



Special issue: Brave new democracy

A brave new democracy: Remarks on the impact of social media, algorithms, and AI on politics and citizenship

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Karolina Koc-Michalska^{1,2} , Darren G. Lilleker³ ,
Homero Gil de Zúñiga^{4,5,6}  and Bente Kalsnes⁷ 

Abstract

Contemporary understandings of democratic citizenship and its role in democracy have evolved over the last few decades, generally in response to periods of societal, political, and communication change. These changes are often connected to challenges associated with globalisation or growing inequality, but also reflect the spread of digital communication technologies, which provide new social and political contexts that call for fresh thinking about citizenship and communication, and how evolving technologies such as algorithm-based social media, artificial intelligence (AI), and emerging synthetic media will sustain or challenge the future of democracy. The proposed collection contributes to theoretical and empirical debates linking the development and employment of AI to citizenship and democratic processes.

¹Communication Culture and Languages Department, Audencia Business School, France

²Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Silesia, Poland

³Centre for Comparative Politics & Media Research, Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

⁴Political Science, University of Salamanca, Spain

⁵Media Effects Research Lab, Media Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

⁶Centro de Investigación en Comunicación, Literatura y Observación Social (CICLOS), Facultad de Comunicación y Letras, Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile

⁷Department of Communication, Kristiania University College, Oslo, Norway

Corresponding author:

Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Media Effects Research Lab, Media Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA
Email: hgzn@psu.edu

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Introduction

Democracy rests on a set of normative principles regarding interactions between a nation state and its citizens (Kurki, 2010). Debates about the meaning and core principles of democracy are long-standing. The inauspicious basis of democracy, in 500 BC Athenian democracy, permitted the participation of a property-owning male minority, foreshadowing current debates regarding empowerment and inclusion within pluralist societies (Bohman, 2004). Viewed as the most ethical and defensible form of government, democracy is predicated on the essential equality of all human beings. Whether representative or deliberative, the universal values of promoting, protecting, and balancing the equalities and freedoms of citizens and encouraging rational deliberation to reach negotiated agreements are closely monitored for their erosion (Jürgen, 2017).

Levels of equality and freedoms vary across systems, often mapping to relative deprivation (Houle, 2009). Certain groups within any democratic society, due to their socio-economic or minority status, can find their demands marginalised due to having lower access to decision-making bodies (Mathisen, 2023). Representative democracy, the most common system, cannot always provide equal levels of representation to all; a minority with economic advantages can have substantially more access to power than the less-privileged masses. Freedoms can also prove contentious. Democracies tend to follow a utilitarian perspective: doing the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens while not causing harm (Cerovac, 2022). Freedom of speech is one area of contention, as discriminatory language must be prevented to avoid harm to others in society. Restrictions on movement sometimes need to be lawfully restricted, including the right to protest. Hence, democracies are in a permanent state of agonism and at times antagonism.

Mouffe (1999) argues that agonism is positive for a society, and that hard negotiation to find mutual satisfaction is crucial, with one or more groups giving up some privileges to ensure other groups' needs are met. In contrast, antagonism involves harsh argumentation, polarisation, and a zero-sum perception in which every gain is framed as a loss by others (Erman, 2009). Agonism requires rational deliberation, allowing all to have a voice that is heard, understood, and valued; placing pluralism as a central democratic tenet. But for pluralism to be accepted, an informed citizenry is needed (Lilleker and Ozgul, 2021). Serious concerns are raised when looking at how democratic agonism plays out, how debates become antagonistic, and how ill-informed personal opinions can become the majoritarian position. While these issues are endemic to societies across centuries, there is a sense that behaviours inimical to the normative principles of democracy have become more prominent since the mass adoption of digital communication technologies (Maati et al., 2024), so we question if the latest developments exacerbate democratic backsliding.

