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Letter from the Director

Dr. Elton Skendaj

Welcome to this year's 23nd edition of *Democracy & Society*, the result of the hard work of Editors Jake Hanson and Jack Gigante and Assistant Editors Victoria Brusa and Nick Papanicolaou. Our Assistant Director Lydia Davis Giuseppe has built community through relationship building and logistical support, and also designs the layout of this journal. In Fall 2025, we welcomed our 20th class of incoming students. You can find more about the events and developments of the year in the Program Highlights section of this issue.

Gabriella Jensen, Phoebe Chambers, Alyssa Caver, Casey Knutson, Ayla Lunberry, Ellie Murphy, Yifan Qian, and Professor Jeffrey Fischer documented malicious use of AI in elections in their article *Electoral Violence and Artificial Intelligence.* They tentatively conclude that AI both creates and amplifies existing conditions for electoral violence. They urge governments to strengthen content moderation and digital literacy education on how to recognize and report malicious AI-generated content.

Henrique Arevalo identifies a different pattern of democratic backsliding in his article *Kleptocratic Equilibrium: Managing Democracy Without Accountability Lessons from Guatemala*. While there is alternation of government in power, Guatemala is run by elites that make corruption pacts in which oligarchs, military leaders, and criminal actors create coalitions to avoid prosecution. Lessons for democratic renewal focus on supporting coordinated counter-coalitions that disrupt such corrupt networks.

Raed Asad points out the limits of electoral engineering in his paper on *Elections Without Integration: Elite Bargains, Armed Actors, and the Reproduction of Sectarianism in Post-2003 Iraq*. Iraq's political system is a hybrid regime where elites appeal to sectarian identities, as they use patronage and coercion to stay in power.

Zak Schneider argues that Russia can be pressured to halt its invasion of Ukraine in his paper *Russia's Demobilization Dilemma and the "New Afgantsy": Pressuring Russia's Structural Dependence on War.* Putin needs the interstate war to consolidate domestic rule, as he fears civil resistance. However, Russia faces the challenge of integrating its angry, traumatized fighters who have been used in the invasion of Ukraine, just like Afgantsy (returning Soviet Afghan war veterans) challenged the Soviet one-party rule following the loss of the war. International supporters of Ukraine should thus induce more demobilization stress in Russia, and not territorial concessions.

Olivia Booth investigates the role that historical trauma narratives play in citizens choosing stability over democracy in her paper *Trianon Trauma: How Orbán's Retelling of History Affects Democratic Resilience.* In Hungary, Victor Orban used the historical trauma of the Trianon Treaty to demobilize citizens by categorizing collective action as instability.

Katie Zeng examines how fan communities and celebrities shape civic participation in her paper *Reimagining Civic Participation: Fan Communities, Celebrity Influence, and Democratic Stability.* She cautions that overreliance on nonpolitical celebrities can undermine democracy, while bottom-up engagement in fan communities can support civic spaces and democracy.

We hope you will enjoy this issue, and we invite you to contribute to the blog at www.democracyandsociety.net. You can find more information about the Democracy and Governance Program at our website: https://government.georgetown.edu/democracy-and-governance/.

Elton Skendaj, PhD, is the Director of the Democracy & Governance Program.

Electoral Violence and Artificial Intelligence

Gabriella Jensen, Phoebe Chambers, Alyssa Caver, Casey Knutson, Ayla Lunberry, Ellie Murphy, Yifan Qian, Professor Jeffrey Fischer

2024 was a pivotal year in global politics, with 147 local, national, and regional elections occurring in 93 countries. As the first major election cycle of the contemporary artificial intelligence (AI) era, 2024 demonstrated the unprecedented risks to global electoral integrity across consolidated and backsliding democracies. This trend carries clear implications for democracies: election interference is no longer limited to physical attacks; adversaries are increasingly employing "soft tactics" to conduct remote attacks.

Given the novelty of AI attacks, most studies do not address AI-driven manipulation during the electoral process. This literature review, therefore, identifies the gap in previous research while using past studies to demonstrate their continued relevance to AI's impact. Traditional theories are applied to emerging challenges, including AI-generated disinformation, deepfakes, digital intimidation, and technology-facilitated manipulation of the election process (Pawelec, 2022; Romanishyn et al., 2025).

Traditional definitions of electoral violence focus on its coercive dimension, referring to situations in which certain candidates and voters are excluded from participating in the electoral process (Straus & Taylor, 2012). Violence could be carried out in the form of organized crime, particularly through the use of technology. Furthermore, Bjarnegard (2020) examined the relationship between electoral violence and gender. It is argued that men and women face different risks: physical violence tends to target male candidates, whereas female candidates are often subjected to psychological abuse. In addition, scholars have found that poor and rural voters are more vulnerable to electoral violence since they possess fewer resources to withstand such attacks (Von Borzyskowski & Kuhn, 2020; Klaus, 2020).

Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund (2020) concluded that electoral violence often occurs outside consolidated democracies through fear of physical injury and electoral manipulation tactics. Höglund (2009) further noted that the institutional components of elections shape the ways in which violence affects electoral procedures. Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski (2014) further develop that electoral violence can occur at any point during the electoral cycle, implying that violence cannot be eliminated solely through changes to election timing and structure.

Since the emergence of OpenAI's ChatGPT in 2022, humanity has entered a new era. With advancing technology, the use of AI in elections has become far harder to prevent and detect. At the same time, the cost and technical barriers to launching AI-driven attacks have significantly decreased. Therefore, the 2024 elections provided a critical opportunity to conduct in-depth case studies and identify emerging trends as to how AI-related interference intersects with global trends of democratic decline. By examining our comprehensive dataset, this paper seeks to answer several research questions: What types of AI techniques were most commonly deployed during these election cycles? Who were the primary perpetrators and targets of these attacks? And what key findings and broader implications can be drawn from these cases to inform future research and strengthen electoral integrity?

Methodology

Data Collection & Codebook Development

All global electoral events in 2024 were identified using International IDEA's 2024 Global Election

Super-Cycle Tracker. Each election was entered into a spreadsheet and categorized by country, date of election, type of election, type of regime, and region. After collecting, six distinct AI types were identified and used as coding categories.

Code	Definition
Deepfake video (DFV)	AI-generated or AI-altered video content
Deepfake audio / synthetic voice calls (DFA)	Any audio that was generated or altered using AI, most commonly in the form of AI-produced phone calls, but also including fabricated speech clips or altered audio within videos
IMG	AI-generated images / fake photos
LLM-T	LLM-generated text used in targeted messaging or mass messaging
BOT-A	AI-enabled automated agent systems, or bots, to amplify election-related content.
AI-driven microtargeting (AD-MIC)	Instances in which either real or AI-generated content was delivered to highly specific audiences through algorithmic, AI-powered advertising systems online.

Incident Outcome Coding

Incidents were labeled by outcome, and ascending risk scores were assigned. Risk scores indicate how likely an incident is to lead to physical violence, as well as how much risk it poses for future elections. Each incident received two scores (on a scale of 1 - 5) that were combined for a total risk score. A total of 0 indicated no violence was likely to happen, and a code of 10 indicated violence had an extremely high risk of happening. These codes should be taken into consideration for future elections, so preparations can be made to reduce repetition of high-scoring incidents. These eight categories comprehensively covered all incidents in the dataset, and no additional categories were required during coding.

Code	Definition	Examples	Risk Score
CSB - Character Support and Reputation Building	Content created by a candidate or supporter to build reputation, cultivate trust, or expand support	Positive story / False positive news amplification	1
CAR - Character Assassination / Reputation Harm	Smear campaigns to damage public image	Mockery, scandal, and fabrications	2
PMD - Policy/Messaging Distortion	Altering candidate statements to misrepresent the platform	Fake quotes, fabricated speeches	2
FTZ - Confusion / Noise Flooding the Zone	Information to prevent clarity	Contradictory claims, flooding channels	2
DLG - Delegitimization	Content undermining trust in electoral processes	Claims that the election is rigged, ballots are fake	3
MOB - Mobilization	Content is trying to provoke real-world action	Rally attendance calls, "take to the streets."	4
INT - Intimidation	Content intended to discourage participation by inducing fear	Threats, warnings of violence, "do not vote" messaging	4
IDT - Identity Threat / Outgroup Incitement	Content that pits one group against another based on their identity	Moral Enemy Framing	5

Escalation Coding

Six escalation codes were developed to classify outcomes based on their level of severity. This categorization was necessary because the degree of escalation associated with an outcome can vary across countries and sociopolitical contexts. These codes were also assigned risk scores ranging from 0 to 5.

Label	Definition	Indicators	Risk
No Effect	Content circulated but remained irrelevant	No engagement spike; no references in discourse	0
Exposure	Content entered public discussion	Shares, reposts, minor commentary	1
Uptake in Polarization	Communities integrate content into belief narratives	People begin arguing using the narrative	2
Threat Behavior	Direct or implied intimidation, harassment, or fear tactics emerge	Death threats, doxxing, "we will come to your polling place."	3
Mobilization	Calls to gather, protest, or act	"Meet at the courthouse", "stop the count."	4
Physical Violence	Harm, damage, or attacks occur	Assaults, riots, killings	5

General Findings from Collected Data

Once cases were identified, they were coded into a spreadsheet that tracked data across 177 identified cases to look for trends. Of the six kinds of AI types used, by far the most common was **deepfake video**, with 91 cases. For escalation, the vast majority of cases recorded were categorized as either causing "**exposure**" or "**uptick/polarization**," but very rarely did cases qualify as threat behavior or higher, and no cases were found directly inspired by **physical violence**. Incident types were most likely to have a goal of **character assassination,** although there were notable cases in most categories, with the exception of very few incidents that sought **mobilization** or **intimidation.**

Among regime types, we found the most cases in **electoral democracies**, followed by relative cases in **electoral autocracies** and **liberal democracies.** We found the most cases compared to the number of elections in the **Western Hemisphere**, but this is likely deeply affected by the fact that much research was done in English, and that region included the United States, which had a major election that included a major presence of AI, malicious and otherwise. Below, a more detailed breakdown of the data collected can be found.

Incident Outcome				
Name	**Definition**	**What we are looking for**	**Risk Score?**	**How Many Cases?**
INT - Intimidation	Content intended to discourage participation by inducing fear	Threats, warnings of violence, "do not vote" messaging	4	9
DLG - Delegitimization	Content undermining trust in electoral processes	Claims that the election is rigged, ballots are fake	3	16
IDT - Identity Threat / Outgroup Incitement	Content that pits one group against another based on their identity	moral enemy framing	5	22
MOB - Mobilization	Content trying to provoke real-world action	Rally attendance calls, "take to the streets"	3	2
PMD - Policy/ Messaging Distortion	Altering candidate statements to misrepresent platforms	Fake quotes, fabricated speeches	2	24
CAR - Character Assassination / Reputation Harm	Smear campaigns to damage public image	Mockery, scandal, and fabrications	2	48
CSB - Character Support and Reputation Building	Content created by a candidate or supporter to build reputation, cultivate trust, or expand support	Positive story / False positive news amplification	1	34
FTZ - Confusion / Noise Flooding the Zone	Information to prevent clarity	Contradictory claims, flooding channels	2	18

Escalation Score				
Label	**Definition**	**Indicators**	**Risk**	**How Many Cases?**
No Effect	Content circulated but remained irrelevant	No engagement spike; no references in discourse	0	4
Exposure	Content entered public discussion	Shares, reposts, minor commentary	1	74
Uptake / Polarization	Communities integrate content into belief narratives	People begin arguing using the narrative	2	76
Threat Behavior	Direct or implied intimidation, harassment, or fear tactics emerge	Death threats, doxxing, "we will come to your polling place."	3	15
Mobilization	Calls to gather, protest, or act	"Meet at the courthouse", "stop the count."	4	5
Physical Violence	Harm, damage, or attacks occur	Assaults, riots, killings	5	0

AI TYPE	How Many Cases?
DFV = Deepfake video	91
DFA = Deepfake audio / synthetic voice calls	19
IMG = AI-generated images / fake photos	30
LLM-T = LLM-generated text used in targeted messaging or mass messaging	16
BOT-A = Automated bot amplification using AI-enabled agent systems	15
ATMIC = AI-driven microtargeting via platform ad systems	6

Region	How Many Cases?	How Many Elections?
(Sub-Saharan) Africa	21	20
East Asia and the Pacific	14	23
Europe and Eurasia	48	59
Near East (ME and North Africa)	3	8
South and Central Asia	32	16
Western Hemisphere	59	21

Regime Type	How Many Cases?	How Many Elections?
Liberal Democracy	56	53
Electoral Democracy	89	51
Electoral Autocracy	29	31
Consolidated Autocracy	1	6

Case Study Trends

After analyzing our final case studies – which are detailed below – six trends were identified illustrating the ways in which AI has been used with malicious intent around elections. In addition to providing a clearer picture of AI usage in elections, these trends can guide further research as to how AI can shape the physical realities of election violence.

