



## Call for Conference Papers

### Character Assassination, Illiberalism, and the Erosion of Civic Rights

*Hosts: Martijn Icks, Faculty of Humanities at University of Amsterdam; Alessandro Nai, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at University of Amsterdam; Edwina Hagen, Faculty of Humanities at VU University*

*Co-Sponsors: Lab for Character Assassination and Reputation Politics (CARP); Illiberalism Studies Program (The George Washington University)*

*Location: University of Amsterdam & VU University, 21-23 June 2023*

Liberal democracies face multiple external challenges from autocracies across the world, as well as internal challenges from populist politicians, nativism, and the normalization of incivility in media and political discourses. Character assassination (CA) often accompanies these political and social conflicts, especially when unresolved ideological and moral issues are involved. Social conflicts become aggravated when moral issues intermix with political and economic factors. Factions then resort to persuasive attacks on character to delegitimize and disempower their opponents. This increased polarization and aggressiveness of elite rhetoric likely foster voters' cynicism and discontent with politics as usual. The increasing gap between liberal elites and the disgruntled electorate, in turn, likely provides even more fertile ground for intra-elite conflict, and paves the way for illiberal conceptions of the democratic order.

Illiberalism is an emerging concept in political science and political philosophy that remains to be tested by different disciplines and approaches, such as political psychology, communication studies, rhetoric, and history. According to one leading definition, "illiberalism is a new ideological universe that, even if doctrinally fluid and context based, is to some degree coherent. It represents a backlash against today's liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles and by winning popular support. It proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies, conservative values, and some forms of cultural homogeneity." (Laruelle, "Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction," *East European Politics*). Defined more broadly, illiberalism "refers to a set of social, political, cultural, legal, and mental phenomena associated with the waning of individual liberty (personal freedom) as an everyday experience" and is "not an ideology or regime type," but is "compatible with the political rituals of a competitive democracy." (Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, xxi). The erosion of civic rights that is one of the cornerstones of illiberalism is not limited to current-day democracies, but



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can also be witnessed in various historical societies. In the Roman Republic, the rise of “great men” with military backing such as Sulla, Caesar, and Octavian led to proscriptions and flagrant transgressions of the checks and balances built into the political system. During the radical phase of the French Revolution known as the “Reign of Terror” (1793-94), Robespierre and other revolutionaries employing liberal rhetoric nevertheless reestablished a form of absolute authority which gave the state all the power at the expense of the individual citizen. Beyond illustrating that the dynamics of authoritarianism and illiberalism are not limited to modernity, these examples provide additional insights to understand current-day cases, helping us move towards a more integrated theoretical framework. Yet, the interplay between political, sociological, communicational, psychological, and historical approaches to the understanding of current-day and historical dynamics of illiberalism remains extremely rare.

This conference seeks to explore current-day illiberal tendencies as well as historical societies where emerging strong men and dictators manipulated the political system and undermined the rights of the people. In particular, it focuses on practices of character assassination in these highly unstable and polarized environments. We invite scholars to submit research and works in progress which will discuss the drivers of illiberalism and the erosion of civic rights in ages of conflicting ideologies from a variety of disciplinary and cultural angles. We welcome both theoretical work and case studies. Authors of selected best papers will be invited to submit their work to [Journal of Illiberalism Studies](#).

#### Suggested Topics:

- The erosion of civic rights in historical societies;
- Character assassination as an illiberal practice;
- Negative campaigns and their effects on behaviors and attitudes;
- Political incivility over time and space;
- The psychological and emotional underpinnings of persuasive attacks on character;
- Populist rhetoric, impression management, and democratic elections;
- Political incivility and polarization;
- The spread of culture wars in the U.S., the E.U., and beyond;
- Illiberal technologies and societal transformations;
- The effects of cancel culture on civil discourse;
- Far-right and far-left social movements;
- Digital activism and the practices of disruption and subversion;
- Neo-authoritarian forms of coercion and dominance in the Internet Age;
- Mediated public scandals in liberal democracies;
- Personalization and infotainment issues;
- Legal aspects of libel, slander, and defamation;
- Reputation management, image repair, and inoculation strategies.

Please submit a 250-word abstract of your paper by 15 February, 2023. A limited number of slots for online presentations will be made available. If you would like to opt for one of these, please include a brief motivation explaining your reasons. Email the abstract as an attachment to Martijn Icks [M.Icks@uva.nl](mailto:M.Icks@uva.nl) and Sergei Samoilenko at [ssamoyle@gmu.edu](mailto:ssamoyle@gmu.edu).



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