changing Role of American Political Parties* (2022), edited by John C. Green, David B. Cohen, and Kenneth M. Miller, and reviewed by Daniel Schlozman, sheds further light on recent dynamics of political polarization, and internal party struggles. Trump's use of social media to spread polarizing, populist, antiestablishment rhetoric has drawn ample academic interest. Charles M. Cameron and colleagues' timely edited volume *Accountability Reconsidered: Voters, Interests, and Information in US Policymaking* (2023), reviewed by Justin H. Kirkland, further explores the extent to which political accountability in the United States is conditioned by the media environment, alongside private interests, and how powerful lobbies themselves shape information—indeed, often manipulate it—and with what effects.

## Propaganda and Legitimacy

While the study of misinformation in democracies is a relatively recent topic, scholars have long investigated how propaganda sustains authoritarianism. The very fact that many do not use the term "propaganda" but rather "misinformation" or "fake news" to delineate the deliberate spread of falsehoods by Trump and his like is significant. It

not only illustrates the sheer influence these political leaders yield—the term “fake news” was itself coined by Trump—but it also highlights that scholars use different paradigms to study democracies and autocracies. And yet there is a lot to learn from related literatures. For example, in *Propaganda in Autocracies: Institutions, Information, and the Politics of Belief* (2023), reviewed by Haifeng Huang, Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter draw a distinction between propaganda as domination, on the one hand, and as persuasion, on the other. They find that regimes that lack any meaningful electoral constraints often use absurd propaganda to project strength. By contrast, regimes with more established power-sharing mechanisms tend to invest in more plausible and credible propaganda to legitimize their rule. How different governing institutions affect the type, use, and impact of propaganda is a pertinent topic across different regime types.

The role of legitimation and ideas is also central to Johannes Gerschewski's *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule* (2023), reviewed by Kurt Weyland. Gerschewski claims that legitimacy, as well as repression and co-optation, are key to regime stability, and that the way these three modes of domination come together result in the following logics of rule: (1) depoliticization, where regimes advance performance-based legitimation claims and only resort to limited repression, such as in Singapore; and (2) overpoliticization, where legitimation is achieved through a grand ideology, and obedience is enforced through fierce repression. North Korea is a key example of overpoliticization, as is Iran, the focus of a review essay by Charles Kurzman entitled “The Self-Orientalizing Republic of Iran.” Kurzman highlights that Iranian leaders actively pursue self-orientalizing—that is, they promote an ideology that stresses the country's divine underpinnings and uniqueness—and, in parallel, harshly clamp down on anyone challenging this narrative. This mode of domination is based on a complex set of legal rules and institutions, which serve to bestow an image of legitimacy and due process, at least ostensibly—a central theme of Hadi Enayat and Mirjam Künkler's edited volume *The Rule of Law in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (2024).

Regimes, including authoritarian ones, are not static but are subject to constant adaptation and change. Transformations sometimes occur in response to external events, domestic dynamics, or both. Political leaders also actively pursue innovation, some of it ideological, to further their strategic interests. In her review essay “China's Governance in the ‘New Era’ of Xi Jinping,” Elizabeth J. Perry shows how a series of reforms facilitated the rise and subsequent power consolidation of President Xi Jinping, who in 2018 even had the legislature abolish term limits to his rule. Among Xi's most important policies were an anti-corruption campaign, which reinforced his grip over the ruling Communist Party. He also promulgated “Xi Thought,” which highlights discipline and strong

leadership, and promises to “[restore] China's national greatness.” Xi's internal regime refashioning has elevated him into the ranks of the People's Republic's most influential and impactful leaders.

## Transnational Trends

While a lot of research focuses on domestic politics, scholars increasingly also investigate the transnational dimension of illiberal politics, in recognition that incumbents do not act alone or in isolation from the geopolitical arena. A Critical Dialogue between Dylan M. H. Loh (*China's Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy* [2024]) and Ketian Zhang (*China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* [2023]) explores China's international role. Importantly, Zhang investigates when and why China employs military coercion, as opposed to nonmilitary coercive instruments, to achieve its foreign policy goals, and with what effects. She argues that Chinese leaders have resorted to military coercion, for example in Taiwan, when they were pressed to demonstrate resolve and the likely costs were low. However, most of the time they do, in fact, employ nonmilitary coercion, including out of a concern for geopolitical backlash, especially from the United States.

Andrew Wilson's *Political Technology: The Globalisation of Political Manipulation* (2023), reviewed by Lucas Kello, shifts our focus to the role of technology in nonviolent coercion and in a range of deceptive politics on a global scale. The spectrum of technological manipulation includes “computational propaganda, troll farming, and paid endorsements,” which, Wilson claims, “have transformed politics into sheer spectacle.” Importantly, these practices exist in autocracies and democracies alike. Indeed, the “globalised information space is inexorable,” and technology is quick to adapt to particular local, political, and ethnic contexts, heightening its manipulative potency. The very industry of technology is transnational, and firms in the West sometimes provide the very know-how infrastructure of spying, repression, and control.

Technology plays another important role, namely that of image creation and dissemination, a central topic of Christopher S. Browning's *Nation Branding and International Politics* (2023), reviewed by Felix Berenskoetter. Browning argues that political leaders increasingly invest in nation branding to gain status, recognition, and, ultimately, an edge in international politics. Both democrats and authoritarians do this, frequently using the same public relations firms to bolster their countries' images on the global scene. Common branding strategies evolve around portraying a country as a “good state” or “peaceful state,” and they are used by leaders from regimes as diverse as North Korea, Sweden, the United States, and Russia. While sometimes reinforcing geopolitical antagonisms, branding often facilitates diplomacy and foreign policy

cooperation. For example, US leaders frequently reiterate the claimed “stabilizing” role of some of their key allies in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, to justify their close cooperation, which includes the military and arms industry.

### Scholarly Synergies and Outlook

Amid the global surge in democratic backsliding and autocratization, we need more scholarly synergies to better understand these trends, both nationally and transnationally. This requires more dialogue between works on democracies and authoritarianism. Goran Hyden makes a related point in *Theorizing in Comparative Politics: Democratization in Africa* (2024), reviewed by Jonathan Fisher, criticizing the way in which influential paradigms, such as that of democratization, have come “at the expense of attention to how and why countries change.” Marie-Eve Desrosiers’s *Trajectories of Authoritarianism in Rwanda: Elusive Control before the Genocide* (2023), reviewed by Omar Shahabudin McDoom, is one explicit attempt to capture the realities of nondemocratic rule beyond the transition paradigm. Desrosiers stresses that “authoritarian regimes dynamically oscillate between moments of greater hardness and greater softness,” an observation that holds across different modes of governance.

An increasing number of scholars seek to better understand the particularities of a range of illiberal politics, and this review issue highlights new cutting-edge research on populism, democratic backsliding, and authoritarianism, including how these trends are often facilitated by misinformation and propaganda. Berinsky’s *Political Rumors*, in particular, sheds light on how misinformation gains political salience and also explores ways to counteract this trend. While Berinsky does not provide any

easy answers, as Wood notes, his work is an important starting point for more research on how information, and the politics of ideas more generally, can be used not only to mislead but also to re-empower the public and strengthen democratic citizenship. In the words of Lucas Kello, one of this issue’s reviewers, “it need not be all doom.” Now that scholars have an increasingly nuanced understanding of how illiberal politics works and is sustained, research must focus on ways to better counter it.

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