Trend 1: AI is used to shape perception rather than to directly mobilize action

Most AI incidents aim to confuse, polarize, or harden beliefs rather than directly tell people to vote or protest. This indicates that AI's role in the 2024 elections was indirect and psychological, not operational.

Two examples that demonstrate this trend occurred in the United States presidential election and the European Union parliamentary election. In the U.S., one case study described the deepfake Kamala Harris video spreading widely after Elon Musk reshared it (137M+ views), damaging her reputation and increasing polarization (Tenbarge, 2024). This did not directly mobilize voters to engage in

violence, yet it demonstrated how AI altered how individuals perceived political actors and events. The incident also had a clear psychological impact: AI's influence during the 2024 elections operated at a cognitive and emotional level—confusing audiences, reinforcing biases, and hardening existing beliefs. A similar phenomenon was observed in the EU parliamentary election, where the Macron nightclub deepfake circulated widely, generating exposure and debate but having no direct mobilizing impact. This content nonetheless caused reputational harm, even without explicitly calling on voters to mobilize against him. Taken together, these cases suggest that AI contributes to electoral violence indirectly by shaping attitudes and grievances, thereby lowering the threshold for future mobilization by non-AI actors.

Trend 2: Character attacks dominate, especially against women

AI is increasingly used as a tool of character attack in elections, focusing on humiliating or sexually degrading candidates rather than debating policy. Women are disproportionately targeted, reflecting and reinforcing existing gender inequalities in political participation. Sexualized AI content serves to shame female candidates, undermine their credibility, and divert attention away from their political agendas.

This trend is evident in Brazil's local elections, where multiple female candidates were targeted with AI-generated pornographic deepfakes, forcing public responses and legal action and increasing the personal cost of campaigning. A similar pattern appeared in Bangladesh's general election, where opposition politician Rumeen Farhana was falsely depicted wearing a bikini, triggering outrage in a conservative social context. While these attacks did not directly mobilize violence, they contributed to hostile electoral environments and heightened the risk of gendered intimidation escalating beyond the digital sphere.

Trend 3: AI lowers the cost of identity-based fear campaigns

AI lowers the cost and increases the scalability of identity-based fear campaigns by making it easier to produce and disseminate emotionally charged visuals targeting ethnic, religious, or migrant outgroups. AI-generated images are particularly effective at inciting fear because they rely on visual stereotypes and simplified narratives that portray outgroups as violent, criminal, or socially destructive, bypassing rational political debate.

This trend was evident during France's parliamentary election, where AI-generated images depicted immigrants as sources of violence and social decay in order to boost support for far-right parties. These visuals reinforced existing anxieties around migration and national identity, contributing to the stigmatization of migrant communities without requiring factual evidence. A similar dynamic appeared in Czechia's Senate and regional elections, where AI imagery portraying a Black man holding a knife was used in anti-migration posters. The imagery prompted criminal complaints, illustrating how AI-enabled fear messaging can cross legal and ethical boundaries. While these campaigns did not directly call for violence, they normalized dehumanizing narratives and heightened social tensions, increasing the risk of discrimination and identity-based political violence.

Trend 4: "Cheap fakes" are effective

Many cases show that high production quality is not necessary for impact. Even obviously flawed or poorly produced AI-generated content proved capable of shaping political discourse, generating unrest, and influencing voter perceptions.

In Namibia, a low-quality deepfake depicting Donald Trump threatening to "blow up Namibian uranium" circulated widely despite obvious visual inconsistencies, illustrating how sensational claims can override credibility concerns. Similarly, in South Africa, a poorly executed deepfake of President Joe Biden threatening sanctions against the ANC was

rapidly debunked, yet still contributed to public unease about foreign interference. These cases suggest that detection and debunking do not necessarily neutralize harm, and that emotional appeal, fear, and symbolic threat often outweigh authenticity.

Trend 5: AI Exploits Nostalgia and Symbolic Authority

Another prominent trend involves the use of AI to invoke revered political figures in order to lend their legitimacy to present-day actors. AI enables campaigns to manufacture continuity with the past.

In India's Tamil Nadu state, the AI "resurrection" of former DMK leader M. Karunanidhi leveraged nostalgia and moral authority to reinforce support for current party leadership, blurring the line between homage and manipulation. In Pakistan, Imran Khan's AI-mediated speeches framed him simultaneously as silenced and legitimate, allowing his absence to be recast as evidence of repression rather than political defeat. Across these cases, AI functioned as a tool for fabricating historical authority, allowing political actors to borrow legitimacy rather than earn it through contemporary democratic competition.

Trend 6: Foreign leaders act as proxies for domestic influence

Deepfakes frequently depicted foreign leaders, most commonly an American president, intervening in elections, raising perceived stakes by invoking global power asymmetries.

In Namibia and South Africa, fabricated videos of Donald Trump and Joe Biden threatening economic or security consequences framed electoral outcomes as matters of international punishment or protection. In Romania, a deepfake showing Trump endorsing far-right candidate Călin Georgescu sought to confer external validation and geopolitical significance on a domestic campaign. These narratives weaponize perceptions of foreign authority to frighten, reassure, or mobilize voters, transforming international figures into symbolic proxies for intensifying domestic political conflict.

Case Studies

This section analyzes how various forms of AI were used to influence the 2024 elections. Researchers identified cases of AI-generated information across 147 national and subnational contests worldwide. Each incident was included in the dataset if credible public reporting, such as news coverage, fact-checking investigations, watchdog reports, or expert analysis, clearly documented the use of AI in an election-related context. Once identified, incidents were grouped by the primary AI modality involved, including deepfake video, AI-generated images, deepfake audio, large language model (LLM) text, automated bot amplification, AI-driven advertisements, and one instance of the "liar's dividend."

For every incident, we applied a common coding framework. First, we coded the primary tactic type, such as character support and reputation building (CSB), character assassination and reputation harm (CAR), identity threat and outgroup incitement (IDT), intimidation (INT), policy and messaging distortion (PMD), delegitimization (DLG), flooding the zone, or mobilization. Second, we recorded regime type and region, distinguishing between liberal democracies, electoral democracies, electoral autocracies, and consolidated autocracies, and then located each case within a regional context. Third, we documented the observed consequences of each incident, including whether it primarily generated exposure, polarization, mobilization, threat behavior, or physical violence. Finally, we assigned a content risk score and an escalation risk score, which together produce a total risk score that captures both the potential harm of the content and the extent to which it spreads or escalates in practice.

The featured cases in this section were intentionally selected rather than randomly chosen. Our selection process followed two guiding principles. First, we highlighted incidents with relatively high total risk scores as they capture the most serious and disruptive uses of AI in elections. Second, we included cases with lower scores when they clearly demonstrated an essential trend in the data, thereby reflecting the full range of tactics, targets, and consequences. After completing the coding, our research team reviewed all incidents together and identified those that best explained trends and demonstrated how AI-generation tools operate across regions, regime types, and differing AI forms. The descriptive patterns introduced for each category, followed by these selected examples, form the basis for the trends discussed in the next section.

Deepfake Video (91 cases)

The Deepfake Videos category encompassed AI-generated or AI-altered video content related to elections. Across 147 elections, 91 cases were identified, making this the most prominent form of AI use in elections. Of the eight incident outcomes coded, 29 cases were used to cause reputational harm to the subject of the deepfake video, 16 cases were used to support the subject and build reputation, and 14 were used to distort a candidate's policy messaging. The least common outcome was mobilization (1 case), where deepfake videos were used to urge people to mobilize before or during an election. Regionally, deepfake videos were most common in Europe and Eurasia (27 cases) and the Western Hemisphere (28 cases), with none recorded in Middle Eastern elections. These incidents tended to occur most frequently in democracies, with 42 cases in electoral democracies and 32 in liberal democracies, and none in consolidated autocracies. Deepfake videos tended to lead to exposure (33 cases) and polarization (46 cases) but very rarely escalated to threat behavior (5 cases) or mobilization (2 cases). This category comprised the majority of cases, although this may reflect the relative ease of recognizing deepfake videos compared to other, harder-to-detect uses (such as bot amplification). Several trends emerged from the cases analyzed. Deepfake videos tended to show endorsements or condemnations from deceased political leaders, threats from living foreign leaders threatening intervention or sanctions, and speeches from jailed or censored candidates. Negative trends also emerged, including deepfakes used to promote racism or to create non-consensual deepfake pornography. Finally, deepfakes were used to falsely portray candidates' opinions, leading to confusion over their actual stances on issues. The cases below illustrate the broad range of trends in this category.

India – General Election (risk score = 8): During the 2024 campaign, a brief but high-tension controversy erupted after an online clip surfaced that appeared to show Home Minister Amit Shah promising to abolish caste-based quotas for Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized communities in public employment and university admissions. The clip had been selectively edited by AI rather than fully generated by AI, causing more confusion about whether these beliefs aligned with the Home Minister's. The confusion was amplified as the video circulated in an environment already saturated with face-swapping, voice-cloning, and other AI-assisted editing tools (Sakunia, 2024). This was coded as a DFV despite it not being a full deepfake, and words were artificially voiced by an unconsenting party. It was then coded as an IDT or an identity-based threat, as it threatened to strip rights from ethnic minorities and underserved populations, giving it a risk score of 5. This clip was directly threatening and had the ability to potentially lead to violence, giving it an escalation score of 3, for an overall score of 8. This is incredibly high, but when rights are threatened, violence is a likely occurrence.

Bangladesh – General Election (risk score = 6): The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) politician, Rumeen Farhana, a vocal critic of the ruling party, was falsely depicted wearing a bikini in an AI-created video. This viral, manipulated content sparked outrage in the conservative, majority-Muslim country. This incident is assigned a Content Risk Score of 2: The content itself is disinformation aimed at personal defamation and humiliation rather than

direct incitement to physical violence or explicit calls for harm; it relies on cultural and religious sensitivities for impact but does not contain overt threats or violent language. However, it receives an Escalation Risk Score of 4 In a polarized electoral context with existing tensions between ruling and opposition parties, such gendered and sexually explicit deepfakes can rapidly inflame public anger, mobilize conservative groups, erode trust in democratic processes, and potentially escalate to offline harassment, protests, or targeted violence against the victim or her supporters (Shukla & Tripathi, 2024).

Brazil – Local Election (risk score = 5): Leading up to the Brazilian election in October of 2024, five separate instances of deepfake pornography were identified, all featuring female candidates for office. The female candidates for office that were targeted were often forced to respond publicly to accusations intended to shame them, or file a criminal complaint to address the situation. In any circumstance, it was very clear that these attacks were gender-based and constituted a specific form of violence intended to denigrate the character and privacy of these women. In our coding, this incident is classified as a DFV and then coded as INT for intimidation, which receives a content risk score of 2. Given the intimate nature of the content, it was assigned an escalation score of 3 for threat behavior. The total risk score was 5 (Farrugia, 2024).