Artificial intelligence, democracy, and citizenship

Prior research into artificial intelligence (AI), democracy, governance, and citizenship has examined AI's dual-edged influence on democratic systems, detailing key threats that undermine core democratic functions (Jungherr, 2023; Yang et al., 2026). Deepfakes, synthetic audio-visual manipulations created within adversarial networks, may paralyse pluralist political deliberation by fabricating compromising content as exemplified by the 2022 deepfake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy falsely urging national surrender amid Russia's invasion, which rapidly circulated on social media before being debunked (Twomey et al., 2023). Algorithmic (news) biases may perpetuate systemic discrimination through flawed training data drawn from historical digital footprints and filter bubbles that could reinforce echo chambers (Scheffauer et al., 2024), evident in Russian-linked propaganda bots during the 2016 US presidential election that amplified divisive narratives on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Akoto, 2026). Likewise, accountability gaps emerge from AI's 'black box' opacity, where origins and purposes are obscured (Hinds et al., 2020). Likewise, privacy erosion spans domains, including *informational privacy* with unconsented data harvesting, *behavioural privacy* with constant algorithmic tracking of online actions, and *decisional privacy* with subtle nudges towards predetermined choices, all exacerbated by AI's pervasive surveillance capabilities (Yang et al., 2026).

Contrasting these dangers, researchers also highlight AI's potential across societal domains. For instance, public service optimisation leverages AI for efficiency, such as Estonia's SATIKAS computer vision system that automatically monitors compliance with grassland maintenance regulations (Van Noordt and Misuraca, 2022), or Denmark's Corti platform, which analyses emergency call audio to dispatch appropriate responders (Jørgensen, 2023). Civic participation may also be empowered through AI-enabled tools like the European Commission's online consultations, where natural language processing aggregates and clusters hundreds of thousands of citizen proposals (Arana-Catania et al., 2021), or Brazilian platforms for auditing public spending irregularities (Rundlett, 2024). News recommender systems can also foster diversity, as experiments show diversity-optimised algorithms increase tolerance for counter-attitudinal content (Lischka et al., 2024). Finally, AI may help reduce misinformation spread by debunking political falsehoods in text and visuals more efficiently than human fact-checkers (Zhou et al., 2024). To accentuate the advantages and minimise the deleterious effects of AI on democracy, researchers advocate increased citizen AI literacy, encompassing recognition of algorithmic systems, critical awareness of their societal implications, and skills to work with or around them, alongside promoting responsible AI frameworks that prioritise evidence-based inputs, outcome accountability, and epistemic oversight (Yang et al., 2026).

Here, we develop a scholarly understanding of AI's role within elections and modern citizenship post 2024, revealing deepening vulnerabilities amid the inclusion of AI in democratic and citizen lives. Six pressing issues demanding academic attention for future elections are identified: (1) crumbling norms around AI deepfakes; (2) increased state-sponsored foreign interference; (3) the political 'liar's dividend' phenomenon enabling accountability evasion; (4) obsolete election infrastructure vulnerabilities; (5) the

regulatory lag amid unchecked technological proliferation, and perhaps culminating these challenges, (6) the rise of an 'AI Democracy' where disillusioned citizens reject human leadership altogether. That is, citizens now do not support humans governing capabilities, but prefer synthetic governance systems due to the perceived ideological neutrality and technocratic efficiency (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2026).

Post 2024 elections reveal a troubling normalisation of AI-generated deepfakes, with voter backlash significantly diminished, signalling heightened risks for democratic discourse. In Virginia's 2025 state races, an AI-simulated 'debate' featuring Sen. Ghazala Hashmi drew minimal public outrage despite its synthetic nature (Kapoor and Narayanan, 2024), while New York's Andrew Cuomo deployed AI-crafted ads targeting Zohran Mamdani that blurred into mainstream campaign tactics without firm widespread condemnation (Foley, 2026). This shift from alarm to acceptance erodes safeguards against manipulation, as campaigns increasingly treat deepfakes as legitimate tools, amplifying their potential to distort voter perceptions unchecked.

Furthermore, state actors have escalated AI-driven interference in local elections using hyper-realistic deepfakes. Examples include fabricated Biden and Trump endorsements of African and Asian candidates, Russia's AI videos of Kamala Harris undermining US allies, and China's deployment of pro-regime bots during Taiwan's contests, culminating in Romania's 2024 election annulment due to undetectable AI manipulation (Jacob and Vajjhala, 2025). Israel's 2026 preparations highlight this trend's persistence, as nations weaponise AI to exert influence, challenging sovereignty and electoral integrity on an unprecedented scale (Shomer et al., 2025).

