



Considering the Assumptions of the Technocentric Model of Democratic Flourishing and Decay

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Abstract

A common explanation of democratic backsliding relies on methods and models adopted from social psychology and cognitive science. According to this model, individuals are radicalized by algorithmically amplified social media content that exacerbates cognitive bias. Following a critical evaluation of this model, we present an alternative organizational-level explanatory framework, one that considers the effects of civil society organizations on political parties, especially conservative parties. In some of the literature, civil society organizations are regarded as a potential threat to the stability of liberal democracy. Bennett and Segerberg's connective action model suggest that under certain conditions routinized online communication—such as hashtags, subreddits, and Facebook groups—constitute an organization. This is communication as organization. If conventional party-aligned surrogate organizations threaten the cohesion and stability of democracy, then digitally constituted organizations like #QAnon or #StoptheSteal are even more corrosive to party ideological boundaries and democratic stability. This article is adapted from the concluding chapter of our forthcoming work, Connective Action and the Rise of the Far-Right: Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy.

Keywords: youth resistance, marginalization techniques, protest paradigm, illiberalism, populism, Hungary

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The most important thing for us to recall may be, that the crucial quality of science is to encourage, not discourage, the testing of assumptions. That is the only ethic that will eventually start us on our way to a new and much deeper level of understanding.¹

For decades, versions of techno-optimism—often slipping into utopianism—have been a staple of American politics and culture. For example, *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy’s wildly popular 1888 novel, envisions America at the turn of the 21st century as a socialist utopia where citizens enjoy universal free education, shorter workweeks, and guaranteed pensions. In his vision, cities are electrified, and music is readily available in homes through devices he calls “cable telephones.”² Almost a half-century later, President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal was in part inspired by Bellamy’s vision.³

As the actual 21st century approached, a quite different techno-utopianism animated the political visions of many Americans, especially those in the Silicon Valley. Sometimes known as “The Californian Ideology,” it offered a paradoxical mélange of 1960s counterculture anti-establishmentarianism combined with free-market fundamentalism.⁴ “Self-empowered knowledge workers,” it claimed, would render traditional hierarchies an “obsolete remnant of the industrial age.”⁵ Government itself would become obsolete. Techno-libertarian optimism grew apace with the spectacular growth of social media platforms. By 2012, Twitter had 100 million and Facebook 600 million users, respectively. Observers at the time averred that newly connected citizens were better informed, more civically engaged, and happier. Internet users were also described as “more active participants in groups and ... more likely to feel pride and a sense of accomplishment.”⁶

Not only were social media platforms thought to be good for citizens and established democracies, but they were also thought to be bad for authoritarian regimes.⁷ “Liberation tech” was empowering oppressed people to free themselves from tyranny.⁸ Such upbeat assessments were common well into the second decade of the 21st century.

Without much effort put into reconciling the sudden shift in perspective, techno-optimism/utopianism quickly gave way to dark pessimism. Digital technologies were not just a source of democratic fragility, but they were thought to be *the* source of it.

1 Halton C. Arp, *Quasars, Redshifts and Controversies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

2 John L. Thomas, *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd and the Adversary Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1983).

3 Daniel Immerwahr, “The Strange, Sad Death of America’s Political Imagination,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/02/opinion/us-politics-edward-bellamy.html>.

4 Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” *Mute* 1, no. 3, September 1, 1995, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/californian-ideology>.

5 Pauline Borsook, “Cyberselfish,” *Mother Jones*, July/August 1996, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070929125249/https://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/1996/07/borsook.html?welcome=true>.

6 Alex Howard, “The Role of the Internet as a Platform for Collective Action Grows,” Radar (blog), O’Reilly.com, January 21, 2011, <https://www.oreilly.com/radar/>.

7 Digiphile, “Unrestricted Open Internet Access Is a Top Foreign Policy for the US,” January 21, 2010, <https://digiphile.info/2010/01/21/unrestricted-open-internet-access-is-a-top-foreign-policy-for-the-us/>.

8 Larry Diamond, “Liberation Technology,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (July 2010): 69–83; Daniel Calingaert, “Making the Web Safe for Democracy,” *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/19/making-the-web-safe-for-democracy/>; Philip N. Howard, and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Tetyana Bohdanova, “Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine’s Euromaidan Uprising,” *European View* 13, no. 1 (June 2014): 133–142, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-014-0296-4>.

Almost overnight (one could point to election night in the US in 2016), social media platforms went from liberation tech to insidious conveyers of democracy-eroding disinformation and conspiracy theories. Some even saw the moment as a break in history, one that—so as to be properly understood—required a new academic discipline devoted to tracking online disinformation and measuring its cognitive effects.⁹ With its privileging of social media as a causal variable, we refer to this as the *technocentric model of democratic backsliding*.

What explains such a whiplash change in sentiment concerning digital technology and the health of democracy? We believe the unstable understanding of technology's effects on democracy flows from fragile assumptions about the nature of human information processing. The cognitive science and political science research literatures upon which the technocentric explanation of democratic decay rests struggles with conceptual coherence and intellectual consensus.¹⁰ We of course *do not* mean to suggest that the technocentric explanation of democratic decay is without merit or that the adoption of cognitive science models and methods has not revealed important insights. Our principal point is that democratic backsliding, so understood, is sealed off from consideration of the effects of historical factors and from economics and other power structures that constitute *politics*. The political universe in the technocentric model is reduced to problematically measured features of brain function. As a result, we believe alternative models are needed. In particular, we argue that understanding the causes of democratic decay requires models that shift at least some of the focus out of the head, out of theories rooted entirely in brain functions and information processing, to consideration of sociohistorical conditions.

We begin with a review of the social science claims that serve as a conceptual foundation of the technocentric explanation of democratic decay. In general, the technocentric model centers on the presumed polarizing effects of algorithmic amplification of extremist social media content and partisan media more generally.¹¹ After reviewing the main contours of the technocentric model, we offer an alternative *institutionalist* model of democratic decay. There we argue that digital technologies affect the nature of *organizations* associated with the Republican Party. Drawing on Ziblatt's "conservative dilemma" model of democratic decay, we claim that in addition to the conventional "surrogate organizations," conservative parties now also find themselves associated with "digital surrogate organizations" like QAnon.¹² This added challenge may very well make it impossible for the GOP to distance itself from far-right extremist elements. We take up each of these ideas below.

⁹ Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, eds., *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Steven Livingston, *The Nature of Beliefs: An Exploration of Cognitive Science and Sociological Approaches to the Crisis of Democracy*, SCRIPTS Working Paper no. 31 (2023), Berlin: Cluster of Excellence 2055, "Contestations of the Liberal Script (SCRIPTS)."

¹¹ Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood, "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," 134, *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 129-146, <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

¹² Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

The Technocentric Model of Democratic Decay

The technocentric model of democratic decay rests on at least three interwoven premises. First, it understands that the priorities of the media companies are shaped by a limitless appetite for financial growth and market domination.¹³

Second, the model assumes that profit-driven social media content (and media content more broadly) radicalizes *individual* users by pulling them deeper into extremist beliefs. Put differently, algorithmically curated content reinforces the human inclination to *accept* information that is aligned with existing beliefs, irrespective of the factual soundness or unsoundness of either the new information or the existing beliefs. At the same time, the tendency to *reject* factually sound information that runs contrary to accepted beliefs is reinforced.¹⁴

Third, cognitive biases lead to social sorting and political polarization.¹⁵ Whereas *policy or ideological sorting* involves rational assessments of one's personal policy preferences in relation to party policy agendas and positions, *social sorting* is based on in-group/out-group affective alignments that usually involve race, geography, and other immutable identity markers.

