

The Role of Social Media in Democratic Recession of the United States of America



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Abstract

The emergence of social media has been a mixed blessing. While it has resulted in easy and cost-effective means of communication, it has nonetheless led to a decline in certain elements of the US democracy. The cheaper means and the ease of communications that have come with the digital era have resulted in constant flows of information with no effective medium in place to check the leakage of misleading and harmful contents. This trend has resulted in dynamics like the spread of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, populism, polarization, etc. Such a trend does not appear to augur well for the country's democracy health.

Combating the negative implications of social media on the United States democracy is a multifaceted endeavor that requires contributions of different actors, such as government, academic institutions, international organizations, civic and civil societies, as well as the individuals. In this work, I argue that measures such as legislative reforms, international cooperation, adoption of best practices, promotion of socioeconomic equality, value-based and inspiring communications, efficient and independent journalism, digital education, just to mention but a few, can help to reverse the tide of democratic recession in the country. These factors are interconnected in a synergistic way. The legislative reforms set the legal framework; international cooperation ensures a coordinated response; adoption of best practices aligns with responsible behavior and actions; and socioeconomic equality addresses underlying issues that reorient some people to unethical social media actions. While inspiring communications instill hopes in people and contribute to a positive online environment, ethical and independent journalism provides accurate information. Lastly, digital education empowers individuals to navigate the digital landscape responsibly and safely. A comprehensive strategy that incorporates these interconnected elements is more likely to effectively combat the negative impact of social media on democracy. While all these factors are instrumental in combatting social media

negative dynamics in the US democracy, digital education and the promotion of socioeconomic equality stand out. First, once Americans are well informed about the social media use and its negative implications, they would not easily become prey of disinformation and misinformation. Second, with social and economic equality Americans would feel part and parcel of the system, thereby not yielding to whims and caprices of polarizing political figures.

Keywords: Democracy, democratic recession, democratic erosion, democratic backsliding, social media, populism, digital era, fake news, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, polarization.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	v
Chapter 1: The Historical Overview of Democratic Recession in the United States	1
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. Structure of the Major Research Paper	3
1.3. Research Objective	4
1.4. Liberalism as a Conceptual Framework	4
1.5. The Overview of Democratic Recession in the United States	6
Chapter 2: The Impact of social media on the United States' Democracy	16
2.1. The Elusive Hopes of Social Media Revolution	16
2.2. Social Media Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation	20
2.3. Social Media and Political Polarization	25
2.4. Populism and Democratic Recession	31
Chapter 3: Remedying the Adverse Effects of Social Media on Democracy	36
3.1. Countering the Effects of Fake News	37
3.2. Curtailing the Rising Tide of Political Polarization in the US	44
3.3. Combatting the Threats of Populism	50
Bibliography	54

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Chapter 1: The Historical Overview of Democratic Recession in the United States

1.1. Introduction

Scholars once debated whether the global democracies, and most especially those within the core, were receding or not. In the past couple of decades however, most scholars have come to accept the fact that democracies around the world are receding. Quite a significant number of democracies have been in a mild but protracted recession since after 2005. In recent years, not only has it become noticeable that global democracies are in decline at a pace never seen before, but democratic recession has made its way into the core of democracy: the United States of America. Beyond the democratic institutional stagnation or its seemingly conspicuous erosion and the dissipation of civil liberties, civic engagement, and freedom, there have been many other concerning trends. First, there has been some degree of democratic institutional breakdown in US, a citadel of global democratic expansionism since after the end of the Cold War (Diamond, 2015). Second, the quality or stability of democracy has been in a declining state in a lot of large and strategically important emerging economies (Diamond, 2015, p. 144). Third, authoritarianism has been on the increase thanks to the influence of the likes of China and Russia, including in big and strategically important countries like Saudi Arabia, India, etc. Lastly, the United States does not only increasingly seem to be performing poorly at the domestic level, it also largely appears to lack the ability to promote democracy abroad.

The decline in the quality of democratic processes and institutions is commonly referred to as democratic recession. Democratic recession involves the weakening of democratic norms and practices, erosion of civil liberties and human rights, reduction in/restriction to democratic political participation, and the rise in authoritarianism. Generally, democratic recession is often used in situations where democratic principles and institutions are under threat, and the states

and their institutions are likely to experience some democratic backsliding, i.e., the “processes of political change in which countries that enjoy a certain level of democracy become significantly less democratic” (Press, 2022, p. 4). For a country to be deemed a democratic backslider, it should have met two conditions: A state should have achieved a “significant level of democracy and then experienced significant erosion of democratic institutions” (Press, p. 4). It is important to state that in this paper the terms such as democratic erosion, recession, and backsliding will be used interchangeably in reference to the current state of the US democracy.

The United States has experienced increasing political polarization, with citizens and politicians becoming more ideologically divided and less willing to compromise. This can lead to legislative gridlock, weakening the ability of democratic institutions to function effectively. Similarly, the erosion of civic norms that support democratic governance, such as respect for the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and a free press, can undermine the foundations of democracy and create an environment where institutions are less able to check and balance one another. Unfortunately, the American democratic institutions have been experiencing rapid erosion in civic norms for some time now. Similarly, attacks on the media and attempts to undermine press freedom can limit access to accurate and unbiased information, hindering the ability of citizens to make informed decisions and hold those in power accountable. Attacks on the traditional media houses give room for disinformation and misinformation (Norman Eisen, 2019). The spread of false or misleading information, particularly through social media, can distort public discourse, erode trust in institutions, and make it difficult for citizens to engage in productive political conversations. The spread of false, divisive, or misleading information has become more common thanks to the rise of populism (Nietsche, 2020). Populist movements that challenge established political elites can both energize political participation and contribute to an "us versus them" mentality in which party sympathisers tend to spread misleading contents about

their political opponents, thereby undermining democratic compromise and consensus-building (Othmeni, 2021). Like the media, the voters are seemingly suppressed in the United States. Efforts to restrict access to voting through measures such as voter ID laws and redistricting can disproportionately affect marginalized communities and undermine the principle of equal representation in a democracy. Consequently, the above-mentioned dynamics result in decreased participation in traditional forms of civic engagement, such as voting or joining community organizations thereby weakening democratic processes and institutions as diverse voices and perspectives that contribute to policy debates are silenced (Richard Wike, 2022; Olaniran & Williams, 2020).

1.2. Structure of the Major Research Paper

This paper is divided into three chapters. The first chapter presents the historical overview of democratic recession in the United States. Preceding the presentation of the historical account of democratic recession is the exposition of the following subsections: a brief introduction that gives an overview of what democratic recession means or entails, the introduction of liberalism as a conceptual framework used to explain the effects of social media on democracy and the recommended remedies, and the research objective of this work.

The second chapter of this paper explains the negative implications of social media on US democracy. In this section, the social media dynamics, such as malinformation, disinformation, misinformation, populism, and polarisation, are used to instantiate the injurious implications of social media use on US democracy. While these are not the only dynamics resulting from the use of social media, I have restricted my discussion to these ones given the scope of this paper. The final chapter of the paper proposes strategies and policy recommendations for mitigating the adverse effects of social media on US democracy. Factchecking mandate, media regulation,

algorithmic transparency, media literacy, legislative reforms, inter alia, are proposed as the necessary remedies to democratic recession in the country.

1.3. Research Objective

While social media has undoubtedly provided opportunities for democratic engagement and activism, its negative impact on democratic values and institutions cannot be ignored. Therefore, in this work, I seek to gather and analyze data from reputable sources, such as Pew Research Center, academic databases, and governmental reports, to examine trends in social media usage with resulting effects of polarization, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, populism and their impact on democracy. Mitigating these adverse effects will require a multifaceted approach, including improved platform regulations, media literacy programs, fact-checking initiatives, and promoting diverse and civil discourse online. Therefore, among other recommendations, I propose some of these measures as a means to address the negative impact of social media in US democratic space.

1.4. Liberalism as a Conceptual Framework

Liberal conceptualization of International Relations emphasizes the implications of domestic factors, ideas, values, preferences, and institutions in the state's conduct of international affairs. They believe that these internal factors influence the choices and behaviour of the state when it comes to international relations and multilateral cooperation. Within the ambience of democratic recession resulting from the misuse of social media, the liberal scholars' perspectives can help us establish how some of these domestic dynamics affect a state's foreign policies implementation.

With respect to democratic peace theory, John Ikenberry who is a proponent of liberal internationalism argues that democracies appear to cooperate more easily in the international

system, especially with other liberal democracies (Ikenberry G. J., 2020). The democratic peace theory argues that such domestic dynamics of a state like public opinion, values, norms, and institutions have a large degree of influence in the conduct of international affairs. That is to say, the state transports its domestic preferences to the external system when implementing its foreign policies and bargaining multilaterally (Ikenberry G. J., 2020). Thus, if the social media platforms are used to manipulate the American public and undermine its democratic systems, it will eventually erode the democracy and its institutions, values, and norms. The negative implication in the international relations is that the US would depart from its original cooperative posturing as it gets focused more on tackling the domestic issues that backslide its democracy.

Ikenberry also argues that the state's power of attraction and ideational power, or soft power and the power of knowledge, can be influenced largely by domestic characteristics, such as the public opinion. The author's concept of "liberal hegemony" implies that the attractiveness of the US liberal values, norms, practices and institutions can influence its behavior in the conduct of international affairs (Ikenberry J. G., 2018). Therefore, when social media is used to manipulate the public to create a delegitimizing image about democracy and the traditional establishment at the White House, as was the case during the regime of former president Trump, it could eventually erode the power of attraction that the US enjoys from the league of nations. The outcome would thus call into question the attractiveness of democratic values that US seeks to transport to other nations, especially the illiberal ones. Moravcsik also emphasizes the role that ideas play in shaping state behavior (Moravcsik, 1997). However, the deployment of social media to spread undemocratic ideas can contribute to reorientation of state's foreign policy focus. The US leaders who come to power through undemocratic means could opt for foreign policies that prioritize nationalism and isolationism over international cooperation and multilateralism, thereby undermining the international architecture of cooperative behaviour among nations.

In the area of liberal intergovernmentalism, Andrew Moravcsik argues that state behavior is influenced by domestic preferences (Moravcsik, 1997). Therefore, the manipulation of social media to influence the electoral outcomes, as witnessed in US 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Kužel, 2019), could produce political leadership with more nationalist, self-centered, and isolationist policies. The reorientation of domestic politics could have an impact on the US engagement with international community due to skepticism about the essence of multilateralism and international cooperation resulting from the anti-establishment leadership¹.

In summary, from a liberal international relations perspective, the domestic dynamics like the misuse of social media with resulting effects on democracy can have a profound impact on a state's behavior in the international arena. These impacts could manifest in state's reorientation toward more nationalist, illiberal, and anti-intergovernmentalist policies as domestic preferences and dynamics shape the state's perception of its interests and role in the international system.

