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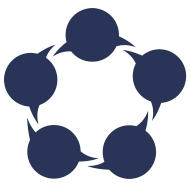

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Abstract

This article examines the 2023 Partito Democratico *(PD) primary election in Italy, comparing the digital campaign strategies of Elly Schlein, current PD Secretary, and Stefano Bonaccini, the long-serving President of the Emilia-Romagna region. Using qualitative content analysis of their campaign manifestos and social media data from Facebook and Instagram, the study explores how digitalization and personalization shaped their leadership styles and electoral performance. Findings show that, despite similar policy agendas, Schlein's inclusive, interactive, and grassroots-oriented communication generated stronger online engagement and follower growth, contributing to her unexpected victory. Bonaccini's campaign, though well-funded and institutionally supported, relied on more traditional political communication. The research argues that Schlein's success marks a partial shift within the PD towards a more digital, personalized form of leadership while highlighting the structural resistance that continues to hinder full organizational transformation.*

Keywords: Political Communication; Political Campaigns; Social Media; Italian Politics; Digitalization; Personalization; Content Analysis; Digital Leadership

Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing political science literature on the use of digital media by political actors to shape voter behaviour and build electoral support (Gerbaudo 2022; Peña and Gold 2023; Minguzzi 2023; McLaughlin 2024). It draws on the classic theoretical tradition that compares the electoral arena to the economic marketplace (Downs 1957), where candidates compete for voter preferences much like firms compete for consumers. In the contemporary context, the rise of digital technologies has profoundly transformed this dynamic. Advanced marketing tools, data analytics, and micro-targeting techniques now play a central role in campaign strategy, influencing not only electoral outcomes but also the broader processes of political mobilization and leadership formation (Dommett 2019).

Building on this theoretical framework, the paper examines the 2023 leadership campaign of the *Partito Democratico* (PD), Italy's Democratic Party, focusing on the two candidates who reached the final runoff held on February 26, 2023: Elly Schlein and Stefano Bonaccini. The central objective is to assess whether Schlein's victory in the primary election can be explained, at least in part, by two defining trends of contemporary politics: personalization and digitization.

While acknowledging multiple factors influence electoral success, this study aims to provide preliminary empirical evidence on how digital communication strategies and online presence affect political performance. Specifically, it examines whether more effective digital organization and campaign design correlate with a higher likelihood of electoral success.

By analysing campaign strategies through this lens, the paper aims to provide a first step toward validating, through further empirical investigation, the hypothesis that digital campaign competence can serve as a significant advantage in political contests. In doing so, it positions Schlein's victory not only as a personal and political milestone but also as a case study through which we can understand how digital infrastructure and personalization strategies may enhance the competitiveness of candidates in modern electoral campaigns.

To explore this, the research is guided by two main hypotheses: the first focuses on the key topics each candidate emphasized to shape their public image; the second examines their respective digital communication styles and strategies throughout the campaign:

> **H1:** Schlein emphasizes different issues in her political manifesto and digital communication compared to Bonaccini, reflecting the age and political sensibility of her target audience. This differentiated program may have attracted electorate outside the party (particularly younger individuals and members of the LGBTQ+ community) who likely contributed to her victory.
>
> **H2:** Schlein's digital campaign was more direct, accessible, and interactive—especially across social media platforms and her personal website—resulting in more effective communication and faster growth of her online following.

Elly Schlein's leadership, at the time of her election, appeared to mark a turning point for the PD, offering a valuable case study to examine how personalization and digitalization can be strategically leveraged within a political campaign.

To test these hypotheses, the study is structured in two main parts, which define the core sections of the paper. The first part analyses the candidates' programmatic motions and their official campaign websites. Using NVivo qualitative analysis software, key excerpts from the candidates' manifestos were coded according to predefined categories. Content observation of the

candidates' digital platforms and newsletters provided further insights into how each campaign used digital tools to organize and engage supporters (Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Dommett 2019).

The second part of the analysis focuses on the candidates' activities on Meta platforms—specifically, Facebook and Instagram—drawing on established research on digital campaigning (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Stier et al. 2018; Koc-Michalska et al. 2020). Data were collected using the CrowdTangle API and analysed using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling (Blei et al. 2003; Blei 2012) to identify the dominant themes in each candidate's social media posts. Additionally, the study monitored user engagement and follower growth in the weeks preceding the primary vote, offering a comparative assessment of the effectiveness of their digital outreach strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The Italian political arena has long served a dynamic political laboratory for innovations, both nationally and internationally. In recent decades, Italy has witnessed major transformations in political communication and organization: from Forza Italia and Silvio Berlusconi's pioneering personalization of politics (Calise 2000) to the digital experimentation of the Five Star Movement, Matteo Salvini's *Lega*, and Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (Gerbaudo 2018; 2022; Nunziata 2021; Giordano and Antonucci 2023).

Digitalization and personalization represent the two main drivers of transformation in contemporary politics (Calise and Musella 2019). The widespread diffusion of digital technologies and the rise of the so-called "platform society" (van Dijck et al. 2018) are affecting all political actors, from parties and their leaders to public administration (Musella 2022b; Borriello 2025). These changes extend far beyond communication, disrupting traditional mechanisms of organization and representation in democratic systems (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Borriello 2023).

Over the past three decades, the centralization of power in the hands of charismatic leaders (Lowi 1986; Calise 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Bordignon 2013; Musella 2020) has been gaining momentum, aided by technological developments that have transformed the interaction between politicians and voters (Sartori 2000; Roncarolo 2008; Rullo and Nunziata 2021; Dommett et al. 2021; Musella 2022a).

Digitalization has thus enabled the emergence of an innovative party model that applies new technologies not only to communicate with the electorate, but also to organize its internal structure (Katz and Mair 2018; Calise and Musella 2019; Gerbaudo 2018; 2022; Fittipaldi 2021).

The Five Stars Movement reached international fame for its innovative use of the web to interact with the electoral base—along its personalized leadership (Tarchi 2015).

In this evolving context, charismatic leadership has developed into platform leadership (Nunziata 2021; Villaplana and Fitzpatrick 2024), where a leader's charisma increasingly rests on the empathic and direct relation between "followers-voters" and politicians (Campus 2009; Calise and Musella 2019). This relationship, far from being exclusively grounded in political ideologies and programmatic manifestos, is mediated through social media interactions that emphasize aspects of leaders' personal life, with whom voters can identify (Thompson 2005; Gerbaudo 2018; Nunziata 2023).

Digitization has also transformed electoral campaigning, making it more personalized, pervasive, and permanent (Calise and Musella 2019). The earliest examples of data-driven political campaign emerged in the United States, from Howard Dean's 2004 campaign to Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's digital mobilizations (Bimber 2014; Baldwin-Philippi 2019; Valbruzzi 2021). Today, international literature is beginning to analyse the phenomenon of intra-party elections and democracy in light of the digitization process, focusing on the relevance of new technologies in internal communication and participation systems, as well as the process of leaders' consensus-building (Datts and Gerl 2023; Lupato and Meloni 2023). However, data-driven campaigning has now become a global phenomenon. Despite scandals such as Cambridge Analytica, Meta platforms remain among the most widely used tools for reaching voters (Stier et al. 2018; Dommett 2019; Koc-Michalska et al. 2020; Bennett and Gordon 2021).

In this context of continuous metamorphosis, the influence of traditional mass parties, which had dominated Italy until the early 1990s, has steadily declined. Silvio Berlusconi's "descent into the field" marked a radical change in the way politics is done in Italy (Campus 2006; Bordignon 2013). Nowadays, it is difficult to find a party that exists based on long-lasting ideologies and not on a charismatic leader to hold its ranks together.

The PD nonetheless remains the repository of a significant political tradition in Italy, grounded in its two notable predecessors: the Christian Democracy (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI). This heritage continues to shape the PD's internal organization, decision-making structures, and factional dynamics (Pasquino 2009; Bobba and Seddone, 2016; Natale and Fasano, 2017). Some attempts—such as the introduction of primaries (Bolgherini and Musella 2006), Matteo Renzi's experience (Bordignon 2013; Calise 2013; Salvati 2014), or Enrico Letta's "democratic *Agorà*" initiative (Valbruzzi 2021)—have produced limited change, often meeting resistance from entrenched elites. As a result, the PD faces competitive disadvantages compared to other political players in Italy, particularly in terms of personalization and digitalization.

Against this backdrop, Schlein's victory in the 2023 primary election appears to signal a turning point for the PD. Although, almost two years after her election, the drive for innovation continues to face the same internal resistance that thwarted previous reform efforts, Schlein's rise nevertheless symbolizes an ongoing generational and structural shift in Italian politics, where traditional forms of participation are giving way to new, digitally mediated modes of political engagement (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Borriello 2023).

Methodology

To test the first hypothesis and examine the core elements of the campaign led by Schlein and Bonaccini, we analysed the candidates' programmatic motions and observed the content published on their official websites (*www.stefanobonaccini.it* and *www.ellyschlein.it*). Two different qualitative research techniques were employed. First, a content analysis of the texts was conducted using NVivo software (Jackson and Bazeley 2019). Second, we examined the content posted on the candidates' personal websites and analysed their design choices. We subscribed to the newsletters from January 26, 2023, to February 26, 2023 to assess the dynamics of digital community engagement.

The two programmatic motions, publicly available on the PD website (*www.partitodemocratico.it*) and on the candidates' platforms, were uploaded to NVivo for qualitative coding. This tool was chosen to enable both in-depth thematic analysis and lexical examination of the texts. Two main nodes were identified—Bonaccini and Schlein—and seven sub-nodes were created representing the main topics addressed in the two documents (Table 1).

Table 1. Nodes and Sub-nodes Used for the Qualitative Content Analysis NVivo

Nodes	Sub-nodes
1: Bonaccini	1: Environment and Digital
	2: Civil and Social Rights
	3: Education, Culture and Tourism
	4: Work and Economy
2: Schlein	5: Party and Political Identity
	6: International Politics
	7: Healthcare

Source: Authors through NVivo software

Based on these categories, we manually coded key excerpts corresponding to each policy area, allowing a comparison of how much attention each candidate devoted to different policy themes and to compare the linguistic structures and communication styles they adopted. After this initial coding, a vocabulary of significant terms was developed[1]. Using NVivo's query tools, we then generated word frequency lists and word clouds to identify the most recurrent terms, both across and within categories. The observation of the candidates' websites involved comparing their homepages and the various available sections. The analyses conducted at this stage allow for the partial rejection of H1, while providing empirical evidence in support of H2.

In the second stage of the research, we analysed the candidates' social media activity using LDA topic modelling (Blei et al. 2003) to identify the main themes of their campaigns (Minguzzi 2023). We extracted all posts published by both candidates on Facebook and Instagram between January 26 and March 26, 2023 using the CrowdTangle API. The primary election date (February 26) served as the midpoint, enabling comparison between the pre- and post-election periods. The dataset included 365 Facebook posts and 289 Instagram posts. No additional filters were applied, as the objective was to analyse the full scope of campaign communication within the selected timeframe. To account for platform-specific affordances, posts were divided into two separate matrices, one for Facebook and one for Instagram, to avoid oversimplification[2].

