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Introduction to the Special Issue: Towards Foolproof Democracy: Improving Public Debate and Political Decision-Making

The events of the year 2016 have led many critical observers to doubt the stability and longevity of democracy. Ideally, democracy effectuates the rule of reason. Debates in elected assemblies and in society as a whole should serve the process of finding best reasons for political decisions. However, the mechanisms that currently produce such decisions are vulnerable to misuse. Opinion formation processes, whether in relation to parliamentary elections or political referendums, are increasingly driven by structural incentives, particularly those relating to the economy of online media. In addition to these systemic challenges, populist politicians and parties as well as foreign agents are on the lookout to exploit the mechanisms of public debate and political decision-making in modern democracies.

Arguably, these mechanisms need to be redesigned in an attempt to make them 'foolproof' – that is, democracies need to design them in a way that seeks to reduce misuse or to minimise its negative consequences. Fake news should not be able to infect political decisions by drawing attention away from actual problems, by casting doubt on well-justified empirical claims, and by bringing decision-makers to adopt unjustified public policies. Hate speech should not be able to exclude minorities from public debate or, generally, to dissuade citizens from participating in political opinion formation and decision-making processes. And, populists should not be able to stage non-existent 'majority positions' and use fake news and hate speech to exploit human cognitive bias and prejudice. What can democracies do to prevent 'post-truth' politics and to ensure healthy public debates and solid political decision-making?

Empirical evidence questions the competence of (political) agents in rational deliberation and debate. Even very intelligent people are prone to accept information that confirms what they already believe and dismiss information that contradicts it. Instead of seeking rational debate, people often cling to forms of modern

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tribalism. In addition, modern communication networks are swiftly replacing traditional print and broadcast news media. This shift presents deliberative democracy with opportunities but also risks, as these communication networks neither encourage a balanced exchange of information nor systematically check its quality. New technologies change the way public debate and political decision-making can potentially be designed and is actually conducted. In view of these developments, the question of the desired relation between democracy, deliberation, and truth looms large. In this special issue on 'Towards Foolproof Democracy' we have gathered six contributions that tackle this question from a number of different angles.

Populist parties and politicians have gained considerable influence in many democracies worldwide and have even began to overturn democracies in some countries. They use the media, and, in particular, online media such as social networks, extremely efficiently and exploit cognitive biases effectively for their political gain. And, the resulting populist media effects are unintentionally reinforced by the infrastructure and indeed the raison d'être of mass media, as the author of the first contribution claims. The scientific literature as well as the public debate has produced a multitude of proposals for how to deal with this problem. Should democracy advocates embrace the media strategies by populists? Should they try to take over their topics? Do they have to politically confront or rather appease them? The first contribution does not directly deal with the question of how to best fight populism. Frodo Podschwadek instead gives a detailed argument for why the state is responsible to provide media competence education to its citizens. He proposes to 'inoculate' citizens against populism by increasing their awareness of the effects that the media have on political decision-making. The contribution is particularly interesting, as Podschwadek does not focus on the political agents that bring about the problem (i. e. the populists), but on the media environment of modern democracies. Specifically, he argues that populist media effects, which result from a problematic interplay between human cognitive biases and the infrastructure of modern mass media, impair the political autonomy of citizens. In most liberal democratic frameworks, Podschwadek argues, such an impairment of political autonomy ought to be prevented, and he identifies the nation state as the agent that has this responsibility. He then goes on to provide reasons why media competence education is a better means to reduce populist media effects than legal regulation. Neither John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle nor Joel Feinberg's Offence Principle can justify legal regulation as an answer to populist media effects because, as Podschwadek argues, these effects arise due to the structure of modern mass media and how citizens are affected by its output – not necessarily due to any individual agent who wrongfully brings about suffering to someone. The required media competence, according to

Podschwadek, consists of a combination of two forms of knowledge. First, the state ought to improve the education of theoretical knowledge about the way in which the output of modern mass media is produced and about the audience that is affected by it. Second, the state ought to improve the education of practical knowledge about how to apply this theoretical knowledge in real life. Podschwadek concludes that while such media competence education is no panacea against populism, it is a robustly justifiable and autonomy-enhancing means to counter populist media effects.