Pakistan – General Election (risk score = 5): During Pakistan's 2024 general elections, jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan leveraged AI-generated deepfake videos to address virtual rallies for his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, bypassing restrictions on his physical presence and media blackout. Drawing on archival footage and extensive audio samples of his previous speeches, PTI technologists trained a commercial text-to-speech system (reported as ElevenLabs) to clone Khan's voice. They then worked with Khan to generate speeches from notes and scripts that he conveyed from prison through his legal team and advisers, before synchronizing this audio with stock imagery and historic rally videos for mass-viewed virtual rallies on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and X. This allowed Khan to use the need to create an AI-mediated likeness to frame the election as a struggle against repression. Because this instance of deepfake use was consensual, it effectively normalized deepfake techniques as a routine tool of electoral communication (Ray, S, 2023; Gaulkin, 2024). In the coding, this incident is classified as a DFV and coded as CSB or Character support, as the deepfake was used to give the imprisoned Imran Khan a voice he would not otherwise have, meaning a risk score of 1. This content was viewed significantly across the country, and highlighted the unfair election conditions, leading to a risk score of 2 for uptake in polarization. Overall, while this incident was extremely newsworthy, its chance to cause electoral violence on its own was deemed low, with a total risk score of 3. In the aftermath of Pakistan's 2024 general elections, Imran Khan's PTI party circulated deepfake "victory speeches" that allowed him to claim a mandate from prison and to contest competing narratives of who had actually won. In these videos, a synthetic version of Khan's voice, modeled by the same developers as the rally speeches, proclaimed that PTI-backed independent candidates had secured a two-thirds majority, using polling-station result sheets. Khan claimed that large-scale rigging had been used to block this result. The messages were released while vote counting and consolidation were still ongoing: after Nawaz Sharif had already spoken publicly about forming the next government, but before the final official seat tally was announced. Therefore, this speech functioned less as a reaction to certified results, but more as an attempt to define the election's meaning in real time. Although PTI-linked independents did emerge as the largest bloc, they fell short of the numbers invoked in the videos, and Khan's specific claims about the scale of manipulation remain politically powerful but only partially proven by observer reports, illustrating how such victory speeches blurred the line between electoral fact and strategic exaggeration (Zhuang, 2024; Gaulkin, 2024). In the coding, this incident is classified as a DFV and coded as DLG or Delegitimization,

as the deepfake was used to not only declare victory, but also question the legitimacy of the voting system, giving it a risk score of 3. This content was also viewed significantly across the country and widely shared, resulting in changed ideological narratives for PTI supporters, leading it to a risk score of 2 for uptake in polarization. Overall, while this incident did not cause violence, the risk was significantly higher due to delegitimization, giving this incident a total risk score of 5.

United States – Presidential Election (risk score = 4): An AI-generated video of Kamala Harris illustrates how synthetic media can distort public understanding and damage a candidate's reputation. The creators produced a DFV that used an AI voice to make Harris appear to say fabricated lines, including calling herself "the ultimate diversity hire," claiming that President Biden "is not mentally fit to serve," and suggesting that she intended to "take over" the administration. None of these statements were real, yet the video spread rapidly after Elon Musk reshared it on X. This is especially harmful because Musk owns the platform and has allowed disinformation to circulate freely without meaningful standards, creating an environment where false content is amplified rather than contained. In our coding, this incident is classified as a DFV and then coded as CAR for character assassination and reputation harm, which receives a content risk score of 2. The widespread uptake of the video and its contribution to polarization earn an escalation score of 2. The overall risk score was 4. While this case ranks lower than others in terms of violence, it demonstrates how quickly AI-manipulated media can spread and how easily it can be promoted by individuals with massive audiences, as evidenced by the video's 137.2 million views (Tenbarge, 2024).

AI-originated Images (30 cases)

Cases classified as AI-Generated Images (IMG) included any photos digitally manipulated or created by AI generation tools based on a user's text-based prompt. In total, 30 cases were identified across 147 elections that occurred in 2024. Of the eight incident outcomes coded, 10 cases were used to create character support and build reputations, 9 were used to create threats to identity and outgroup incitement, and 8 were to cause reputation harm. The least common outcomes were delegitimization, mobilization, and flooding the zone, with case counts of 0. Regionally, the Western Hemisphere recorded the most cases, with 13, followed by Europe and Eurasia with 9. The region with the fewest occurrences was the Near East (Middle East and North Africa), with 1 case. These attacks were most common in democracies, with 15 cases in Liberal Democracies and 11 in Electoral Democracies. There were no recorded cases in Consolidated Autocracies, where cases are 0. AI-Generated Images (IMG) most often led to exposure, where cases are 15, and polarization, where cases are 9. Few cases were associated with mobilization, with 1 case, and no recorded cases of physical violence. Several trends emerged from the cases analyzed. One dominant pattern involved the deliberate manipulation of immigration narratives, where AI-generated images portrayed migrants as violent, destabilizing, or socially burdensome. A second trend centered on gendered targeting, in which AI imagery was weaponized to defame and sexually exploit female candidates. A third trend highlighted the growing use of AI-generated visuals to reshape candidate personas, often softening or rebranding public figures to increase their appeal among voters, particularly youth. The cases below illustrate these trends in this category.

Czechia – Senate and Regional Elections (Risk Score = 8): The far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) coalition's campaign utilized controversial anti-migration posters, including one featuring a Black man with a blood-stained shirt, a fierce expression, and a knife, alongside the text: "Shortcomings in healthcare won't be solved by 'imported' surgeons. Stop the EU migration pact." (Tkáčová, 2024). In response to this imagery and messaging, the chairman of the TOP 09 party in Prague filed a criminal complaint against the SPD campaign, alleging that it incites hatred, restricts rights and freedoms, and

defames various groups. This incident is given a Content Risk Score of 5 and an Escalation Risk Score of 3, for a total Risk Score of 8, reflecting explicitly inflammatory visual messaging that targeted marginalized groups, triggered formal legal action, and carried a high potential to exacerbate social tensions and political polarization.

France – 2024 Parliamentary Election (Risk Score = 8): The Politico report details how far-right actors in France used AI-generated images to influence voters during the 2024 election cycle. Supporters of National Rally and Reconquest circulated fabricated visuals on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X that depicted immigrants as violent, destabilizing, or responsible for France's economic decline. These images were presented as real photographs and spread widely through partisan networks. The goal was to heighten fear, anger, and resentment toward outgroups and to strengthen support for parties running on strong anti immigration platforms (Mark & Herrero, 2024). In our coding, this instance is classified as an AI-generated image, or IMG, that functions as identity threat and outgroup incitement, or IDT. Because the imagery directly targets minority groups and encourages hostile attitudes, we assign a content risk score of 5. The behavior poses a clear threat by shaping negative emotions and encouraging divisive political engagement, earning a threat behavior score of 3. Together, these assessments produce a total risk score of 8, showing how AI-generated visuals are now being strategically used to inflame public opinion and amplify polarization in French politics.

Indonesia – General Election (Risk Score = 5): Presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto, a retired military general previously known for his fiery nationalism and "strongman image," underwent a rebranding using AI to cast him as a "cuddly grandfather" to soften his public perception. The focus was shifted from substantive issues, such as economic challenges and corruption, to superficial narratives, including his "cheerful dances" (Trajano & Priamarizki, 2025). This rebranding resonated particularly well with young voters, who made up about 60 percent of the electorate and often lacked political maturity. This incident is given a Content Risk Score of 1 and an Escalation Risk Score of 4, for a total Risk Score of 5, indicating low levels of overt deception in the content itself but a high potential for broader electoral influence through sustained narrative manipulation and its disproportionate appeal to politically inexperienced voter groups.

Deepfake Audio (19 cases)

Cases classified as Deepfake Audio included any kind of audio that was generated or altered using AI, most commonly in the form of AI-produced phone calls, but also including fabricated speech clips or altered audio within videos. In total, 19 cases were identified across 147 elections. Of the eight incident outcomes coded, six cases were used for policy or messaging distortion, five cases for character assassination or reputation harm, and a small number of cases (two or fewer) were identified in each of the remaining categories. No cases were identified that promoted mobilization or identity threat. Regionally, deepfake audio usage was by far the most common in the Western Hemisphere, with 12 cases recorded, while two or fewer cases occurred in each of the other regions. These attacks were also most common in Electoral Democracies, with 16 cases in this regime type, followed by 3 in Liberal Democracies. No cases were recorded in either Electoral Autocracies or Consolidated Autocracies. Deepfake Audio attacks, like other forms of AI-enabled attacks, most commonly led to exposure or polarization, with eight cases identified in each category. Very few cases were observed in any of the remaining outcome categories. Deepfake audio attacks were relatively evenly distributed across content type and escalation, and no major trends were identified regarding the type of content in the recordings. However, deepfake audio was more likely to portray a confidential meeting or phone call, and was less likely to be used in attacks specifically targeting a candidate or group's image, such as pornography or race-based attacks that are often necessarily visual.

United States – Presidential Election (risk score = 8): The FCC's recent enforcement action against the political operative behind the AI-generated Biden robocall illustrates the accelerating risk of deepfake interference in U.S. elections. Days before the New Hampshire Democratic primary, thousands of voters received an audio message created through deepfake audio (DFA) technology that convincingly mimicked President Biden's voice and urged them not to participate, falsely suggesting they should "save" their vote for November. Investigators found that the message was engineered to mirror Biden's tone and familiar phrases, enhancing its credibility and increasing the likelihood that recipients would view it as authentic (Bond, 2024). In our coding, this incident constitutes a clear DFA case that impersonates a political leader and manipulates voter behavior. Because it explicitly sought to dissuade people from voting, it aligned with voter intimidation (INT), intertwined with mobilization tactics aimed at shaping turnout. The deceptive nature of the content and its direct attempt to alter voter engagement yielded a content risk score of 4 and an escalation risk score of 4, totaling 8. This episode illustrates how easily produced deepfake tools are becoming instruments of electoral manipulation, capable of confusing voters, undermining participation, and weakening democratic trust.

Mexico – Local Election (risk score = 7): This news report details an instance in which an AI-generated fake phone call was used to both distort public perception of a candidate and result in genuine concern over the physical safety of the candidate, given the nature of the content of the fake recording. During spring of 2024, prior to Mexico's June 2024 election, a supposed telephone conversation between Yoshio Ávila González, the Movimiento Ciudadano (MC) candidate for mayor of Acapulco, and Federal Deputy Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, in which González and Pacheco agree that if the campaign does not start gaining traction, they will make a pact with former Governor Zeferino Torreblanca and organized crime in order to defeat the Morena candidate. After the release of the recordings, Political Coordinator of MC, Bulmaro Cabrera, accompanied by the state leader, Julián López Galeana, reported that the recording is fake and was created by AI and claimed that the accusations affected the physical safety of the candidate. In addition, they requested that the Instituto Electoral y de Participación Ciudadana del Estado de Guerrero (IEPC) investigate who might have created the recording. In our coding, this incident is classified as a DFA and then coded as INT for intimidation, given the comments of the party leaders after the incident, which received a content risk score of 4. Given the nature of the content and its relation to organized crime, and the later concerns over the safety of the candidate, it was assigned an escalation score of 3 for threat behavior. The total risk score was 7 (Vargas, 2024).

Large Language Model Originated Text (16 cases)

An LLM (Large Language Model) is an AI system designed to interpret and generate large volumes of text. These models are trained to produce natural-sounding language that is as indistinguishable from human writing as possible. In the 2024 elections, LLMs were frequently used to generate mass messages targeted at voters, deceiving them into believing the content came from real human sources and, in many cases, personalized to them. We observed 16 cases (of LLM-generated text being used to target voters, most frequently occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia. Differentiating by regime type, we observed 2 cases in liberal democracies, 5 cases in electoral autocracies, and 1 case in a consolidated autocracy. Within LLM messaging, common trends included state-led propaganda and foreign-initiated disinformation. Together, these patterns show how LLMs are lowering the cost, increasing the volume, and improving the believability of influence operations, reshaping the information environment of elections worldwide.

Taiwan – Presidential Election (risk score = 4): On the eve of the election, a digital book titled "The Secret History of Tsai Ing-wen" suddenly

appeared, filled with false information and slurs against the President and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (Chen, 2025; Hung, 2025). The book quickly flooded significant social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X, and Reddit, creating a "Debunking Challenge" where the volume of falsehoods diminished the effectiveness of official clarifications. This incident is given a Content Risk Score of 2 and an Escalation Risk Score of 2, for a total Risk Score of 4, reflecting moderately harmful false content that achieved rapid, cross-platform diffusion and overwhelmed debunking efforts without escalating into direct electoral disruption.