After automated lemmatization in T-Lab software, the datasets were analysed through LDA topic modelling. Initially, seven themes were requested, mirroring the NVivo sub-node structure (Table 1). However, preliminary extractions showed redundancy, so the number of themes was reduced to five for both datasets (Table 2).

[1] The vocabulary was developed by researchers through the removal of less relevant parts of the text for analysis—such as conjunctions, articles, adverbs, pronouns, and prepositions—which carry little weight in shaping the political language of the two candidates. This allowed for the identification of the most frequently used nouns, adjectives, and verbs in the campaign platforms, providing a solid basis for generating the respective word clouds.

[2] For both Facebook and Instagram, the matrix takes into analysis the following variables: PageName, which is the profile of the two candidates; Date of the post (Date), divided into pre- and post-election; type of media present in the post (MediaType); total interactions with the individual post (TotInteractions); and the number of comments to the post (Comments). In the case of Instagram, Likes to the posts were also taken into account, while for Facebook the variables PositiveInteractions ("like", "love", "wow", "care") and NegativeInteractions ("angry", "sad", "haha") were added. Moreover, even in cases where the variables are the same for the two matrices, the modes are different: in the case of MediaType, we have "Link", "Photo", "Status" and "Video" as modalities on Facebook; where only "Photo" and "Video" are considered on Instagram.

Table 2. Topic Modelling (LDA) Results

Dataset	Facebook	Instagram
Extracted Themes	1. Electoral Campaign	1. Electoral Campaign
	2. Investments	2. Investments
	3. Political Opposition	3. PD Renewal
	4. Popular Participation	4. Popular Participation
	5. Solidarity and Rights	5. Solidarity and Rights

Source: Authors' elaboration through T-Lab software.

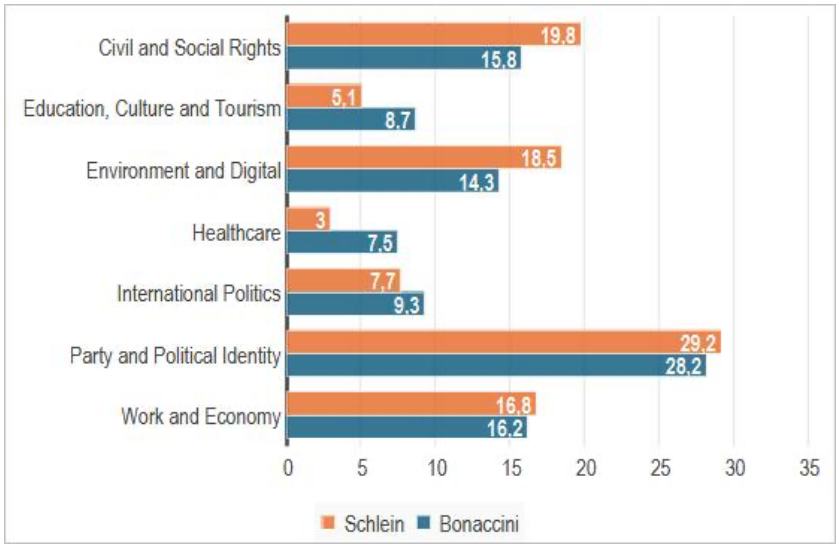
The themes identified were largely consistent across both platforms, with one notable difference: "PD Renewal" emerged on Instagram, while the analogous theme on Facebook was "Political Opposition." Although overlapping conceptually, these themes emphasize different aspects of the candidates' messaging.

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis focused primarily on the pre-election period, to better capture the candidates' strategic use of digital platforms during the active phase of the campaign. The next sections present the findings of the research, one analysing the political manifestos, the second, the personal websites of the two candidates during the electoral campaign; finally, the latter concentrates on social media.

Thematic and Stylistic Features of the Candidates' Manifestos

The qualitative content analysis of the programmatic documents (Figure 1) reveals a broad thematic alignment between the two candidates, consistent with the intra-party nature of the competition. However, subtle differences emerged in the emphasis and framing of key issues, reflecting distinct political identities and campaign strategies (Gagliardi 2020; Gressi 2023; Meli 2023).

Figure 1. Qualitative Content Analysis of Candidates' Manifestos: Distribution of Thematic Areas (% of total text)



Source: Authors

Schlein positioned herself as the "left-wing outsider," having rejoined the PD only in December 2022 after leaving in 2013. Her campaign emphasized ideological renewal, social justice, and a clear progressive identity, resonating with youth and minority voters (Seddone 2023). Schlein's approach aligns with existing literature on "outsider" candidates (Judis 2016), which has often been closely linked to populist mobilization (Fittipaldi 2021). Conversely, Bonaccini built his candidacy on administrative competence and long-standing party experience—as a member of the PD since 2007 and former PCI affiliate—projecting the image of a "good administrator." Bonaccini's candidacy should be read as a systemic one, aligned with the party's organizational characteristics and evidenced by the direct support of most of PD mayors and regional governors across the country. Notably, the President of Emilia-Romagna won the first round of the primaries, open only to party members, but, for the first time in the party's history, failed to secure confirmation in the second round on February 26, 2023.

A closer comparison of manifesto content shows Schlein dedicated greater attention to green and digital transformation (18.5% vs. 14.3%) and civil and social rights (19.8% vs. 15.8%), while Bonaccini prioritized healthcare (7.5% vs. 3%) and education, culture, and tourism (8.7% vs. 5.1%). Both candidates devoted similar attention to party identity and renewal, labour and economy, and foreign policy. These proportions reflect differing electoral target groups: Schlein's younger, progressive base versus Bonaccini's older, moderate electorate (Bolgherini and Trastulli 2023).

In addition to thematic differences, stylistic contrasts were observed in the manifestos' length and structure. Bonaccini's document, comprising 25,766 words across nine sections plus an

introduction, adopts a detailed policy-report format rich in data and specific measures. By contrast, Schlein's manifesto contains 17,091 words—roughly two-thirds the length of Bonaccini's—and employs a more direct, narrative style organized around motivational slogans such as "Take Back Hope," "A Fairer Future," and "It's Our Time." Both candidates also used distinctive campaign mottos: Bonaccini's "*Energia Popolare*" ("Popular Energy") and Schlein's "*Parte da Noi!*" ("It Starts from Us!").

Using NVivo's word frequency queries, we identified the 100 most frequently used words in each manifesto (Figures 2). Both manifestos highlight labour (*lavoro*) as the most recurrent term. Of the twenty most frequently used words (Table 3), ten are common to both documents, while the remaining ten reflect subtle distinctions in messaging. Bonaccini's vocabulary emphasizes "services," "education," "development," and "territory," whereas Schlein's includes "women," "inequality," "new," and "ecological."

Table 3. Common and Exclusive Words among the 20 Most Frequent Terms

Shared Terms	Exclusive to Bonaccini	Exclusive to Schlein
Job, party, country, politics, social, people, PD, rights, community, them	Everyone, services, Right, education, Italy, citizens, development, national, world, territory	Policies, inequalities, ecological, resources, together, new, time, everyone, women, European

Source: Authors

Figure 2. Most Frequent 100 Words

Elly Schlein's Manifesto

Stefano Bonaccini's Manifesto

Source: Authors through NVivo software

Communication Design and Online Engagement Strategies

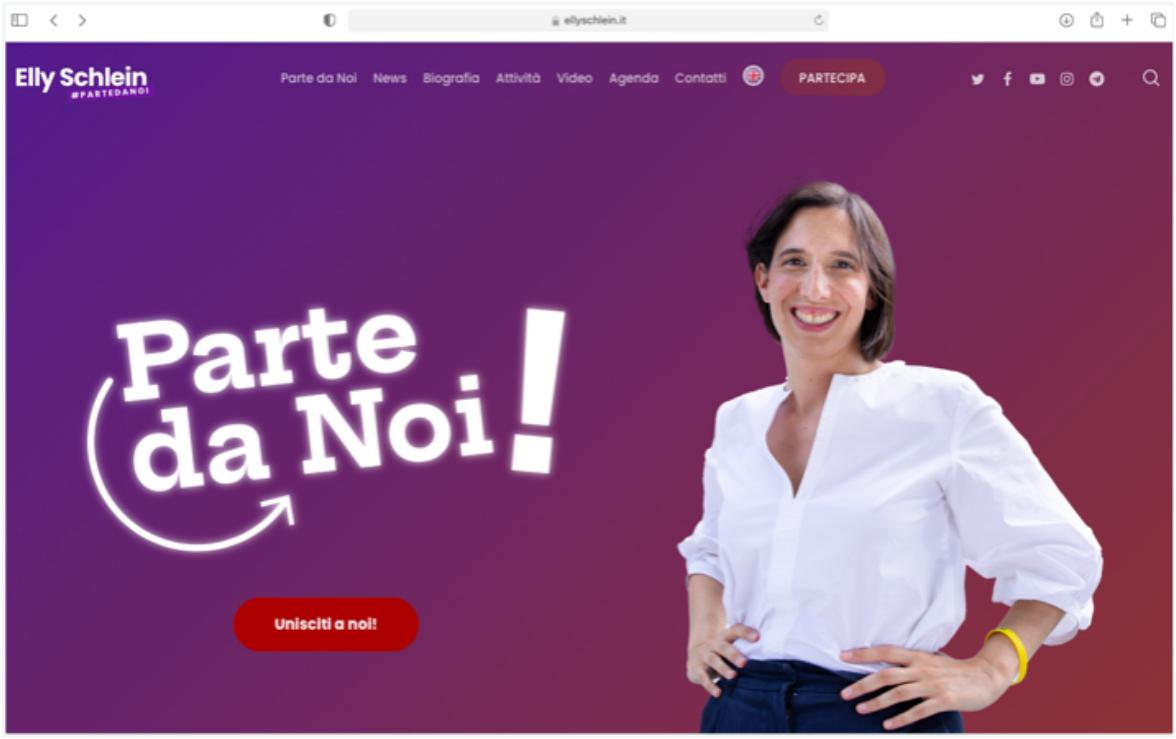
Schlein demonstrated greater proficiency in digital campaigning, likely influenced by her experience in Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns (Schlein 2023). Her website and communications targeted younger voters, women, and minority groups, whereas Bonaccini relied more heavily on in-person campaigning with local administrators. Schlein's younger age and familiarity with social media appear to have enhanced her capacity for digital mobilization (Laor 2022).

We observed the candidates' personal websites between January 26 and February 26, 2023, and analysed their respective campaign newsletters. Both candidates relied primarily on digital platforms as one-directional communication tools, yet their tone, layout, and user engagement strategies differed in significant ways.

From the homepage designs, key similarities and distinctions emerged. Both websites prominently displayed the candidates' slogans and participation calls. Schlein's homepage (Figure 3) is dominated by the slogan "*Parte da Noi!*" ("It Starts from Us!"). The use of the inclusive imperative "Join us!" (*Unisciti a noi!*) and dynamic typography conveys openness and grassroots energy. The absence of the PD logo emphasizes her semi-outsider positioning and focus on bottom-up mobilization rather than institutional continuity. The navigation bar prioritizes engagement-oriented sections—*Parte da Noi*, *Attività* (Activities), and *Partecipa* (Participate)—underscoring a strategy of relational politics and community participation.