A similar problem concerns the author of the second contribution. Kirsten Jewell Worden starts from the premise that digitisation has changed media consumption in a way that makes it easier for populists to undermine democracy. Her proposal for how to counter this problem is even less intrusive than Podschwadek's. In online political discourse, users often seem to be unaware of, ignore, or block friends and news sources that support political perspectives different from their own (for instance, due to 'filter bubbles,' 'epistemic bubbles,' or 'echo chambers'). Worden identifies the problem as one of epistemic sorting, which does not necessarily amount to a complete lack of exposure, but instead is mere disengagement with other viewpoints. However, engaging in political discourse with civic friends on social media is, as Worden argues, conducive to the pursuit of the good life because it facilitates the acquisition of the socio-political information and understanding necessary to the Aristotelian ideal of living one's life well. Under this conception, which she assumes in her argument, civic friends are those friends who mutually benefit from being in society with each other and concern themselves with the goods that affect life for the community. Based on this broadly Aristotelian picture, she proposes four sensible principles for civil debate: inclusive engagement, self-control, discretion, and audience-sensitivity. These principles ought to be adhered to in order to prevent epistemic sorting and to ultimately be able to pursue a good life. First, the principle of inclusive engagement aims at facilitating cross-cutting exposure by deliberately forming balanced networks of friends with diverse viewpoints and actively engaging with the content that they are sharing online. Second, the principle of self-control in the sense of Vallor (2016) is required to counter epistemic sorting as well. This is the ability to choose those goods and experiences that most contribute to human flourishing. In the context of online political discourse, this amounts to monitoring and counteracting one's cognitive biases as well as resisting the temptation to act uncivilly. Third, the principle of discretion consists of the habit of choosing one's discussions well. That is, one should neither completely avoid political controversy (i. e., by getting stuck in an 'echo chamber') nor seek it in the wrong mind-set (i. e., by 'trolling' other people). This principle builds upon the two before it: The

right balance can be found in a diverse online environment of civic friends and self-controlled engagement with that environment. Fourth, the principle of audience-sensitivity in online political discourse amounts to a concern for lurkers. When participating in such discourse, one ought to take those into account who are mere passive observers. The goal should be to avoid unnecessarily alienating visible and invisible civic friends online. Worden's four principles may form the basis of a media competence education as Podschwadek envisions it.

Gamification mechanisms are often expected to increase political participation on platforms, apps, and other digital services. The third contribution sheds light on gamification as a tool to improve public debate and political decision-making. Wulf Loh examines potential problems in using gamification mechanisms as involvement strategies and argues that – depending on the severity of the psycho-motivational effects as well as the covertness of the mechanisms – certain forms of gamification constitute an inadmissible kind of paternalism. Four particular goals with respect to political participation are commonly seen as being furthered by gamification. First, the use of gamification mechanisms for political participation is supposed to enhance political autonomy. Second, it is assumed to strengthen civic solidarity and thus counteract social divide and isolation. Third, it seems to generally support democratic deliberation and thus contribute to democracy's epistemic function. Fourth, it may also improve the legitimacy of governmental institutions by reducing political disaffection. In employing gamification mechanisms, e-participation apps such as the 'Hillary 2016' app – which Loh discusses in detail – aim at drawing more people into participating and sustaining this participation for a longer time, which arguably furthers these four goals. However, Loh discusses four interrelated reasons why the use of gamification mechanisms for political participation might be problematic from a normative democratic theory perspective. First, it is manipulative to the extent that it constitutes a form of 'strategic action' that contradicts the Habermasian ideal of participation as 'communicative action'. Once users realise this, they may turn their back on such participation apps or even on politics in general. Second, the use of gamification mechanisms for political participation might undermine the participants' *individual* autonomy. Third, it might undermine their *political* autonomy due to the fact that they are being manipulated. And, fourth, it might undermine it due to the fact that their motivational dispositions are being externalised. Loh argues that the standard case for the use of gamification mechanisms for political participation instantiates a form of weak paternalism. Someone is weakly paternalised if that person shares the reasons for her manipulation with the paternaliser and suffers only from a lack of self-efficacy. Such weak paternalism can only be justified, according to Loh, if

the reasons between the operators and users of the gamification tool overlap to a substantial degree with respect to both initiating and sustaining participation. And, this is only the case if the involvement strategies and their psycho-motivational effects are made transparent to users. However, the use of gamification mechanisms seems to not be made transparent in many cases. Loh thus concludes with a cautious outlook at the increasing use of gamification mechanisms for political participation.

In her contribution, Suzanne Bloks looks at the conflict that, under certain circumstances, arises between referendum and parliamentary voting. For example, when the parliament votes in favour of one policy and the public votes against it in a referendum. To be precise, she makes use of three paradoxes (the Ostrogorski paradox, the Anscombe paradox and the Nurmi representation paradox) from social choice theory to show how the application of majority rule to both kinds of voting can result in contradictory judgments. It is worth noting that such discord arises even when voters are assumed to act perfectly rationally and their preferences remain invariant. Bloks complains that although these paradoxes and their implications for voting systems are well-known to experts, they have largely gone unnoticed by those who have a vested interest in the political process, including politicians and constitutional lawyers. The first part of her contribution attempts to address this problem by providing a non-technical account of the paradoxes in the context of referendum vs. parliamentary voting. The second part offers a useful discussion of the conditions under which conflict between referendum and parliamentary voting can be avoided. Four such conditions are identified. Perhaps the simplest one comes from Nurmi who suggests that making referendums legally-binding, i. e. not merely consultative, would resolve any conflicting judgment with the majority opinion of parliamentarians. Another condition concerns the use of sequential referendums to diffuse conflict. Referendums in such cases are used as a means to revise a policy. Voting down the policy prompts the revision which, in turn, prompts another referendum. Alas, this condition only seems to apply in cases where the policy is rejected, as opposed to accepted, by the public. Bloks argues that the first two conditions succeed in addressing at least some versions of Nurmi's representation paradox. The third and fourth conditions address the other two paradoxes. The third involves a quorum requirement, e. g. that a relatively high percentage of the electorate participates in the referendum, and draws on the work of Wagner (1983). Bloks identifies certain worries with the political feasibility of this solution, including voter abstention as a method to prevent the satisfaction of the participation requirement. The fourth and final condition focuses on a fundamental difference between referendums and parliamentary elections. The former solicit public opinion on individual issues while the latter