In short, according to the technocentric model of democratic backsliding, algorithmically amplified content exacerbates irrational social sorting that leads inexorably to polarization, which then opens space for more algorithmically amplified disinformation that is aligned with preferred directional reasoning, which of course exacerbates polarization. A downward recursive spiral of democratic decay emerges.¹⁶ Layered over this democratically dysfunctional dynamic is the disruptive influence of foreign adversaries leveraging social media affordances and people's

13 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018); Sandra González-Bailón et al., "Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook," *Science* 381 (July 2023): 392–398, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.ade7138>; Alexander Heffner, "Greed Is to Blame for the Radicalization of Social Media," *Wired*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/greed-is-to-blame-for-the-radicalization-of-social-media/>.

14 Charles S. Taber, and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (July 2006): 755–769, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00214.x>; Roy F. Baumeister and Leonard S. Newman, "How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experiences: Motives that Shape Autobiographical Narratives," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20, no. 6 (December 1994): 676–690, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167294206006>; Susan T. Fiske, and Steven L. Neuberg, "A Continuum of Impression Formation, from Category-Based to Individuating Processes: Influences of Information and Motivation on Attention and Interpretation," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* vol. 23, ed. Mark P. Zanna, (New York: Academic Press, 1990): 1–74, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60317-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60317-2); Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–498, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480>; Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Greater Internet Use Is Not Associated with Faster Growth in Political Polarization among US Demographic Groups," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 40 (September 2017): 10612–17, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1706588114>; Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (June 2010): 303–330, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1109-010-9112-2>.

15 Yphtach Lelkes, Gaurav Sood, and Shanto Iyengar, "The Hostile Audience: The Effect of Access to Broadband Internet on Partisan Effects," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (January 2017): 5–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12237>; Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, ed. Shelly McKeown, Reeshma Haji, and Neil Ferguson (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6_1; Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022); John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

16 Gordon Pennycook, Adam Bear, Evan Collins, and David Gerter Rand, "The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake Headlines Increases Accuracy of Headlines without Warnings," *Management Science* 66, no. 11 (November 2020): 4944–4957, <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2019.3478>.

propensity for motivated or directional reasoning.¹⁷ This outlines the main contours of the underlying logic of much of the contemporary debate about democratic erosion and digital technology.¹⁸ Versions of this explanation have been presented in dramatic congressional testimony,¹⁹ inspired countless university conferences and seminars, redefined political communication research,²⁰ and served as the justification of content regulations in Europe.²¹ It has also supported the allocation of millions of dollars in research funding to establish university research centers.

We step back and offer a critical examination of the underlying premises and implicit logic upon which this widely embraced model rests. In the section to follow, we review methodological and conceptual challenges associated with the scientific literature that undergirds the claim that the best way to understand democratic decay is through theories concerning the media-induced radicalization of individuals.

Cognitive science methods and models adopted by political scientists to explain political beliefs have struggled to achieve conceptual coherence. Much of the variation in results stems from *unintended* variations in the treatments (independent variables), such as the wording of a correction to a factually unsound belief, rather than to differences in the actual underlying cognitive function. One example of this is the once blockbuster discovery of a corrections “backfire effect.”

In 2010, Nyhan and Reifler²² found that efforts to correct factually unsound beliefs held by conservatives about the Iraq War led subjects to double down on their factually unsupported beliefs. Rather than change their beliefs to come into closer alignment with factual corrections, Nyhan and Reifler’s research subjects went in the other direction; they appeared to *deepen* their factually unsound beliefs. The implications of such a result are profound. How is democracy possible if people doubled down on faulty beliefs when challenged by disconfirming evidence? Backfiring could lead only to a deepening dogmatism and polarization. Nyhan and Reifler’s study received wide attention from other scholars, journalists, and even from famed German artist Wolfgang Tillmans, who organized a 2018 art installation around Nyhan and Reifler’s research at the Tate Modern gallery in London.²³ Following the unexpected Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, such dark assessments of technology and democracy fit the lugubrious mood of the time.

17 Joshua Aaron Tucker, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barberá, Christian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan, “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature,” Social Science Research Network, March 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3144139>.

18 Samuel Woolley and D. Guilbeault, “Computational Propaganda in the United States of America: Manufacturing Consensus Online,” in Computational Propaganda Project, ed. Samuel Woolley and Philip Howard (2017): 1–29, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:620ce18f-69ed-4294-aa85-184af2b5052e>; Yariv Tsfati, H. G. Boomgaarden, J. Strömback, R. Vliegthart, A. Damstra, and E. Lindgren, “Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News: Literature Review and Synthesis,” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44, no. 2 (2020): 157–173, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1759443>; Neal Gabler, “The Internet and Social Media Are Increasingly Divisive and Undermining of Democracy,” *Alternet* (news site), June 30, 2016, <https://www.alternet.org/2016/06/digital-divide-american-politics>.

19 Bobby Allyn, “Here Are 4 Key Points from the Facebook Whistleblower’s Testimony on Capitol Hill,” National Public Radio, October 5, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/05/1043377310/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-congress>.

20 Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (February 2020): 145–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>.

21 Directorate-General for Communication, “The Digital Services Act,” European Commission, n.d., https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en.

22 Nyhan and Reifler, “When Corrections Fail.”

23 Anna Codrea-Rado, “Wolfgang Tillmans Explores the Role of Art in a Post-Truth World,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/21/arts/wolfgang-tillmans-fake-news.html>.

About a year later, Wood and Porter²⁴ found that evidence of the backfire effect disappeared with a change in wording of Nyhan and Reifler's overly complex correction treatment. As it turns out, the research subjects were not doubling down on their convictions; they were confused by the complexity of the attempted correction. Indeed, across dozens of issues, Wood and Porter failed to find evidence in support of a backfire effect. The apparent backfire effect seems to have been the consequence of Nyhan and Reifler's wordy and confusing correction, and not the result of human cognitive resistance to updating prior beliefs.

A deeper problem with the motivated reasoning literature is found in its struggle to agree on the nature of motivation itself. Without such an agreement, stimulating motivation and measuring it becomes problematic. In her highly regarded and much cited article, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning,"²⁵ social psychologist Ziva Kunda argues that people are in some instances motivated toward accuracy goals and in other instances toward directional goals. By directional goals she means motivation toward alignment with existing beliefs. When people are motivated toward accuracy, they expend more cognitive effort by devoting close attention to relevant information and its implications.²⁶

On the other hand, with directional reasoning, individuals may simply search for conclusions that are aligned with existing beliefs.²⁷ Left unclear in this is the precise nature of *motivation*. What is motivation? Kunda herself sidesteps the issue by offering a definition of motivation that comes close to a tautology—followed by a capitulation. By motivation, she says, "I mean any wish, desire, or preference that concerns the outcome of a given reasoning task, and *I do not attempt to address the thorny issue of just how such motives are represented.*"²⁸ Motivation is as motivation *does*.

The struggle over the meaning of motivation runs through the cognitive science-inspired political science research literature. One of the first studies undertaken by political scientists using cognitive science models and methods redefined the cognitive science understanding of motivation by adding *affect* to the mix.²⁹ People *think*, Taber and Lodge note, through the lens of *emotion*. In psychology, *affect* refers to the experience of emotion, feeling, or mood. Because cognitive dissonance researchers generally paid little attention to the strength of prior *affect*, research stimuli or treatments—the independent variables in experimental research—were not designed to elicit strong *affective* responses. *The implication was that cognitive scientists had misconstrued the nature of motivation, at least regarding political matters.* To correct this, Taber and Lodge rely on more emotive political issues, plus

24 Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence," *Political Behavior* 41, no. 1 (March 2019): 135–163, <https://doi.org/10.1007>.