The *liar's dividend* is a further concerning issue which erodes trust, leading to authentic scandals being dismissed as AI fabrications fracturing a sense of shared reality. Turkish and Indian politicians routinely label genuine audio recordings of corruption as 'deepfakes', similar denials surfaced in US local races, allowing bad actors to evade accountability by claiming synthetic origins (Novelli et al., 2024). This psychologically neutralises real evidence and fosters pervasive cynicism, where citizens struggle to distinguish truth from fake, fundamentally destabilising democratic deliberation (Ahmed et al., 2025). When elected officials deem any content potentially fake, nothing is real, and no one is accountable anymore.

We also argue that AI augments direct attacks on electoral infrastructure, including systemic sabotage. Notable incidents include AI-orchestrated distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) floods (Zhang et al., 2017) overwhelming Georgia's voter portal during 2025 registration, sophisticated phishing campaigns mimicking election officials, and predictive models plotting disruptions against tabulation systems. Federal warnings from DHS and CISA for 2026 cycles underscore these vulnerabilities, as AI lowers barriers for non-state actors to paralyse voting processes, threatening democratic safeguards (Puran and Tabacu, 2025).

Despite AI's presence in over 80% of 2024 global elections (IPIE, 2025), regulatory responses lag dangerously behind technology and self-imposed campaign norms are rapidly fading. While 2026 US efforts focus on mandatory labelling and micro-targeting disclosure, voluntary restraints, like platforms pausing AI political ads, have collapsed amid competitive pressures (Davola et al., 2023). This gap enables unchecked escalation, as seen in the surge of unlabelled AI videos during the Singapore

2025 election. Harmonised international standards are needed to restore electoral integrity before AI becomes fully entrenched. Disillusionment with human governance has fuelled demands for what is coined *AI Democracy*, where citizens advocate replacing human-elected officials, decision-making and representation with synthetic AI systems (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2026). Demands suggest AI synthetic systems become more than administrative or governance aids but as autonomous rulers perceived to eliminate ideological biases, corruption, and incompetence. Such preferences are intertwined with support for comprehensive AI surveillance techniques, as evidenced in Chile, Spain, and the United States (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2026), but also different conceptions of representation as championed by populist and technocratic challenges (Marcos-Marne and Gil de Zúñiga, 2025). Support for AI democracy correlates with rising approval for predictive policing in the United States (Makanadar, 2024), AI crowd monitoring in Chile (Smart, 2025), and Spain's algorithmic automated decision-making (Casado, 2023). Outcomes where citizens trade privacy for promised stability.

Brave new democracy special issue

The special issue is organised around three interconnected clusters of articles dedicated to technology's impact on democracy in the context of elections, the increasing use of AI, and citizenship.

The first section, focused on the digitalisation of electoral processes, includes three papers that examine exposure to information about electoral interference, search engine queries related to electoral issues, and Telegram's usage for building a civic movement within the Belarusian authoritarian regime. First, Karlsson, through a survey experiment, investigates how exposure to news about digital electoral interference (such as disinformation campaigns) may increase political polarisation. This is found to be the case when interference is framed as beneficial to the opposition party. The paper adds to ongoing debates on the importance of narratives and how they can further erode public trust and, consequently, contribute to lowering support for democratic principles and established electoral procedures. Second, Vziatysheva et al. examine Google search engine queries for electoral information, focusing on the effects of framing and users' prior predispositions. They show that the majority of queries are neutral, but predispositions are revealed in searches conducted by undecided or non-voters; the discussion evaluates how these practices might evolve with the development of AI and their consequences on democratic processes. Third, Doroshenko and Wilson focus on Belarus following the heavily disputed 2020 presidential election. Drawing on theoretical principles of network analysis, personalised communication strategies and decentralised structures, the research indicates communication hubs formed from grassroots initiatives, rather than directly connected to prominent opposition figures.