1.5. The Overview of Democratic Recession in the United States

The 1990s marked the era of hopes and exhilaration as democracy experienced a global exponential growth. This was the era during which the Journal of Democracy began publishing fascinating stories about the democratic ascendancy even in seemingly autocratic or authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2022, p. 2). As Diamond argues, “democracy was on the march” not only in organized electioneering processes, such as at the ballot boxes, but also at the normative and intellectual level. The academics from universities and colleges as well as practitioners in various institutions and organizations got engrossed in the subject of democratic expansionism and its political dividends. However, notwithstanding the explosive expansion that democracy witnessed

¹You may consult [How America First Became America Alone](#), published in the Atlantic, to learn more about former president Trump's isolationist policies.

in the 1990s, the experts in the field had serious doubts about the solidity of many democratic regimes (Diamond, 2022, p. 4). Not only were many of these democracies illiberal, but they were also poorly governed in ways that researchers predicted them prime candidates for democratic backsliding (Diamond, 2022, p. 2).

In recent years, the United States has witnessed a concerning decline in the quality of its democracy. Kleinfeld argues that the US “democracy is at a dangerous inflection point”, and that such a “moment requires a step-change in strategy and support”, else the country will face a democratic recession that could be as “serious as the ones already occurring in India and Hungary”, and as almost “one-hundred-year reversal that occurred following America’s Reconstruction era” (p. 2). In fact, it is not out of place to intimate that the American democracy is currently in a downward spiral. In 2017, the Economic Intelligence Unit did its rating in which it downgraded the United States’ democracy to a flawed democracy; currently, Europe’s International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (EIIDEA) classifies the United States under “backsliding democracy, while Freedom House considers the United States’ democracy to be “one of fastest downward trajectories of any country, now ranking U.S. democratic quality alongside Romania and Croatia” (Kleinfeld, p. 3).

The democratic woes of the United States have not just emerged out of the blue; in fact, they do have historical antecedence, which some scholars prefer to call the “inherent” shortcomings or weaknesses of democracy. There have been unresolved democratic challenges that have compounded over the last couple of decades and have started manifesting themselves thanks to certain immediate drivers, such as the social media dynamics. While the country’s political landscape has experienced dramatic changes, many Americans born decades ago have failed to appreciate how much of the change it has been. For instance, the terms that have come to be known as the “swing” and “battleground” states never existed until the 1990s since many of the

states were highly competitive (Kleinfeld, p. 3). Unlike the 1990s, there are now just a handful of states that may be classified as “swing” and “battleground” ones where stakes are high for political parties. In an article, Myra Adams identifies only six states to be “swing” and “battleground” states that may decide the winner in the 2024 elections². This means that most seats are now deemed to be “safe seats” for both Democrats and Republicans. As Alexander Kustov et al argue, the rise of safe seats incentivizes political candidates to cater to the views of partisan followers, even if those views are extreme, while it disincentivizes them from taking into consideration the views of those who mean well for the nation and democracy in particular (Alexander Kustov, 2021). However, a system that motivates parties “to offer policies aimed at the encompassing and long-term interests of the electorate, rest on fragile foundations” (Alexander Kustov, p. 6) . Precisely, this has become a trend in US where the political system has become “inhospitable to strong parties from the very start” (Alexander Kustov, p. 6). Safe seats together with other corrosive dynamics, such as polarization, has empowered the antidemocratic politicians to enact authoritarian policies (Kleinfeld, p. 6). Typical examples are the former President Trump’s policies on immigration, such as family separation, border wall, anti-muslimism, etc.³

All the democratic structures, such as bicameralism, the separation of power, presidential veto points, federalism, inter alia, are contributory factors to campaigns that gear toward candidates and the party leadership inability to deselect their elected members in Congress (Alexander Kustov, p. 6). In fact, some of the democratic procedural tools used by the elected representatives may pose more problems to the system than being a solution. For instance, the

² For more information on the said states, you may consult Myra’s article at <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/3870203-these-6-states-will-determine-the-2024-presidential-election/>

³ In her article “Five moments that define Trump’s record on immigration”, Maggie Haberman identifies the border wall, family separation, and the Muslims travel ban as those defining moments. These policies were criticized as being authoritarian and anti-democratic by the left leaning analysts, and even some right-wing sympathizers. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/14/us/politics/trump-immigration-record.html>

procedural tool known as the filibuster requires sixty votes to override and allow the minority senators to overturn a legislation that might be supported by the majority side (Kleinfeld, 2022). Some amendment was made to this procedural tool in 1970s to make it easier to use, yet it has been rarely used since 2010 (Kleinfeld, p. 4). Filibuster has inadvertently transformed rule by the majority into that by the supermajority, thereby creating gridlock, and serving as incentive for gerrymandering. These outcomes frustrate American voters, making them feel that their votes for a particular political party may not necessarily inure to the accomplishment of their policy goals (Kleinfeld, p. 4). Among other things, these emerging phenomena are the drivers of US democratic recession.

While there may be many factors that drive democratic recession, many scholars have come to conclusion that the drivers of democratic recession can be grouped into two main categories. First, there is the role played by external actors, which we shall label as external drivers of democratic recession or backsliding. Second, there are internal factors that turn to undermine democratic processes and institutions within the state. We shall name the latter the internal drivers of democratic recession. Some of the most cited reasons for democratic recession in the United States have to do with the external factors that derail the democratic processes in the country. In most instances, political commentators and analysts lay the blame squarely on authoritarian regimes, such as those of Russia and China, for their antidemocratic actions and inactions (Press, 2022, p. 7). In these accusations and counteraccusations between US and the rogue regimes, it appears that democracy and autocracy are locked in a global contestation for primacy of legitimacy and acceptance in which autocracy triumphs over democracy (Press, 2022, p. 7). Among other things, the autocratic regimes' success factors are perceived by these analysts to have ranged from the defiance of the United States' propagation of democratic ideals around the globe; the breach of US led sanction regimes, such as economic sanction induced protocols

and alienation of rogue regimes such as those of military and other authoritarian regimes; overt support for other authoritarian regimes; wanton human rights abuse; elections meddling, inter alia. Undoubtedly, the most recent assertiveness by China and Russia to challenge America's international order and to build a new world order in consortium with many other authoritarian regimes through BRICS only lends credence to belief in how external authoritarian actors undermine American democracy⁴.

Another most recent external aggression that lends support to how external actors undermine the United States' democracy is the Russia's meddling in the 2016 and the 2020 elections, although the latter interference did not sway the election outcome in favour of Russia's favourite candidate. The election meddling by Russia succeeded in swaying the outcome in favour of the 2016 presidential candidate, Donald Trump, who was believed to be in good terms with the Russian autocrat, Vladimir Putin. Consequently, a committee of inquiry was constituted to investigate the election meddling, and on July 13, 2018, a federal grand jury sitting in the District of Columbia returned an indictment against 12 Russian military intelligence officers for their role in interfering with the 2016 presidential election⁵.

Another overarching external explanation given to the United States' democratic erosion relates to inefficient regulatory framework put in place to deal with the emergence of new technologies and social media. Social media is usually considered to be an external driver with respect to the nation's democratic backsliding, especially given the role these networks play in amplifying the spread of hate speech, disinformation, malinformation, and misinformation which contribute to untamed political polarization and fragmentation, which in turn reduces citizens'

⁴ In this article, Giovanni Salzano explains that the BRICS enlargement will only worsen the problem of democratic recession. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-28/brics-enlargement-is-going-to-worsen-its-democracy-problem#xj4y7vzkg>

⁵ The indictment charges 11 defendants. <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/cyber/russian-interference-in-2016-u-s-elections>

approval of governments, democratic institutions and processes, as well as the traditional media platforms that once served as the gatekeepers of information flows and dissemination (Seth Flaxman, 2016). As Press and Carothers highlight in their work, added to the democratic woes emanating from the influence of social media are the emerging forms of electronic surveillance systems, such as “AI-enabled facial recognition and targeted spyware”, used by governments in certain authoritarian regimes, and even in some democratic states, “to help harass or repress political opposition and independent civic actors” (p. 8). While some might argue that the AI-empowered facial recognition aimed at dealing with certain segments of the society is currently not a concern in the United States, there are fears that an anti-establishment or authoritarian leader might use it in the near future, most especially given the current polarization in the country. This technology is believed to have been used by the United States’ police in racial profiling of the Black Americans and other minorities⁶. Notwithstanding these threats, the government has not been successful in enacting regulations and policies to remedy the situation. The government has admitted its failure and has determined to act on the related technologies such as the Artificial Intelligence, as documented by Daniel Howley⁷.

On the other hand, many other analysts attribute the current US democratic recession to certain internal dynamics that corrode democracy and its associated institutions from within the country. Press and Carothers group these internal drivers into three categories: populism, polarization, and the failure of democracy, i.e., “democracy not delivering” (p. 9). Populism may be defined as a political approach that emphasizes the concerns of ordinary people, often by contrasting the citizens against the elites and political establishment. Merriam Webster

⁶ In an article published by Harvard University, Alex Najibi bemoans the discriminatory profiling of Black Americans by AI facial recognition technologies.

https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2020/racial-discrimination-in-face-recognition-technology/?fbclid=IwAR2wU4LhNsj87kzIrNfe5p3UV6x_AK5apGKhMafMHKzp31rV1Kvcj6zdxHY

⁷ [Senators say they failed to act on social media, won't make same mistake with AI](#)

Dictionary defines polarization as a state in which people's opinions, interests, and beliefs no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes. Polarization and populism are part of the major social dynamics discussed in this paper; and as a result, I treat them in more details in chapters two and three.

While Press and Carothers are not entirely in agreement with this school of thought regarding democratic recession, they nonetheless acknowledge the fact that these internal dynamics have negative implications on democracy (p. 9). The former president Trump is a classic example of a populist whose actions and inactions could disintegrate democratic infrastructure. In his work, "Social Media Effects: Hijacking Democracy and Civility in Civic Engagement", Williams emphasizes that within the ambit of populism, there are serious threats to democratic cohesion of the masses. According to him, "societies are politically polarized in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", "Us" versus "They", or "citizens" versus "immigrants" (2020, p. 81). When this happens, he adds, the political performance of any party reflects only people's "general will to forcefully reflect their sovereignty", and as a result, these groups are formed by means of "unsatisfied demand, along with other unsatisfied needs" (p. 81). The result is "a springboard for people to identify a common ...enemy believed to be the perpetrator even if this entails the use of fake news" (p. 81).