Rwanda – General Election (risk score = 3): In the lead-up to Rwanda's July 15, 2024, presidential election, a coordinated influence campaign used AI-generated content – especially via ChatGPT – to amplify pro-Kagame narratives on X (formerly Twitter). According to researchers from the Media Forensics Hub at Clemson University (cited in The Conversation), at least 464 accounts were part of this network, producing over 650,000 messages since January 2024. Rather than copy-pasting the same lines, these accounts used ChatGPT to generate variations of pro-government content, making the output more diverse and harder to block for repetition. Many posts pushed election-related hashtags like #ToraKagame2024 ("Vote Kagame2024"), elevating the impression of genuine grassroots support. The campaign also targeted critics, including journalists involved in the "Rwanda Classified" investigation, by flooding online discussions with AI-generated content to drown out dissent. This operation signals a worrying new trend in African politics: the use of generative AI to scale political propaganda, shape public perceptions, and possibly legitimize tightly controlled regimes. This incident was codified as an LLM with a content code of CSB, or character support and reputation building. The classification of this content resulted in a risk score of 1. The result of this LLM content was uptake and increased polarization in support of Kagame, giving it an escalation score of 2. These factors gave the content an overall risk score of 3. (Africa Confidential, 2024; Wack, 2024).

Bot Amplification (15 cases)

The Automated bot amplification using AI-enabled agent systems coding category contained election-related content that was boosted across social media platforms through fake accounts and AI-powered autonomous software. In total, 15 cases were identified across 147 elections. Of the 8 incident outcomes coded, 1 case was used to cause voter intimidation and discourage participation, 2 cases were used to character assassinate candidates, and 2 cases were used to threaten members of an ethnic outgroup. The most common outcomes were flooding the zone (4 cases), character support and reputation building (3 cases), and electoral delegitimization (3 cases). Several trends emerged across these cases. Bots amplified disinformation intended to confuse voters, boost perceptions of candidates, and decrease faith in electoral processes and results. The least common outcomes were mobilization (0 cases) - where bots were used to ask people to mobilize before or during an election- and policy and messaging distortion (0 cases) - where bots misrepresented candidate or party issue platforms. Regionally, automated bot amplification cases were most common in Europe and Eurasia (5 cases) and Sub-Saharan Africa (5 cases), and no cases were recorded in South and Central Asian elections (0 cases). These attacks tended to be most common in hybrid regimes, with 6 cases occurring in Electoral Autocracies, and 5 cases occurring in Electoral Democracies, and no cases happening in consolidated autocracies (0 cases). Automated bot amplification tended to lead to exposure (10 cases) and polarization (4 cases), but very rarely elevated to threat behavior (1 case) or mobilization (0 cases).

North Macedonia – Presidential Election (risk score = 6): Russia-linked actors were behind deepfake videos and automated social media accounts that circulated content that exacerbated ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians, ultimately benefitting the right-wing VRMO-DPMNE party. The bot farms spread disinformation on Facebook, Instagram, and Parler about the EU/NATO and ethnic Albanians

rigging votes and harming North Macedonian sovereignty. This incident is given a content risk score of 5 due to the ethnic polarization and an escalation risk score of 1 for the minimal actions taken afterwards, for a total risk score of 6 (Trojachanec & Rizaov, 2024; Marusic, 2024).

Moldova – EU Membership Constitutional Referendum (risk score = 5): Pro-Russia oligarch Ilan Şor, the Evrazia Foundation, and Promvyazbank ran a disinformation-based STOP EU/СТОП campaign on TikTok and Telegram designed to increase skepticism of the EU and to pull Moldova closer to Russia and Eurasia. This led to increased protests over anger with Russian election interference, but no physical violence. This incident is given a content risk score of 3 due to the moderate level of disinformation spread and an escalation risk score of 2 due to the presence of protests, for a total risk score of 5 (Al Jazeera, 2024; Dymova, 2024; Myers & Thompson, 2025; Bryjka, 2024).

AI-driven microtargeting via platform ad systems (6 cases)

This coding category refers to the tactic that utilizes generative AI to produce inaccurate and provocative information and deliver it to specific groups of people. This process typically involves social media platforms, where generative AI is combined with precision advertising delivery systems (microtargeting) to push highly personalized disinformation on a large scale and in an automated manner to narrowly defined population segments (typically segmented by religion, ethnicity, language, political orientation, geography, and other dimensions), thereby achieving the goal of interfering with elections. Of the 147 elections examined, only 6 cases were identified, 4 of which occurred in India during its 2024 general election. The average risk score for these cases was 5.67, with both the highest and lowest scores recorded in the Indian cases, reflecting the diverse scenarios observed during that election. From the documented cases, it is clear that the cost of using AI is decreasing while its efficiency is increasing. Through Meta's targeting mechanisms, the precision of dissemination has reached unprecedented levels. Another noteworthy point is that the attack pattern already observed in India has been characterized as highly replicable, which means the threshold for conducting electoral attacks has been significantly lowered, and it also implies that the probability of certain specific ethnic or religious groups becoming targets of electoral attacks will substantially increase in the future.

India- General Election: Investigations showed that during India's 2024 general election, Meta approved a series of political ads that combined AI-manipulated visuals with explicit hate speech and incitements to violence, largely targeting Muslims. The groups created 22 sample ads in multiple Indian languages, using common generative tools to produce synthetic images such as burning mosques and threatening scenes, then paired them with copy that echoed real-world Hindu supremacist slogans and conspiracy theories about opposition leaders, including one ad that called for executing an opposition politician. Meta's review systems approved 14 of these ads, and three more after minor tweaks, failing both to detect the AI manipulation and to classify most of them as political despite their clear electoral content and timing during the 48-hour "silence period" before voting, raising concerns that similar real ads could slip through and reinforce existing currents of Islamophobia and election disinformation at scale (Ellis-Petersen, 2024). The fact that this was an experiment means that the classification of this instance is odd. It was labeled an ATMIC or an AI-driven Ad attack. The content was based on identity threats towards Muslims, giving it a risk score of 5. Finally, the ads were not actually seen by anyone, given that they were taken down by the testers, giving them an escalation score of 0. However, this is a high-risk case, as it has the potential to be replicated, with major social media platforms acting appropriately to remove content, allowing it to spread further.

Liar's Dividend (1 case)

The *Liar's Dividend* section falls outside the forms

of AI influence in elections that were within this research scope. That being said, the "liar's dividend" was relevant in certain cases and will likely become a more prevalent trend in future elections, signifying why it is included in this study. A "liar's dividend" is a form of plausible deniability. It is a phenomenon where people claim real information as mis/disinformation as a form of manipulation. AI opens avenues for a liar's dividend during elections because it makes it difficult for individuals to distinguish between real and fabricated content. Politicians can claim that real footage/audio/content that they've produced is AI-generated. In total, 1 case was identified across 147 elections, making it a rarely used tactic during the 2024 election cycle. That being said, considering that the liar's dividend was outside of the scope of our research, it is likely that there were more cases than what was recorded. Consequences of the liar's dividend could include weakening transparency, complicating fact-checking, and allowing leaders to create plausible deniability for any revelation of mal-actions. The specific case of the liar's dividend in Mauritius is discussed below:

Mauritius – General Election

During Mauritius's November 10, 2024, parliamentary election, a major wiretapping scandal erupted when phone conversations involving politicians, police officials, journalists, and civil-society figures were leaked online. Among these recordings, authorities and the Prime Minister's office claimed that some clips had been altered using AI, creating a deepfake or manipulated audio risk. This intervention generated a "liar's dividend," undermining trust in the leaked material and casting doubt on the credibility of political figures. The controversy, combined with a temporary social media ban on TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and X, created uncertainty in the electorate, complicating the public's ability to assess genuine scandals versus doctored content and shaping the election environment through exposure-based manipulation (Agence France-Presse, 2024). This case does not have a formal code because it falls outside of our coding process.

Implications

After reviewing over 170 cases of malicious AI use across 140 elections in 2024, we conclude that AI both creates and amplifies existing conditions for electoral violence. Given that the majority of cases occur in electoral democracies, we believe that governments should strengthen content moderation and digital literacy education on how to recognize and report malicious AI-generated content. Campaign officials, policymakers, and social media platforms should work together to ensure that content moderation regulations accurately reflect the prevalence of malicious AI use in election cycles and to set clear consequences for those who violate them. Specifically, governments and platforms will need to precisely define which AI-generated content qualifies as dangerous or malicious and which AI-generated content does not. Additionally, existing mechanisms and laws that seek to combat foreign information, manipulation, and interference (FIMI) should be updated to reflect the dangers and presence of malicious AI use in elections as a FIMI tactic. Given that different types of AI attacks are more common in different regions, collaboration among transnational actors such as the European Union or the Organization of American States will be important for ensuring that governments can respond appropriately.

Finally, we acknowledge the limits of this research. We examined cases that had been reported on by news outlets or academic publications, which do not encapsulate all incidents of malicious AI use in elections. Because our research was conducted exclusively in English, it was also biased towards cases in the Western Hemisphere. Those looking to examine this issue in the future should use a larger, more linguistically diverse research team to ensure that all regions of the world are more accurately represented. Furthermore, future researchers should consider utilizing tools like digital data scrapers to build a more comprehensive database of cases that is not affected by human error.

Reimagining Civic Participation: Fan Communities, Celebrity Influence, and Democratic Stability

Katie Zeng

Introduction

Fan communities and celebrity influence can shape civic participation through both top-down mobilization and bottom-up collective action. These dynamics demonstrate that the boundaries of political engagement extend well beyond formal institutions and into the cultural spheres where young people are. With the discussion of the importance of civil society and media in protecting democratic institutions, the theoretical impact of such spaces is evident. What remains underexplored, however, are the conditions under which fan dynamics most effectively encourage civic participation and how these mechanisms can be leveraged to strengthen democratic institutions. This paper contributes to this emerging area by examining the forms of engagement within fan cultures that are most conducive to democratic participation and by evaluating their potential to support the broader health of democratic systems.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A liberal democracy is one with high contestation and high participation. These two concepts, though conceptually ambiguous, are most commnly operationalized through voting behavior and voter choice. This outwardly political behavior is well documented, yet trends in recent voter history, specifically younger voters, highlight a decrease in political participation around the world in terms of pure voting numbers.[1]

When attention shifts from formal avenues of participation to the everyday practices of young people, a different picture emerges. Scholars have increasingly debated the status of nonformal civic behaviors, activities that may not appear overtly political, such as community volunteering, and whether they should be understood as forms of political engagement. For the purposes of this paper, civic engagement is defined more broadly than traditional political participation. This expanded definition captures the diverse, nontraditional ways individuals, particularly youth, express their beliefs, defend their interests, and participate in public life beyond institutional politics. More and more, the interest in traditional forms of politics has been shifted onto "nonmainstream forms of civil involvement that can become mobilized". This takes the form of participating in protests and social movements, as well as in civic spaces through "volunteering, collective advocacy, and activism movements". [4]

Robert Putnam famously argues for a reinvigoration of civil society as a method of protecting against democratic erosion and backsliding. He proposes that "civil associations provide the 'networks of civic engagement' within which reciprocity is learned and enforced, trust is generated, and communication and patterns of collective action are facilitated".[5] Additionally, such associations must "cut across social cleavages" in order to generate cooperation, and thus, should not be "polarized or politicized".[6] Some discussion additionally highlights the importance of using creative tactics in promoting civic movements, delegitimizing the actions of the government who crackdown against seemingly innocuous and innocent measures.

Many other scholars echo this discussion of strengthening civil society in the context of democracies. Specifically, in order to restore the

effectiveness of liberal democracies, the focus on liberal institutions such as an independent media and a "protected space for civil associations (secular and religious) represent the first line of defense against illiberalism and they must be safeguarded".[8] This focus on civil associations and strengthening of spaces where cooperation and trust exists provide the basis for the discussion and inclusion of fan culture in political spaces.

With "fan activism", the original definitions typically are "associated with active fans lobbying for a content-related outcome".[9] However, this definition has changed with the evolution of fandom culture as, and has begun to include the action of organizing and bringing awareness to certain issues using engagement with these elements of pop culture as a metaphor or call to action.

Two features of fandoms help explain its growing civic potential. First, fandoms offer " a "sense of joy or playfulness, self-care, and other affective resources" that can make political engagement more sustainable and less onerous.[10] Second, fandoms provide ready-made infrastructures for organizing: communities already accustomed to coordinated participation, sophisticated online engagement, and collective agenda-setting.[11] It is important to mention that not all fans and contexts are conducive to these actions, but focus specifically on those with high levels of engagement. The following sections will tap into the other side of fan engagement.