The second section turns the focus to AI, covering governance frameworks, patterns of use during electoral campaigns, and the potential effects of AI-generated messages. First, Porlezza et al. explore how media and civil society actors shape debates about the responsible use of AI-driven tools in public communication. Using governance and

media accountability theoretical frameworks, the research shows that while immediate risks (such as human oversight, transparency, and privacy) are relatively well addressed with public guidance, systemic or long-term challenges (societal or environmental) remain neglected; it demonstrates that shared norms and standards for AI governance remain far from being well established. Second, Gulbrandsen et al. examine generative AI use during the 2024 electoral cycle to categorise such instances as positive, malicious, or obscure. It subscribes to the heated debate over whether AI is beneficial or undermines democratic processes, further reinforcing calls for stricter governance. Third, Kruijemeier et al. focus on the persuasive potential of AI-generated messages through a 15-country experimental design using large language models (LLMs). The research shows that only targeting based on political alignment, whether using AI or not, has significant effects, suggesting that targeted messages may be more important for strengthening existing political ideologies than altering voting preferences.

The final section explores citizenship, focusing on democratic attitudes and norms, and on fostering social cohesion and solidarity. First, Tang et al. examine social media platform capacity to build constructive versus destructive attitudes towards democratic values. The US panel data show debunking misinformation may encourage political participation, but also lead to greater endorsement of political violence, reflecting increased partisanship, identity politics, and rising polarisation. Second, Koc-Michalska et al. examine changing perceptions of citizenship norms during the pandemic. The 17-nation two-wave panel survey reveals complex relationships between platform use and broader political and democratic contexts, with Facebook reinforcing dutiful citizenship, Twitter associated with autonomy, and WhatsApp linked to solidarity norms. Finally, Boichak and Kasianenko examine the formation of an alternative, digital, playful, and pan-national community that emerged to expose war-related disinformation and propaganda, while supporting resistance in the context of military and humanitarian crises. The researchers conceptualised 'algorithmic citizenship' grounded in algorithmic literacy, becoming, and resistance, and intertwined with a specific, humoristic form of online political engagement.

ORCID iDs

Karolina Koc-Michalska  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5354-5616>

Darren G. Lilleker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0403-8121>

Homero Gil de Zúñiga  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4187-3604>

Bente Kalsnes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8764-6925>

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Author biographies

Karolina Koc-Michalska is a Professor at Audencia Business School (France), Associate Professor at University of Silesia (Poland) and Affiliated Researcher at CEVIPOF Sciences Po Paris. She is part of the NEPOCS group (nepocs.eu). She studies the strategies of political actors

in the online environment and citizens' political engagement. She employs a comparative approach focusing on the United States and European countries.

Darren G. Lilleker is a Professor of Political Communication in The Media School, Bournemouth University and Convenor of the Centre for Politics & Media Research. Dr Lilleker's expertise is in the intersecting areas of political campaigning and public engagement in politics, and has published over 200 works covering various aspects of campaigning as well as communication psychology. He is currently conducting research on perceived marginalization within post-industrial communities exploring failures in political representation.

Homero Gil de Zúñiga (Ph.D. in Politics at Universidad Europea de Madrid and Ph.D. in Mass Communication at University of Wisconsin – Madison) is Distinguished Research Professor – Chair in Political Behavior at University of Salamanca, Distinguished Professor of Media Effects & AI at Pennsylvania State University, and Senior Research Fellow at Universidad Diego Portales. In general, his work draws from theoretically driven research, aiming to shed an empirical social scientific light over how social media, algorithms, AI, and other technologies affect society and democracy.

Bente Kalsnes is a professor of political communication at the Department of Communication, Kristiania University of Applied Sciences. Her research interests include political use of new technology, digital journalism, platform power, disinformation and AI. She has published in academic journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Digital Journalism*, *European Journal of Communication*, *Journalism Practice*, *Media, Culture & Society*, and she is the author of the book "Fake news: Lies, disinformation and propaganda in the digital public" (Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2019).