Populism is not only an ingredient for political polarization, but also an incentive for mass delegitimization of political establishment and technocratic style of politicking. To rally support for his presidential bid in the 2016 elections, former president Trump declared his supposed likes for poor and uneducated Americans and his dislikes for the rich Americans. Such a rhetoric "evinces populist leaders' performance based on pretending to be "outsiders" in mainstream politics to give perceived distance between their actual experiences as the "elite" (Williams B. O., p. 81). Former president Trump once again displayed his outlandish opportunistic and

populist rhetoric during the United Auto Workers strike in September 2023. Claiming to side with the union workers, Mr. Trump criticized the government for electric car policy as an attempt to push manufacturing jobs to China. He claimed that “the all Electric Car is a disaster for both the United Auto Workers and the American Consumer”⁸. Trump meant to incite the auto workers against the Biden government with the hope that it would translate to some political dividends in the lead up to the 2024 presidential election. Unfortunately, he failed to explain how the government’s vision for increase in electric cars production would automatically push the manufacturing jobs to China. He then went on to label Shawn Fain, the union president, as one who is “not doing a good job in representing his union”, and for that matter would not “have a union in three years from now”⁹. Despite his view on Fain’s failure, Trump could not suggest what the union president should have done differently.

Closely related to populism is the political polarization of the United States’ democratic system which some observers, shocked by contentious political discourse of various political leaderships, blame for the declining influence and legitimacy of democratic processes. Miller and Benjamin (2021) argue that “polarization may lead to brinkmanship or gridlock, making the” democratic processes and institutions less functional (p. 100). Citing from Nate Haken, Miller and Benjamin postulate that in the instance of polarization “the usual brokers (media, state institutions, opinion leaders, religious and community leaders) lose relevance and legitimacy, making consensus-building difficult with no shared vision or context to build from and organize around.” (p. 100). Worst of it all, the synergic result of populism, polarization, disinformation, and fake news is the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, practices, processes, and the traditional media that serve as a bulwark against the effects of social media (Miller, 2021).

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/27/us/politics/trump-united-auto-workers-strike.html>

⁹ Idem

One other internal dynamic to which many analysts anchor their explanation regarding the US democratic erosion is the failure of democracy to deliver its promise. Since 1990s, the failure of most democracies has been associated with domestic governments use of various methods, like gerrymandering and changes in technical rules to overturn democratic institutions and processes. Rachel Kleinfeld argues that the destructions of these “democracies have been supported by pluralities or majorities of their citizenries, whose polarization leads them to back policies that harm democracy to ensure their side prevails” (p. 1). Care must be taken that the US democracy does not come near such a trajectory. Even though some analysts bank their hopes on the historical strength of the United States’ democratic institutions and processes, dwelling on the past glory might not necessarily offer much consolation given the role of emerging technologies and a couple of other reasons. First, as Kleinfeld observes, many of the laws that form the basis of democratic “institutional guardrails were written poorly in the aftermath of the Civil War, with loopholes that are easily challenged given a lack of precedent” (p. 1). Second, the country’s laws, practices and institutions have existed for more than two centuries. The age of the United States means that most of its laws and institutions have become old-fashioned and may only be qualified as norms and traditions. Unfortunately, norms and traditions erode with the passage of time, and that is the case with the United States’ ages old laws and institutions (Kleinfeld, p. 1).

Moreover, there is an emerging conflict between democratic values and what the right-wing thinkers prefer to term as “American values”. In this value-based contestation, what is considered to be American value by one camp is the opposite for the other camp. For right-wing thinkers in particular, democratic values and practices that serve as the cornerstone of the United States’ democracy have come to adulterate the values and practices that are hitherto American. In the October 2020 poll, the Pew Research Centre found that about eight out of ten registered voters from both sides of the divide declared that their differences with the other side were about

core American values, and roughly nine out of ten in both camps expressed concerns that a victory by the other party would lead to irreversible harm to the country (Diamond, 2022, p. 16). The keen contestation between the two camps for American values nurtures suspicion and mistrust. A February 2021 survey found profound partisan divisions over the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election in which former president Trump accused the Democrats of voter fraud, “with most Republicans but very few Democrats believing that there was widespread voter fraud” (Diamond, 2022, pp. 16-17). In this survey, it was documented that about 29% of Americans, and 39% of Republicans were advocates of violence to “protect America” if the elected representatives could not live up to the expectation (Diamond, 2022, pp. 16-17). This motive manifested on January 6, 2021, when Mr. Trump’s supporters attacked the Capitol Hill, vandalising properties and causing casualties in an attempt to overturn the outcome of 2020 presidential election. It is worrisome to note that a sizable number of politicians and elected officials in the United States have expressed willingness to circumvent or abandon democratic norms and practices in order to achieve political goals. Therefore, it has become common to hear complains about “restrictions on voting, politicization of electoral administration, and increasingly audacious and scientific gerrymandering that seeks to foreclose electoral alternation” (Diamond, 2022, pp. 16-17).

Even though philanthropic organizations and individuals have taken measures to reverse the rapid decline in democratic processes and institutions, largely through time commitment and financial sacrifices to get people to vote with the hope of re-extracting institutional trust and legitimacy from Americans, such efforts have not proven sufficient enough. Notwithstanding the record numbers of minorities and swing voters turning out to vote in the recent general elections, there has been some accelerated backsliding of US democracy as witnessed in the 2016 and 2020 elections. The January 6, 2021, attack on Capitol Hill exemplifies just how low the democratic

credentials of the United States have sunk¹⁰. Given these failures, it suffices to say “the community supporting U.S. democracy needs a better strategy” than what is currently in place (Kleinfeld, p. 2).

In all these causal explanations of factors accounting for democratic recession, the emergence of social media and the related technologies presents an interesting scenario. The use of social media has both the internal and external dynamics that have come to test the resilience of the US democratic processes and institutions. Through their vogue, alluring, and intrusive nature, various social media platforms have come to manipulate behaviors and perceptions regarding democratic governance and its related values, practices, and norms. Both external and internal actors have exploited social media to shape or influence various democratic outcomes. Dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, hateful contents, and the rise of populism and polarization have been facilitated thanks to the role of social media. For the rest of this paper, I discuss how the emergence of social media has resulted in democratic recession in the United States and the measures needed to remedy the situation.

Chapter 2: The Impact of social media on the United States’ Democracy

2.1. The Elusive Hopes of Social Media Revolution

The digital revolution which took place in the 21st century appeared to have validated two main ideas about the world. First, there was the era’s predominant ideological preference for the minimal state, i.e., the reduced role of the state in citizens’ affairs as advocated for by Robert Nozick¹¹. The internet revolution of the 21st century came as the neoliberalism’s most successful triumph as government’s regulations governing sociopolitical and economic life of the citizens

¹⁰ For more on the January 6 riot, you may consult New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com>

¹¹ Robert Nozick, though did not consider himself to be a political philosopher he nonetheless advocated for the reduced role of the state in personal affairs in his famous work, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, published in 1974.

were highly reduced. With the emergence of digital revolution came an explosive emergence of digital market, increase in properties and wealth acquisition, a new sense of personal empowerment, vibrant online communities, and connection (Starr, 2021.). The second idea that got validated was the acute optimism regarding the technological progress and the implications for political institutional setup. Regarding the second validation, the social media came with the new means of communication as there was an expanded access to different news items, and with reliable and faster delivery of such news. With personal computers and access to the internet, it became easier for the individuals to access information. It was thus assumed that all this would be good for democracy as it provided enormous opportunities for free expression of ideas and opinions thereby resulting in more public discussions (Starr, p. 67). The neoliberals were equally convinced that the digital explosion would break down the concentration of power which would in turn impede dictatorship and authoritarianism around the globe.

Paul Starr identifies three main errors regarding the hopeful validation of the two ideas mentioned above. First, Starr argues that the surging optimism during the era highlighted only the pros of the digital revolution without any thought on the cons that could come along with it. What accounted for this mishap was that the neoliberals placed very little value on how the predigital media space served the interests of democratic institutions. For instance, they assumed “that the emerging digital economy left to itself would be no less supportive of a free press than the predigital economy” (Starr, p. 67). The second error, Starr argues, was that the internet optimists failed to conceive how the affordability of the explosive digital information dissemination could serve as a “double-edged sword”. Among other things, the online communication has facilitated the spread of disinformation and hateful contents at a lower cost and faster speed than it was the case during the predigital era. This has become a double-edged sword because when given the chance, people opt for sources of information that “confirm their

pre-existing biases and to self-segregate into groups with similar views”, leading to polarization of the political landscape (Starr, p. 67). The last misconception regarding the breakdown of centralized power was the failure to consider the possibility for stricter state’s control, monopoly, and surveillance of digital space. The digital optimists were inattentive to the fact that the emergence of internet during the century was not necessarily inherent in the technology and thus its use could be manipulated and restricted contingent on the constitutive choice about its development and implications for the governments (Starr, 2021.).

Unsurprisingly, it did not take long for the neoliberals and the digital media optimists to recant their optimism regarding the role of social media. The Pew Research Centre survey documented a sharp disapproval of the role of social media in the United States’ democratic institutions and processes. It found that 64% of Americans indicated that social media was largely not a good thing for democracy; 79% said it has resulted in sharp division among people in their political opinions; and 69% of the Americans stated that it made people less civil in their political discourse (Richard Wike, 2022, p. 5). In fact, the survey further discovered that out of the 19 democratic nations surveyed, Americans had the most negative opinion about the impact of social media on democracy: a whopping 64% of them said it has been bad for democracy. The perception of the social media negative role in democracy varied from person to person depending on one’s political leaning. Therefore, the responses on its effects were disproportionate between the Democrats and the Republicans (Richard Wike, 2022). According to Wike and coauthors, the Republicans and the 74% of the independents leaning toward the Republican Party were “much more likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners (57%) to see the ill effects of social media on the political system” (p. 7).

Regarding the overall satisfaction with democracy faced with the challenges posed by the social media, the result has largely been abysmal in the United States. Studies document that in

US, even considering the supporters of the party in power, less than half of them were satisfied with democracy. For instance, less than half (49%) of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents were said to be satisfied, compared with a paltry quarter (25%) of Republicans and the Republican Party leaners (Richard Wike, 2022, p. 13). The driving force behind this democratic dissatisfaction, the authors discovered, had to do with their inability to influence the political outcomes. For instance, among the Americans who said they were not able to influence politics, 70% of them said they were not satisfied with the country's democracy, compared with about 42% of those who stated that they had any amount of influence (Richard Wike, p. 15).