Fan-driven mobilization is sometimes catalyzed by the actions of the celebrities themselves. In the United States, where low voter turnout "raise(s) concerns about the health of our democracy", the effect of celebrities has been apparent. In 2018, pop icon Taylor Swift made a post urging her followers to register to vote; as a result, over 65,000 voters registered in a single day.[12] Similarly, a voting site linked by influencer Kylie Jenner recorded 1,500% more traffic than previous days. [13]

Celebrities may also hold "epistemic power", making them problematic in the promotion of democratic ideals. Epistemic power, or being "able to influence what people think, believe, and know, and to the extent…able to enable and disable others from exerting epistemic influence", is central to this argument, wherein celebrities (unknowingly) use of this power "threatens provision of equal opportunities to influence political outcomes" and, possibly, "derail productive and epistemically fruitful deliberative practice threatens provision of equal opportunity". [14] This effect differs among different groups, though, and such effectiveness is dependent on whether the respondents are fans- if they are, celebrities are able to exercise more of their credibility and epistemic power as a whole.[15] In order to combat this, however, there needs to be a more detailed understanding of celebrities' influence and the responsibility those with epistemic power have on a democratic society. [16]

Case Studies

Chile

In 2019, Chile was embroiled in massive social movements and anti-government protests as a result of cost-of-living crises in the country. Spearheaded by high school students in response to a "fare hike for the public transport system", the resulting protests grew to address the massive inequality within Chile, largely seen as a result of the reforms implemented by the Pinochet regime. [17] In response, the Chilean government unleashed "drastic violence" against the protestors, violating human rights on a large scale. [18] A significant portion of these protests centered around online participation and, in particular, K-pop fans work in the online space. Utilizing the same social media tools used to push their favorite artists comebacks to the top of billboard charts, fans were trended "#ChileViolatesHumanRights" to garner international support. Furthermore, using memes and descriptors of famous idols, (i.e. BTS), fans were able to "gather (others) to protest against the injustices of the government. Through the protests, in K-pop fashion with choreographies and K-pop music, fans demanded that the Mayor should resign for… allowing police brutality". [19] Though not the only driving force behind the protests, "K-pop fans were particularly highlighted" in a report Chilean Ministry of the Interior and Public Security discussing the civil unrest in the country. The report "explicitly states 'is K-pop behind the Chilean protest?' and accuses fans of making malicious comments about the Chilean police force". [20] While the phenomenon of K-pop was acknowledged, the ""threat' represented by K-pop is more integrally the threat represented by a populace for whom any and every pop culture object can be re-purposed as a rallying point". [21] In attributing these protests to the "K-pop phenomenon", the government was ridiculed for drawing such links to try and explain the unrest in Chile.[22] With the impact of social media in both democratic promotion and democratic backsliding, the actions of these fans highlight a significant impact on the ability of individuals and groups to create social change and highlight a new strategy to democracy promotion.

The United States

The United States offers a particularly interesting case study, as celebrity involvement in politics has long been both highly visible and widely debated. Critics warn that celebrity positioning in politics are increasingly evident in the contemporary United States, where public figures often issue forceful calls to action without substantive reasoning, encouraging followers to adopt uncritical, loyalty-based political positions. Scholars liken this pattern to the types of blind allegiance that can facilitate authoritarian tendencies.

Recent U.S presidential elections have prompted a deeper discussion of the role of celebrity endorsements in promoting democratic ideals. In 2024, while Kamala Harris received the endorsement of many high-profile celebrities like Taylor Swift, Charli XCX, and Beyoncé, a BGSU survey of Ohio voters found that "Swift's endorsement had a net negative impact, with 24% in the red state saying it made them less enthusiastic about Harris as a candidate and only 14% saying it made them more". [23] Justine Bateman, "an actor, director, and preeminent observer of America's fame-industrial complex", argues that "people really don't want to be told what to think. That's why voter registration is a good place for it, but the rest of it is, 'Thanks for your suggestion'".[24] Multiple other actors have agreed with this statement, arguing that despite their political outspokenness, their impact seemed limited. These dynamics suggest that while celebrities may successfully raise awareness, their direct political endorsements offer limited democratic benefits and can, in some cases, produce backlash or undermine deliberative engagement.

Discussion and Results

Chile and the United States provide an understanding of two different approaches to fan and celebrity political involvement. Both rely on fan involvement and fan engagement, but what separates the two is revealed in the actual role celebrities and the media that fans are proponents of, have. The case study of the United States highlights how such blind following of celebrities to vocalize political endorsements can be detrimental to democracy, and also is not *that* effective in swaying voters, especially those who do not already support such issues.[25] Conversely, there has been consistent discussion of the effectiveness of celebrities in nonpartisan activities like registering to vote. [26] When taken together and observed through the spectacle of protecting democratic institutions, the use of a celebrity in such a space seems to be relegated to bringing awareness to such issues, rather than promoting a stance. The seemingly contradictory notion of celebrity endorsements being both detrimental and ineffective indicate how important the relationship that these celebrities and the media that these fans engage in is with the fans themselves. Thus, the United States provides insight as to how celebrity and media endorsement should and should not be used in the political arena; overreliance on nonpolitical actors to provide political agency harms democratic institutions. However, Chile highlights how the transformation of civic participation can occur with the fans, outside of the media that they are engaging

with. By organizing through means that they already actively participate in (e.g. spreading awareness through hashtags), as well as utilizing the media they enjoy to engage in such civil actions (e.g. using K-pop music during protests, organizing dance events during walk outs), the perceived effectiveness and strength of "fan culture" in the political and civic space is much more evident. And in the discussion of democratic values and protections, this makes sense. Many of the strategies espoused in protecting democratic institutions focus on the strengthening of existing institutions and the protection of independent civil society actors and media. Introducing ways for individuals to engage and be engaged in civic movements provide a much more effective technique than simply telling individuals to act a certain way or follow a certain cause, supporting my original hypothesis. Furthermore, the Chilean case study supports discussions of utilizing creative measures to harm the credibility and authority of oppressive regimes (Mclennen et al., 2023). [28] This study thus contributes to these emerging discussions of utilizing creative means to engage in democratic deliberation and civic action, as well as highlights the limitations of relying on non-political entities as well.

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DEMOCRACY & SOCIETY

Elections Without Integration: Elite Bargains, Armed Actors, and the Reproduction of Sectarianism in Post-2003 Iraq

Raed Asad

Introduction

What explains Iraq's stubborn sectarianism despite two decades of elections? While Iraq has maintained democratic institutions, electoral competition has consistently reproduced sectarian blocs and elite cartels. Elections reinforce a political order centered on identity and patronage. This pattern emerges from four mutually reinforcing structural conditions: (1) exclusive elite bargains during the U.S.-led transition that marginalized domestic actors and incentivized sectarian mobilization; (2) an informal consociational order (muhasasa) that transformed government formation into an ethnosectarian bargaining process; (3) a hybrid security landscape where militias, notably the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), convert coercive power into electoral advantage; (4) a fractured society where citizens rationally rely on identity-based actors for protection and services the state fails to provide. Within the context of hybrid regimes, Iraq's electoral engineering has failed because of the political order surrounding its processes. Iraqi sectarianism is a product of specific institutional design and post-2003 state-building choices, rather than 'ancient hatreds.' In this environment, elections renegotiate the internal balance of an entrenched sectarian cartel.

Elite Exclusion and the Birth of Sectarianized Politics

Iraq's sectarianized electoral competition originated in the foundational political settlement of the U.S.-led transition. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) partnered with a narrow set of exiled opposition groups, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da'wa Party,[1] who lacked the domestic legitimacy required to act as interlocutors with the citizenry. This reliance on an 'exile elite' prevented the formation of a horizontal social contract, instead establishing a vertical order where identity served as the primary vehicle for political mobilization. [2]

By dissolving the Iraqi civil service and military, the CPA eliminated the core institutions of national identity and sealed off large segments of society, particularly Sunnis, from any stake in the new order. The exclusion of grassroots leaders like Muqtada al-Sadr and the disenfranchisement of the former military establishment incentivized the use of irregular violence as a rational tool to renegotiate political standing. The resulting Sunni insurgency and Sadrist uprisings were responses to institutional incentives that rewarded those capable of eroding the state's monopoly on violence.

As the state vacuum deepened, citizens rationally sought protection and services through communal security structures. Instead of reversing this trend, the 2005 elections codified it. The emergence of identity-based coalitions like the United Iraqi Alliance and the Iraqi Accord Front transformed the ballot box into a "demographic struggle for power." [3]

In this environment, electoral victory was about the capture of state resources. Iraq's *muhasasa* emerged from this logic, as winning office granted elite access to ministries as patronage fiefs for their respective ideology blocs. Consequently, the post-2003 order established a ritualized cycle of elections that renewed a

sectarian elite cartel, ensuring that governance remained a zero-sum contest for state-funded patronage.

Informal Consociationalism and the* Muhasasa *System

Iraq's 2005 constitution, negotiated by a narrow coalition of Kurdish and Shia Islamist parties under an artificial U.S. deadline, institutionalized a political order reliant on identity-based apportionment. This process marginalized crucial constituencies, specifically Sunnis; for instance, the constitution was rejected by 97% of voters in Anbar and 82% in Salahaddin.[4] This foundational exclusion replaced a shared national identity with "fluid federalism,"[4] where informal norms supersede written law.

A primary example of these extra-constitutional norms is the allocation of the 'three presidencies': the Speaker of Parliament is Sunni, the President is Kurdish, and the Prime Minister is Shia. Without the constitutionally mandated Federation Council to represent regional interests, Baghdad has become a venue for elites to protect their respective groups through the *muhasasa* system, a spoils-sharing arrangement that treats the state as a patronage cartel. This system transformed ministries into identity-based fiefdoms. The 2010 elections demonstrated the resilience of this cartel: although Iyad Allawi's cross-sectarian *Iraqiyya* bloc won the most votes, Nouri al-Maliki retained power by co-opting rivals with the promises of senior cabinet posts.[6] This is a systemic process funded by rentier oil revenues. According to one senior official, a typical ministry budget is drained by 25% for party-linked contracts and 25% for 'ghost workers,' leaving only 50% for actual services.[7]

To formalize this division, elites utilized an informal points system. In the 2018 elections, two parliamentary seats equaled one point; 15 points for the Prime Ministry, Presidency, or Speaker; 5 points for sovereign ministries (Interior, Oil); 4 points for service ministries (Electricity). [8]

This system creates a deep state within ministries, where civil servants answer to party bosses. Consequently, elections reward actors that demonstrate command over a sectarian constituency. For the voter in these constituencies, supporting a sectarian party is a rational survival strategy to ensure access to jobs and protection.

The human cost of this cartelization is reflected in declining political engagement. Voter turnout plummeted from 80% in 2005 to a record low of 43% in 2021,[9] only rebounding to 56% in 2025.[10] Those who still vote are often members of organized, mobilizable factions, such as the Sadrists or militia-linked alliance, motivated by patronage or symbolic identity. Non-organized, cross-sectarian movements struggle to compete against these entrenched blocs, which collude to divide state institutions while maintaining the outward veneer of electoral democracy.

How Armed Actors Shape Electoral Incentives

The post-2003 Iraqi state has never exercised a Weberian monopoly on violence. Instead, it operates within a "heterarchical"[11] security ecosystem of "fragmented sovereignty,"[12] where multiple bosses compete for authority through both electoral politics and conflict. While hybrid actors like the Kurdish *Peshmerga* or the Badr Brigade predated the transition, the state's inability to consolidate power allowed new militias to proliferate. Figures like Muqtada al-Sadr combined religious and popular legitimacy to create parallel security and service providers, building a base of support that bypassed formal state institutions.

This ecosystem expanded significantly following the war against ISIS. The PMF, established via 2014 decree by Nouri al-Maliki following a *fatwa* by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani,[13] institutionalized this hybridity. Although legalized as part of the Iraqi Security Forces in 2016,[14] the PMF is a decentralized network of factions that shape-shift their sources of legitimacy. Groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah or Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq operate simultaneously as state-funded security forces, municipal service providers, and autonomous

political actors engaging in foreign diplomacy.

The institutionalization of these armed actors has transformed the electoral landscape. Battlefield popularity and service provision, ranging from garbage collection to security checkpoints[15], translate directly into political capital. The 2018 Fatah Alliance, for example, campaigned on a platform of "restoring the rule of law,"[16] despite being composed of nominally non-state actors. Political inclusion has granted them access to state revenue and authority while allowing them to maintain their private arsenals.