Bonaccini's homepage (Figure 4), by contrast, reflects a professionalized and institutional aesthetic. The visual palette—dominated by red and black—evokes authority and determination, aligning with his slogan "*Energia Popolare*" ("Popular Energy"). The inclusion of the PD logo, formal title (*Segretario*), and calls to action such as "*Dona ora*" ("Donate now") and "*Guarda il video della candidatura*" ("Watch the campaign video") indicate a top-down campaign logic oriented toward organizational legitimacy and mobilization of party networks.

Figure 3. Homepage of Schlein's Campaign Website (*ellyschlein.it*), January 27, 2023



Source: web.archive.org

Figure 4. Homepage of Bonaccini's Campaign Website (*stefanobonaccini.it*), February 28, 2023

Source: web.archive.org

During the observation period, we received five newsletters from Schlein and five from Bonaccini. Both candidates used their mailing lists to share information about upcoming events and to mobilize supporters around key campaign milestones. These messages primarily reminded recipients about important dates—such as the deadline for party registration to vote in the first round, registration on the *primariepd2023.it* platform, the location of polling stations, and participation in the primary election. This functional use of email reflects a minimalist approach to digital engagement, focused on turnout management rather than fostering a sustained, interactive relationship with voters.

In sum, the combined analysis of manifestos and campaign platforms highlights broad thematic convergence but also clear divergences in tone, communication style, and target audience. Schlein's campaign employed a more inclusive, direct, and digitally oriented approach, while Bonaccini's relied on administrative competence and traditional party structures. However, both candidates largely used their digital platforms as "one-to-public" communication channels, with limited evidence of interactive or participatory engagement; far from the more integrated digital mobilization models seen in other European contexts (Peña and Gold 2023).

Analysis of the candidates' activities and interactions on Meta platforms

Meta platforms remain among the most influential social networks and have become central to political communication, particularly during electoral campaigns (Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Valbruzzi 2021). However, information on social media such as Facebook and Instagram runs less fluidly than on other social media, as was the case with Twitter before Elon Musk's acquisition in 2022. Meta's algorithm privileges content produced from followed accounts, thereby reinforcing echo chambers and limiting outreach to non-followers (Stier et al. 2018).

Both Schlein and Bonaccini appeared to use Meta's cross-posting feature, which allows identical content to be published simultaneously on Facebook and Instagram (Facebook 2023). This is supported by the results of the LDA topic modelling, which revealed continuity between the two platforms and five dominant themes across both candidates' posts:

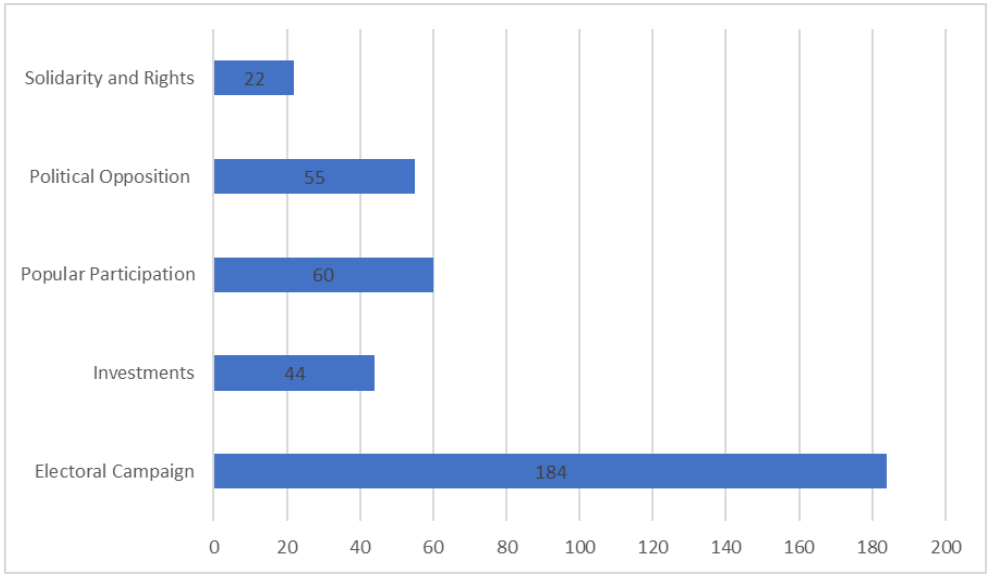
- **Electoral Campaign**: references to the primary election and the action of going to vote, especially enticing registered voters to show up at the gazebos.
- **Investments**: policy-oriented proposals concerning funding for innovation, research, and the public sector.
- **Political Opposition/PD Renewal:** messages about the PD's role in Italian politics. On Facebook, this took the form of broader critiques of the Meloni government (Political

Opposition); on Instagram, it emphasized renewal and repositioning within the left (PD Renewal).

- **Popular Participation:** posts encouraging grassroots activism and participation in events and rallies organized in the run-up to the election.
- **Solidarity and Rights**: references to social causes, memorials, and human rights issues such as anti-discrimination and LGBTQ+ equality.

The dataset also reflects differences in volume and engagement. Bonaccini was considerably more active, posting both before and after the primaries, while Schlein concentrated her online activity before her victory. On Facebook, Schlein accounted for 32.3% (118 posts) of total posts, compared to 67.7% (247 posts) by Bonaccini. As shown in Figure 5, both candidates' posts primarily fall under the Electoral Campaign theme.

Figure 5: Facebook Posts Classified by Emerging Themes

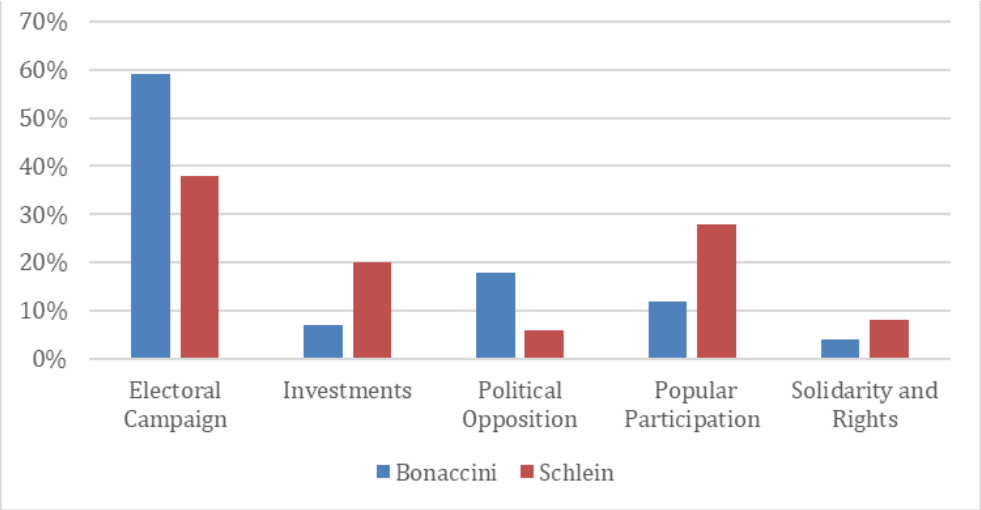


Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

Of the 251 posts published before the primary election—148 by Bonaccini and 103 by Schlein—the majority focused on mobilisation. Nearly 60% of Bonaccini's posts related to the "Electoral Campaign" theme, while Schlein's communication was more evenly distributed across topics (Figure 6). Bonaccini emphasized "Political Opposition" (18%), presenting himself as the institutional defender of the PD, while Schlein devoted more attention to "Popular Participation" (28%). Indeed, the latter's posts denote her focus on thanking those who attended the events she took part in, thus trying to maintain an empathetic relationship between the leader and her electorate (Campus 2006; Calise and Musella 2019; Villaplana and Fitzpatrick 2024).

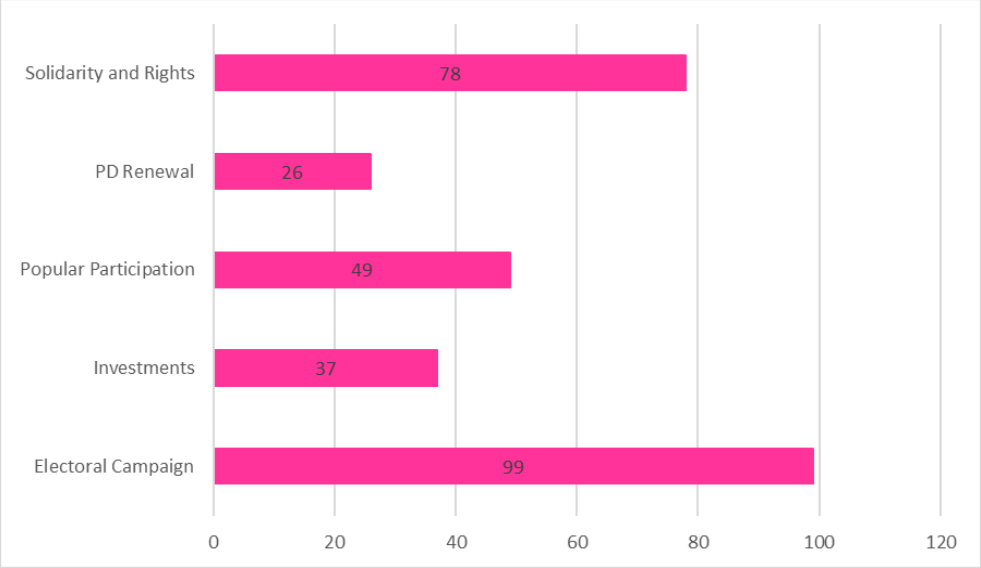
On Instagram, Schlein's posts account for 37.7% (109 posts) of the total sample analysed, compared to Bonaccini's 62.3% (180 posts). In this case, "Solidarity and Rights" emerged as a more prominent theme, nearly matching "Electoral Campaign" in volume, 78 posts for Schlein and 99 posts for Bonaccini in total (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Facebook Topics in the Thirty Days before the Elections



Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

Figure 7. Instagram Posts Classified by Emerging Themes



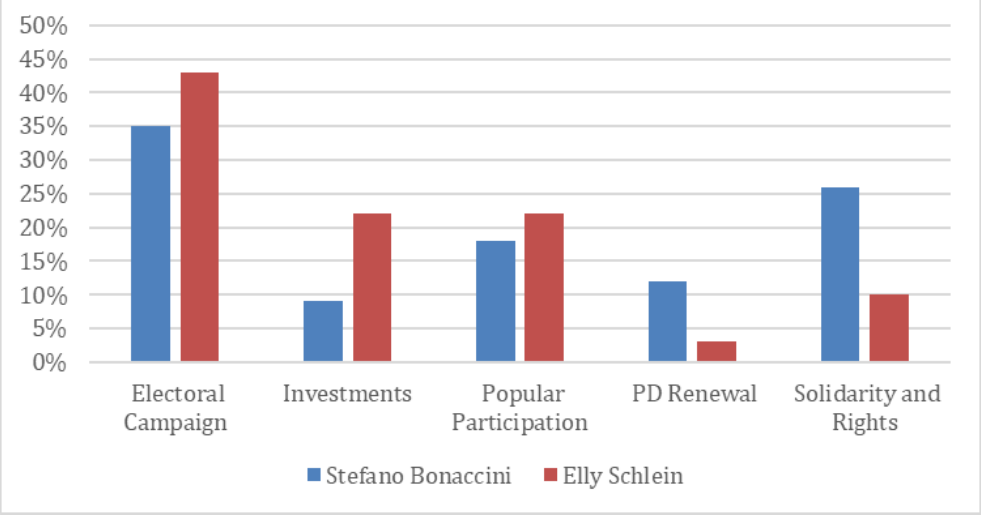
Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

In the month leading up to the election, Bonaccini posted 102 times and Schlein 96 times, indicating comparable activity levels (Figure 8). However, Schlein devoted 43% of her posts to the "Electoral Campaign" theme, compared to Bonaccini's 35%. Both candidates regarded their relationship with the electorate, in person and online, to be essential. This is reflected in the

"Popular Participation" theme, which appears in about 22% of Schlein's posts and 18% of Bonaccini's. Bonaccini focused more on "Solidarity and Rights" (26%), while Schlein distributed her focus more evenly between "Popular Participation" (22%) and "Investments" (22%).