The role of social media has become quite inimical that it now leads to insurrection and physical violence in the United States. For the first time in the history of the country, the seemingly dissatisfied individuals, launched an assault on the U.S. Capitol Hill and occupied it for hours following the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. The violent attack resulted in five casualties, with many more wounded and several properties vandalized in the process. The attack that occurred on the Capitol Hill emanated from "polarizing political rhetoric and serious planning that took place on websites that propagate far-right conspiracy theories and radical agendas" (Othmeni, p. 13). Certain websites and social media platforms, such as Parler, Gab, Donald, and MeWe promoted conspiracy theories and disinformation regarding the results of the presidential election. At least 80% of the top posts on former president Trump included calls for violence regarding the Electoral College certification (Othmeni, 2021). This online extremism could lead to other far-reaching consequences. For instance, it was discovered that the shootings in the Chabad of Poway Synagogue as well as the El Paso massacre were attributed to the extremist online anonymous message shared on a platform called 8chan (Othmeni, p. 14). The most worrisome part of this extremist site is that not only do its extremist users share their manifestos and hate speech, they also use it to celebrate mass shootings and massacres (Othmeni,

2021, p. 14). According to the Washington Post, Fredrick Brennan, the founder of 8chan in 2013, admitted that “the board is a receptive audience for domestic terrorists¹²”. On this ground, Williams et al conclude that given the current state of social media it is not far-fetched to conclude that these media platforms are “holding democracy hostage instead of leading to the free and equal democratic ideals they were believed to support” (Williams B. O., 2020).

The rest of this chapter presents a number of dynamics resulting from the use of social media which have been the bane of backsliding democracy in the United States. More specifically, the available evidence from such sources as the Pew Research Centre and many scholars’ research works suggests that these dynamics play a key role in democratic recession. However, given the scope of this paper I only analyze the negative role of a few social media dynamics: populism, polarization, and disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation.

2.2. Social Media Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

Contrary to liberalism’s perspective on the need for self-expression and freedom, the inefficient norms and regulations governing the social media have made the platforms a breeding ground for rapid dissemination of false information. The speed at which misinformation spreads can negatively impact public discourse and decision-making processes. In a similar fashion, it has become the channel of disinformation and malinformation. These three terms are often collectively termed as “fake news”. Fake news may be defined as news items “that are intentionally and verifiably false” and possibly with intention to mislead or harm the target (Giancarlo Ruffo, 2022). Since the term “fake news” has become a buzzword, it has become necessary to unbundle the term and break it down into its various components. Ruffo et al argue

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/08/04/three-mass-shootings-this-year-began-with-hateful-screed-8chan-its-founder-calls-it-terrorist-refuge-plain-sight/>

that many manipulations conflate in the “term “fake news” without a global agreement on what it actually means, and when researchers target and study as “fake news” different phenomena, it is hard to agree on findings, and to verify the results with scientific rigour” (Giancarlo Ruffo, p. 3). It is therefore appropriate that this term be replaced with a proper terminology which may solve or avoid two problems as follows. First, online false information can come in different ways that may not fit such a wholesale definition; and second, it helps us to arrive at exactitude with definitions so that we can ask same questions for comparative answers (Giancarlo Ruffo, p. 3). It is thus against this background that unbundling the term into misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation has become necessary in the academic discourse. While these terms sound similar, they are not necessarily the same. It is therefore important to define what each of these terms connotes.

Merriam Webster dictionary defines misinformation as incorrect or misleading information. Misinformation takes place when there is dissemination of false or misleading information but with no intention to harm any target. Examples of misinformation include the publication of news with mistakes and the “news in which the title or a captivating picture are not adequately supported by the body of the article, like click-baiting” (Giancarlo Ruffo, 2022). Malinformation, on the other hand, is partially true and verifiable piece of information which is disseminated with malicious intent aimed at the target. Examples may include the publications of hate speech, threats, and character assassination (Giancarlo Ruffo, 2022). Finally, when a piece of false information is shared with malicious intent, then it is termed as disinformation. In the last scenario, a falsified piece of information may contain some authoritative nonsense and attribute it to a reliable news source. Ruffo et al state that “manipulated content, such as true facts distorted to serve a false narration; fabricated content, i.e., proper fake; and true news framed in a

narrative they do not belong” fall under disinformation (p. 4). For the purpose of this paper, these terms may be used interchangeably or could collectively be denoted as fake news.

For years now, misinformation has become a major source of concern for many Americans. The Pew Research Centre survey documented that in the wake of 2016 presidential election, 64% of adults in the United States opined that misinformation and its likes “had caused a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events”, while at least 33% of them had the feeling that they were constantly exposed to political news online that was largely falsified (Richard Wike, p. 19). Moreover, at least 23% of the U.S. adults disclosed that they had shared such fake news advertently or inadvertently (Richard Wike, p. 19). The Pew Research Centre survey also documented that in 2019, many Americans (57%) pointed accusing fingers at the political leaders and activists as those behind the exponential spread of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Richard Wike, 2022).

The survey documented that majority of Americans (82%) in 2019 were said to be “very” or “somewhat” concerned about the potential impact of made-up news on the 2020 presidential election” (Richard Wike, p. 19). Similarly, the survey found that the political and electoral news consumers with experience and knowledge in political processes were also said to be very concerned about the effects of fake news in the 2020 election (Richard Wike, 2022). In 2021, Twitter was singled out as the incubator for the dissemination of fake news. Among adult Americans, Twitter users in 2021 stated that they were very concerned about the spread of misinformation in the country. More than half of adult Americans (53%) expressed their feeling that the fabrication and dissemination of fake news was a major challenge on the platform, while 33% of them reported that when using the Twitter platform they saw a lot of contents that were deemed to be fake news (Richard Wike, 2022). In the same year, the Pew Research Centre survey documented that almost half (48%) of Americans thought that it was necessary for the

government to tackle the flows of misinformation, even if that meant denying people “freedom to access and publish content” (Richard Wike, 2022, p. 19).

Disinformation could pose serious threats, such as the incitement of violence, the spread of conspiracy theories, and the stigmatization of particular groups. These consequences can harm the fabric of society and contribute to instability. For instance, fake news emanating from social media contents is playing an increasingly vital role in radicalizing the United States extremists. Unlike in the past when the extremists were ambivalent in embracing the social media, the increasingly elusive and intractable nature of the platforms has made their use so appealing to this group of people. In recent times, the digital extremists hide behind the user-to-user platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. to fabricate and disseminate extremist contents. Between 2005 and 2016, the commonly used social media platforms in the United States, also largely used by extremists, included Facebook, used by over 64% of the extremists for the dissemination of fake news, radicalization and mobilization; YouTube, used by over 30% of Americans and the extremists; and Twitter, used by over 23% of extremists (Othmeni, 2021, p. 8). These platforms remain the most used platforms in 2023, according to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com). Rather strangely though, recent research has shown that out of the 265 extremists who used various social media platforms from 2005 to 2016, about 92% of them “ at least consumed extremist content passively, meaning they watched videos or read texts but may not have actively contributed any content themselves” (Othmeni, 2021, p. 8). On the other hand, the far-right leaning extremists were said to have participated in extremist discourse at a much higher rate (about 68%) than the far-left leaning extremists (about 55%) and Islamists (about 55%). Othmeni findings also discovered that far-right leaning “extremists were also substantially more likely to actively create content (30.65%) than far-left (18.18%) and Islamist extremists” (p. 5).

By examining some historical instances in which the United States has become a country of acute radicalization and civil rebellion, we are able to grasp the reality of how social media has impacted the country's democracy. The oblique manifestation of social media became more pronounced following the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. After the loss of former President Trump to President Biden, the Republican supporters, being animated by the rhetoric and the tweets of the former president, took advantage of the cracks within the political setup, and actively amassed partisan supporters, even including those from various unions and the American corporate environment, to protest against the outcome of the election. In the resulting violence that bedevilled the Capitol Hill, five people lost their lives and over 140 people maimed. Twitter intercepted a tweet from the former president Trump which bespoke volume of the political rhetoric that the partisan supporters used to garner support (Othmeni, p. 15). The tweet, laced with malinformation, stirred up Twitter to block the former president from using the platform, including the removal of some three other tweets and the heroic praises of the insurrectionists that they were "very special" (Othmeni, 2021). This harrowing event marked yet another turning point of democratic recession in the United States.

The fallouts from the 2020 presidential election, which exemplifies the downward spiral of the United States' democratic backsliding, might have only accentuated further democratic disintegration and polarization. As I write now, the former president Trump is facing 40 charges, and has already been indicted four times with possibility of going to jail, all linked to the 2020 presidential election¹³. In addition, at least 11 of the former president's associates/supporters have been indicted of various crimes, with some being jailed for years¹⁴. However, many

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61084161>

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/21/politics/tom-barrack-trump-arrested/index.html>

political commentators fear that the indictments of the former president and his associates will only worsen the onslaught of political polarization that is currently raging in the country¹⁵.

In summary, the pervasive influence of social media dynamics poses a significant threat to the foundations of democracy in the United States. The falsified and harmful news' corrosive impact extends beyond individual beliefs; it jeopardizes the very fabric of democratic processes. By sowing seeds of mistrust, deepening sociopolitical divisions, and fostering an environment where objective truths become elusive, fake news weakens the democratic ideals of informed citizenry and transparent governance. Social media misinformation, malinformation and disinformation often lead to emotional appeal, echo chambers, confirmation of bias, institutional mistrust, cognitive dissonance, filter bubbles, inter alia. These dynamics often act synergistically in ways that polarize the political environment; and for this reason, I discuss next how polarization has become one of the drivers of democratic recession.

2.3. Social Media and Political Polarization

In the digital age, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools of communication, public debates, and political engagement. At the emergence of social media, the digital optimists, and the liberal thinkers thought that the ample offering of means of communication was meant to break down the concentration of power and amplify self-expression and freedom of speech. While the optimists were not necessarily wrong in their optimism, they nonetheless got disappointed as the platforms' exponential growth came with far-reaching consequences for democracy and its institutional framework. While the social media platforms offer unprecedented

¹⁵ In this article, Prof. William Howell talks about how charges might play out, and how divided US really is: <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/what-do-trump-indictments-mean-election-democracy>

opportunities for people to form digital communities and express their views, they have also given rise to a concerning phenomenon: social media political polarization. The social media has particularly resulted in polarization due to domestic preference for unmoderated free speech and self-expression and weak rules and norms governing its use¹⁶.

Political polarisation may be seen as both a state and a process. Political “polarisation as a state refers to the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum. Polarisation as a process refers to the increase in such opposition over time.” (Giancarlo Ruffo, p. 9). Sikorski et al have identified two distinct forms of political polarization. First, it could take the form of “ideological polarization”, which, citing from Dalton (1987), “is the divergence of political opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and stances of political adversaries” (p. 188). The second form is what the authors have termed as “affective polarization”, a classification of political polarization derived from Mason’s 2018 work¹⁷, “which is based on work considering the role of identity in politics, and how identity salience within groups ... can exacerbate out-group animosity” (p. 188). The latter form of political polarization assesses the extent to which people express the feeling of like or warm towards their political allies on one hand, and dislike towards political opponents on the other hand (Sikorski, 2021 , p. 188).