25 Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning."

26 Fiske and Neuberg, "A Continuum of Impression Formation, from Category-Based to Individuating Processes."

27 Steven L. Neuberg and Susan T. Fiske, "Motivational Influences on Impression Formation: Outcome Dependency, Accuracy-Driven Attention, and Individuating Processes," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, no. 3 (1987): 431–444, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.53.3.431>; see also David Dunning, "A Newer Look: Motivated Social Cognition and the Schematic Representation of Social Concepts," *Psychological Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (November 2009): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.53.3.431>; Peter M. Gollwitzer and John A. Bargh, eds., *The Psychology of Action: Linking Cognition and Motivation to Behavior* (New York: Guilford, 1996); Tory E. Higgins, and Daniel C. Molden, "How Strategies for Making Judgments and Decisions Affect Cognition: Motivated Cognition Revisited," in *Foundations of Social Cognition: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert S. Wyer, Jr.*, ed. Galen V. Bodenhausen and Alan J. Lambert (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2003): 211–236.

28 Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," 480 (emphasis added).

29 Taber and Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs."

better measures of affect, and more strongly worded treatments.³⁰ They found a pronounced tendency toward affect-laden directional reasoning. Only the politically apathetic and poorly informed subjects showed a willingness to update prior beliefs, while the better informed and more emotionally engaged subjects showed less willingness to update their priors.

Taber and Lodge are not alone in their efforts to adapt cognitive science models and methods to the study of political beliefs. In seeking more authentic expressions of motivation, some researchers have all but disregarded the requirements of a true experimental design. In one well-known case, the researcher embeds correction treatments in a mix of real-world issue debates present in the news. In doing so, he made it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish treatment effects from the effects that might spring from uncontrolled ambient stimulation.³¹ In other words, an experimental treatment becomes entangled in the flow of news about the same topic.

In other cases, researchers have tried to distinguish motivated reasoning from “cheerleading,” a subject’s full-throated expression of partisan claims, despite their factual inaccuracy.³² Peterson and Iyengar, like other researchers exploring a possible cheerleading effect, rely on a small monetary inducement (50 cents) in an effort to motivate adherence to factually sound claims. Because motivations are assumed in the political cognition literature to be relatively subtle, as Peterson and Iyengar do, it was further assumed that they can be easily updated with minor inducements, such as a modest monetary reward for accuracy or by words of encouragement to be fair and accurate. Motivation is cheap.

Such an understanding of the relationship between expressed beliefs and underlying motivation stands in stark contrast to views found in the classic sociology literature. Berger, for example, treats the absence of meaning (what he calls *nomos*) as a profound existential crisis.³³ Meaninglessness means that “danger is the nightmare par excellence, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror.”³⁴ Following Durkheim, Berger concludes that the absence of meaning can lead some to prefer suicide.³⁵

This view of the relationship between beliefs and motivations is starkly different from the one found in the cognitive science/political science research literature. If beliefs reflect and stabilize *systems of meaning*, why would one expect minor financial inducements or verbal coaching to “be accurate” to have an effect? Would one be surprised to learn of the failure to “correct” the beliefs of the one-third of the

³⁰ Taber and Lodge, 756.

³¹ Adam Berinsky, “Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation,” *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (April 2017): p. 241–262, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123415000186fOpens%20in%20a%20new%20window>].

³² Erik Peterson and Shanto Iyengar, “Partisan Gaps in Political Information and Information-Seeking Behavior: Motivated Reasoning or Cheerleading?” *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 1 (January 2021): 133–147, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12535>.

³³ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 1967).

³⁴ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 22.

³⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 22; Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1912); Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951).

US Catholics who profess to a literal belief in transubstantiation?³⁶ It seems safe to say that the belief that the eucharist and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ during the Mass is an important part of the devout person's system of belief. Rather than shallowly held, it seems reasonable to further assume that such a belief provides deep meaning and purpose, without which the devout Catholic might very well experience the sort of existential crisis that the sociological literature and existentialist philosophy have spent centuries describing.³⁷ In our view, beliefs are motivated by the exigencies of lived social lives and the accompanying pressures and anxieties that many people experience as bordering on existential collapse.

According to Bruner, the fact that the study of psychology has been removed from its social context was exemplified by the shift from the study of *meaning* to the study of *information*. The study of "the construction of meaning," as Durkheim and the existentialist philosophers pursue, has been replaced by the study of "the processing of information."³⁸ And as DeGrandpre notes, "The influence of the information-processing approach is widespread in basic psychological science, neuroscience, and social psychology."³⁹ He continues:

Perhaps one reason why meaning does not rank as a primary dependent variable in psychological science is because social-constructivist notions in psychology are believed to threaten, rightly or wrongly, the possibility of a pure science of psychology that operates independent of consideration of larger, sociohistorical forces.⁴⁰

There are other assumptions found in the technocentric explanation of democratic decay. The claim that social media users are pulled into extremism by recommendation algorithms is based on the conclusions found in the selective exposure research literature. The argument here is that over time users train algorithms that then produce content that is aligned with—if not exaggerating of—positions already held by the user.⁴¹ Past content engagements train algorithms to serve up more of the same. A steady diet of unchallenging content deepens one's convictions about the nature of the world. Cognitive discomfort is therefore avoided.

Despite its intuitive appeal, the selective exposure research literature is far from reaching a consensus on whether it even exists. While some studies have found supporting evidence,⁴² other studies have found that Americans typically select ideologically neutral content.⁴³ What is more, research has found that affective

36 Gregory A. Smith, "Just One-Third of US Catholics Agree with Their Church That the Eucharist is Body, Blood of Christ," Pew Research Center, August 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>.

37 Richard Appignanesi, and Oscar Zarate, *Introducing Existentialism* (Cambridge, UK: Icon, 2001).

38 Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 722.

39 Richard J. DeGrandpre, "A Science of Meaning: Can Behaviorism Bring Meaning to Psychological Science?" *American Psychologist* 55, no. 7 (July 2000): 721–739.

40 DeGrandpre, "A Science of Meaning," 722, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.7.721>.

41 Boxell et al., "Greater Internet Use Is Not Associated with Faster Growth in Political Polarization among US Demographic Groups."

42 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin, 2011); Natalie Jomini Stroud, and Bartholomew H. Sparrow, "Assessing Public Opinion after 9/11 and before the Iraq War," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 148–168, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edro08>; Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

43 Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Ideological Segregation Online and Offline," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, no. 4 (November 2011): 1799–1839, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjr044>.

polarization increases the most among those *least likely to use social media and the Internet*.⁴⁴ Even more unsettling to the technocentric argument is the finding that increases in social media use correspond to *diminishing* polarization.⁴⁵ The premise here is that social media use increases the likelihood of incidental exposure to a broad range of novel information. Incidental exposure to new ideas encourages political moderation at the individual level, as it mitigates mass political polarization. Or as Iyengar and colleagues note, “even if partisan news or other identity consistent information heightens effective polarization, few people may actually limit their exposure to sources representing a particular identity or ideology.”⁴⁶

In short, while some have found support for the selective exposure (or filter bubble) hypothesis, other researchers have found little supporting evidence for its existence. What is more, there is even evidence suggesting that just the opposite result is produced by social media platforms. If algorithmically amplified content does not necessarily lead to deepening partisan convictions, a foundational element of the technocentric explanation for polarization and democratic decay falters.