Overall, the themes on Instagram appear more evenly distributed across both candidates' posts. The "Electoral Campaign" theme remains the dominant focus, as Schlein and Bonaccini both emphasize the importance of participation and mobilize out-of-town voters to visit polling stations—an appeal particularly visible in Schlein's messaging[3]. Discussions about online voting also feature prominently on Instagram. This emphasis likely reflects the platform's younger user base, prompting both candidates to maintain engagement by addressing issues relevant to digitally active and first-time voters (Kahne and Bowyer 2018; Presidenza del Consiglio 2022).

Figure 8. Instagram Topics in the Thirty Days before the Elections



Source: Authors through CrowdTangle API (2023)

This analysis suggests that both candidates moved away from the substantive themes of their manifestos, instead embracing a rhetoric shaped by the propagandistic logic typical of electoral campaigning. Their discourse relied on a Manichaean dialectic (Meijers and Zaslove 2021), portraying PD as the principal opposition to the current right-wing government. More than elaborating policy proposals, their primary communicative goal was to mobilize and persuade undecided voters to participate actively in the primaries.

Beyond the "Electoral Campaign" theme, "Popular Participation" emerges as a central focus on both Facebook and Instagram. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary politics, where digital platforms have become essential arenas for fostering visibility and symbolic proximity

[3] PD primary election of 2023 was the first Italian election where people living in a different location then their official residence (as it is often the case for students) could vote for the candidates just by going to the PD official gazebos in any public squares and showing their id card. Previously, people had to go back to their hometowns to vote for any kind of election or referendum.

between leaders and voters. As Gerbaudo (2018) argues, the mediatization of participation encourages politicians to cultivate a sense of collective belonging online. Consequently, both Schlein and Bonaccini use social media not merely to inform but to sustain engagement within their follower communities, illustrating how online interaction increasingly complements traditional forms of political mobilization (Peña and Gold 2023; Villaplana and Fitzpatrick 2024).

Despite embodying the figure of the traditional "good administrator," Bonaccini seems to understand the importance of digital media. Between November 2022 and February 2023, Bonaccini reportedly spent about €15,000 to sponsor his content on Meta platforms, compared to €1,820 by Schlein (Gonzato 2023). Nevertheless, Schlein's growth on both platforms far outpaced Bonaccini's. On Facebook, Schlein's followers increased by 5.7% (from 215,470 to 227,787), compared to Bonaccini's modest 0.53% growth (Table 4).

Although Bonaccini retained a larger base due to his institutional role, his posts generated fewer interactions. Schlein's posts achieved 295,149 interactions, nearly matching Bonaccini's 317,116, despite her smaller audience (Table 5). Moreover, her posts accumulated over twice as many views and elicited far fewer negative reactions (Table 6).

On Instagram, the contrast was even more striking. Indeed, while Bonaccini continued to have more followers on Facebook, a platform with an older population (Laor 2020; Boulianne and Larsson 2021), Instagram proved to be a younger and more dynamic social media. In the month leading to the primaries, Schlein's follower base grew by 30%, compared to Bonaccini's 5.6% (Table 4). Despite fewer total posts and followers, Schlein's content generated nearly double the total interactions and exponentially higher video views—658,947 vs. 6,397 (Table 7).

The comparative analysis of Meta activity shows that the two candidates focused on similar themes—a predictable outcome, given that the contest took place within the same party. Both candidates prioritized active interaction with followers over elaborating on the policy content of their manifestos (Boulianne and Larsson 2021). The analysis also highlights the different digital leadership models within the PD. In particular, the analysis of profile activity shows that despite the smaller number of posts published on both platforms and Bonaccini's large expenditures on Meta platforms to sponsor his posts, Schlein appears to be the more popular candidate.

In light of the nature of the Meta algorithm, Schlein's case is particularly instructive: she managed to reach non-followers and grow her base, both online and in real life (Stier et al. 2018). Her campaign demonstrates how digital competence can offset structural disadvantages in political organization. Despite Meta's algorithmic barriers to non-follower outreach, Schlein managed to expand her audience and convert online visibility into real-world political momentum.

Table 4. Growth of Facebook and Instagram Followers in the 30 Days Before the Election

Candidate	Platform	Followers	Follower Growth	Growth (%)
Bonaccini	Facebook	417,310	2,220	0.53
	Instagram	176,807	9,439	5.64
Schlein	Facebook	227,787	12,317	5.72
	Instagram	166,569	38,575	30.14

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Table 5. Interactions with Facebook Posts in the Thirty Days Before the Election

Candidate	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Post Views
Bonaccini	317,116	221,273	46,939	14,397	507,658
Schlein	295,149	179,576	50,401	22,966	1,196,879

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Table 6. Facebook Reactions to Facebook Posts in the 30 Days Before the Election

Candidate	Loves	Wows	Hahas	Sads	Angrys	Cares
Bonaccini	12,692	501	5,663	7,249	5,230	3,172
Schlein	17,450	433	16,243	2,298	2,034	3,748

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Table 7. Instagram Interactions in the 30 Days Before the Election

Candidate	Total Interactions	Likes	Comments	Video Views
Schlein	413,988	402,965	11,023	658,947
Bonaccini	263,986	253,959	10,027	6,397

Source: CrowdTangle API (2023)

Conclusion: Challenges of Leadership and Digital Transformation in the PD

Elly Schlein's victory in the PD primaries in 2023 can be interpreted as the outcome of a complex combination of factors. Based on our analysis of electoral manifestos, candidates' websites, and social media activity, it appears that the campaign was shaped by three interrelated dynamics: personalization, spectacularization, and, most of all, digitization.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative content analysis across social media reveal that, despite limited differentiation in themes, it was the communication style and public image projected to voters that made the difference (Seddone 2023). Schlein adopted a simpler, more accessible communication style aimed at generating greater engagement. This strategy, clearly reflected in both her manifesto and online activities (Santoriello and Stavolo 2024), proved more effective than Bonaccini's more policy-oriented and complex program. Her focus on social and civil rights, green and digital transition helped Schlein attract younger voters and activists outside

the PD's traditional base (Marino et al. 2023; Santoriello and Stavolo 2024). This strategy finds confirmation in the way the campaign was set up through both her personal website and the growth of followers and interactions on social media. In particular, by distancing her candidacy from the party establishment (Marino et al. 2023), even though part of it openly supported her, Schlein was able to capitalize, to some extent, on the emerging "people-palace" cleavage, often exploited by populist actors (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Müller 2016; Musella 2018; Mény 2019).

This strategy is evident in several aspects: first, the absence of the party logo on the homepage of her personal website, which served as the main hub for campaigning and organizing participation; next, the strong emphasis on his personal history as an activist and the theme of renewing the party leadership, while asserting a more explicit left-wing identity; and finally, in the choice of the campaign slogan itself, "*Parte da Noi!*" ("It starts from us!"), which echoes an "us" versus "them" rhetoric that calls for mobilization and direct voter activism (Meijers and Zaslove 2021).

The same logic is reflected in her social media communication. Despite a substantial disparity in resources—Bonaccini invested roughly ten times more than Schlein in digital advertising—he failed to achieve comparable engagement. Bonaccini demonstrated an understanding of the relevance of digital platforms in modern political communication, but his campaign remained primarily focused on consolidating his image as a "good administrator," grounded in his record as President of Emilia-Romagna. This institutional profile appealed to party insiders and local administrators but also reinforced his association with the political establishment, inadvertently amplifying Schlein's appeal as a "left-wing outsider." As a young, internationally educated woman and member of the LGBT+ community, Schlein embodied a progressive, anti-establishment (populist, even) identity that resonated strongly with non-party voters—whose participation ultimately proved decisive to her victory (Grimaldi 2023; Boldrini and Vicentini 2023).

However, it is important to note that, in absolute terms, the candidates' digital investments remain modest compared with both Italian and international benchmarks. For instance, Giorgia Meloni spent approximately €150,000 on Meta advertisements in the month preceding the September 2022 general election (Leo 2022), while US presidential candidates collectively spent nearly $200 million on digital advertising in 2020 (Valbruzzi 2021). Kamala Harris alone reportedly invested $57 million since launching her 2024 presidential campaign (Andringa et al. 2024). Schlein's previous experience with Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns likely helped her optimize limited resources and achieve significant online growth. Nevertheless, the relatively low

level of digital investment by both PD candidates confirms a broader underutilization of the digital sphere within the party.

Considering the research hypotheses, H1 is only partially supported, while H2 is fully confirmed. Schlein did not diverge significantly from Bonaccini in terms of policy content, as both manifestos demonstrated substantial overlap. What made the difference was the communication strategy and better use of social media, which supported the construction of a specific public image of Schlein that succeeded in gaining the trust of non-party members. The results highlight the importance of charismatic voting versus opinion voting for electoral programs (Almagisti and Zanellato 2023) and the influence of digital communication in organising the campaign. What emerges from the trends that were recorded in the post-primary election period is that Schlein has the potential to be a digital leader, as can be confirmed by her 139,308 new followers on Instagram in the month following the primary.

Yet, her first two years as party secretary have been marked by significant challenges. The entrenched oligarchic structure of the PD, fragmented into often competing factions (Calise 2013; Grimaldi 2023), has created a difficult environment for any leader seeking to reconcile divergent positions while maintaining unity and internal cohesion. Furthermore, the party's old guard and leadership cadres have resisted digital transformation, as it threatens to disrupt the traditional power structures typical of twentieth-century mass parties. Finally, the electoral results achieved since the beginning of her tenure, most notably the June 2024 European Elections and several regional contests, have shown that Schlein's leadership has not yet been strong enough to assert itself fully, either within the party or across the broader left-wing political landscape. Consequently, the process of building a credible alternative to the right-wing coalition led by Giorgia Meloni remains fragile. On a more positive note, despite the national dominance of the right, the PD secured twenty-one seats in the European Parliament—three more than in the previous term—making it the largest delegation within the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (European Parliament 2024). The party also achieved encouraging results in several regional and municipal elections.