solicit public opinion on complex policy programmes that invariably link together multiple issues. Since these links sometimes matter, Bloks argues, the fourth condition prohibits the application of referendums in such cases. The upshot of her discussion is that the use of referendums should be limited in the context of representative democracies in order to avoid conflict between referendum and parliamentary voting.

The fifth contribution explores the question of how best to change the public's attitude towards man-made climate change. Dominic Lenzi holds that advocates of deliberative democracy typically promote the view that only rational discussion can sway public opinion towards an appreciation of what needs to be done to tackle such change. By contrast, advocates of nudging are pessimistic about the public's ability to reason their way to the right conclusion (or to a conclusion desirable to some group). Instead, they urge a reorientation of public opinion through the use of indirect methods such as positive reinforcement. Lenzi argues that neither method is sufficient on its own and makes a case for a combined approach towards problems like climate change. The trouble with deliberative approaches is that they ignore a voluminous body of behavioural evidence that paints a pessimistic picture of the level of understanding people – especially laypersons – have of data, expertise and, more generally, science. It's not that Lenzi thinks that the deliberative approach is devoid of any utility. In fact, he proposes that mini-publics – fora where people can learn from each other and reach informed opinions – can make some headway in reducing polarisation and value-driven bias. But, he argues, deliberation is not a cure-all. This is particularly true in relation to climate change since in this case democracies need to take action sooner rather than later and, moreover, it is time-consuming to train people to be more reflective and mindful of the scientific evidence and the inferences they draw from it. Here is where nudging comes to the fore. The hope is that, by modifying the ways in which information about climate change is conveyed and by introducing various incentives, public opinion can become more sensitive to the facts. Lenzi proceeds to voice some concerns about standard approaches to nudging, e. g. the assumption that elites possess socially legitimate ends. Still, he thinks that it is a useful tool that can supplement deliberation. Indeed, he considers some examples that employ both approaches promising, e. g. using mini-publics as information regulators or nudging individuals towards more reflective thinking by giving their personalised media feeds more diverse content. The paper thus strikes an upbeat tone in its conclusion.

The sixth contribution examines the future of governance against the backdrop of developments in artificial intelligence. Fiona McEvoy starts by pointing out that political decision-makers such as politicians and policymakers have a

moral obligation to make the best decisions. The trouble is that, like all human beings, they are highly fallible individuals. Just as Lenzi did in his contribution, she cites the bulging research literature on the limits of human judgment, especially judgment guided by intuition, as a cautionary tale against our putting too much trust on the abilities of political decision-makers. More precisely, she lists six types of effects that cast doubt on decision-making, namely ego depletion, the halo effect, the affect heuristic, belief overkill, the law of small numbers and the availability cascade. To give one example, ego depletion occurs after a physical or mental exertion on a task, which is likely to leave us with a significantly reduced incentive to exert ourselves on another task. Since political decision-making involves many such tasks in a row, the concern is that the judgments of those who exercise it are likely to deteriorate as the tasks keep piling on. Indeed, in the political domain, argues McEvoy, even subject-specific experts frequently fail to make good judgments on account of its hard-to-predict nature. Her positive proposal to tackle these problems is an appeal to technology and, to be precise, to data-driven artificial intelligence (AI). To be clear, McEvoy does not think that any such technology will do the job on its own. But where it can be shown to be competent, it would be morally reprehensible for human political decision-makers not to take it into account and defer to its judgments. It should be obvious that an AI decision-maker would not suffer from the kinds of limitations cited earlier – ego depletion being an obvious one. Moreover, argues McEvoy, such a decision-maker would be swift and very accurate in its judgements as demonstrated by a cascade of recent experiments pitting human against AI competitors. The paper concludes with some potential objections (e. g. algorithmic bias) and replies (e. g. supplementing biased data sets with synthetic data to produce non-biased algorithms).

This special issue gathers contributions that discuss the following topics: media competence education as the state's responsibility to deal with populist media effects (Podschwadek), virtue ethics as a way to improve online political discourse (Worden), the risks of gamification mechanisms as tools to enhance political participation (Loh), the conditions under which conflict between referendum and parliamentary voting can be avoided (Bloks), the prospects of combining rational deliberation with nudging to mend the debate about climate change (Lenzi), and the opportunities provided by AI to support human political decision-making (McEvoy). Despite their varied focus, all of these contributions seek novel ways to improve public debate and political decision-making. It is our hope that the readers of this special issue will gain new insights on the path 'towards foolproof democracy'.