The ubiquitous presence of militias incentivizes all political parties to rely on armed wings for campaign protection and intimidation. These private militias utilize their state access to bypass legal consequences for the selective use of violence. This dynamic is best exemplified by the vulnerability of outlier politicians like incumbent Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. Lacking his own militias, al-Sudani has been forced to backtrack on state decisions, such as the designation of Lebanese Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, following death threats from domestic armed factions.[17] In this environment, electoral competition is merely violence by other means, where armed elites use a combination of coercive force and state co-optation to extract resources and secure policy outcomes.

Societal Fragmentation and Weak National Identity

Iraq's post-2003 order has eroded national identity through top-down identity engineering. This fragmentation stems from two primary causes: foreign policymakers mistakenly applying a Bosnia paradigm of soft partition, and local elites who exploited this assumption to carve out sectarian fiefdoms.[18] Contrary to the misconception that Iraq is a manufactured state without a common narrative, history demonstrates a resilient national identity, evidenced by Shi'a participation in the Iran-Iraq War and modern cross-sectarian nationalist rhetoric.

A sharp divergence exists between elite interests and popular sentiment. While ordinary Iraqis have consistently coalesced into cross-sectarian movements, such as the 2011 and 2019 protests, elites remain incentivized to maintain the *muhasasa* system.[19] For the populace, sectarian politics is viewed negatively as "Lebanonization,"[20] yet the collapse of state functions forces individuals to adapt to identity-based patronage for survival. This trickle-down sectarianism has devastating governance costs; ministry capture facilitated the theft of an estimated $551 billion in public funds between 2003 and 2022.[21]

The legacy of conflict has also physically altered society, turning once-mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad into segregated enclaves. This homogenization creates fertile ground for sectarian actors to appeal to identity while reducing cross-group engagement. Furthermore, elites use the fear of reprisal to politicize violence. Nouri al-Maliki's 2013 crackdown on Sunni protestors[22] illustrates this dynamic, as the hollowing out of security forces to install loyalists indirectly fueled the rise of ISIS and the subsequent proliferation of legalized non-state actors. Ultimately, the 2019 protests, where citizens across sects demanded *mawatan*a 24 (citizenship), confirm that sectarian identity is not immutable. The persistence of sectarianism is the result of an elite system that co-opts leaders through power and monetary incentives. These bargains prevail because the current political order relies on external rents and informal norms in the absence of a credible, inclusive social contract.

Conclusion

Iraq's persistent sectarianism is a failure of the political order within which elections are embedded. Electoral competition has functioned as a recurring arena for renegotiating elite bargains, who utilize a combination of identity, patronage, and coercion to remain in power. Elections have rewarded actors best positioned to mobilize sectarian constituencies, who in turn extract rents from the state and rely on extralegal militias for order. In this context, sectarian voting is a rational response to institutionalized insecurity and state capacity.

Democratic procedures in Iraq alone cannot resolve sectarian fragmentation. Elections have and will continue to entrench the very divisions they are intended to overcome if elite incentives are not properly reformed. Iraq's state-building demonstrates what happens when inclusive political settlements and credible state authority are neglected in favor of establishing formal institutions in quick fashion. Nevertheless, sectarian identity is not immutable, and there is clear popular opposition to its ubiquitous presence in Iraqi governance. Future Iraqi political change requires a disruption to the underlying elite cartel, which requires a shift in incentives.

This incentive shift may emerge from various dimensions, such as an economic shock to the rentier system, or from sustained popular pressure.

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Russia's Demobilization Dilemma and the "New Afgantsy": Pressuring Russia's Structural Dependence on War

Zak Schneider

Abstract

This article argues that Russia can be pressured into halting its ongoing invasion, in part, by accentuating its own inherent weaknesses. Using historical analysis, parallels can be drawn to previous times Moscow ended wars, and the consequences for the soldiers returning home. Russia's war stems not from discrete territorial ambitions but from grand narratives and structural weaknesses within Vladimir Putin's regime that require him to maintain military mobilization. Much like the Cold War pressures during the late Soviet period, Russia today faces an existential demobilization dilemma: for Putin, perpetual interstate violence has become the mechanism to preserve internal control, suppress dissent, and sustain Russia's war-dependent economy.

Intrduction

George Kennan, the architect of American strategy during the Cold War, argued in the 'Long Telegram' that Moscow had "learned to seek security only in patient but deadly struggle… never in compacts and compromises with [rival powers]." This perpetual conflict, Kennan stated, was to compensate for a "neurotic" sense of insecurity and desire for self-preservation in the Kremlin. (Kennan 1946) Different times reflect similar sentiments.

In order for the United States and Europe to calibrate their policy response to Russia's attack on Europe, they must first assess the once democratic experiment of Russia slipping into the totalitarian abyss, while accurately calculating capabilities, aims, and historical scars. As Kennan would argue, the objective is not to change Moscow's intent, but to exploit the regime's internal contradictions until it restrains itself.

As calls for negotiations grow, Western capitals have been distracted from the Kremlin's true fears in any peace settlement. Leveraging peace as a wedge to weaken Russia has historical antecedents–the vast nation struggles to maintain internal stability during peacetime largely because of its depleted fighting force returning home.

Putin won't stop the war because he can't stop the war. Putin has a demobilization problem. As Andrei Kolesnikov remarked, "Putin lacks a reverse gear." (Kolesnikov 2025) Russia's inability to demobilize can be exploited to force Putin to further publicly own the reckless aggression in Ukraine or push for favorable off-ramps to end the war. While there appear to be policy oscillations regarding the American appetite for escalation, (Balmforth and Slattery 2025), a long-term sustainable approach justifies using Russia's inherent weaknesses against itself.

Russia's Inherent Weakness

In Russia, foreign policy often serves as an extension of domestic policy. Putin's civilizational claims about the 'Russian World' (UCMC 2021) function as a rationale for Russia's violent adventurism abroad while legitimizing internal repression at home. After circumventing constitutional limits to return to power in 2012, Vladimir Putin faced a sharp decline in domestic approval ratings. His popularity rebounded dramatically following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and

invasion in the Donbass. (Dong, Smeltz, and El Baz 2025) Several years later, amid renewed[1] instability in what the Kremlin views as the core of the "Russian world," Putin again sought to consolidate domestic support–this time through the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the Kremlin, the ability to menace Europe is not just about projecting influence or claiming imperial control; it reinforces conformity, servility, and obedience at home (Yaffa 2023) by militarizing society in the name of a manufactured outside threat. (Kolesnikov 2022)

Sustaining a climate of fear is central to Putin's internal legitimacy. He must constantly prove to his own people that aspirations for a better society are hopeless, which is why Russia is primarily concerned with ensuring 'color revolutions'–like those in Georgia in 2024, Belarus in 2020, or Ukraine in 2014–never succeed. (Walker and Alexievich 2020) After consolidating society at large, Putin's fears of popular uprisings are increasingly directed toward his own soldiers. Stopping the war prematurely, either in a ceasefire or other settlement, represents a threat to Putin's regime's stability. (Bary and Burchill 2025)

Historical Antecedents from the Cold War Period

Lessons from the late Soviet period offer insight for the current day. By the mid-1980s, casualties and public sentiment caught up to the Kremlin after its disastrous invasion of Afghanistan. The daily grind of the war and the lack of a quick victory eroded the legitimacy and power of the Soviet army. Casualties and visibly disabled war veterans were increasingly highlighted, and media organizations covering the war voiced their first critical view of the Soviet government, predating and foreshadowing *glasnost*. (Reuveny and Prakeesh 1999) By 1988, at the Congress of People's Deputies, some deputies openly accused the Party of corruption and extreme mismanagement, calling the invasion of Afghanistan a "shameful crime" while accusing state security forces of murder and torture. Moreover, especially in Republics that were disproportionately committed to the war effort, a sentiment of anti-militarism bound with latent nationalism began to fray the social fabric of the Soviet Union. (Hamilton and Spohr 2019) It is hard to overstate the seismic pressures the Soviet Union was under: fighting a lost war, the failure of internal security services to quell internal dissent, and external economic and military pressure from the West all fed off each other. These conditions led to a set of unresolvable conflicts for the Soviet leadership that would ultimately lead to collapse.

Returning war veterans began to form cohesive, organized social groupings that challenged the long-standing one-party rule. "Emerging non-party political organizations," write Reuveny and Prakash, fought "both for the rights of the Afgantsy [returning Soviet Afghan war veterans] as well as [struggling] for social goals" of the population. These initiatives organically arose from the dissatisfaction with the failed war and the return of battle-hardened soldiers. (Reuveny and Prakeesh 1999) Thus, with hundreds of thousands of disgruntled Afgantsy, this became a key pillar of the domestic instability that led to the collapse of the Union, and the instability and mafia-related violence that followed in the 1990s.

The ensuing volatility during the breakup of the Soviet Union was not driven only by the pro-democratic factions. During the summer of 1991, the plotters (like Boris Gromov, a former commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan) and the muscle behind such operations were disproportionately staffed by Afgantsy. (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025) As the Red Army operated outside of civilian control, many coup plotters and senior state security personnel joined hardline factions vying for power in the new system.

Yet, for the average soldier, the glory of being at the forefront of historical events was out of reach. Svetlana Alexievich, in her authoritative documentation of post-Soviet political memory, described how soldiers felt rejected on the home front: "they sent us off with music and flowers. They met us with curses and spit." (Aleksievich 1992) This left most with no loyalties to the party, the state, or the new regime; instead, many

Afgantsy turned to organized crime and later to contract mercenaries abroad.

The particular nature of the Russian war-fighting apparatus illustrates why Russian soldiers come back traumatized, ready to mobilize instead of rejoining peaceful civil life. In a 2004 study on the workings of the gratuitous abuse and hierarchy of the repressions within the Russian Ministry of Defence, they describe how *dedovshchina*, or 'rule of the grandfathers,' "degenerated into a system in which [soldiers enjoy] untrammeled power to abuse their juniors [with impunity]...The result is not enhanced esprit de corps but lawlessness and gross abuse of human rights, which leads to increased suicide, desertion, and long-term psychological scarring." (Lohman 2004)

Organizations like the "Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia," formed in 1989, were organized responses to the mistreatment of soldiers and tools of anti-Kremlin social organization. (Fürst 2024) Yet, despite these organizations, soldiers in Ukraine can be characterized as having a general sense of "ambivalent fatalism," which could paradoxically act as either an inhibitor or an accelerant depending on the authority figure who takes control (or lack thereof). (Schwirtz 2023) In sum, the Soviet soldiers returning from the front lines of the invasion of Afghanistan played a significant role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union; this was mainly due to the hundreds of thousands of mobilized men with weaponry and training causing chaos or participating in outlets to voice frustrations or to process the horrors they endured. The Afghanistan war played a central role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union by "causing shock waves" in Soviet society, where the disintegration of centralized Soviet authority was left unchecked. (Cicek 2015)

Turning to late 2025. Russia finds itself in a situation that parallels the late Soviet period. After launching its limited operation in Ukraine over a decade prior and then unleashing the full might of its armed forces nearly four years ago, cracks in the Kremlin's airtight control are beginning to form. Releasing hundreds of thousands of battle-hardened veterans back into Russian society is existential for Russia because, similar to historical examples, they represent a volatile, potentially uncontrollable organized social force. Moreover, unlike Western professionalized militaries, Russia's forces are disproportionately composed of prisoners and ethnic minorities scooped up by exploitative contracts. *Dedovshchina* is alive and well in the current war against Ukraine. Superiors derisively label conscripts as "meat," and soldiers undergo mass sexual violence, torture, and staggering abuse by their own military superiors on the front lines, just as in prior eras. (Topol 2024) Further hellish conditions continue on the front, including a "core underlying theme" that hampers Russia, the "lack of concern for the lives and well-being of its personnel." (Massicot 2022)

The cocktail of traumatized, angry fighters, equipped with battlefield skills and new social networks, could form the basis of an unquietable domestic opposition, which has otherwise been violently quelled since the 2022 invasion. The rise of Private Military Corporations (PMCs), while not as common on the frontline now as at the beginning of the war, can still serve as organizations that house a more autonomous outlet of anti-Ministry of Defence (anti-Putin) frustrations. Importantly, unlike the 1980s, these anti-system tendencies manifest themselves as more nationalistic than the *United Russia* party, calling into question any democratic future in Russia.