In summary, the process of constructing a personalized and digitally integrated leadership within the PD remains incomplete. While the US Democratic Party has evolved into a "data-intensive" organization that systematically leverages digital tools for both campaigning and internal mobilization (Valbruzzi 2021), its Italian counterpart still uses social media primarily as an electoral communication tool, rather than as an instrument for continuous engagement or organizational innovation. However, this limitation is not unique to Italy. Across Europe, primary elections are employed unevenly: while long institutionalized in the UK for both Labour and the Conservatives

(Alexandre-Collier and Avril 2021), they have emerged in Spain as mechanisms promoted by new parties like *Podemos*, pushing mainstream formations to adapt despite elite resistance (Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2021).

Finally, although scholars have increasingly examined the personalization of intra-party elections, few have done so through the lens of digitalization. This represents a valuable avenue for further research, ideally through comparative analysis across national contexts.

Since her election, Schlein's digital presence—her website and newsletters—has changed only marginally. While her Meta followers have grown in number[4], the progress has slowed significantly compared to other Italian political leaders, such as Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Giuseppe Conte, and Matteo Renzi[5].

In conclusion, while the PD remains far from achieving a fully personalized and digital leadership, the party's ability to adapt to these transformations will be crucial for its future viability. The challenge of digital modernization, already evident in Schlein's campaign, is not merely strategic but existential for the survival and renewal of the Italian center-left.

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[4] In the month following her victory in the PD's primary election — between February 25 and March 27, 2023 — Schlein's Meta profiles grew of 21.31% on Facebook and 95.45% on Instagram. (CrowdTangle 2023). On the other hand, her personal website has recently been updated (May 2025) to fit better the image of a left-wing leader, moving from the pink and purple of her primary election to green and red, the colours of the Democratic Party. The logo of the party is also now visible on the homepage. On the other hand, her personal website has recently been updated (May 2025) to fit better the image of a left-wing leader, moving from the pink and purple of her primary election to green and red, the colours of the Democratic Party. The logo of the party is also now visible on the homepage.

[5] On June 3, 2025, Elly Schlein's Meta accounts count about 398,000 followers on Instagram and over 326,000 on Facebook. These numbers, though growing, are still far behind those of other Italian party leaders such as Giorgia Meloni (3,8 million followers on Instagram and 3,1 million on Facebook), Matteo Salvini (2,3 million followers on Instagram and half a million on Facebook), Giuseppe Conte (1,7 million followers on Instagram and 4,4 million on Facebook), and Matteo Renzi (288,000 followers on Instagram and 1,1 million on Facebook).

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Energy Crisis Revolution? The Impact of the Solidarity Contribution on the Evolution of EU Fiscal Powers

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Abstract

Since 2021, the EU has been threatened by an energy crisis, causing a dramatic rise in energy prices and the inflation rate. Among the measures adopted by the EU in response is Regulation 1854/2022, introducing a solidarity contribution to be levied on the surplus profits of companies in the energy market. Through the lens of historical institutionalism, this paper analyzes the solidarity contribution to understand what kind of institutional change, if any, it represents for EU fiscal integration. The paper finds that, rather than a revolution, the adoption of the solidarity contribution reflects path-dependence. That is, with the adoption of Regulation 1854/2022, the EU has maintained a fiscal regulatory approach to the energy sector that does not substantially depart from previous fiscal governance modes.

Keywords: Energy Governance; Energy Crisis; Fiscal Governance; Fiscal Capacity; Fiscal Regulation; Fiscal Integration; Next Generation EU; Recovery and Resilience Fund; Solidarity Contribution; Historical Institutionalism

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exacerbated the energy crisis that followed the COVID-19 pandemic, thus urging the European Union (EU) to take immediate action in the face of severe threats to the security of energy supply and the sustainability of energy prices. EU action has focused both on tackling short-term threats and on finding medium- and long-term solutions to the crisis in order to increase EU security in the face of future energy uncertainty (European Council 2022).

Part of this effort resulted in the enactment of Regulation 1854/2022 (formally known as Council Regulation (EU) 2022/1854), which addresses the issue of high energy prices. This regulation aims at controlling the rise of energy prices through the combined effect of three measures: a reduction of gas demand, a price cap on revenues from energy products, and the adoption of a "solidarity contribution" imposed on companies operating in the energy sector.

The introduction of the solidarity contribution was not designed to directly address rising energy prices but responded to the need to collect resources intended to protect EU final customers. Since the beginning of the energy crisis, the EU has attempted to shield both private

consumers and the productive sector affected by the rise in energy prices. This EU effort was carried out mainly through direct transfers, a reduction of energy taxes, and business support measures. Although these measures enabled the Member States to partially mitigate the effects of the crisis, they required an investment exceeding €650 billion (Sgaravatti et al. 2023). In this emergency context, the introduction of the solidarity contribution enabled redirect them towards measures aimed at protecting final energy customers within the EU from the effects of the crisis.

Since its adoption, the solidarity contribution has attracted an increasing academic interest stemming from its debated nature as an EU tax (Antón 2023) and its questionable compatibility with the EU's post-pandemic policy objectives, such as the European Green Deal (Antón 2023). Likewise, questions remain as to its implications for the scope and degree of European integration, especially in the field of fiscal governance. The solidarity contribution introduced, for the first time since 2003, a new energy tool with fiscal implications. Unlike in the past, the solidarity contribution represents a non-environmentally related levy with purely redistributive aims. Therefore, analyzing the characteristics and impact of the solidarity contribution is essential to understanding how this measure fits into the broader process of change within the EU.

Against this backdrop, this research paper examines the impact of the solidarity contribution established by Regulation 1854/2022 on the general evolution of EU fiscal powers. Using energy fiscal policies as a benchmark, the paper assesses whether the creation of these measures has produced any relevant change in the modes of fiscal governance of the Union. This analysis seeks to answer the core research question: What kind of institutional change does the solidarity contribution represent with respect to the consolidated EU modes of fiscal integration, particularly in the field of energy fiscal integration? To address this research question, the paper is structured into four main sections. The first section outlines a concise analytical framework and clarifies the methodology and sources employed in the research. The second section traces the evolution of EU fiscal governance, with particular attention to developments following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Section three of the paper examines Regulation 2022/1854, focusing specifically on the characteristics of the solidarity contribution. It highlights the measure's extraordinary and temporary nature, as well as its distinctive features, including its redistributive purpose, the entities to which it applies, and the mechanisms governing its implementation. The final section analyzes the effects of Regulation 2022/1854 on the broader process of EU fiscal integration in order to assess the type of institutional change it has brought about.

The paper argues that Regulation 1854/2022 and the solidarity contribution it sets up do not constitute a revolutionary shift but rather a path-dependent evolution of the EU fiscal framework. Although adopted within a very short timeframe and applied to a broad range of

economic actors, the regulation does not enhance EU fiscal capacity on either the revenue or on the expenditure side. Instead, Regulation 1854/2022 represents a step back from the more ambitious fiscal initiatives adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, favoring a model of fiscal regulation that of substantial discretion to national governments while assigning EU institutions a primarily coordinating and supervisory function. This indeed resembles European fiscal integration in the energy sector observed over the past two decades, and particularly the approach adopted in 2003.

The findings of this paper are particularly relevant in light of the existing research gap on EU energy fiscal policy. This gap is especially significant in a period when energy policy has gained unprecedented prominence within the EU, largely as a consequence of successive exogenous crises. At the same time, fiscal policy at the EU level is undergoing multiple transformations—or, in some cases, attempted transformations—that may carry important implications for the Union's approach to energy governance. In this context, an analysis of the solidarity contribution provides valuable insights into the patterns of institutional change within the EU. It reveals that, despite numerous episodes of adaptation and reform, different policy sectors evolve at different speeds, and the Union continues to display a fragmented approach to policy integration. Moreover, the paper identifies potential elements of future development in the field of EU energy fiscal policy. Regulation 2022/1854 has succeeded in introducing a new fiscal instrument into a policy domain that had remained largely unchanged since 2003. While the temporary nature of the solidarity contribution prevents it from being regarded as a fully consolidated instance of institutional change, it may nonetheless serve as a precedent for future initiatives aimed at deepening fiscal integration in the energy sector.

Analytical Framework and Research Methodology

This research adopts a historical institutionalist perspective to examine the adoption of the solidarity contribution within the broader evolution of EU fiscal policy. This approach captures how past trajectories and recent developments shape institutional change in response to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 energy crisis. It puts "political contingency in a temporal perspective" (Schramm and Terranova 2024) and examines the dynamics that generate institutional innovation. Historical institutionalism focuses on how institutions are created, maintained, and adapted (Sanders 2006). Following Christiansen and Verdun (2020), institutions are understood as a set of formal and informal rules that shape actors' behavior. Using this framework, the research assesses how the solidarity contribution reflects institutional evolution within the EU fiscal system.

The paper adopts three main criteria: (1) the pace of change, referring to the timeframe for adopting a policy measure relative to the onset of a crisis; (2) the scope of change, the range of actors or sectors affected by the measure; and (3) the scale of change, which captures the magnitude of the measure's effects within a defined unit of analysis. Based on these criteria, three patterns of institutional development are identified: path dependence, gradual change, and radical change.

The concept of path dependence views the institutional evolution as constrained by previous paths and developments. Institutions tend to follow established paths that become reinforced over time due to high reversal costs, which entrench existing arrangements and inhibit change (Levi 1997). This process of increasing returns makes continuity along a given path progressively more likely, as the relative benefits of maintaining the status quo grow with repetition (Pierson 2000). The persistence of rules and established practices therefore reinforces institutional behavior and limits opportunities for transformation (Trouvé et al. 2010). Path dependence, consequently, is associated with the maintenance of institutional equilibrium rather than with substantial innovation.

From path-dependent situations, two additional types of change may emerge: gradual and radical. These forms of evolution differ both in pace and scope. Radical change, or a critical juncture, has been defined by Capati (2023, 27) as "abrupt and large-scale transformations that terminate long periods of path-dependent institutional reproduction." Similarly, Mahoney and Thelen (2009, 7) argue that radical change is a form of punctuated change in which "enduring historical pathways are periodically punctuated by moments of agency and choice." In this framework, fundamental events occurring within a short period of time (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007) enable institutions to undergo radical transformation (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). Such change is often triggered by major exogenous shocks—such as wars, economic crises, or revolutions—that create "windows of opportunity" enabling swift and comprehensive institutional transformation (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Christiansen and Verdun 2020). By contrast, gradual change is characterized by transformations that are "either minor in scale, slow in pace, or limited in scope" (Capati 2023, 27). It arises from endogenous pressures—such as government crises, strikes, or social conflicts—that generate internal frictions within existing structures. Over time, these tensions erode institutional stability and lead to adaptation or incremental reform (Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Broschek 2013).

In line with historical institutionalism's preference for qualitative case studies (Rixen and Viola 2016), this paper evaluates the evolution of EU fiscal policy through an in-depth case study of the solidarity contribution introduced by Regulation 2022/1854. This case is particularly

relevant, as it represents the first EU energy fiscal measure since 2003. Although confined to a limited fiscal domain, the measure provides valuable insight into the broader dynamics of EU fiscal integration, illustrating how change in a single sector can reflect or anticipate wider institutional developments.