Some scholars argue that political polarization can be beneficial for society in the sense that it predicts “higher levels of political participation and perceptions of electoral choice”¹⁸. However, political polarization in the United States has largely posed democratic challenges, instead. Among other things, it has resulted in increased centralization of power, congressional gridlock, and high level of dissatisfaction among citizens¹⁹. Some scholars have also documented

¹⁶ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46662>

¹⁷ Also see Markus Wagner, *Affective polarization in multiparty systems*, Department of Government, University of Vienna, *Rathaussstrasse 19/1/9, 1010, Vienna, Austria*.

¹⁸ *Idem*

¹⁹ *Idem*

interpersonal implications of political polarization, such as lack of willingness to interact with political opponents, and dehumanization towards political adversaries²⁰. The rapid spread of information and the ease with which like-minded individuals can congregate online have fueled the deepening of political divisions among Americans. This polarization has become a defining feature of modern politics, impacting everything from policy debates to election outcomes and challenging the foundations of civil discourse. In this subsection, I delve into the complex dynamics of social media political polarization, its origins, manifestations, and the far-reaching implications it carries for the United States of America's democratic processes and institutions.

While politics has mostly been seen as a polarising endeavour, the emergence of social media platforms has greatly amplified the degree of polarization. In their studies, Richard Wike et al documented that majority of Americans view social media as a highly political polarising tool with unintended consequences for democracy (Richard Wike, 2022). The research found that at least 79% of Americans are more likely to hold the view that social media leads to acute political polarization. The sharp division over political issues means lack of tolerance and compromise among people of different political leanings. Thus, as the research has documented, over 33% of Americans are intolerant over political differences (Richard Wike, 2022, p. 23). The political intolerance has thus resulted in political discourse incivility in the country. In the United States, about 70% of Americans express the feeling that social media intolerance has affected civility of political discussion (Richard Wike, 2022, p. 25). The political intolerance and the resulting incivility translate to conflicts and violence among supporters of different partisan groupings.

²⁰ See Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin's article, "Polarization in America: two possible futures", published in *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 2020, 34:179-184

The authors have documented that the United States is one of those “countries where people are most likely to report conflicts between people who support different political parties” (p. 22).

Some recent psychological researchers have documented the psychological consequences of political polarization in the United States. They have highlighted that quite a sizeable number of Americans opt for lower pay rates and remunerations to avoid listening to their political opponents; some even relocate to new places altogether so that they could entourage themselves with ideologically echo-chambered partisan fellows who share similar political interests and opinions, while they “swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically” (Laurin, 2020, p. 180). While racism has often been highlighted as a major divisive dynamic in American social fabric, the research has shown that politically polarized Americans are more willing to exclude those with opposing political beliefs and convictions than to do so with the racialized groups (Laurin, 2020, p. 180). This represents a significant shift in many Americans’ perception of “us” vs “them” and a “jarring comparison considering the prevalence of race-based exclusion” in the country (Laurin, 2020, p. 180). Similarly, due to political polarization, Americans are not able to do critical evaluation of the flaws and merits of policies from within and without their partisan parties. Rather, they only seek merits in policies that confirm their political preferences and pre-existing prejudices and overlook facts that contradict their preferences (Laurin, 2020). Thus, all core partisan issues are treated as those immune to any debate while the political opponents’ policies or opinions are hotly debated, regardless of their merits (Laurin, 2020).

Political polarization has given rise to a vicious cycle of disintegration that threatens the US stability and democratic principles. This vicious cycle of democratic disintegration is self-reinforcing. As polarization deepens, it becomes increasingly difficult for politicians to work together and find common ground. This leads to legislative gridlock and a lack of progress on important issues. The COVID-19 pandemic mask mandates, lockdowns of businesses, schools,

and other public places made the right-wing leaning supporters believe that the government was becoming authoritarian, and even felt that their constitutional rights and freedoms were forcefully curtailed (Kleinfeld, p. 7). The feeling that the left on the political divide did not take their concerns seriously made them disregard any concerns raised by the left-wing thinkers. For instance, reeling from COVID-19 policy discontent, most of the Republican supporters viewed the Democrats' support for Black Lives Matter mantra as hypocritical and declined to lend support to the latter's clarion call for justice (Kleinfeld, p. 8).

Frustration, mistrust, and disillusionment among the public weaken trust in democratic institutions and can ultimately erode the foundations of a functioning democracy. With the upsurge of extreme partisanship and lopsided policy agendas, the supporters and sympathisers from both aisles entertain much fear toward each other so much such that they are ready to do anything possible to keep the opponent away from the corridors of power. Barely a month after the January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill riot, the research documented that about 72 percent of each party believed that the political rival was "a serious threat to the United States and its people" (Kleinfeld, p. 8). Some scholars have documented that between 85 and 90 percent of Americans were ready to cast their votes for their party even if it were engaged in undemocratic actions, rather than cross party lines however appealing other party's policies might appear (Kleinfeld, p. 8). Polarization has become so inimical that the partisan fellows are ever ready to wobble the policy efficiency of their opponent. In fact, the 2021 Bright Line Watch surveys has found that at least 28 percent of Democrats and 39 percent of Republicans were ready to do "everything possible to prevent the other party from governing effectively"²¹. Moreover, Kalmoe and Mason's 2020 survey found that 16% of Americans said it was justifiable in some instances to

²¹ See "Tempered expectations and hardened divisions a year into the Biden presidency" at <https://brightlinewatch.org/tempered-expectations-and-hardened-divisions-a-year-into-the-biden-presidency/>

use violence to achieve political ends, and this percentage increased to 21% of the respondents if the presidential election was at stake in that particular year²².

Notoriously, the United States has recently been labelled as the most polarized democracy in the world. Historicising the cases of severe polarization on a global scale dating back to 1950, researchers Jennifer McCoy, Murat Somer, and Benjamin Press (2022) have concluded that no other established democracy has ever been as polarized as it is currently the case with the United States. They emphatically state that “there are no peer analogues for the United States’ current political divisions—and the track record of all democracies does not provide much consolation”²³. The missing consolation stems from the fact that “among less-established democracies that faced pernicious polarization, the majority experienced democratic degradation” (Kleinfeld, 2022, p. 8).

In addition to the major concerns mentioned above, political polarization can also result in political populism. Political polarization can create an environment where populist movements and leaders thrive. When there is a deep divide between political factions, people may become disillusioned with mainstream politics and turn to populist figures who promise radical change and a break from the status quo. Populist leaders often exploit the polarization by framing themselves as outsiders who will disrupt the existing political order and address the concerns of the masses. In some cases, populism can further exacerbate polarization by adopting divisive rhetoric and demonizing opponents, contributing to a more polarized political landscape. Therefore, to further elucidate how these dynamics reinforce one another, the last section of this chapter explores the nexus between populism and democratic recession in the United States.

²² Nathan P. Kalmoe & Lilliana Mason “Most Americans Reject Partisan Violence, But There Is Still Cause for Concern” <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/blog/has-american-partisanship-gone-too-far>

²³ You may consult Jennifer McCoy, Murat Somer, and Benjamin Press (2022), “Reducing Pernicious Polarization: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Depolarization” <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/05/reducing-pernicious-polarization-comparative-historical-analysis-of-depolarization-pub-87034>

2.4. Populism and Democratic Recession

The political environment has greatly been influenced by the emergence of social media. One of the dynamics that has become ubiquitous as a result of social media is the rise in populism around the world. Populism may be defined as a political ideology, or approach, that typically involves a focus on the interests and concerns of ordinary people, that is, those who are not within the corridors of political and socioeconomic power and influence, against those who are perceived as elites, political establishment, or power structures. Frances E. Lee defines populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people²⁴”. At the core of populism is some sort of politically manipulative language that seeks to pitch clean or virtuous citizens “against nefarious, parasitic elites who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk” (Rahn, 2016, p. 190). Rahn and Wendy have identified a number of traits common to populist rhetoric: the tone of populism is Manichean which treats politics as a constantly opposing struggle between the honest, righteous people and a self-seeking governing class that always aspires to maximize political dividends at the expense of the common folk (Rahn, 2016). The goal of populism is about restoration of and or replacement of a governing system deemed to be inefficient or corrupt in ways that give power back to the pure and honest people to fulfil their long-standing aspirations and goals (Rahn, 2016). Moreover, populism does not consider any good out of the elites at the realms of politics; instead, it presumes to see good, wisdom and well-meaning with the common people. Therefore, its worldwide view is that of

²⁴ Frances E. Lee, *Populism and the American Party System: Opportunities and Constraints*, Cambridge University Press 18(2). https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/80267F1481932B2D381F456BA397153A/S1537592719002664a.pdf/populism_and_the_american_party_system_opportunities_and_constraints.pdf

apprehension, suspicion, and doubt of the capacity and the intention of the elites (Rahn, 2016). Populist movements and leaders claim to represent the will and grievances of the masses, often emphasizing a sense of victimization or marginalization of common folks.

Not only has social media become a catalyst for amplifying the spread of fake news and polarizing rhetoric, but it has also become a medium through which populism propagates itself. The American democratic landscape has become quite vulnerable to populism, and the evolving means of communication has often been cited as one of the dynamics driving this trend. Frances Lee has identified three factors that animate populism in the United States, and among them include social media (Lee, 2019). The author argues that political parties in the country are more susceptible to populist insurgency than it was the case in the past because of “(1) changes in communications technology, (2) the unpopularity of mainstream parties and party leaders, and (3) representation gaps created by an increasingly racialized party system” (Lee, 2019). Given the current impact of social media on democracy and governance, I definitely agree with Lee, most especially on the point regarding how changes in communications technology have become a springboard for populist insurgency.

The networked democracy has made it easier for those who feel victimized or alienated by the political elites to buy into populist rhetoric and propaganda. This is because, once connected as an online community, it is easier and faster for the populist actors to spread their political messages to such an audience. While the proliferation of populism is not a new phenomenon, the emergence of social media platforms has facilitated its preponderance of spread relative to the traditional media era. The emergence of social media is central to the rise of populist movements because “it represents political strategies in novel and exciting forms” (Williams B. O., 2020, p. 79). For now, social media platforms are superior ways of creating socially connected communities that can be the medium through which behaviours and attitudes of people are

shaped. The main problem, however, is that the role of social media in a political discourse may be conceptualized outside the realms of democratic theory which could result in a disastrous outcome (Williams B. O., 2020). On a theoretical basis, democratic theory subscribes to the ideal of participatory democracy, or individuals' "involvement in non-activist decision making" (Williams B. O., 2020, p. 79). The theory of participatory democracy calls for the involvement of the general public in the assessment of policy merits and demerits. This is usually in sharp contrast with the alluring appeal of social media which ensnares people into the webs of echo chambers, misinformation, and polarization (Williams B. O., 2020).