Though still posing a threat, the Kremlin fears that these uncontrollable veterans, many of whom purchased their own weapons and armor, could destabilize Russia. (Galeotti, Baev, and Herd 2024) PMCs aren't the only organized social faction that can display anti-Kremlin sentiment. Discontentment among patriotic Russian military bloggers, who are fed up with state repressions and failures on the battlefield, also pressures the Kremlin. They perceive themselves as being punished for speaking truth to power. (Reuters 2024) These patterns mirror late Soviet period failures as different social factions are tugging beneath the surface of the

authoritarian dictatorship. A more unstable home front necessarily restrains the ability of the Kremlin to be successful in its other war aims.

To mitigate these outcomes, the Kremlin has taken steps to corral Ukraine war veterans into tightly managed state structures, such as the "Time of Heroes" organization. (Institute for the Study of War 2025) These organizations were meant to monopolize their loyalty and integrate them into a regime-controlled political order, to avoid a late-Soviet scenario. Intending to form a new political elite, the Kremlin is attempting to staff bureaucratic and representative positions across the sprawling wartime state with these veterans.

Tellingly, and in line with the thesis of this article, Kremlin Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko referred to these veterans as the 'new *Afgantsy*.' (Noble and Petrov 2025) Too early to assess the success of these programs, funneling only high-level veterans into prestigious positions could backfire unless tight controls are in place at the lower levels. More pertinently, these state-run organizations are stopgap solutions that may not capture the degree of discontent among the hundreds of thousands of returning soldiers. The larger picture is that Putin now needs war to keep these brutalized veterans employed, contained, and dependent.

Lastly, the Kremlin isn't just concerned about veterans coming home during peacetime; the entire Russian economy relies heavily on the status quo of large-scale war at the expense of other social goods, similarly to the end of the Soviet Union. After massive monetary injections into the defense economy, the military-industrial complex has become a massive employer, pulling people from other sectors and providing a significant source of income for many Russians. Some figures suggest that Russian military spending could account for a whopping 40% or more of total yearly federal spending. (Najafi 2025) External elements like sanctions, coupled with crippling levels of internal mismanagement, would make removing wartime stimulus difficult and would increase the likelihood of triggering widespread social unrest.

Conclusion

Russia's domestic situation in 2025 mirrors the situation of prior eras. As in the late Cold War, the West's decisive advantage lies in forcing Moscow to confront the incompatibility between external aggression and internal stability. Just as Kennan's containment sought to let internal contradictions neutralize Soviet power without direct confrontation, today's strategy must focus on inducing demobilization stress, not territorial concessions. The Euro-Atlantic community's task is to plan for a Russia locked in endless mobilization or destabilized from within. Either scenario requires concerted, focused attention on successful strategies to end Russia's attacks on Ukraine, and deter further attacks on Europe.

Notes

1. Belarusian protests in 2020

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Kleptocratic Equilibrium: Managing Democracy Without Accountability Lessons from Guatemala

Henrique Arevalo

Contemporary democratic backsliding is usually told as a story about strongmen. A populist leader wins office, concentrates power, rewrites the rules, and dismantles democracy from above, often with mass support. From Bukele to Erdoğan, Orbán to Duterte, this model fits familiar cases across the world, and it dominates how we imagine democratic erosion.

But many democracies today do not collapse this way. Their backsliding is quieter.

They hold competitive elections, where opposition parties run and governments alternate. Constitutions remain intact, yet accountability disappears. Courts cease to function as referees, prosecutors stop investigating insiders, and corruption becomes effectively immune to sanction. Citizens retain the vote but lose the guarantee that voting constrains power.

Guatemala offers one of the clearest illustrations of this alternative pathway. Rather than replacing democracy, powerful actors learned to inhabit it, coordinating to neutralize oversight while preserving the legitimacy elections provide. The result is not authoritarianism but a stable *kleptocratic equilibrium*: a political order in which public institutions operate formally yet serve private protection.

So, rather than looking out for the loud populist we fear could become a dictator, in weakly institutionalized democracies, the central danger may instead lie in the quieter coalition that seeks to govern without accountability.

A weak democracy, coopted

Guatemalan state institutions have long been vulnerable to elite influence. Traditional economic families—rooted in agriculture, energy, banking, and construction—exercised decisive power during decades of military rule. After formal democratization in 1986, their influence did not disappear; it adapted to a mix of formal and informal leverage over political institutions.

The 1990s and early 2000s brought neoliberal reforms, decentralization, and economic growth. They also saw the emergence of new criminal and economic actors—regional power brokers, traffickers, and contractors—seeking state contracts, preferential treatment, and immunity from prosecution. A new class of 'nouveau-rich elites' entered the arena.

Faced with growing corruption and mounting international pressure, Guatemala agreed in 2006 to host the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Working alongside the Public Prosecutor's Office, CICIG exposed entrenched corruption networks and illicit campaign finance structures. Dozens of high-profile cases led to arrests but, crucially, it led to the 'naming and shaming' of members of the elites. In 2015, investigations uncovered a customs fraud scheme implicating the sitting president and vice president. Mass protests followed, forcing both to resign and face arrest. While for Guatemala this represented democratic renewal, for the first time in decades, political and economic elites faced credible legal risk. This changed their incentives, as a previously fragmented network of influence now confronted uncertainty.

The response was coordination. Actors who had

long competed economically and politically aligned to ensure that such enforcement would not recur. Traditional oligarchic elites partnered with emerging business interests, and established military networks converged with newer criminal actors. What became known as the pacto de corruptos [corruption pact] was not an ideological coalition but defensive one, forged to shield their shared system from reform and accountability.

For this coalition, overt authoritarian rupture would have been costly. Close ties to the United States, dependence on trade, and sustained international scrutiny raised the price of abandoning democracy outright. And unlike populist movements, this corruption pact had no single dominant leader capable of centralizing power. It was held together by shared vulnerability, not authority. As a result, their objective was not to abolish democracy, but to remove the possibility that democratic institutions could meaningfully punish insiders.

The Capture Playbook

From 2015 onward, this coalition of private, illicit, and entrenched interests, threatened by democratic accountability, launched a systematic effort to co-opt Guatemala's institutions. By the next electoral cycle, they had aligned with outsider President Jimmy Morales, who in 2019 unilaterally ended CICIG's mandate. Corruption investigations were placed entirely under the authority of the Public Prosecutor's Office, led by their preferred appointee, Consuelo Porras, later reappointed under pact-approved President Alejandro Giammattei. Gradually, contest after contest, appointment after appointment, the coalition tightened its grip on the state.

But Guatemala reveals a patterned sequence — a playbook for institutional capture that does not require a coup or a dominant leader.

1) *Neutralize investigators:* Controlling the appointment of the leadership of the Public Prosecutor's Office and other key offices, law enforcement was reoriented toward selective action. Widespread corruption stopped being investigated, while reformist prosecutors and judges were harassed, prosecuted, or driven into exile.

2) *Control the referees.* Attention turned to the judiciary. Through patronage, intimidation, and political bargaining, the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court were gradually aligned with coalition interests. Courts became capable of selectively validating or blocking political outcomes. Elections remained competitive but conditional: candidates could run unless they threatened the coalition.

3) *Dominate institutional elections:* In Guatemala, judges and magistrates are selected through nominating commissions involving professional associations and universities. By capturing bodies such as the Bar Association and the National University system and the dean of private colleges, the coalition shaped future courts before cases ever reached them.

4) *Keep politics weak.* Guatemala's political system grew increasingly fragmented. Dozens of parties emerged and vanished, functioning as short-lived electoral vehicles rather than durable organizations. This fragmentation made mayors and legislators transactional and easier to co-opt, while members of the *pacto* themselves entered formal politics. Criminal and narco-linked actors gained footholds within the system, while legal harassment discouraged long-term opposition building and unfriendly candidates got barred from office.

5) *Preserve democratic legitimacy.* Democracy survived procedurally so that impunity could continue substantively. Election day remains transparent and fair, while the media operates with relative freedom. These features provided legitimacy domestically and internationally, while posing limited risk to insiders because accountability institutions had already been neutralized.

Why the System Holds

The stability of Guatemala's kleptocratic equilibrium rests on incentives. The country

offers enough predictability for insiders—contracts can be enforced when powerful actors agree—yet enough institutional weakness to enable rents. Proximity to the United States and remittance flows cushion economic pressure. State capacity remains selective: strong where elite interests require order, weak where citizens demand services.

Unlike authoritarian regimes, this system distributes power across multiple actors. Elites do not need total control, the kleptocratic equilibrium requires only preventing credible enforcement. Dispersion makes a single-leader takeover unlikely, but it also complicates reform. No individual controls the system; many benefit from maintaining it.

The 2023 Shock: Attempted Renewal

The election of Bernardo Arévalo in 2023 disrupted the equilibrium. After several anti-establishment candidates were barred from running, Arévalo––who had polled in the single digits and was barely considered a contender—mobilized voters frustrated by corruption and institutional manipulation. He unexpectedly advanced to the second round, revealing both the depth of institutional capture and the possibility of resistance.

Faced with a candidate who could restore accountability, the corruption pact consolidated behind former First Lady Sandra Torres. Yet Arévalo and his Semilla party prevailed with nearly 60 percent of the vote.

The pact responded with legal challenges to invalidate the election, disqualify Arévalo, and cancel his party. The elites turned against democracy but, unlike previous quiet maneuvers, these actions were visible and provoked mobilization. Mass protests, civil society, indigenous authorities, and international partners—including the United States, the European Union, and the OAS—defended the electoral outcome. The transition ultimately proceeded.

The new government has pursued an agenda of institutional reform, albeit with limited success as it confronts an obstructive judiciary and a hostile Attorney General backed by entrenched interests.

However, 2026 presents a significant opening: several key judicial and prosecutorial positions are set for renewal, this time under a reformist executive. Anti-corruption actors within government, civil society, and across the political spectrum have mobilized to contest the full institutional process. Meanwhile, the pacto de corruptos, deprived of some state resources and facing internal divisions, appears more fragile than before.

The results remain partial, and yet to be decided, but they reveal that kleptocratic systems are sustained by coordinated coalitions, and they can only be dismantled by counter-coalitions.

Rethinking Democracy Support

If kleptocratic equilibria operate through institutional coordination, responses centered only on elections or prosecutions will be insufficient. As Guatemala shows, the challenge is altering the balance of actors capable of enforcing accountability.

First, support must prioritize accountability coalitions, such as investigative journalism, civil society monitoring, and professional networks that can sustain oversight beyond electoral cycles. Individual reformers rarely survive alone, supporting coalition-building is key.

Second, attention must extend to the institutional selection processes. Judicial nominations, professional associations, and oversight bodies matter as much as observing elections themselves. These are the arenas where illicit interests have proved effective at quietly coopting the state, and where monitoring and effective action is needed.

Third, cooperation on security or migration cannot be detached from governance conditions. Supporting governments solely because they are geopolitically aligned risks reinforcing the coalitions that generate long-term instability. Conditional engagement structured around institutional performance—prosecutorial independence, transparent appointments, and protection of investigators—is more effective than episodic pressure after crises.

Recent improvements in governance indicators and renewed security and trade cooperation suggest that reformist engagement can deliver tangible results. Under Arévalo, Guatemala's score on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index improved for the first time in decades, while the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Index registered a significant gain. At the same time, the government has secured new trade arrangements with the United States and advanced cooperation on migration management, port security, and military coordination.

Here, institutional integrity and strategic cooperation are not competing goals. In Central America, strengthening the rule of law and advancing U.S. national interests often move in the same direction

Lessons and a warning

Contemporary democratic erosion does not always arrive through the dramatic seizure of power. More often, it unfolds through coordination among actors who preserve the procedures of democracy while stripping away its accountability. In this kleptocratic equilibrium, the symptoms of backsliding are quieter and harder to detect.

Guatemala shows democracy not collapsing but being managed: elections credible enough to confer authority, institutions weak enough to avoid sanction. Yet while the country offers a playbook for capture, it also offers lessons in renewal. Coordinated counter-coalitions—linking reformist leaders, civil society, and international partners—can disrupt entrenched networks and gradually erode their hold on the state.

Preventing authoritarian takeover remains essential. But in parts of Latin America, the more urgent task may be preventing something subtler: the slow neutralization of democracy from within.