This broader process of change began following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the adoption of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the main measure of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) program. As affirmed by Capati (2023), the adoption of the RRF has represented a critical juncture. Indeed, it constituted an instance of immediate change (as the RRF was established within one year of the pandemic outbreak), comprehensive change (as it applied to all EU member states without differentiated integration), and large-scale change (as it shifted fiscal governance from fiscal regulation to fiscal capacity) (Capati 2024). An analysis of the solidarity contribution is thus necessary to assess whether it fostered a second wave of radical change in response to the energy crisis caused by the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The paper focuses on legislative texts establishing the solidarity contribution. It will assess both the procedural characteristics and the substantive content of the norms to trace similarities, differences, and developments through a comparative lens. Secondary literature will also be used to provide the broader context necessary to interpret the specificities of the solidarity contribution.

The Evolution of EU Fiscal and Energy-Fiscal Policy

The EU is not endowed by the Treaties with the power to levy taxes (Lindholm 2023, 3). Despite this lack of formal competence, the EU has constantly sought to expand its fiscal powers at the expense of member states' prerogatives. The lack of political will and unanimous agreement has so far prevented any amendment of the Treaties. Nevertheless, the series of crises that have confronted the EU over the last fifteen years has fostered an evolution of EU powers along two main axes: fiscal regulation and fiscal capacity. Fiscal regulation can be defined as the power of the center (in this case, the EU) to establish rules governing the autonomous extraction and expenditure of resources by the units (the member states). Fiscal capacity, by contrast, refers to the ability of the center to directly raise and spend resources in an autonomous manner (Buti and Fabbrini 2023, 2).

A useful conceptualization of the modes and potential patterns of fiscal integration has been provided by Woźniakowski, Zgaga and Fabbrini (2023), who systematized the EU's instruments of fiscal integration, identifying eight distinct types. As shown in Table 1, fiscal integration processes can be analyzed by considering two different aspects, which together

determine their classification: the side of the budget involved (revenue or expenditure) and the type of fiscal instrument developed (fiscal regulation or fiscal capacity).

Bearing in mind the lack of formal powers provided by the treaties, it is possible, building on Woźniakowski, Zgaga and Fabbrini's (2023) analytical framework presented in Table 1, to outline the typical modes of EU fiscal governance. EU fiscal governance has evolved significantly since the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon and, more profoundly, since the 2008 economic crisis.

On the revenue side, the EU possesses both fiscal regulatory and fiscal capacity instruments. In particular, the Union combines a limited budgetary capacity (Crowe 2020), based on national fiscal transfers from member states proportionate to their GDP, with an extremely modest taxing capacity (for example, the Carbon Tax, Plastic Tax, and proposed Digital Levy). This limited fiscal capacity is accompanied by a broad use of instruments aimed at regulating member states' revenues. It can therefore be affirmed that the EU conducts its "ordinary business," and even manages most crisis situations, primarily through fiscal regulation. Indeed, instruments within the EU fiscal framework have historically been of a regulatory nature. Since 1995, the main instrument of fiscal oversight has been the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which enables the Union to monitor and issue recommendations on member states' fiscal programs (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2013, 92–93). During the 2008 economic crisis, the EU again relied on fiscal regulation as its main mode of response (Buti and Fabbrini 2023). The adoption of the Six-Pack, Two-Pack, and Fiscal Compact further strengthened EU institutions' control over member states' public finances (Fabbrini and Capati 2023), thereby reinforcing the centrality of fiscal regulation both in normal times and during crises.

Turning to the expenditure side of fiscal integration, the EU combines both fiscal capacity and fiscal regulation, both of which coexist with comparable importance. Expenditure regulation, by contrast, relies on the same instruments used for revenue oversight, complemented by the European Semester (Woźniakowski, Zgaga and Fabbrini 2023), which provides guidance to member states on fiscal policy and spending constraints.

Having outlined the general framework of EU fiscal instruments, it is now useful to trace the evolution of EU energy fiscal policy, as this field illustrates how recent developments—especially the solidarity contribution—may signal a structural change in EU fiscal governance. Historically, EU energy taxation has evolved slowly; thus, any modification in this relatively stable domain assumes notable significance. Despite numerous attempt[1], the EU struggled to reach

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Table 1. Dimensions of EU Fiscal Integration: Fiscal Capacity vs. Fiscal Regulation

		Instruments of Fiscal Integration			
		Fiscal capacity		Fiscal regulation	
Mode of Fiscal Integration (Autonomous vs. Dependent)		Autonomous: Supranational institutions involved	Dependent: Intergovernmental institutions only	Regulation of the center (autonomous or dependent)	Regulation of the units (autonomous or dependent
Side of the Budget	Revenue capacity	Tax capacity based on independent resources (Fiscalization)	Budgetary capacity based on non-independent resources	Revenue regulation of the center	Revenue regulation of the units
	Expenditure capacity	Spending capacity of independent or non-independent resources	Transfer capacity of independent and non-independent resources	Expenditure regulation of the center	Expenditure regulation of the units

Source: Adapted from Woźniakowski, Zgaga and Fabbrini 2023, 2

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A first amendment proposal, introduced in 2011, was eventually withdrawn due to the lack of unanimity among member states. In 2019, the Commission again proposed a revision of the Directive under the European Green Deal, later integrated into the Fit for 55 package. However, despite these discussions, no substantive changes have been adopted since 2003. Referring again to Woźniakowski, Zgaga and Fabbrini's (2023) analytical framework presented in Table 1, it may be observed that EU action in the field of energy fiscal policy has largely followed a pattern of revenue regulation of the units.

Given the slow progress on the revenue side, the adoption of Regulation 1854/2022 on an emergency intervention to address high prices to face the energy crises in response to the Russo-Ukrainian war marks a significant development. This regulation introduced a solidarity contribution—a levy on energy companies designed to redistribute surplus profits generated by the crisis—representing a notable evolution in the EU's fiscal and energy-fiscal framework.

Regulation 1854/2022 and the Introduction of the Solidarity Contribution

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the EU's dependence on Russian energy supplies[3] further aggravated the energy crisis that had already emerged in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Popkostova 2022). Tensions between EU member states and Russia severely affected the EU's security of supply, increasing the risk of gas shortages and driving up energy prices. At the beginning of 2021, when natural gas was priced at $7.27 per MMBtu, prices surged to $70.04 per MMBtu at the height of the crisis in August 2022. The spike in gas prices was accompanied by a broader rise in energy costs, which placed severe pressure on both households and businesses.

The sharp increase in energy prices threatened the stability of the EU's economic system. Higher energy costs directly burdened European households and, even more critically, the productive sector. A 2022 report by the European Investment Bank (EIB) estimated a doubling of firms reporting losses and an increase from 10% to 17% in firms at risk of default within the EU (EIB 2022). The same report highlighted a rise in poverty rates and a 1.1% decline in real private consumption across the Union. This situation was compounded by rising inflation, which averaged 9.2% in 2022 (Eurostat 2023a).

In this context, EU institutions and member states were compelled to act swiftly to counter the economic effects of the crisis while introducing emergency measures to safeguard the Union's energy security. Security of supply was strengthened through a series of regulations addressing gas

[3] In 2020, 24.4% of the EU's gross available energy was imported from Russia. In the same year, the EU depended on Russia for 40.1% of its total natural gas imports and 25.7% of its total crude oil imports (Eurostat 2023b).

storage, demand reduction, joint gas purchasing, and infrastructure solidarity. Meanwhile, the economic consequences of the crisis were mitigated through both national and EU-level measures designed to curb energy prices and protect consumers from secondary effects such as inflation. At the national level, the most common measures included temporary energy tax reductions, business support schemes, and direct transfers to vulnerable households (Sgaravatti et al. 2023). At the EU level, efforts focused on coordinating national actions, enhancing their effectiveness, and preventing market distortions.

Among these initiatives, Regulation 1854/2022 of 6 October 2022 on an emergency intervention to address high energy prices stands out as particularly significant. The Regulation responded to the exceptional profits earned by energy companies as a result of the crisis. In 2022 alone, the five largest European energy firms accumulated approximately €134 billion in surplus profits (Global Witness 2023), while European governments spent around €651 billion shielding consumers and businesses from the crisis's effects (Sgaravatti et al. 2023). To address this imbalance, Regulation 1854/2022 introduced a Europe-wide cap on market revenues for certain energy producers and established a temporary solidarity contribution on surplus profits generated by energy companies as a result of the crisis. The measure's primary objective is to redistribute these extraordinary gains in order to protect final consumers and alleviate pressure on national budgets.

The solidarity contribution, like all other measures introduced in the Regulation, was intended as an exceptional and temporary response to the crisis—a characteristic clearly expressed during the legislation process and confirmed within the Regulation's text. Regulation 1854/2022 was adopted under the procedure of Article 122(1) TFEU, which provides for a simplified process in cases of a "severe crisis in the supply of certain products, notably in the area of energy." Two key points should be noted regarding this legal basis. First, the Regulation is grounded in the existence of supply disruptions—stemming both from Russia's actions and the EU's dependence on Russian gas. Second, it seeks to enhance security of supply and contain the impact of soaring prices.

The temporary nature of the solidarity contribution is confirmed in Article 18, which, with reference to Article 15, also points out the period on which it shall be calculated and levied. Its exceptional nature, in turn, is demonstrated by its limited scope: it applies only to surplus profits directly linked to the crisis, without replacing ordinary taxation of energy companies. The Regulation also takes into account the need to preserve the financial stability and investment capacity of energy companies.

Responsibility for collecting the solidarity contribution lies with the member states, which are required to implement either the Regulation itself or "equivalent national measures" (Article 14(1)). These national measures must not only target surplus profits but also pursue the same objectives and adhere to similar principles. The Regulation thus places member states at the center of implementation, granting them a degree of flexibility while simultaneously imposing a duty of coordination and solidarity (Preamble 57) to ensure the measure's overall effectiveness.

Finally, the Regulation assigns a specific redistributive purpose for the funds collected through the solidarity contribution. Articles 15 and 16 identify the specific categories of resources and entities subject to the levy, while Article 17 specifies their use in supporting final consumers. Four possible forms of expenditure are listed, all pursuing the same objective of mitigating the impact of the crisis. Notably, the Regulation encourages not only short-term relief measures (for example, price reductions) but also long-term structural investments, including green transition projects aimed at sustainably reducing energy costs for final consumers.

The Solidarity Contribution: Incremental Adjustment or Revolution?

The adoption of Regulation 1854/2022 formed part of a broader process of EU crisis management that began with the COVID-19 pandemic and continued with the EU's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis. Given this continuity and the evolution dynamics of EU fiscal policies since 2020, it is important to analyze the creation of the solidarity contribution through a comparative perspective. Drawing on the analytical model previously outlined, this section assesses whether the solidarity contribution, represents a case of path-dependent, incremental change, or rather a critical juncture leading to radical institutional change.

The dimensions considered are the timing, scope, and scale of change. *Timing of change* refers to the speed at which institutional transformation occurs following a crisis. A critical juncture—and thus radical change—occurs only when transformation happens within approximately 12 months of the triggering event (Hogan 2006), in this case, the outbreak of the energy crisis. Gradual change unfolds over a longer period, exceeding 12 months, while path-dependent evolution lacks a defined timeframe of reference, as it involves the continuation of self-reinforcing institutional patterns rather than genuine transformation. The *scope of change* concerns the extent of actors or domains affected. Change may affect different entities unevenly, or it may influence all of them in the same way. A critical juncture occurs only when the entire set of relevant actors is affected in a similar manner (Hogan 2006). While this feature may also be present in gradual change, in the case of radical transformation, such comprehensive reach is a necessary condition rather than a contingent one.