The reinforcing capabilities of different social media dynamics have made populism even a more appealing tool by the populist leaders. The spread of misinformation and disinformation is a significant concern on social media. Populist leaders may use false or misleading information to support their narratives and attack political opponents or enact anti-democratic policies. Sensing that majority of his supporters were anti-immigration and Islamophobic, former president Trump made immigration a major campaign issue in the 2016 presidential election. Consequently, after ascending to the presidency, on 27 January 2017, Mr. Trump enacted a travel ban which blocked people from seven predominantly Islamic countries from entering the United States. Among them included nationals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen²⁵. While he claimed this was a temporary ban for only 90 days to allow the country to do some vetting, this was a populist response to the desire of his partisan followers who felt that the immigrants were taking up their jobs and competing with them unfairly for social services and amenities. Such a ban was an affront to American democracy on freedom of movement and freedom of worship, as it targeted people from a particular religion.

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/38794001>

Social media platforms can amplify extreme or divisive views because the contents that generate strong reactions, such as likes, shares, and comments tend to be promoted by algorithms. Populist leaders often adopt confrontational and polarizing rhetoric, which can attract more attention and engagement on social media. This enables them to mobilize and organize their supporters quickly and at a relatively low cost. Bickart et al argue that Trump opts for tweets that are provocative in nature “because they strike raw nerves, speaking boldly to themes that people struggle to work through: race, nationalism versus globalism, financial insecurity, status inequity, sexism, and more”, and with that his “fans cheer him on by retweeting and favoring his messages, while his enemies hope to get under his skin through their posts and replies” (Barbara Bickart, 2017). This can lead to large-scale protests, rallies, and other forms of collective action that gain media attention and political influence. As a matter of fact, the storming of Capitol Hill was organized on social media. On far-right social media platforms like Gab and Parler, there were disseminations of directions regarding the streets the insurrectionists should take to avoid the police and the tools needed to open the doors and windows of the offices²⁶. Frighteningly, many of these protesters came to the halls of Congress wielding guns or having them concealed in their clothes and bags²⁷. It was later discovered that the calls for violent protest against members of Congress and to reverse the outcomes of the 2020 presidential election had been circulating online for months²⁸. Emboldened by Trump with the support of anti-establishment movements, such as QAnon and the Proud Boys, far-right leaning groups had daringly organized on social media platforms and recruited as many of their likes as possible²⁹.

Digital populist politicians have mastered the art of employing the tools of social media to achieve other subtle political goals. Together with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), it has

²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/protesters-storm-capitol-hill-building.html>

²⁷ Idem.

²⁸ Idem

²⁹ Idem

become even easier for the populist movements to exploit the psychology of the masses toward such ends. Some scholars have documented that exposure to AI could result in individuals experiencing anxiety about their future conditions which could derive them toward favoring populist attitudes, rhetoric, or actions (Manschein, 2023). Some studies have shown that the effective use of social media and related technologies, such as AI, for populism has a crowding out effect, a situation in which the voice of the populists gets louder while those who tread the path of the traditional media to do politicking get noticed far less. Jacquemet explains that Trump's tweeting is:

(...) remediated by other social media users through retweets, mentions, critiques, and likes, then remediated again by formal and informal media – blogs, print, televisual, networked, and 'fake' news outlets. The end result of this process is that Trump uses tweets to redevelop media neighborhoods under his name and crowd out other competitors for as many news cycles as he can control, sometimes for a short time and sometimes for days, weeks, or even, in rare instances, months³⁰.

In conclusion, the impact of social media on US democracy cannot be overstated. While these platforms have provided unprecedented opportunities for communication and engagement, they have also amplified divisive tendencies and eroded the foundations of a healthy democracy. The unchecked spread of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, filter bubbles, and algorithmic polarization have all contributed to a toxic information ecosystem that undermines trust, fosters political polarization, bolsters populist movements, and weakens the very essence of democratic ideals. The increase in manipulation of social media for political gain has led to a decline in the quality of public discourse, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to engage in meaningful, fact-based discussions. Moreover, the potential for social media platforms to be

³⁰ See page 88 of Jacquemet's (2019) metric populism and media conspiracy at <https://www.scielo.br>

used as tools for surveillance and manipulation by both state and non-state actors further jeopardize the democratic process. The good news, however, is that the US political leadership and policymakers are taking measures to inhibit the growing threats of social media. For instance, nearly 1,069 individuals have been charged in nearly all the 50 states and the District of Columbia in relations to January 6 insurrection inspired by social media dynamics³¹. This is not only about justice being served but also a deterrence to individuals who intend to use undemocratic means to gain political capital. That is, it signals the fact that any attempts to overturn democratic processes will not go unpunished.

Chapter 3: Remediating the Adverse Effects of Social Media on Democracy

The apparently intrusive and transformative power of social media in the United States, facilitating the ease of exchanging information at far lesser costs, and enabling citizens to connect in virtual environment to express views and opinions, and engage with the political process and like-minded individuals globally has unarguably reshaped the landscape of democracy. This has been quite a transformative medium of communication that has never been witnessed before. The improved means of virtual connectivity and easy exchanges of information has nonetheless posed serious challenges. As noted in the preceding chapters, the proliferation of social media platforms has brought a myriad of political concerns in American democracy, among which include dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, populism, and polarisation. The synergistic outcomes of these social media dynamics have threatened the core foundation of the United States' governance system: the integrity of democratic processes, such as elections, and the institutions. To address the impact of social media on American democracy, a multifaceted approach is essential, encompassing regulatory reforms, media

³¹ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/30-months-jan-6-attack-capitol>

literacy initiatives, and collaborative efforts between government, tech companies, and civil society. In this context, this chapter explores some measures needed to navigate the complex terrain of social media's influence on US democracy and ensure that it remains a robust, transparent, and resilient system for the future. Given the scope of this paper, however, only the social media dynamics that were discussed in the previous chapters will be addressed. Therefore, in this section, I propose some of the remediating measures needed to address the concerns of fake news, political populism, and political polarization.

3.1. Countering the Effects of Fake News

The digital revolution that came about with various social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Netflix, YouTube, Instagram, podcasts, inter alia, and made it easier to connect virtually with one another has, unfortunately, brought serious challenges to American democracy. It is no longer debatable to quantify just how much spurious political misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation – such as the wild allegations about the 2020 presidential election, that it was stolen and rigged - have threatened the democratic integrity of the country. Combatting such fake news in American politics is a crucial endeavor that requires a multifaceted approach involving various stakeholders, including government, media, tech companies, educators, and individuals. Below are some strategies required to address this issue.

One of the measures needed to address the spread of fake news is making some legal changes to existing laws, or enacting new legislations, while at the same time safeguarding freedom of speech and the press. One of such changes could pertain to updating the existing political campaign finance laws to regulate the indiscriminate political advertisements over various social media platforms. Among others, regulating the advertising could entail the act of mandating social media platforms to label fake news as such in order to enable the news consumers on these

platforms to distinguish fake news from real news. In addition, the Congress could consider making it a criminal offense to peddle falsehood on “when, where and how people vote”³². For example, a Trump supporter who was charged with electoral disinformation in 2016 that voters could “vote by text or social media post” was not immediately convicted of any crime since it was not clear if such an act was illegal under the existing laws³³.

The government could enact special acts meant to regulate only social media advertisements, separating such requirements from the traditional media platforms. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018) recommend the enforcement of the likes of Honest Ads Act. This Act was introduced by Senators Amy Klobuchar, Mark Warner, and John McCain as the first major legislative efforts aimed at addressing the challenges posed by the social media platforms. The main objective of the Honest Ads Act was to increase transparency and accountability in online political advertising in the United States. The Act sought to achieve three objectives. In the first place, it distinguished paid internet communications from unpaid communications, where it incorporated the former into the regular models usually adopted for communications (Yochai Benkler, 2018). By separating the types of communications, the bill sought to preserve the democratizing aspect of the internet – its capacity to empower decentralized individuals to make informed political decisions and organize themselves instead of relying largely on the political parties and wealthy donors of campaigns (Yochai Benkler, p. 369). The second objective was that the bill mandated that there be disclaimers on online advertising, and identification of the sponsors of such paid communications. This was meant to inform the public about the communications that were political and those that were not (Yochai Benkler, 2018). The third mandate was that, and most likely the most important one, it required that a fine-grained public

³² Richard L. Hasen explains “How to Keep the Rising Tide of Fake News From Drowning Our Democracy” in New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022>

³³ Idem

database be created for online political advertising, even beyond the realms of electioneering (Yochai Benkler, pp. 368-369). Benkler et al emphasize the relevance of such a bill in the following terms:

We assess the credibility of any statement in the context of what we think the agenda of the speaker is. That's why we require political advertising to disclose its sponsor to begin with. If the Clinton campaign were to target evangelical voters with communications that emphasized her opponent's comments on the Hollywood Access video, these voters would treat the communications with more of a grain of salt even if its contents are true. The same would be true if the Trump campaign had targeted African American voters with narrowly tailored targeted ads quoting Hillary Clinton's use of the term "superpredator" in the context of a 1996 criminal law reform debate (p. 370).

Generally, the Honest Ads Act intended to bring the regulation of online political advertising closely aligned with existing regulations for political advertising in traditional media, such as television and radio. It sought to address the challenges posed by the social media revolution and the facility at which various political figures could target certain demographics online without clear disclosure. While versions of the Honest Ads Act have been introduced in Congress, the Act has since not been passed into law³⁴.

The United States of America may also consider partnering with international communities, such as other friend shoring countries across the Atlantic, and international organizations like NATO, the Five Eyes Alliance, and the G7 in combatting fake news. Thankfully, the country already has such an initiative in place, the Global Engagement Center (GEC). It can thus invest massively in GEC in partnership with its most trustworthy allies like the Five Eyes alliance to

³⁴ Lauren Feiner and Megan Graham explain how "Congress has failed to pass Big Tech legislation in 4 years leading up to the next election", <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/31/congress-fails-to-pass-big-tech-legislation-ahead-of-election.html>

combat disinformation that is transnational in nature³⁵. Doing so can be a valuable strategy for the country to fight disinformation in its democracy because disinformation is a global issue, and international cooperation can provide several benefits in addressing this challenge. First, global partnership can facilitate the sharing of information and intelligence on disinformation campaigns targeting at US and its allies. Collaborating with other nations and organizations can provide the US with a broader and more comprehensive understanding of disinformation threats, including their sources and tactics. International partnership would also offer access to a global perspective on disinformation since different nations may have different experiences and insights into dealing with disinformation campaigns, and such knowledge sharing endeavor can be valuable for the US in developing effective strategies.