There have been other methodological concerns, including the conclusion that experimental cognitive science results do not hold up well under scrutiny. Experimental psychology research has, in recent years, been shaken by a replication or reproducibility crisis. *Reproducibility* asks if the same answers can be found when existing data are reanalyzed by different researchers. *Replicability* asks if the same results are gotten with new data collected and analyzed in the same manner as previous studies. As a shorthand, both of these possibilities can be referred to as replicability.⁴⁷

In general, in the last two decades, several social science disciplines have faced a replicability crisis. An article in *Science* reported that most of a sample of 100 published research findings in social and cognitive psychology journals were not replicable.⁴⁸ Even Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman has been caught up in the cognitive psychology replication crisis. Significant portions of his landmark book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, mostly about priming effects, are based on *another* scholar’s unreplicable research.⁴⁹

By no means is Kahneman alone. According to the Open Science Collaboration, many of the “successfully” replicated studies offer effect sizes (the difference between the experimental group and the control group) that are only about half the size of

44 Boxell et al., “Greater Internet Use Is Not Associated with Faster Growth in Political Polarization among US Demographic Groups,” p. 10616 (emphasis added).

45 Pablo Barberá, “How Social Media Reduces Mass Political Polarization: Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the US,” Paper prepared for the American Political Science Association Conference, Vancouver, British Columbia, September 11–14, 2015, http://pablobarbera.com/static/barbera_polarization_APSA.pdf.

46 Iyengar et al., “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.”

47 Scott E. Maxwell, Michael Y. Lau, and George S. Howard, “Is Psychology Suffering from a Replication Crisis? What Does ‘Failure to Replicate’ Really Mean?” *American Psychologist* 70, no. 6 (September 2015): 487–498, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039400>.

48 Open Science Collaboration, “Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science,” *Science* 349, no. 6251 (August 2015), <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aac4716>.

49 Replicability Index, February 2, 2017, <https://replicationindex.com/2017/02/02/>; Retraction Watch, “I Placed Too Much Faith in Underpowered Studies: [sic] Nobel Prize Winner Admits Mistakes,” Retraction Watch (blog), undated, <https://retractionwatch.com/2017/02/20/placed-much-faith-underpowered-studies-nobel-prize-winner-admits-mistakes/>.

the results obtained in the original study.⁵⁰ Perhaps more worrisome is the discovery that studies that have *failed* to replicate have been more prominently cited than have those that were successfully replicated.⁵¹ These findings led Jeffrey Lieberman, past president of the American Psychiatric Association, to exclaim that “psychology is in shambles.”⁵² The replication crisis in cognition and social psychology constitutes a serious structural weakness in the core architecture of the technocentric explanation for democratic backsliding.

These conclusions ought to be sobering for disinformation studies scholars. The assumed potency of disinformation comes from the assumption that it triggers and deepens directional reasoning. *If cognitive science conclusions are suspect, so too are core premises of disinformation studies.* Still, it is important that we not overstate this conclusion. Replication crisis aside, it simply makes sense to conclude that people are resistant to information that runs contrary to their convictions. As Taber and Lodge note in their 2006 study,⁵³ it makes sense to see that well-informed and politically engaged persons would show resistance to information that undermines existing beliefs. Such beliefs are like hard-earned possessions that most would naturally want to protect. Indeed, from a sociological perspective, beliefs are fundamental to the avoidance of existential despair, and even suicide. In the end, our claim is not that beliefs are not directionally motivated. Rather, we assert that the cognitive science methods and models fail to plumb the greater depth of the phenomenon. Just as Taber and Lodge recognized that motivated reasoning has an affective layer, we believe that it is more accurate to say that it has, at least at times, an existential layer. Beliefs are not cheaply held. They are instead often something approaching a meaning-making devotion that guards against existential despair.

Below, we will pick up on our earlier observations about the relationship between beliefs and meaning. It could be that the unresolved challenge facing the cognitive science modeling of motivated reasoning is its implicit understanding of the nature of meaning. Meaning, according to cognitive science methodological orthodoxy, must be a measurable attribute of cognition. Therefore, subtle changes in treatment conditions—such as the verbal encouragement to be fair and accurate that was given to research subjects by Taber and Lodge, or the 50-cent incentive provided by Peterson and Iyengar to express known accurate responses to questions—are assumed to capture the relationship between beliefs and meaning-making. We think this approach misses the mark. Instead, people believe what they say, no matter how wildly exotic it might seem to the outside observer, because doing so reflects the system of beliefs—*nomos*—that gives their life meaning and purpose. And even more importantly, systems of meaning are especially needed when confronting precarious social and economic conditions.

Another assumption of the technocentric argument is found in the focus on individual-level effects. Democratic decay is understood to be the result of the radicalization of *individuals* through exposure to media messages. Perhaps reflecting the American bias toward individualism, the technocentric model understands the radicalization of democracy running through individual-level effects. The alternative, discussed

50 Randal J. Ellis, “Questionable Research Practices, Low Statistical Power, and Other Obstacles to Replicability: Why Preclinical Neuroscience Research Would Benefit from Registered Reports,” *eNeuro* 9, no. 4 (July–August 2022), <https://www.eneuro.org/content/9/4/ENEURO.0017-22.2022.abstract>.

51 Marta Serra-García and Uri Gneezy, “Nonreplicable Publications Are Cited More Than Replicable Ones,” *Science Advances* 7, no. 21 (May 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abd1705>.

52 Scott O. Lilienfeld, “Psychology’s Replication Crisis and the Grant Culture: Righting the Ship,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12 no. 4 (July 2017), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/17456916166687745>.

53 Taber and Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs.”

below, is to focus on digital network effects on democratic institutions. Let us take a moment to consider the technocentric model's propensity to explain democratic decay in terms of individual radicalization. This section serves as something of an onramp to our organizational-level backsliding model.

Chater and Loewenstein⁵⁴ argue that explaining a social-level phenomenon through individual-level effects is seriously flawed. They call the latter the *i*-frame approach and the former the *s*-frame approach to understanding the causes of and solutions to harmful conditions. Whereas individuals and their thoughts and behaviors are the focus of *i*-frame analyses done by social psychology, *s*-frame analyses look at the system of rules, norms, and institutions usually studied by economists, sociologists, and some political scientists. The *i*-frame approach identifies individual limitations, including confirmation bias, as the source of failure.⁵⁵ Thaler and Sunstein's influential book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*,⁵⁶ offers an example of an *i*-frame approach. Nudges are subtle verbal cues to behave in prescribed ways. Asking people to sign a pledge to be accurate and truthful before completing a tax return offers an example of a nudge.⁵⁷ The assumption here is that such a small act nudges the signee to be more scrupulous when completing the tax form.