Finally, the *scale of change* is the core criteria distinguishing the three types of institutional transformation. To assess this, the analysis adopts EU fiscal integration as the unit of analysis, structured along the two dimensions illustrated in Table 1: the side of the budget affected (revenue or expenditure) and the type of fiscal instrument involved (fiscal capacity or fiscal regulation). Having identified the pre-existing configuration of EU's fiscal integration, the scale of change can be measured by observing shifts between these categories. A path-dependent evolution would not alter the prevailing mode of fiscal integration, and thus no movement would be observed across the table's categories. A radical change, by contrast, would imply a fundamental transformation, such as a shift from fiscal regulation to fiscal capacity or from revenue capacity to expenditure capacity. Gradual change, reflecting a long-term process, might involve a series of incremental adjustments across the table's axes—potentially leading to larger transformations over time—but it would necessarily exhibit a visible pattern of cumulative evolution.

Table 2. Analytical Framework for Assessing the Nature of Institutional Change in EU Fiscal Governance

Type of Change	Time	Scope	Scale
Path-Dependent Evolution	Not applicable	Not applicable	Continuity of the governance model
Gradual Change	More than 12 months	May or may not affect all actors	Incremental adjustments within existing governance models
Critical Juncture	Within 12 months	Has to affect all actors	Substantial shift to a new governance model

Source: Author

To summarize (see Table 2), for a situation to qualify as a critical juncture, it is necessary—and jointly sufficient—to observe a swift change (occurring within less than 12 months from the outbreak of the crisis), a comprehensive change in terms of the actors affected, and a substantial change in terms of its scale. Only when all these conditions are met can the adoption of the solidarity contribution be considered a critical juncture. A gradual change, which falls short of a critical juncture, corresponds to either a moderate or minor transformation occurring over a period longer than 12 months. A path-dependent evolution, by contrast, is characterized primarily by its lack of change in scale—that is, by continuity in existing modes of governance. The dimensions of timing and scope are not decisive in classifying a development as path-dependent.

Given the broad scope of EU fiscal integration and the limited domain of the solidarity contribution, energy fiscal policies will be used as a benchmark to assess the scale of change in EU fiscal governance. Using energy fiscal policy as a reference point makes it possible to highlight specific innovations introduced by the solidarity contribution without treating EU energy fiscal policy as a monolithic whole, but rather as a field composed of multiple, distinct components. Moreover, the solidarity contribution stands out as a unique instrument within the EU fiscal policy framework as it introduces an innovation in an area where numerous previous attempts failed — notably the Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), first proposed in 2013, which ultimately collapsed due to the lack of consensus among member state governments.

Turning to the solidarity contribution, it is now possible to analyze it through the lens of the framework described above. Starting with the dimension of timing, a baseline must be established to define the temporal context of the crisis. The Russo-Ukrainian war and the ensuing energy crisis began with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. While the exact correspondence between the onset of the war and the outbreak of the energy crisis may be subject to interpretation[4], 24 February is adopted here as the reference date for the start of the crisis. This choice offers two advantages: first, since the invasion was the root cause of the energy crisis, it enables a comprehensive account of its multiple dimensions (gas price spikes, storage shortages, and risks to energy security); second, it provides a clear and unambiguous temporal marker, unlike subsequent phases of the crisis, which unfolded progressively.

From this standpoint, the solidarity contribution qualifies as a case of swift change. Regulation 1854/2022, which introduced the measure, was adopted on 6 October 2022, well within the 12-month timeframe identified above. Moreover, the Regulation resulted from an accelerated emergency procedure: the first proposal for a price cap on revenues was advanced at the Extraordinary Energy Council meeting of 9 September, followed by the Commission's draft on 14 September, which was discussed and approved in less than one month.

The encompassing nature of the change is evident when analyzing the scope of the solidarity contribution. Regulation 1854/2022 imposed a minimum level of contribution applicable to all member states, and although it permitted higher taxation rates on surplus revenues, it also acknowledged the risk of uneven implementation (Recital 11). It can therefore be affirmed that the solidarity contribution was intended to apply uniformly across the Union, while

[4] Despite being recognized as a concern since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU did not immediately treat the energy issue as a full-scale crisis. During at least the first month of the war, although the Union took steps to reduce energy risks and mitigate rising prices, it refrained from formally acknowledging the existence of an emergency situation. The first extraordinary meeting of the EU Energy Council was convened only on 2 May 2022.

the EU institutions were explicitly aware of and sought to limit the risk of heterogeneous national applications.

Although the solidarity contribution meets the criteria of swift timing and comprehensive scope, these two elements alone are insufficient to qualify it as a critical juncture. It is therefore essential to examine the scale of change introduced by Regulation 1854/2022 to determine its structural significance. The measure represents an important development within the energy fiscal domain but did not alter the underlying modes of fiscal governance. Even though the Regulation is the first EU legislative act addressing energy taxation since 2003, it retains substantial continuity by adhering to a fiscal regulation, rather than a fiscal capacity, approach. Specifically, the Regulation was premised on the concern that "uncoordinated caps on market revenues […] may lead to significant distortions" (Recital 11) and therefore sought to regulate the issue by setting minimum contribution levels and rules for the allocation of revenues collected.

At the same time, the legislator deliberately avoided establishing an autonomous fiscal capacity at the EU level, leaving implementation and resource allocation to national governments. Regulation 1854/2022 is based on a decentralized application model that accommodates national specificities (by permitting partial exemptions or higher contribution rates) and assigns member states responsibility for both levying the contribution and determining the use of proceeds, in line with the Regulation's objectives. The role of EU institutions remained consistent with previous fiscal practice: they acted ex ante as regulators and entrusted the Commission with monitoring and enforcement powers (Article 19).

By reference to Table 1, it is evident that no fundamental transformation has occurred. Since the 2003 Energy Taxation Directive, EU energy fiscal governance has been based on fiscal regulation, particularly "revenue regulation of the units" (Woźniakowski, Zgaga, and Fabbrini 2023). The same applies to the solidarity contribution, which, while introducing regulatory measures affecting member state revenues, did not create fiscal capacity on either the revenue or expenditure sides of the EU budget. Consequently, regarding its scale, the solidarity contribution does not represent a substantive change in energy fiscal governance. Although the measure constitutes a noteworthy step in a field long marked by legislative inactivity, it did not modify the existing governance model—neither gradually nor radically.

The absence of significant structural change makes it impossible to consider the solidarity contribution a critical juncture in EU energy fiscal governance. Despite its rapid adoption and broad scope, the measure exhibits continuity with past approaches and is therefore better understood as a path-dependent development. The EU thus opted for a "business-as-usual" strategy rather than pursuing a paradigmatic shift in fiscal governance. This interpretation is

reinforced by the measure's non-renewal following the end of its applicability period, reflecting the lack of political will to alter established fiscal practices. While one might argue that it represents a case of gradual change, empirical evidence suggests otherwise for two main reasons: first, the Solidarity contribution maintained a fiscal regulatory logic consistent with historical patterns and did not introduce a new EU-level fiscal capacity; and second, it was explicitly designed as an emergency, time-limited response to a specific crisis. Its non-renewal confirms the Union's intention to revert to the pre-existing governance model once the emergency subsided.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been that of understanding what kind of institutional change the solidarity contribution adopted by Regulation 1854/2022 brings about for what concerns the considered modes of EU fiscal integration. To carry out such a task, a historical institutionalism framework has been adopted to look at the past evolutions in the field of EU fiscal and energy fiscal governance and to assess whether the solidarity contribution has been an instance of path-dependence, gradual change, or radical change.

This paper began its analysis by examining the main instruments of EU fiscal governance. This analysis portrays the complex nature of the EU fiscal system, which is mainly grounded in fiscal regulation instruments on the revenue side. Conversely, the expenditure side has historically adopted a more mixed approach, with the EU displaying elements of both fiscal capacity (direct and indirect) and fiscal regulation. Furthermore, a brief analysis of EU energy fiscal policy has highlighted the sector's persistent stagnation. The energy taxation system, established in 2003, has remained largely unchanged due to the lack of consensus among member states. The EU Green Deal and the Fit for 55 packages represented the most recent attempts to reform the system. Overall, energy fiscal policies continue to follow a regulatory logic, establishing minimum tax thresholds to maintain market uniformity.

Drawing on Woźniakowski, Zgaga and Fabbrini's (2023) analytical framework, this paper has clarified the institutional foundations of EU fiscal governance and the ways in which recent crises have influenced the Union's fiscal trajectory. This has provided the necessary context to understand the design and implications of the solidarity contribution introduced by Regulation 1854/2022.

Based on this background, this paper has first described the main characteristics of the solidarity contribution, an exceptional and temporary measure designed to tax surplus profits of companies operating in the energy sector. The adoption of Regulation 1854/2022, which

introduced the solidarity contribution under Article 122 TFEU, demonstrates the emergency-based nature of the provision.

To assess the impact of the solidarity contribution on EU modes of fiscal governance, this paper operationalized the concepts of path-dependent change, gradual change, and radical change (critical juncture) through three analytical variables: timing, scope, and scale of change. To determine the scale dimension, EU energy fiscal policy was used as a benchmark to evaluate whether any substantial transformation had occurred.

From this analysis, the paper concludes that the solidarity contribution is best understood as an instance of path dependence. Although it was adopted rapidly and applied uniformly across member states, the measure followed a fiscal regulatory approach, thus remaining consistent with existing modes of energy fiscal governance rather than introducing a new fiscal capacity.

In conclusion, the findings of this paper underscore the uneven evolution of EU fiscal integration. Despite the temporal proximity between the COVID-19 pandemic—marked by the adoption of the Next Generation EU program—and the energy crisis triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war, the EU has once again demonstrated a sector-specific and crisis-contingent approach to integration. Moreover, this study has addressed a significant gap in the literature on EU energy governance, a field where the slow development of fiscal instruments has long hindered academic debate. The energy crisis of 2022 re-emphasized the strategic importance of this domain. The adoption of the solidarity contribution, although path-dependent, revealed a renewed dynamism in a policy area that had remained stagnant since 2003, potentially paving the way for future incremental developments.

As for the future implications of the measure, two elements deserve particular attention. First, the solidarity contribution was adopted in a unique context—characterized by simultaneous energy and economic crises—which enabled the EU to invoke Article 122 TFEU. It therefore appears unlikely that similar instruments could be introduced outside emergency circumstances. Second, while the solidarity contribution may serve as a precedent or catalyst for future fiscal integration, such developments would likely follow a different trajectory. Despite its path-dependent nature, the measure contained several politically sensitive features, such as the strong supervisory role of the European Commission in its implementation—an element difficult to replicate under normal conditions.

Based on these findings, future research should explore comparative analyses between the solidarity contribution and other EU taxing initiatives, particularly the Plastic Tax and Carbon Tax proposals. Likewise, it would be valuable to compare the solidarity contribution with unsuccessful

fiscal initiatives, such as the Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), to identify the factors behind the adoption of some instruments and the rejection of other(s).