With respect to forming international partnership to deal with social media dynamics, Norman Eisen et al (2019) have identified four major tasks that the actors should focus on. First, the authors argue that the international actors should deploy targeted funds to support the investigative efforts of domestic journalistic actors who “monitor and expose media consolidation through non-transparent financial schemes, journalist harassment and censorship, raids of independent news outlets, and other abuses of public resources aimed at stifling the space for independent media” (p. 59). Second, the international actors, such as the EU, NATO, and the G7 should invest in capacities aimed at identifying and combatting misinformation campaigns that emerge from foreign aggressors, such as China, Russia, Iran, etc. (p. 59). Third, the US led international partnership should establish a more robust and transparent communication and information sharing mediums with the social media giants and various

³⁵ The Global Engagement Center has the following mission: To direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate U.S. Federal Government efforts to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations. For more information, consult <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>

democratic governments (p. 59). Last, the alliance(s) should carve out democratically positive narratives about democratic processes, values, and institutions as a means to counter anti-democratic manoeuvres (p. 59). Such collaborative efforts can help the United States to counter transnational disinformation campaigns, such as happened in 2016 elections when Russia became the hatchery of fake news regarding the elections (Norman Eisen, p. 68).

Working with international partners would allow for the development and standardization of best practices in countering disinformation, especially when it comes to balancing between protecting free speech and combatting disinformation. These practices can be based on shared experiences and lessons learned from various countries and regions. For example, the United States could learn from Germany's Network Enforcement Act. This Act obliges social media platforms with over two million users in Germany to have a system in place for handling reports regarding the illegal contents³⁶. Largely, the major social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc. have established systems that users use to flag contents they deem inappropriate or violate the security and safety policies of the platforms. Since liberalism upholds individuals' freedom and free speech, the government could face criticism if it moderates social media usage. This is because, moderating social media usage could be (mis)interpreted by the users as the government's attempt to interfere in free speech. For this reason, Germany has gone extra miles to oblige the platforms to put systems in place that allow Germans to flag social media contents that violate the German laws. By doing that, the German government has succeeded in shifting the responsibility of social media monitoring and compliance to the platforms themselves and has therefore largely absolved itself from public criticisms³⁷. The Act has also succeeded in transforming the German social media user into "an

³⁶ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2019), "How to respond to disinformation while protecting free speech". <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-respond-disinformation-while-protecting-free-speech>

³⁷ Idem

agent of the law”, as most users have taken the responsibility upon themselves to flag and report the illegal contents³⁸. Once flagged, the platform is mandated to address the issue within 24 hours or use seven days to investigate and address the issue. Failure to address the concern would result in some hefty fines. Perhaps, the long-awaited US Honest Ads Act could be broadened to cover the larger scope of mandate as does the Network Enforcement Act.

The educational institutions could play a vital role in combatting the spread of fake news by equipping their students with digital literacy knowledge, critical thinking and analytical skills, and the appreciation of the importance of embracing verifiable and trustworthy sources of news. Already, the educational institutions are in the forefront of combatting disinformation and misinformation by raising generations of trained individuals who are discerning and conscious of the presence of fake news. This role could become more instrumental in combatting disinformation if institutions make it a core mandate to instill such knowledge in all their students. To this regard, government ought to prioritize funding efforts that enhance social media literacy in various educational institutions. As Darrell West notices, such funding initiatives are especially more crucial for those who are new to social media, such as young people³⁹. This is because, for such people it is even harder to distinguish fake from real news. Equipping such category of individuals with digital literacy knowledge entails more resource commitment by government and other institutional actors. The United States government and other actors, such international bodies, need to raise money to support partnerships between different outlets like journalistic institutions, the corporate world, the academic, institutions as well as nonprofit organizations to encourage social media literacy⁴⁰.

³⁸ Idem

³⁹ Darrell M. West (Dec. 18, 2017), “How to combat fake news and disinformation”, <https://www.brookings.edu>

⁴⁰ Idem

The question that might arise with respect to the aforementioned suggestions is the policy plausibility, especially given how polarized the US political climate has become. While the suggested approaches appear commendable, it remains to be seen how both the Democrats and Republicans can forgo their political differences and work for the collective benefits of entrenching democratic resilience amidst the emerging threats of social media and the related technologies. One policy tool the community interested in the wellbeing of democracy can employ to extract collaborative efforts from the political divides is the externalization of fake news while giving it the deserving policy salience. Policy salience may be defined as the prominence or importance given to a particular issue or policy in the public sphere (Beyers, 2019). That is to say, the degree to which a specific topic is at the forefront of public consciousness, political debates, and policymaker's attention at a given point in time. Externalizing threats and propagating their salience is a role that can be executed well by the lobbyists, the media outlet, the research and academic institutions, and the government itself.

Some studies have documented that whenever an emerging issue is given salience with an external dimension, it largely diminishes domestic political differences and reinforces bipartisan collaboration (Pedro Bordalo, 2021). In their working paper, "Issue salience and political stereotypes", Pedro Bordalo, Marco Tabellini, and David Yang (2021) document that after September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US the policymakers instantaneously externalized the threat with acute salience. With such externalization of terrorism and with salience, the authors discover that "not only did Americans shift their attention away from domestic issues and towards external ones after 2001, but also they significantly" forwent major partisan differences between Democrats and Republicans (p. 3). Likewise, the threats of fake news could be accorded with major salience with the touch of externalization. This would in turn conscientize Americans that there is a common threat facing them regardless of political

inclination and ideology. Consequently, any Congressional policy enactment against social media misuse would be viewed positively as a means to protecting the collective interests of the citizenry. Not only would such a move help to avert the possibility of the outcomes of policy objectives being viewed as political witch-hunt directed at partisan opponents, but it would also disarm populist movements of polarizing rhetoric. This is because, the larger proportion of Americans, regardless of party affiliation, would likely consider the fake news threats as one of the most pressing issues facing the country just like they did after the 9/11 terrorist attack (Pedro Bordalo, p. 25). This would also be a subtle way of dealing with domestic fake news spreaders without being overt about the policy objective so that the government is not accused of executive or legislative excesses, especially with respect to freedom of speech.

3.2. Curtailing the Rising Tide of Political Polarization in the US

The upsurge of extreme political polarization in the United States has become a pressing concern that threatens the core foundation of the nation's democracy. As divisions among politically opposing ideologues deepen and political discourse becomes increasingly polarized and less civil, the need to address this canker has become more urgent than ever. Combatting political polarization in the US requires measures that go beyond partisan lines, fostering unity, understanding, and constructive dialogue. This could be achieved by construction of policy salience and externalisation as explained in section 3.1 above. In this section, I explore a couple of measures that can be implemented and used to combat the rising tide of political polarization.

Frist, the political and civil discourse can be a make-or-break tool in a politically polarized environment like that of the US. As explained in the preceding chapters, many Americans view political opponents as a threat to the nation's security and democracy. The social media platforms have worsened the tendency to use abusive language and derogatory remarks against

one another. With the advent of social media, trolling and shaming one another has become even more trendy than ever. However, such “moralistic judgments”, as Guerrero explains, in the form of labels, name callings, insults, and diagnoses, may only result in further polarization⁴¹. It is therefore important to encourage open, frank, respectful, and fact-based political discourse that allow for the exchange of various viewpoints. Expression of empathy and active listening where Americans seek to understand others’ perspectives, even in disagreement, can go a long way to diminish political polarization and build trust with one another.

The quest to quench the flame of polarization can take the form of physical interaction as group face-to-face exchanges have more effects than the virtual and individual ones. To this regard, Waldroff has suggested that we can mitigate political divisiveness by physically bringing people together in “safe, highly structure dialogue groups” ((Waldroff, p. 42). Citing from Schneider’s work, *The Depolarization of America: Guidebook for Social Healing*, Waldroff explains that for more than 15 years, the author has developed and participated in dialogue groups that have proven quite useful for sociopolitical healing. The after-workshop surveys of 1,800 participants by Schneider documented that at least 79% of the participants felt that the group dialogue was helpful in their understanding and appreciation of the “experiences, feelings, and beliefs of those on the other side,” and that they equally “felt better understood” (Waldroff, p. 42). Moreover, about 75% of the surveyed individuals “felt less angry and less estranged” toward their opponents after the workshop, while at least 80% of participants felt that they were “more able to start constructive conversations” with political opponents (Waldroff, p. 42). Therefore, physical group dialogue can be a potent solution to the growing polarization. By bringing individuals of diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and political ideologies together in face-to-face interactions and exchanges, the US can create an environment where understanding can

⁴¹ Jean Guerrero (March 20, 2023), “Americans are terrified of other Americans. How to stop the polarization” <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-03-20/united-states-fascism-political-parties-polarization>

flourish, empathy can grow, and bridges of commonality can be built. These dialogues together with any other form of communication, conducted respectfully and constructively, can provide for a platform for people to humanize one another, transcending the divisive labels of partisanship. In doing so, they help break down the barriers that have contributed to the chasm of polarization, fostering a sense of shared citizenship and collective responsibility among Americans, regardless of political affiliations.

The traditional media space plays a crucial role in promoting harmony and coexistence among Americans. A divisive and polarized media space is a breeding ground for the spread of political polarization. Thus, the alignment of major media houses and platforms with the two major political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, has not augured well for the American democracy. Research has shown that even the traditional media polarization has been on the increase in recent years, and both the Republicans and Democrats are complicit in this outcome⁴². The Cable news networks have become a breeding ground for peddling of polarizing rhetoric. For example, Fox News and MSNBC have become the targets for media bias allegations⁴³. The traditional media space has become susceptible to polarization because of the advent of social media which has provided a plethora of news sources with ease of access and less costs to news consumers. Consequently, the intense competition for news audience and the threat to the survival of traditional media journalistic business has transformed how the “political news is produced and consumed”⁴⁴. The trend has resulted in the traditional media vulnerability to buying into polarizing rhetoric as long as that helps to garner larger audiences.

⁴² Flavia Roscini (June 18, 2023), “How the American Media landscape is Polarizing the Country”, <https://sites.bu.edu/pardeeatlas/advancing-human-progress-initiative/back2school/how-the-american-media-landscape-is-polarizing-the-country/>

⁴³ Idem

⁴⁴ Idem

To reverse the polarizing trend of the traditional media, the government and the independent journalistic watchdog organizations have the responsibility to incentivize the traditional media to provide balanced and unbiased reporting that reflects diverse perspectives. Norman Eisen et al (2019) have explained a number of measures that can be taken to help maintain the independence and fairness of the traditional media. First, the trainings of journalists should integrate practitioners from diverse backgrounds and draw on the knowledge of older media generations. This can “foster occupational socialization” and help raise a generation of journalists who are able to weather the storm of polarization targeting the industry (p. 33). Second, various professional associations should help build journalists on issues of “professional values, employment conditions, legal questions, salaries, and editorial standards” (p. 33). The authors argue that the “civic weakness of the media community”, as observed by the European Commission in 2014, largely as a result of “fragmented and politically polarized” environment, has given room for clientelism and a compromise in professional standards (p. 33). Therefore, giving the needed assistance in building up professionalism could help to mitigate the threat of the decline in professional standards of journalism. In addition, more efforts should be made toward developing a robust media criticism community in order to increase public trust and support (p. 33). This could take the form of transparent and constructive questioning of media houses relationships with political figures and advertisers (p. 33).