Chater and Loewenstein argue that *i*-frame interventions such as nudges fail in two ways. First, evidence of its effectiveness is weak and inconclusive. Indeed, "nudge theory" is experiencing its own replication crisis.⁵⁸ Secondly, and more importantly, by focusing on individuals rather than systems, it misunderstands the fundamental causes of social problems. It does not seek to "change the rules of the game but make subtle adjustments to help fallible individuals play the game better."⁵⁹ Chater and Loewenstein rely on an analogy to make the point:

... seeing individual cognitive limitations as the source of society's problems is like seeing human physiological limitations as the key to the problems of malnutrition or lack of shelter. Humans are vulnerable to cold, malnutrition, disease, predation, and violence. An *i*-frame perspective would focus on tips to help individuals survive in a hostile world. But human progress has arisen through *s*-frame changes—the invention and propagation of technologies, economic institutions, and legal and political systems has led to spectacular improvements in the material dimensions of life. Human physiology varies little over time. But the systems of rules and institutions we live by

54 Nick Chater and George Loewenstein, "The *i*-Frame and the *s*-Frame: How Focusing on Individual-Level Solutions Has Led Behavioral Public Policy Astray," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 46 (September 5, 2022):e147, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X22002023>.

55 Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler, "Libertarian Paternalism Is Not an Oxymoron," *University of Chicago Law Review* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2003), 1162, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclrev/vol70/iss4/1/>.

56 Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

57 Carlos Scartascini, "Nudging to Get Citizens to Pay Their Taxes and Improve the Delivery of Public Goods," September 28, 2022, Ideas Matter (blog), Inter-American Development Bank, <https://blogs.iadb.org/ideas-matter/en/nudging-to-get-citizens-to-pay-their-taxes-and-improve-the-delivery-of-public-goods/>.

58 Maximilian Maier, František Bartoš, T. D. Stanley, David R. Shanks, Adam J. L. Harris, and Eric-Jan Wagenmakers, "No Evidence for Nudging after Adjusting for Publication Bias," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 31 (August 2022), <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2200300119#con3>.

59 Chater and Loewenstein, "The *i*-Frame and the *s*-Frame," 2.

have changed immeasurably. Successful s-frame changes have been transformative in overcoming our physiological frailties.⁶⁰

With respect to disinformation and democracy, *i*-frame interventions include media literacy initiatives or fact-checking and correction efforts to improve on the individual's ability to spot sound information. An *s*-frame intervention would address the systemic causes of the collapse of trust in institutions.⁶¹ The focus would be on, for example, the decades-long attacks by think tanks and news organizations established by billionaires and corporations to undermine support for climate science, labor unions, mainstream journalism, and the administrative state.⁶²

Not only are *i*-frame interventions likely to fail, but they also elide attention from *s*-frame interventions. Chater and Loewenstein offer the following example:

... slum landlords (by analogy with corporations opposing *s*-frame reform) will see illness as arising from poor hand-washing or unhygienic food and drink preparation. And well-intentioned behavioral scientists may suggest *i*-frame interventions to increase the use of soap and boiled water, probably to a little effect. But the *i*-frame perspective may itself weaken the impetus for tried-and-tested *s*-frame reform: regulations to enforce quality housing, with heating, sanitation, and safe drinking water.⁶³

Corporate public relations departments have learned to champion *i*-frame analyses to deflect pressure for systemic change to corporate behavior, such as more robust regulations. It seems that the technocentric explanation for democratic backsliding emphasizes *i*-frame solutions to the presumed cognitive effects of algorithmically amplified content. They consist of efforts to bolster the individual's resilience in the face of radicalizing information, such as media literacy training and fact-checking.

We have reviewed several of the weaknesses of the research literature on which the technocentric explanation of democratic decay rests. We have argued that the research literature has so far struggled to come up with unambiguously operationalized core concepts. This has led to a rather ad hoc quality to treatment conditions, which seems at least partly responsible for observed variations in results. We have also noted the disinclination to investigate the relationship between expressed beliefs and the existential need for meaning and purpose. Finally, the individual-level focus of the research literature we have just reviewed might cloud more than it clarifies the causes of democratic decay.

A Connective Action Explanation for Democratic Decay

To assert that democratic decay in the United States and elsewhere is the result of social media is to neglect other explanations that have emerged over the

60 Chater and Loewenstein, 2.

61 Lance W. Bennett and Steven Livingston, *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

62 Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016); Naomi Oreskes, and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011).

63 Chater and Loewenstein, "The *i*-Frame and the *s*-Frame," 4.

course of decades of scholarship.⁶⁴ Democracy scholars, or what we shall here call *institutionalists*, or the *institutionalist model*, constitute an interdisciplinary field that includes economists, sociologists, historians, and political scientists who, respectively, emphasize the critical role of economics, elites, organized interests in society, historical contingency, and political parties when considering the threats to liberal democracy. Our institutionalist approach is compatible with Chater and Loewenstein's s-frame approach. Much of the debate among institutionalists revolves around social, economic, and political factors thought to be associated with democratic consolidation or backsliding.

Many intuitionist scholars have emphasized, for example, the contingent decisions made by political leaders,⁶⁵ while others contend that executives who are unconstrained by countervailing institutions or power centers are more likely to initiate democratic backsliding.⁶⁶ The qualities of civil society and civic culture have also been thought to affect democratic stability.⁶⁷ Inglehart and Welzel and Norris and Inglehart⁶⁸ have emphasized the role of cultural values in democratic stability and decay. Almond and Verba, for example, identified three types of political culture in their landmark 1963 comparativist study.⁶⁹ "Participant" political culture is characterized by heavy citizen involvement in politics and voluntary civic associations. A "subject" political culture is characterized by obedient citizens who participate little in civil society organizations. A third "parochial" type is characterized by a poorly informed and civically disinterested citizenry. For Almond and Verba, stable democracy requires that *subject* and *parochial* attitudes provide a counterweight to *participant* culture. Otherwise, too much citizen engagement runs the risk of destabilizing democracy by overwhelming the state.

While we do not disagree with these observations, we follow Ziblatt in his emphasis on the important role played by wealth and income inequalities in influencing democratic stability. In his view, parties closely aligned with concentrated wealth (in whatever form) face a dilemma. How can such parties remain competitive in an election without abandoning their closest natural allies, the economic elites? Or as Waldner and Lust put it, "As Income inequality rises, democracy's costs for the wealthy increase, lowering the probability of democratic transitions."⁷⁰ Yet Waldner and Lust add that it would be too simplistic to claim that political alignments hinge

64 Ellen Lust and David Waldner, "Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding," June 11, 2015, US Agency for International Development, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PBAAD635.pdf.

65 Juan Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Re-Equilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Giovanni Capocchia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

66 Steven M. Fish, "The Dynamics of Democratic Erosion," in *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy*, ed. Richard D. Anderson, Steven M. Fish, Stephen E. Hanson, and Philip G. Roeder (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001): 54–95. Marianne Kneuer, "Unraveling Democratic Erosion: Who Drives the Slow Death of Democracy, and How?" *Democratization* 28, no. 8 (December 2021): 1442–1462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1925650>.

67 Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Kay Schlozman, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

68 Ronald Inglehart, and Christian C. Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Pippa Norris, and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

69 Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, reprint (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publishing, [1963] 1989).