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Trianon Trauma: How Orbán's Retelling of History Affects Democratic Resilience

Olivia Booth

Introduction

At the end of World War I, German authoritarian elites faced a problem: how could they lose the war without being blamed for it? Their solution was to champion democratization, creating the Weimar Republic and installing civilian leaders who were then forced to accept the Treaty of Versailles instead of doing so themselves.[1] This allowed the elites to scapegoat the very democrats they empowered through what became known as the Dolchstoßlegende, or "stab-in-the-back" legend—the claim that the democrats betrayed the country through accepting the Treaty and were responsible for the humiliation of defeat.[2] As economic crises and political fragmentation mounted throughout the following decade, the Germans abandoned their new democracy, which had been associated with chaos and catastrophe from its inception, for authoritarian promises of order and the restoration of national dignity. The result was the collapse of democracy and the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

This demonstrates that when democracy is associated with national trauma, citizens may choose to trade democratic freedoms for authoritarian promises of stability and revitalization. However, because Weimar was never a fully consolidated democracy, this case is insufficient to explain whether these mechanisms can work to undermine more established democracies. The autocratization of Hungary under Victor Orbán reflects how, even in consolidated democracies, the rewriting of historical narratives can prevent the popular resistance necessary to reverse autocratization, in what scholars call a democratic "U-Turn."

Hungary had achieved far more than the failed German republic: 20 years of democratic governance, multiple peaceful power transfers, and integration into the EU and NATO by 2010. Since then, Hungarian democracy has eroded to the point where some scholars classify it as an electoral autocracy.[3] This paper argues that when heritage narratives link democracy to historical trauma, citizens choose perceived stability over resistance because the collective action necessary to defend democracy paradoxically appears to validate the autocrat's chaos narrative.

Literature Review

Democratic Resilience and U-Turns

Recent scholarship on democratic resilience, the ability of a democracy to resist autocratization pressures, explains how Hungary could reverse autocratization but does not answer why resistance has not occurred. The most common type of democratic resilience is the U-turn or "bounce back" effect, where a period of autocratization in a democracy is stopped and linked to subsequent democratization. These U-Turns, which in the past 30 years have restored democracy in over half of cases of breakdown and are becoming more common, require both "institutional safeguards," specifically independent judiciaries and electoral integrity, as well as "societal collective action," such as protests, civil society, and opposition parties, to materialize.4 It has been noted, however, that more research needs to be done into why some democracies bounce back and why bottom-up democratic resilience does not appear in others.[5]

Post-Authoritarian Attitudes in the Former Soviet Union

One explanation for the unwillingness of Hungarians to push against autocratization is the public perception of democracy by the post-authoritarian societies of the former Soviet Union. Compared to other regions, citizens of post-communist nations are generally less supportive of democracy and markets.[6] As in the early Weimar Republic, many associate the turbulent transition to democracy with chaos and suffering, predisposing them to trade democratic freedoms for perceived stability.[7] However, though fewer citizens have personal experiences of communism as time passes, democratic backsliding has been occurring in even "the region's erstwhile democratic frontrunners," namely Hungary and Poland, demonstrating a "weak popular commitment to democracy."[8] And yet, despite the similarities in their backgrounds, Poland has been able to successfully U-Turn their period of autocratization[9] while the same has not been the case in Hungary. The differences between Poland and Hungary illustrate that variation across countries cannot be solely attributed to individual anti-democratic attitudes based on personal experiences with communism.

Imagined Communities and Heritage Regimes

This paper argues that the reactivation of anti-democratic attitudes, even among younger cohorts, derives from the reconstruction of historical narratives that create cross-generational associations between the origins of democracy and political instability. This process by which collective memory is constructed to achieve political goals can be seen in Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," where statebuilding and nationalism are legitimized in the connection between a state's perception of a shared "immemorial past" and the perception of a "limitless future."[10] The concept of "heritage regimes" further details how states sustain the imagined community through actively constructing narratives that bridge history with contemporary policy goals, ensuring that these associations are reproduced across generations.[11] Sustaining a heritage regime often involves elevating a typically one-dimensional version of history while actively suppressing competing accounts and interpretations. This selective shaping of memory allows governing bodies to justify national borders, legitimate claims to sovereignty, and rationalize the exclusion or marginalization of particular constituencies, revealing how present-day reconstructions of the past can actively shape contemporary political attitudes and actions.[12]

This paper bridges these three bodies of literature—U-Turns, post-communist attitudes towards democracy, and heritage regimes—by analyzing how the manipulation of cultural narratives by an autocratic regime inhibits citizens' desires to engage in the collective action necessary for U-turns. This framework explains both how autocratization has not been reversed in Hungary and how similar historical narratives may prevent U-turns in other consolidated democracies.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Historical narratives can prevent U-turn resistance through a specific causal mechanism. First, the autocrat identifies a historical event that has not been fully processed by the society and thus retains political potency. Then, they link the traumas of the event to democratic transitions, associating democracy with national suffering and a loss of dignity. As this narrative spreads, particularly through state media, it becomes naturalized and ultimately monopolizes public discourse, crossing temporal and generational gaps to connect the historical event with modern political issues. When collective action occurs, citizens have been conditioned to see democratic mobilization as threatening a return to instability and thus trust the autocrat over defending democracy. Institutional safeguards are not enough to execute a U-Turn without sustained popular mobilization, and each failed attempt at resistance reinforces the narrative that democratic opposition is the source of chaos and instability. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the failure of democratic resistance, especially early in the process of autocratization when reversals are most likely, both results from and validates the polarizing political logic of democratic backsliding.[13]

Case Study of Hungary and Empirical Analysis

Hungary's Democratic Trajectory

After Hungary gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1989 and transitioned to a democracy, it came to be seen as one of "the greatest successes of the postcommunist era."[14] The country had multiple peaceful leadership transitions, including in 2002 when then-Prime Minister Orbán lost power, and democracy appeared consolidated.[15] Despite the apparent strength of democracy in Hungary, once Orbán and his Fidesz party returned to power in 2010, a period of autocratization began.[16] Orbán undermined the independence of institutions like the judiciary, the media, and opposition parties, and the emergency powers granted to him during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed him to further consolidate power. By 2022, V-Dem classified Hungary as an electoral autocracy, and Freedom House designated the country as "Partly Free"—the first time an EU member state had received that label.[17]

The "Trianon Trauma" Narrative

Though Orbán did not begin restructuring the government until his return to power in 2010, his work to build a nationalistic version of history to generate popular support and delegitimize his opponents started years earlier. The foundation of his heritage regime was the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920, which "stripped Hungary of three-fifths of the territory, and two-thirds of the population."[18] Orbán has since used the feelings of shame and dishonor surrounding Trianon for a variety of political issues regarding "globalist influences," including migration and the resurgence of a strong Hungary.[19]

The 2004 Dual Citizenship Referendum: Portraying Democratic Actors as "Anti-Hungarian"

Even while in opposition, Orbán was using Trianon to polarize Hungarian politics. After the treaty, millions of Hungarians were left outside of Hungary's new national borders, meaning that with the loss of territory came also displacement of Hungarians in neighboring countries. This fragmentation was framed by Orbán and Fidesz as a national trauma and injustice, becoming a core piece of Orbán's narrative about Hungarian victimhood, and the 2004 national referendum about dual citizenship became the battleground on which Orbán claimed to be protecting ethnic Hungarians abroad. The referendum aimed to grant citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living abroad, particularly to those in regions affected by Trianon. Orbán used this concrete policy issue to mobilize nationalist sentiment, portraying his party as the protector of Hungarians abroad and the opposition as unpatriotic.[20] Although the referendum ultimately failed due to low turnout, it "played a crucial role both in the deterioration of the left's popularity between 2006 and 2010, and in the rise of Viktor Orbán and the incorporation of Trianon-narratives into the mainstream."[21]

Spreading the Narrative

Orbán's consolidation of institutional power has directly strengthened his ability to propagate his Trianon narrative. Through laws giving the government greater control over the media and limiting the freedom of journalists to criticize the regime, as well as business networks that allow Orbán to control several media outlets, the autocratic government has been able to use the media to dominate political discourse and "monopolize the issue of nation-building." Concurrently, they have been able to "spread misinformation about Orban's political opponents and silence opposition candidates through media blackouts,"[22] which both prevents the opposition from dissenting and discredits them when they try.

Furthermore, the media has become a "propaganda machine" that masks the continued consolidation of power. Through transmitting nationalistic messages presenting him as the defender of Christian and patriarchal family values with law and order, Orbán became the embodiment of stability and security, even as he simultaneously destabilized the rule of law by changing the Constitution nine times in six months.[23]

Failed Protests: The Creation of a Feedback Loop

Orbán's control over the media landscape and of the viewpoints of citizens is especially clear in the 2018 protests against a labor law, which eventually grew into a broader protest against Orbán and the Fidesz party. These protests represented the first substantial cooperation between opposition parties against Orbán's execution of policy.[24] However, though about 11,000 people protested in Budapest alone, there was no media coverage of the resistance but rather continued news on migrants. When the government did acknowledge the protests, the opposition were accused of being traitors influenced by foreign agents and were subject to "political, legal, administrative or financial measures to limit their scope of actions."[25] The suppression of media coverage of the protests as well as rhetoric demonizing the opposition support Orbán's claims that he is the defender of Hungarian interests, and that the protests themselves are examples of what his government is defending citizens against. This generates a feedback loop where the Trianon narrative that associates democracy with foreign interference and instability frames collective action as foreign-backed chaos rather than democratic resistance, which serves to confirm the original warnings against democratic instability. Although the 2018 protests represented a genuine and coordinated resistance to autocratization, it failed to materialize in electoral success, reflecting how historical narratives like Trianon can prevent bottom-up mobilization even when institutional conditions and citizen grievances are in alignment.

Conclusions and Implications

When the government unilaterally shapes discussion through essentialization and identity politics, citizens are prevented from being exposed to diverse viewpoints, limiting their perspectives and preventing the desire for a U-Turn from manifesting in the first place. This analysis contributes to scholarship on democratic resilience by identifying the heritage regime as an important aspect of the consolidation of power by autocrats. While it has been established that U-Turns require bottom-up mobilization to be successful, this research demonstrates how autocrats can undermine U-Turns by strategically creating historical narratives that shape how citizens perceive collective action. The implications for policy makers and scholars of democratic resistance are that the role of reconstructed historical narratives should not be overlooked but rather understood as both a cause and consequence of centralization of institutional power, even in democracies that appear consolidated.

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Program Highlights

Dr. Elton Skendaj

Program Highlights 2025-2026

From the Director

During the 2025-2026 academic year, the Democracy & Governance program added three innovative courses to the curriculum: Digital Governance taught by practitioner faculty Altin Ilirjani; Rule of Law, taught by practitioner faculty Paul Vaky; and Behavioral Science of Democracy Assistance, taught by practitioner faculty Max Henning.

We hosted alumnae Katie LaRoque and Liza Prendergast and advisory board member Annika Silva-Leander for a career panel talk for our students. Our program hosted Donald Leka, Founder, Chairman and CEO of The Jumptuit Group, for a talk on "Next Generation AI Reasoning Models: De-Risking Policymaking in an Uncertain World, Forecasting Unexpected Geopolitical and Environmental Events."

On February 3rd, our Center for Democracy and Civil Society (CDACS) organized the 4th Democracy and Governance Student Research Symposium. The event is an opportunity for graduate students from the DMV area universities who are focused on democracy and governance to present their independent research/projects, gain practical experience, connect with other young people in the field, and make career connections with established professionals looking for exciting new ideas and innovations. 16 Master's and 8 PhD students participated in this event. They represented universities such as Johns Hopkins, Columbia University, American University, George Mason, George Washington University, University of Delaware, University of Maryland. Special thanks to Gabby Jensen for organizing this event.

Democracy & Governance students and faculty at Georgetown University participated in June 2026 in a study trip to Lisbon Portugal. This international experiential trip helped students understand Portugal's democratic development through historical and institutional lens. Portugal transitioned to democracy after the Carnation Revolution in 1974, and it has since developed stable democratic institutions within the European Union and NATO, underscoring Portugal's long-standing European and Atlantic identity. Our host in Portugal was the Institute for Political Studies of the Catholic University of Portugal.

Elton Skendaj, PhD, is the Director of the Democracy & Governance Program.

A special thanks to our staff:

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Dr. Elton Skendaj

Assistant Director
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