The above aspirations for professional and independent journalism cannot be realized without financial resources. As mentioned earlier, the attrition of traditional media audiences and the consequential threat to the relevance of traditional journalism threatens the revenue streams of these media houses. It is for this reason that some of the media houses have yielded to broadcasting polarizing rhetoric so that they might garner larger audiences and attract advertisers to generate revenue. To counter the menace, the media houses should explore alternative sources

of funding to bolster their financial self-sufficiency. This could take the form of crowdfunding, users' subscriptions, paywalls, and grants from media watchdogs and government (Norman Eisen, 2019, p. 34). With financial sufficiency and flexibility, the traditional media would become more resistant to political manipulation from populists and propagandists. This would in turn earn it public trust and legitimation and then disincentivize many news consumers from turning to harmful and misleading news sources prevalent on social media platforms.

Last but not least, while it would be preferable for social media platforms to ensure that there are systems in place to flag and deal with polarizing contents, this is not happening satisfactorily. Therefore, it is important that the US government intervene directly in the content production, dissemination, and consumption in order to provide a sustained oversight responsibility over the social media companies. This could take the form of legislative enforcement with binding clauses limiting what social media platforms can do and what is explicitly disallowed. For example, the Congress could empower the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to enact and enforce a social media code of conduct that does not only ensure transparency but also defines the responsibilities of the social media companies in addressing harmful and polarizing contents emanating from the platforms (Paul Barrett, 2021, p. 9). The FTC could be empowered to set benchmarks for different categories of contents that are considered harmful on the platforms, even after being moderated by humans or any automated mechanism (Paul Barrett, 2021). In an event where the limits of such benchmarks are exceeded, Barret et al suggest, the FTC could impose fines (p. 9). Congress could even require that the social media platforms incorporate the code of conduct into their respective terms-of-service agreements with their clients. The failure to observe the new rules could mean that FTC would enforce actions under its authority.

In summary, the issue of political polarization in the US requires a concerted and sustained effort from individuals, political leadership, corporate world, and other institutional actors who

cherish the ideals of a strong and inclusive democracy. Given the depth of polarization, however, it is important to admit that it is such a herculean task to get the major political divides onboard to deal with the menace posed by the social media. One likely remedy to hindrance to cooperation on issues of common concern is the notion of issue salience and externalization of risks posed by domestic dynamics. It usually reflects the extent to which an issue of current nature captures the attention and concerns of the public, policymakers, political leaders, and the general media. As explained in subsection 3.1 above, some studies have shown that when a domestic issue of current nature is accorded salience with externalization of its risks, it helps to bridge the political divides and capture public concerns pertaining to its threats. For example, Pedro Bordalo et al have discovered in their studies that when the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US were given salience with externalization of the threats, the American public shifted their attention from domestic issues toward the externalized ones (Pedro Bordalo, 2021). Moreover, the study has found, there was a significant drop in partisan differences between the Republicans and the Democrats (Pedro Bordalo, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, aligning the threats posed by social media with the external risks associated with rogue actors could possibly garner political and public support for coordinated policy actions.

Remedies to polarization lie in a combination of fostering dialogue and empathy, physical interactive communications, the capacity building for traditional media, and the institutionalisation of the ethical code of conduct. While these are not the only means to dealing with this arduous social media menace, they can go a long way to restrain the galloping pace of political polarization in the country. It is important to re-emphasize that solving political polarization is not only a matter of policy but also a matter of collective will, a reminder that the shared values of democracy, liberty, and justice can unite all Americans. In the face of

polarization, Americans have to reaffirm their commitment to those values, ensuring that they continue to guide the nation towards a more inclusive, constructive, and harmonious future.

3.3. Combatting the Threats of Populism

The rise of populism in the United States politics is a phenomenon that has become a major concern for citizens, policymakers, and scholars alike. Populism, characterized by its appeal to the grievances and frustrations of the broader population, often manifests in divisive rhetoric, anti-establishment sentiment, and a rejection of traditional political norms. The rising sociopolitical inequalities, diminishing bonds to established traditional parties, increasing salience of identity politics, the re-emergence of nationalistic tendencies, the desire for American isolationism, and economic grievances have all played a role in the rise of populism (Nietsche, 2020, p. 1). The social media revolution in recent decades has only intensified the pace of populism in the nation. In this section, I explore some of the strategies that are essential for preserving the resilience of the nation's democratic institutions and processes in the midst of uptick in populist movements.

One major shortfall the populists exploit is the economic inequality among Americans. Having observed the economic despondency and frustrations expressed by the working-class, the then candidate Trump in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election promised to bring back the economic prosperity⁴⁵. This was a situation the former president exploited quite well, adding to the host of other polarizing topics that resulted in his political victory in the election. Therefore, the liberal actors should implement policies aimed at reducing income inequality, such as progressive taxation, a higher minimum wage, affordable access to education, healthcare, and

⁴⁵Tim Dickinson (October 26, 2020), "How Trump Took the Middle Class to the Cleaners"
<https://www.rollingstone.com>

housing. They may also allocate resources to revitalize and support economically distressed regions, addressing the root causes of economic discontent. Policymakers may need to give the threats of inequality an external dimension, such as creating awareness about the possible exploitation of the situation by illicit and non-state actors, in order to counteract the potential policy hindrance emanating from polarization (Pedro Bordalo, 2021). This could help inspire the public about the true intent of political leadership, thereby courting bipartisan support for inequality-alleviating policy initiatives. In his work, “How to Beat a Populist”, Larry Diamond argues that while a democratic alternative does not necessarily “have to be charismatic or radical to motivate people”, it nonetheless needs to “articulate more than a rational appeal to interests or a technocratic future of smart government” (2020, p. 4). That is to say, it has to offer – in the words of Richard Nixon’s first State of the Union address, “the lift of a driving dream” (Diamond, 2020, p. 4). Diamond adds that even though the populists normally look backwards and divisively to promise a lift for the people, the “driving dream” is more uplifting if it looks forward”; the liberal actors have what it takes to offer such a forward-looking, hopeful, more inclusive, and uplifting dream (2020, p. 4). If well implemented, such a measure would disarm the populist movements of the tool of economic inequality and deprivation often used to whip the populist sentiment against liberal actors.

Social media revolution has been the enabler of populist movements. Therefore, these companies should be regulated and made to account for the damages caused to democratic institutions and processes. Populist leaders and their party supporters normally share the belief that political debates and free speech have been stifled by the traditional establishment and their political opponents. Thus, to counter the opposition these populists take to social media where they pose themselves as the heroes who yearn to right the wrong⁴⁶. As Mudde argues, the

⁴⁶ Cas Mudde, “How can liberals defeat populism? Here are four ideas” <https://www.theguardian.com>

populists have taken to social media because “it is the most democratic and free medium, with almost no gatekeepers and unlimited readers”⁴⁷. To overcome the flood of populism on social media, Congress could mandate the social media giants to flag populist rhetoric and require that the social media platforms incorporate the code of conduct into their respective terms-of-service agreements with their clients so that any client caught in populist propagation could be blacklisted. To ensure that the social media companies are able to comply with such a directive, these companies would have to employ specialists, well-resourced in terms of budget and equipment, to undertake the responsibility of monitoring and oversight (Norman Eisen, 2019, p. 41). The decisions to take down populist and other unhealthy contents, such as polarizing and disinforming materials, should be guided “by clear criteria that illustrates the connection between facts, rational argument, and a healthy democracy” (Norman Eisen, 2019, p. 41). Moreover, the social media companies could establish and maintain a robust process of appeals process managed by employees who are not part of the initial decision regarding content monitoring and control (Norman Eisen, 2019). With the authority conferred on it by the Congress, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) could ensure that failure by any social media company to observe the rules result in reasonable amounts of fines (Paul Barrett, 2021, p. 9).

The choice of language used by the liberal actors can play a significant role in addressing the issue of populism. Liberals should endeavor to use communication strategies that put more emphasis on understanding, empathy, shared values, inclusivity, and respect for different opinions and perspectives of different people, even including the populists and the supporters of populism. Instead of allowing populist leaders to usurp the political landscape, liberal actors can seize the opportunity to appeal to values and enduring belief systems that shape people’s attitudes and behavior and resonate with the target audiences (Nietzsche, p. 13). By addressing the

⁴⁷ Idem

question of values, the liberal actors can reorient the level of reasoning of different participants in ways that bring salience and persuasion to the subjects of debate (Nietsche, p. 13). For instance, if immigration policy were framed in terms of inclusivity, then the future of immigration would be less moot and more certain “than framing it as a purely economic issue or talking about it in technical terms, such as debating how many migrants to accept” (Nietsche, 2020, p. 13). Moreover, the liberal actors should desist from using the language of blame game, a strategy often used by populist movements against the establishment. For example, if liberals are inclined to using descriptives, such as corrupt, compromised, etc. to label others at the White House, such a language would only reinforce the populists’ perception and rhetoric about the corrupt elites at the realms of political affairs (Nietsche, 2020). Adopting depolarizing and anti-populist communication strategies can reduce the appeal of populist narratives and disarm populists of the rhetoric and propaganda often used to incite their supporters against opponents.

To sum it up, the battle against populism in the United States politics requires a combination of strategic approaches, inclusive language, legislative reforms, socio-economic equality, and a commitment to democratic values. Populism, with its divisive rhetoric and anti-establishment appeal, poses challenges to the stability and unity of the nation. However, by addressing the underlying issues that fuel populism, engaging in respectful and empathetic communication, revamping the hopes of despondent citizenry, promoting socioeconomic equality, and strengthening democratic institutions, there is a pathway to mitigating its influence. The battle against populism is not solely a partisan struggle, but a collective effort that transcends party lines. It calls for a reaffirmation of democratic norms, a renewed commitment to the principles of inclusivity, and a dedication to bridging the sociocultural, economic, and political divides that have emerged in recent years. It is a call to action for political leaders, civil society, media, and citizens alike to work together in defense of a robust and resilient democracy. In this endeavor,

the choice of language, characterized by its inclusivity, empathy, and respect for diverse perspectives, emerges as a potent tool for change (Nietsche, 2020). By actively listening to the concerns of citizens, fostering dialogue, and articulating a positive vision for the future, leaders and actors in the political arena can lead the way in defeating populism and strengthening the foundation of a united and inclusive United States.

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