70 David Waldner and Ellen Lust, "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding," *Annual Review of Political Science* vol. 21 (May 2018), 102, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>.

solely on class consciousness. Instead, identity-based political alignments can also turn on “religious, linguistic, racial, or other descent-based attributes.”⁷¹ They also note that “it is not accurate to claim that social divisions are first formed and then influence political processes and structures; *political structures and processes also influence group identity formation. Political entrepreneurs, for example, might deliberately facilitate certain forms of group formation and impede others.*”⁷²

These ideas about civic culture, class concerns, and identity formation serve as the contours of Ziblatt’s conservative dilemma model of democratic consolidation and decay.⁷³ Conservative parties such as the Tories in the United Kingdom, claims Ziblatt, face daunting challenges in fair elections, especially during times of great social and economic inequality. They must on the one hand find ways to remain competitive in elections where majorities matter while *also* remaining loyal to economic elites, with whom they are most closely aligned. They must, in other words, learn to, “win the numbers game,” as Ziblatt describes the need to find ways to remain competitive in elections without advocating policies that would disrupt the status quo.⁷⁴ Put differently, while remaining loyal to the economic and social power structures, conservative parties must find ways to appeal to voters who are not economically privileged. *Parties do so by priming elections with non-material issues that are intended to mobilize publics across class divides.*⁷⁵ So called “cross-cutting cleavage issues” mobilize publics by tapping into existing social identity divisions. These are not shallow beliefs; as Hacker and Pierson put it, to be effective, cross-cutting cleavage issues cannot be trivial or temporary. “In modern societies, the list of such ‘cleavages’ is short, and their history unpleasant.” They are often “racially tinged, all involving strong identities and strong emotions—that draw a sharp line between ‘us’ and ‘them’.”⁷⁶ In a sense, one could say that cross-cutting cleavage issues reshape civic culture by mobilizing parochial citizens into participant status by way of highly emotive issues.

Secondly, a conservative party must find allies—organizations that have manageable degrees of separateness from the party. Ziblatt calls these advocacy allies “surrogate organizations.”⁷⁷ They are often civil society groups, social movements, agrarian leagues, and media organizations. If all goes as expected, the dilemma is mitigated. As a conservative party gains confidence that it has a fighting chance of winning free and fair elections, albeit elections that fail to address social and economic inequality and despair, it will be less inclined to turn to more direct anti-democratic measures in an effort to cling to power. Of course, all of this comes at a price: the conditions

71 Waldner and Lust, 102.

72 Waldner and Lust, 103 (emphasis added).

73 Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Democracy*.

74 Ziblatt, 33.

75 Nina Eggert and Marco Giugni, “Does the Class Cleavage Still Matter? The Social Composition of Participants in Demonstrations Addressing Redistributive and Cultural Issues in Three Countries,” *International Sociology* 30, no. 1 (January 2015): 21–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580914555935>; Hanspeter Kriesi, “Restructuration of Partisan Politics and the Emergence of a New Cleavage Based on Values,” *West European Politics* 33, no. 3 (May 2010): 673–685, DOI: 10.1080/01402381003654726;

Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, “Cleavage Theory Meets Europe’s Crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the Transnational Cleavage,” in “Theory Meets Crisis,” special issue, ed. Liesbet Hooghe, Brigid Laffan, and Gary Marks, *Journal of European Public Policy* 25, no. 1 (November 2018): 109–135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1310279>.

76 Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 22.

77 Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Democracy*, 174, passim; Lance W. Bennett and Steven Livingston, “Technological and Institutional Roots of Democratic Backsliding in the United States,” in *Connective Action and the Rise of the Far-Right: Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy*, ed. Steven Livingston and Michael Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), passim.

in greatest need of systematic redress—deep disparities in the life and well-being of citizens—remain sublimated by identity grievance issues.

But even in the more optimistic scenario, surrogates are a mixed blessing, as the institutionalist literature’s ambivalence about civil society organizations suggests.⁷⁸ Surrogates and the issues they promote can quickly drift into extremism. In some cases, surrogates can become more powerful and popular than the party itself. In this way, news organizations or other surrogate organizations can pull a party into uncompromising stances that fly in the face of democratic norms. Of course, some in the party are quite eager for this to happen.⁷⁹

In sum, the health and vitality of democracy is, according to this literature, affected by economic conditions, the nature of governing elites, and their relationship with publics. It is also affected by the nature of the issues around which publics are mobilized and civic cultures are formed. Finally, the nature of the civil society organizations is key to democratic stability or decay. What this research tradition has yet to do is give sustained thought to the ways social media and other digital platforms affect the organization of publics, or the nature of civil society and voluntary organizations. We turn next to offering an institutionalist model of democratic backsliding that takes into account digital platforms.

Digital Surrogate Organizations

In *Connective Action and the Rise of the Far-Right: Platforms, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy*⁸⁰ we argue that the conventional understanding of surrogate organizations (or of civil society organizations) must be combined with insights gained by media scholars about the nature of organizing and organizations in digital space. To the concerns about conventional surrogate organizations championing highly emotive issues, we add that organizations are now constituted online. Bennett and Segerberg put it this way: “Communication routines can, under some conditions, create patterned relationships among people that lend organization and structure to many aspects of social life.” Beyond the basic transmission of information, online communication can “establish relationships, activate attentive participants, channel various resources, and establish narratives and discourses.”⁸¹ Hashtags, Facebook groups, and subreddits emerge and facilitate patterned relationships among

78 Ariel C. Armony, *The Dubious Link: Civic Engagement and Democratization*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*; Sheri Berman, “Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic,” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (April 1997): 401–429, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1997.0008>; Nancy G. Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

79 Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*.

80 Livingston and Miller, *Connective Action and the Rise of the Far-Right*.

81 Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2014): Kindle 304.

people online. In this way, “technology-enabled networks may become dynamic organizations in their own right.”⁸²

Unlike conventional organizations, digitally-enabled organizations are in a constant state of *becoming*, which is to say they are liminal, and therefore more organically reactive to exogenous stimuli, and less bound by formal roles and rules. Participation is often motivated by social expressions of identity—or what Bennett and Segerberg call “personal action frames.”⁸³ These are easy-to-personalize issue frames that encourage broad symbolic inclusiveness—such as “We are the 99%,” heard during the Occupy Wall Street protests. “These frames require little in the way of persuasion, reason, or reframing to bridge differences in others’ feelings about a common problem.”⁸⁴ Lifestyle elements organize personalized political meaning concerning issues such as climate change (buying sustainably certified produce, recycling, and avoiding single-use plastics), or food production (buying fair-trade-labeled products). “Seemingly disparate issues become related as they fit into crosscutting demographics and consumer lifestyles.”⁸⁵ While Bennett and Segerberg focus on progressive causes such as Occupy Wall Street, right-wing opposition to a vaguely defined “wokeism” and opposition to certain lifestyle choices seem to constitute some of the far-right personal action frames.

If conventional surrogates are a mixed blessing, how might digitally-constituted organizations affect the stability of democracy? Even conventional surrogates can “quickly and easily overrun and capture weak and institutionally porous parties.”⁸⁶ What effect on democratic stability might digital surrogate organizations have? First, social technologies, and digital platforms more generally, broaden the range of what is reasonably understood to be a civic or social movement organization. Ziblatt’s original formulation of party surrogate organizations include civic associations, business enterprises (such as newspaper groups and their owners), and interest organizations (such as agrarian leagues).⁸⁷ Hacker and Pierson, in their convincing application of Ziblatt’s model to the contemporary Republican Party in the United States, do not change Ziblatt’s historical understanding of a surrogate organization in any fundamental way.⁸⁸ In their analysis, important GOP surrogates include donor networks of billionaires and corporations, single-issue groups like the National Rifle Association, and cultural institutions such as Evangelical churches and the Catholic Church. These are all examples of *conventional* surrogate organizations.

