Editorial: Social and political psychological perspectives on global threats to democracy

Shannon Christine Houck[1]*, Sean Everton[1] and Leonard S. Newman[2]

[1]Defense Analysis Department, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, United States, [2]Psychology Department, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, United States

KEYWORDS

democracy, sovereignty, authoritarianism, resilience, political psychology

Editorial on the Research Topic
Social and political psychological perspectives on global threats to democracy

An alarming reversal of democratization is evident on a global scale, from the rise of autocratic rulers to an uptick in aggression directed at sovereign neighbors. Even in long-established democracies like the United States, rising extremism, political polarization, institutional distrust, and digital disinformation signal a period of democratic backsliding.

In response to these threats, this Research Topic—*Social and Political Psychological Perspectives on Global Threats to Democracy*—aims to deepen our understanding of the psychological causes and consequences of democratic decline, while also offering pathways for countering authoritarianism and renewing democratic commitments. Contributors examine these threats from various geographic and theoretical vantage points, including Israel, Mongolia, China, Argentina, and the United States. Collectively, their work highlights the cognitive, emotional, and ideological factors that shape political attitudes and behaviors in increasingly polarized environments.

Psychological roots of antidemocratic and authoritarian attitudes

Several articles in this Research Topic delve into the psychological underpinnings that make antidemocratic and authoritarian beliefs appealing, particularly during periods of social unrest and uncertainty.

The psychological appeal of authoritarianism

Newman draws on classic psychological theories to explain why individuals in liberal democracies might willingly turn toward authoritarian governance. Drawing on insights from Fromm, Baumeister, and Schwartz, the study contends that in times of uncertainty and complexity, authoritarianism provides a sense of control and simplicity. Rather than a baffling anomaly, this retreat from freedom may be a psychologically predictable response to societal turbulence.

Rethinking Christian nationalism in the U.S.

Everton uses multivariate analysis to dissect the predictors of Christian nationalist sentiments in the United States. Findings reveal that age, political conservatism, biblical literalism, and frequent worship attendance are stronger indicators than race or ethnicity. This challenges the assumption that Christian nationalism is exclusively a white phenomenon and suggests a broader cultural and ideological movement rooted in deeper grievances and dislocations than racial identity alone.

Polarization and the politics of perception

Zapata et al. examine Argentina's 2019 presidential election to understand how trust and familiarity shape voter behavior. Using logistic regression and cluster analyses, they find that these psychological factors are powerful predictors of candidate choice and are closely linked to ideology and media consumption. The study highlights how easily these variables can be manipulated, especially in polarized two-party systems, which can contribute to deeper social divides and democratic fragility.

Documenting antidemocratic threats through novel contexts and methods

Bass et al., Efimov et al., and Finkelstein et al., offer another set of studies that highlight threats to democracy through empirical analyses and novel investigative approaches, focusing on propaganda, foreign influence, and institutional pressures.

TikTok, propaganda, and public opinion

Finkelstein et al. present three studies examining how TikTok, a Chinese-owned platform, may serve as a tool for state propaganda. Compared to Instagram and YouTube, TikTok significantly limited access to content critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), while amplifying pro-CCP narratives, even when such content attracted less user engagement. A U.S. survey further revealed that heavy TikTok users viewed China's human rights record more favorably than non-users. These findings raise alarms about foreign influence over digital platforms and the implications for democratic discourse.

Foreign influence, funding, and academic freedom

Bass et al. explore the relationship between foreign funding of U.S. universities and preserving liberal democratic norms. Across seven studies, they find that while overall foreign funding shows weak associations with speech suppression, funding from authoritarian regimes and members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is associated with increased speaker deplatforming, punitive speech actions, and antisemitism on campus. This line of research highlights the potential risks of foreign financial influence on academic environments and the values they uphold.

Coping with and resisting threats to democracy

The final group of articles examines how individuals and societies psychologically navigate and cope with threats to democracy, highlighting sources of resilience and wellbeing during democratic crises.

Mental health and political identity in crisis contexts

Avidor and Shmotkin investigate the link between political orientation and mental health during Israel's 2023 judicial overhaul crisis. They find that while both leftists and rightists report similar levels of general wellbeing, leftists exhibit significantly higher psychological distress. Differing psychological mindsets partially explain this disparity: rightists more often coped with what they perceived to be a hostile world through "positive engagement," allowing them to reinterpret threats in a reassuring way. The study underscores how political beliefs and coping styles interact under conditions of national stress.

Building psychological resilience against authoritarianism

Houck focuses on Mongolia as a case study to explore psychological resilience in the face of potential invasion. The article outlines a conceptual framework for understanding the psychological capacities necessary to resist authoritarian pressure. It offers a foundation for future research on how smaller nations can defend democratic sovereignty through psychological preparedness and resilience.

Conclusion: psychological defenses for democratic integrity

Together, these contributions offer an examination of democracy's psychological vulnerabilities. Whether through foreign influence, ideological capture of science, algorithmic propaganda, or the human desire for certainty in uncertain times, democracies face threats that extend beyond the ballot box and into the minds of their citizens.

To address these challenges, we must cultivate not just institutional safeguards but also psychological resilience. Interventions must account for the deep-seated cognitive and emotional needs that make authoritarianism attractive and democratic engagement difficult. By better understanding these underlying forces, we can begin to design more effective strategies to reinforce liberal democracy.

Author contributions

SH: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SE: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LN: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.