82 Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, Kindle 297 (emphasis added); see also Sarah M. Parsloe and Avery E. Holton, “# Boycottautismspeaks: Communicating a Counternarrative through Cyberactivism and Connective Action,” *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 8 (March 2017): 1116–1133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301514>; Emmanuelle Vaast, Hani Safadi, Liette Lapointe, and Bogdan Negoita, “Social Media Affordances for Connective Action: An Examination of Microblogging Use during the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill,” *MIS Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (December 2017): 1179–1206, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26630290>; Jiyoun Suk, Aman Abhishek, Yini Zhang, So Yun Ahn, Teresa Correa, Christine Garlough, and Dhavan V. Shah, “# MeToo, Networked Acknowledgment, and Connective Action: How ‘Empowerment through Empathy’ Launched a Social Movement,” *Social Science Computer Review* 39 no. 2 (April 2021): 276–294, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319864882>; Milad Mirbabaie, Felix Brünker, Magdalena Wischniewski, and Judith Meinert, “The Development of Connective Action during Social Movements on Social Media,” *ACM Transactions on Social Computing* 4, no. 1 (2021): 1–21, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3446981>; Lance W. Bennett and Steven Livingston, “Technological and Institutional Roots of Democratic Backsliding in the United States.”

83 Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, Kindle, 257.

84 Bennett and Segerberg, Kindle, 954.

85 Bennett and Segerberg, Kindle, 1502.

86 Ziblatt, *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Democracy*, 174.

87 Ziblatt.

88 Hacker and Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets*.

The institutionalist literature offers ambivalent assessments of the role played by civil society organizations in democracy.⁸⁹ Some scholars regard robust civil society organizations as foundational elements of democracy while others have understood them to be sources of destabilization and autocracy.⁹⁰ To use Almond and Verba's civic culture framework, overly robust civil society and civil society organizations throw off the balance that is needed between *subject* and *parochial* political cultures on the one hand and *participant* culture on the other. Surrogates promote *emotively engaging yet potentially destabilizing cross-cutting cleavage issues that usually involve racial, gender, ethnic, religious, or nationalist status threats*. Cross-cutting cleavage issues involve some form of threat. "They are threatening Us." "They are out to get you and your way of life." In fact, as recent sociological research has demonstrated, various status threats have coalesced around a volatile brew of white Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and Identitarianism.⁹¹ As Hacker and Pierson put it, "In a worst-case scenario, the [Republican] party falls into a spiral of weakening control over the most extreme elements of its coalition." As a result, "Reliance on surrogates can thus lead a party down the path to extremism."⁹²

This takes us to the core concern of our investigation: If *conventional* surrogate organizations carry such risks, "digital surrogate organizations" might very well deepen the threat to democracy. If routinized communication constitutes organization, and if recommendation algorithms amplify outrage, conspiracy theories, and disinformation, *at an organizational level* social technologies are destabilization engines. In digital space, boundaries between the party, some of its surrogates, and issues collapse. In online space, the distinction between cross-cutting cleavage issues, on the one hand, and surrogate organizations, on the other, disappears. Routine patterns of online communication *are* the organization.⁹³ Digitally-enabled organizations such as QAnon, in turn, become elements of hybrid organizational forms that involve other more conventional surrogate organizations, such as news channels. In some circumstances, the party is but a node in a hybrid network of powerful conventional surrogates such as the Koch Foundations *and* digital surrogates that emerge around the latest conspiracy. As a result, the GOP and other conservative parties are left with less control over fundraising, candidate selection, or issue agendas.

For instance, a self-described Christian crowdfunding site called GiveSendGo raised millions of dollars for the Proud Boys, a violent group that played a prominent role in the January 6th, 2021 Insurrection.⁹⁴ Sometimes after more mainstream online fundraising platforms have refused, it has taken up a variety of right-wing causes, including a legal defense fund for Kyle Rittenhouse, the right-wing vigilante who killed two Black Lives Matter protesters in 2020. It has also raised funds for those charged in crimes related to their involvement in the January 6th Insurrection. It also raised in excess of \$9 million in support of the "Freedom Convoy" campaigns by Canadian truckers in 2021–2022. But hybrid surrogate networks are not only digital. Around 2016, a different sort of billionaire donor to far-right causes began to emerge.

89 Armony, *The Dubious Link*; Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*.

90 Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*.

91 Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

92 Hacker and Pierson, *Let Them Eat Tweets*, 24.

93 Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 160.

94 Jason Wilson, "Proud Boys and Other Far-Right Groups Raise Millions via Christian Funding Site," *Guardian*, April 10, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/10/proud-boys-far-right-givesendgo-christian-fundraising-site>.

The older economic libertarian donors like Charles Koch were still there, of course, but a new more radical, social-issues-oriented donor became visible.⁹⁵ Donors such as Peter Thiel bankroll far-right nationalists, as he did in J. D. Vance's successful 2022 Senate campaign.⁹⁶ In addition to political campaigns, Thiel has reportedly met with white nationalists and has embraced a neo-monarchist blogger popular among the "post-liberal" right.⁹⁷

What is the upshot of all this? *The combination of extraordinary amounts of available donor money and digital affordances makes it difficult for conservative parties to police their own ideological borders.* This is what makes far-right connective action so threatening to conventional conservative parties and to liberal democracy.

There is a second important closing thought. The institutionalist backsliding paradigm correctly draws attention to social and economic conditions when assessing the stability of democracy. The dilemma itself emerges from the unique challenges faced by any party that aligns itself with economic elites while simultaneously competing in a democracy that requires broad public support in elections. At its root, the dilemma is borne of tensions found between democracy and concentrations of wealth. According to the logic of the model, for democracy to survive, social and material inequality must remain subordinate to distracting cleavage issues. Otherwise, the conservative party's wealthy core constituency—the wealthy and party allies—might lose confidence in their ability to remain competitive in elections and resort to taking more sharply undemocratic measures. Ziblatt's model of democratic stabilization relies on distractions and confused self-interest. In the face of dire economic and social conditions, the prescribed course of action is to distract national debate from the most pressing issues confronting a nation and the majority of its citizens. Ziblatt of course is not prescribing such a solution; he means only to describe how it works. Resolving the dilemma requires subterfuge, a reorientation of the national conversation away from inequality and to alternative cleavage issues. And what issues are these?

They are issues rooted in identity threats, including race, gender, ethnicity, and nationalism. Cross-cutting issues stoke racism, misogyny and bigotry toward non-normative gender expression, and jingoism. Put differently, they tap into a sense of existential dread that is itself the product of years, decades, of Republican promotion of "cross-cutting cleavage issues" around race and immigrants and non-normative gender identification. So understood, democracy is perched on a powder keg with pyromaniacs striking matches left and right. Is it any wonder that when formulated in this way digital technology upends the delicate balance between having just enough threat-induced rage to keep desperate citizens distracted from their own lived material conditions to instead having too much rage, a rage that spills over into extremist violence? The greatest paradox of the conservative dilemma model is

95 Courtney Weaver and Sam Learner, "Far-Right US Republicans Receive Millions from New Class of Debt Hardliners," *Financial Times*, March 4 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/998f0ff9-e78f-415c-8bc4-c431dded76bc>.

96 Greg Sargent, "Why a Secretive Tech Billionaire Is Bankrolling J. D. Vance," *Washington Post*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/05/05/peter-thiel-bankrolling-jd-vance-reactionary-nationalism/>; Ryan Mac and Lisa Lerer, "The Right's Would-Be Kingmaker," *New York Times*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/technology/republican-trump-peter-thiel.html>.

97 Hannah Gais, "White Nationalist Who Met with Peter Thiel Admired Terrorist Literature," Southern Poverty Law Center, March 18, 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/03/18/white-nationalist-who-met-peter-thiel-admired-terrorist-literature>; James Pogue, "Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel is Placing His Biggest Bets," *Vanity Fair*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>.

that it defines success as a continuation of an unsustainable status quo of grief and misery.

At the heart of the conservative dilemma is wealth and income inequality. In closing, it might be worth recalling what is subordinated by cross-cutting issues. According to data from the US Federal Reserve, in 2024 the top 10% of US households by wealth held on average \$6.9 million, or 67% of total household wealth. Meanwhile, the bottom 50% of households by wealth had \$51,000 on average, which translates into only 2.5% of total household wealth.⁹⁸ Measuring financial disparities another way, government statistics estimate that in 2022 approximately 12% of Americans lived in poverty. Translating that into population counts, of the approximately 340 million people living in the United States, between 38 and 41 million of them live in poverty. But even this extraordinary number seems to underestimate the total. In 2022, a family of four was considered poor if they made less than \$29,679 that year.⁹⁹ In 2024, the average cost of rent in the United States was \$1,712 per month, or \$20,544 for the year,¹⁰⁰ leaving \$9,135 for a family of four to cover transportation, food, and clothing.

And the disparities are growing. During the covid-19 pandemic alone, the wealth held by billionaires in the US increased by 70%.¹⁰¹ It is difficult to think clearly about such an extraordinary concentration of wealth because the numbers are difficult to comprehend.¹⁰² Despite all of this wealth, many billionaires continue to shirk their responsibilities as citizens. A 2019 study found that the average effective tax rate paid by the richest 400 families (0.003% of the population) in the US was 23%, while the rate paid by the bottom half of American households was 24.2%.¹⁰³

Measured in other ways, the working class also shoulders a far greater part of the burdens of citizenship. As the *Baltimore Sun* put it in describing combat fatalities in Iraq by service members from Maryland, “No one from Bethesda, Potomac (median family income of \$200,000 in 2021) or Columbia was among those from the state who died in Iraq. Instead, young soldiers from places like Elkridge, Port Deposit (median family income of \$50,833 in 2021) and Waldorf gave their lives.”¹⁰⁴ The wealthy do what they will, and the poor suffer what they must.

Predatory corporate capitalism is another part of the often status quo. From the start of the pandemic, a great deal of research attention has been paid to anti-vaccine online propaganda, and for good reason. Confidence in vaccines is certainly affected by pernicious online disinformation charlatans. But these purveyors of online

98 Ana Hernández Kent and Lowell R. Ricketts, “The State of US Wealth Inequality,” Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, August 2, 2024, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/institute-for-economic-equity/the-state-of-us-wealth-inequality>.

99 Matthew Desmond, “A Prophet for the Poor,” *New York Review of Books*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/10/03/a-prophet-for-the-poor-white-poverty/>.

100 Janice Kai Chen, Rachel Lerman, and Kate Rabinowitz, “How Much Are Rents Going Up?” *Washington Post*, August 1, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2024/rent-average-by-county-change-rising-falling/>.

101 Aimee Picchi, “America’s Richest 400 Families Now Pay a Lower Tax Rate than the Middle Class,” October 17, 2019, CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americas-richest-400-families-pay-a-lower-tax-rate-than-the-middle-class/>.

102 A trillion is a million times a million or a thousand times a billion. If one were to go back in time by a trillion seconds, one would find oneself somewhere around 30,000 BC.

103 Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, “Progressive Wealth Taxation,” Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Fall 2019, <https://gabriel-zucman.eu/files/SaezZucman2019BPPEA.pdf>.

104 Tom Bowman, “Iraq War Casualties Mostly White, Working Class,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 30, 2005, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2005-10-30-0510290288-story.html>.

misinformation and disinformation have had help in undermining public confidence in the pharmaceutical industry. Purdue Pharma has *knowingly* addicted hundreds of thousands of Americans to OxyContin, a move that led to tens of thousands of deaths.¹⁰⁵ And Purdue is not alone. Walgreens and CVS, two of the largest US pharmacies, agreed in 2023 to pay more than \$10 billion to several states in a settlement of lawsuits brought by their attorney generals. Walmart also agreed to pay more than \$3 billion. And four pharmaceutical companies—Johnson & Johnson, AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health, and McKesson—agreed to collectively pay \$26 billion in February 2024.¹⁰⁶ OxyContin overdoses are a small part of the wave of “deaths of despair” that sociologists Anne Case and Angus Deaton write about in their description of the social devastation wrought by modern neoliberal capitalism.¹⁰⁷ In 2018 alone, some 158,000 people in the United States died from suicide, drug overdoses, or chronic liver disease caused by alcohol consumption, compared to 65,000 in 1995.¹⁰⁸ Predatory corporate greed is a part of the lived experience of people in the material world, the status quo.

The status quo also includes an epidemic of police violence. In 2022, police killed at least 1,176 people around the country, making it the deadliest year on record. From 2013 when data were first collected to 2022, 11,119 people have been killed by police officers in the United States. In 2022, 24% of those killed were Black people, many of them men, while only 13% of the US population is Black. From 2013 to 2022, Black Americans were three times more likely to be killed by US police than white people. In some cities, the disparities were worse. According to Mapping Police Violence, in Minneapolis where George Floyd was murdered by police officers, Black residents are 28 times more likely to be killed by a police officer than are white residents.¹⁰⁹

These conditions, these material realities, these sociohistorical conditions notwithstanding, the outrage engines that draw attention to the threat du jour keep cranking out the hits, from immigrant caravans, Haitians eating family pets, to critical race theory, from drag queen reading hours to vague assertions of “wokeness.” Meanwhile, almost 34 million Americans were food insecure in 2022, including 9 million children.¹¹⁰ According to the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, in their annual survey of financial wellbeing of American families, 40% of Americans would struggle to pay an unexpected \$400 expense.¹¹¹ The leading cause of bankruptcy in the United States is unpayable healthcare costs. And for those who own a home, this vital source of personal financial security is put at risk by the costs of healthcare.

105 Meghan Keneally, “US Opioid-Related Deaths Have Quadrupled in Past 18 Years, Affecting Young Adults and Northeast the Most,” ABC News, February 22, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/us-opioid-related-deaths-quadrupled-past-18-years/story?id=61236140>.

106 Ayana Archie, “CVS and Walgreens Agree to Pay \$10 Billion to Settle Lawsuits Linked to Opioid Sales,” National Public Radio, December 13, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/13/1142416718/cvs-walgreens-opioid-crisis-settlement>.

107 Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

108 Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “American Capitalism Is Failing Trump’s Base as White Working-Class ‘Deaths of Despair’ Rise,” NBC News, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/american-capitalism-failing-trump-s-base-white-working-class-deaths-ncna1181456>.

109 Mapping Police Violence, “2022 Police Violence Report,” 2022, <https://policeviolencereport.org/>.

110 Olivia Hampton, “The Hidden Face of Hunger in America,” National Public Radio, October 2, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/02/1125571699/hunger-poverty-us-dc-food-pantry>.

111 Michael Grover, “What a \$400 Emergency Expense Tells Us about the Economy,” Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, June 11, 2022, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2021/what-a-400-dollar-emergency-expense-tells-us-about-the-economy>.

Considering the Assumptions

To understand the roots of public rage, to understand democratic backsliding, political communication scholars must look outward to the world, to lived experience. Social media platforms certainly stoke the flames, but they didn't start the fire. To survive, a democracy must address the basic needs of its citizens. And to do work that matters, social scientists must connect with the lived realities of the people they purport to study and understand.