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The Politics of Apologies and Colonial Aphasia: Dutch Colonial Violence in Indonesia's War of Independence (1945–1949)

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Abstract

The colonial violence in Indonesia's War of Independence (1945–1949) remains a controversial subject in Dutch society up to this day. In 2022, former Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte apologised for the "systematic and widespread extreme violence," prompting renewed debate on how official statements and apologies function as forms of hegemonic remembrance. This paper revisits Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia and Gloria Wekker's concept of white innocence. It examines several critical moments that reveal the persistent difficulties of remembering and forgetting colonial violence. Each section presents primary sources related to a specific critical event, followed by speeches, statements, or reports issued by the Dutch government. This research highlights how reports, statements, and apologies have historically been instrumentalised by the Dutch state to construct a nationally accepted hegemonic narrative—one that acknowledges colonial violence while simultaneously evading deeper accountability.

Keywords: Colonial Aphasia; Indonesia's War of Independence; Perang Kemerdekaan Indonesia; Indonesische Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog; Dutch Colonisation; Politics of Regret; Colonial Violence; White Innocence

Introduction

Colonial violence during Indonesia's War of Independence (1945-1949) remains a deeply contentious subject in Dutch society. Dutch influence in the archipelago dates back to the early 17th century with the establishment of the United East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC), which later transitioned into formal colonial rule that lasted until the Japanese occupation during World War II. Shortly after Japan's surrender, taking advantage of the vacuum of power, Indonesia declared independence on August 17, 1945, but the Netherlands refused to recognise the proclamation, leading to a protracted and violent struggle for independence. A figure from the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) estimated that 100,000 Indonesians died as opposed to as few as 5,000 Dutch soldiers (Harinck, Van Horn, and Luttikhuis 2017). Complicating the situation further was the participation of pro-colonial groups not only from Indo-Dutch population but also from segments of the Moluccan and Chinese-Indonesian communities.

In its effort to reassert colonial authority, the Dutch colonial government conducted two military offensives: first, Operation Product (July 21-August 4, 1947), and second, Operation Kraai (December 19 1948-January 5, 1949) against the *de facto* Republic of Indonesia. This paper limits its scope exclusively to these two instances of postcolonial violence, while bearing in mind that they can never be disentangled from the broader history of Dutch colonisation in Indonesia. The topic of colonial violence has historically been a subject of controversy from the two sides. In Dutch history, the dominant narrative has traditionally referred to both operations as "police actions" (*politionele acties*) intended to restore Dutch authority over the rebellious territory, while in Indonesia, they are known as "Dutch military aggressions" (*agresi militer Belanda*) in the attempt to restore colonial power.

It was not until February 17, 2022, that the Dutch prime minister at the time, Mark Rutte, apologised not only for the "systematic and widespread extreme violence" committed during the independence war but also for the failure of past governments to acknowledge it (Rutte 2022a). One year later, he finally "recognise[d] fully and without reservation" Indonesia's independence on August 17, 1945, instead of December 27, 1949, which was during the transfer of sovereignty (Pascoe 2023). This was the second-highest level apology, following the apology from King Willem Alexander in 2020.

These apologies not only raise the question of why it took over six decades for the Dutch state to come to terms with its colonial past, but also highlight a more fundamental question: how the process of (dis)remembering has unfolded and continues to unfold. Rather than adopting a teleological reading of the apology, this paper situates the apology in the process of remembering and disremembering by understanding its meanings and social implications, echoing what Jeffrey Olick coined as the "politics of regret" (Olick 2007). In this light, political apologies are not merely symbolic gestures of acknowledging perpetration; they must be understood alongside material reparations and sustained post-apology engagement, with a focus on victims' perspectives and their need for an apology (Wohl, Hornsey, and Philpot 2011). When applied to colonial violence context, it recognises the apology itself just as one important milestone among others.

Prominent Indonesian figures have dismissed the apology as meaningless because it avoids addressing war crimes and responsibility. For example, former Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda noted "Indonesia paid a compensation of 4.3 billion guilders to the Netherlands during the transfer of sovereignty… to cover the cost of Dutch military operations, including the 'extreme violence'" (Wirajuda 2022). Despite the fact that the Netherlands recognised the systematic and widespread use of violence, Jeffry Pondaag, the head of the Netherlands-based Dutch Honorary Debts Committee Foundation, regarded the apology as "not sincere" or even "huge insult" as it avoided

the question of responsibility, compensation, and legal repercussions of such acts (Yuniar 2023). He also cited Mark Rutte's statement that the remarks "would not change any existing legal grounds" and that "[they] see the proclamation as (just a) historical fact" (Yuniar 2023).

Only in the last two decades have historians begun to ask why the process of remembering took so long in the Netherlands. Scagliola (2012) put the blame on the differing experiences faced by veterans on the "nature of the struggle," scarcity of evidence, and the mutual interest of both the Indonesian and Dutch governments to ignore the issue of war crimes. Later, Oostindie further substantiated these arguments by bringing the idea of (selective) collective victimhood of postcolonial migrants who focused on their own communities' sufferings in the colonial violence memory and by examining the Dutch government's cover-ups, while also acknowledging the Indonesian government's limited interest in addressing the issue (Oostindie 2020; Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022).

More critical accounts draw upon Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia, a condition marked by the inability to generate the vocabulary needed to speak within a national framework shaped by what historian Gloria Wekker (2016) calls "white innocence"—the belief that the Netherlands was innocent of wrongdoing in its colonial past, rooted in its self-image as a leader of the international human rights regime (Captain 2017; Bijl 2012, and Doolan 2021). The term itself entails three defining features: 1) an occlusion of knowledge or memory; 2) difficulty generating a vocabulary and associating appropriate words with appropriate things; and 3) difficulty comprehending the relevancy of what has been spoken. Previous accounts have yet to fully explain how this "colonial aphasia" comes into being, especially in the context of Dutch colonial violence. Much of the scholarship focuses on discourse incoherence as the primary difficulty, rather than on the deliberate occlusion of knowledge. Stoler (2011) outlines the mechanism, noting that "knowledge is disabled, attention is redirected, things are renamed" and, as a result, "disregard is sustained."

Building on this body of work, this paper moves beyond asking why the process took so long or why it appears to be a Sisyphean task for the Dutch government. More importantly, it examines how the state has used reports, statements, and apologies in the process of forgetting — not merely unremembering—the colonial violence in the *longue durée* perspective. This paper argues that these instruments have historically been carefully employed by the Dutch government to construct a nationally accepted hegemonic discourse that acknowledges colonial violence in Indonesia while simultaneously avoiding further responsibility. This process illustrated the ongoing difficulty of the Dutch state in coming to terms with the truth of its colonial past.

Methodology

This paper will revisit Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia by focusing on the more critical account of history based on the intentional and structural dimensions: deliberate act of occlusion of knowledge, the difficulty in generating a vocabulary, which causes the difficulty in articulating a critical account of the past. It will do so by analysing chronologically the three critical moments that led to difficulty to "comprehend the relevancy of what has been spoken" and "difficulty generating [new] vocabulary" to associate the new phenomenon, which will be divided by a periodisation (Stoler 2011, 125). Each period will present primary sources on the critical event(s) followed by the primary sources of the narrative formation by the state through speeches, statements, or reports, supplemented by secondary sources on forgetting, censorship, and the long process of remembering colonial memory.

Using a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, this paper recognises that the state—in this case, the Dutch government—plays a crucial role in creating and sustaining a "regime of truth." At the same time, this framework enables an examination of the legitimising and/or subverting voices from other groups such as the veterans, Indo-Dutch (*Indisch*), Moluccans, and the Indonesian victims. The paper traces the historical development of the discourse over time, identifies key actors and the socio- political climate of that shapes it, analyses the components of official statements, and examine recurring themes and shifting ideas. It will also explore instances of disunity, discontinuity, and the limits of the discourse, as well as the challenges posed to it—where they originated, why they were rejected, by whom, and for what purposes (Grbich 2007).

The analysis begins with the first period after decolonisation, characterised by the sustained legitimation of violence as "police actions" (*Politionele Acties*). This era was marked by censorship of war reporting, widespread silence, and attempts to justify the "police actions." The second period examines the moment when this silence was broken in 1969 (the first critical moment), when war veteran Joop Hueting publicly confessed to the war crimes he had witnessed and committed (Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022). His testimony pressured the De Jong government to publish the *Excessennota*—a report portraying the violence as incidental "excesses," thereby concealing the systematic nature of the war. The third period considers the intense scrutiny and growing memorialisation that emerged alongside the collective memories of Indo-Dutch and Moluccan communities entering the public sphere in the 1980s (the second critical moment). This development eventually led to the first official statement from the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2005, which framed the war as unfinished business and emphasised "comparative victimhood" rather than offering an apology. The final period begins with the 2008–2009 Rawagede case (the third critical moment), in which the widows of Rawagede won their lawsuit

against the Dutch state (Scagliola 2012). In 2016, the Rutte cabinet commissioned a major research project, yet avoided addressing the issue of "compensation," which remained the central unresolved concern. The conclusion will synthesise these findings and examine both continuity and change in the long-term process of (dis)remembering.

Two Decades After the "Police Actions": Censorship, Concealment, and Cover-Up Narratives

On December 27, 1949, the Netherlands formally transferred its political sovereignty over the former Dutch East Indies following the Roundtable Conference Agreement in The Hague. Far from being the culmination of decolonisation, this was just the starting point of the long-overdue process. Indonesia was compelled to assume financial responsibility for Dutch colonial assets and initially was even pressured to pay for the cost of "police actions." The agreement authorised the formation of confederate relations under the Netherlands-Indonesia Union, which dissolved in 1959. The dispute over New Guinea was resolved in 1963, whereas the unfulfilled promise of South Moluccan independence remains a historical grievance until today.

The transfer of sovereignty ended not only in the demobilisation of veterans, mass exodus of Dutch personnel, and large-scale postcolonial migration to the Netherlands, but also two decades of concealment and censorship. The veterans remained silent about their actions in the Dutch East Indies due to the military's code of silence (Scagliola 2012; Scagliola and Vince 2022). Meanwhile, the postcolonial migrants—particularly the Indo-Dutch community—preferred not to discuss these issues publicly, confining their dissatisfaction and resentment largely to their own circles (Oostindie & van der Kaaij 2022).

As Stoler (2008) cautions, this period should not be described as "collective amnesia," for colonial memories did not simply disappear. Nor is this a case of "colonial forgetting," since the whole society never fully remembered these histories in the first place, placing this period somewhere in between (Doolan 2021, 18). It is an overstatement to characterise these two decades as marked solely by silence; critical voices did exist, albeit on the margins, and memories of violence continued to circulate within private sphere (Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022, 406).

The Dutch state played the central role in sustaining the "silence." The attempt to publicise documentation of violence was suppressed through systematic censorship of wartime records and through official framing that left no room to acknowledge or discuss colonial atrocities. This constituted an active and deliberate process of "occlusion of knowledge," which later contributed to the absence of a public discourse capable of addressing the violence. While Scagliola (2012) claims that the challenge stemmed partly from a lack of evidence, but this scarcity was itself largely

constructed: many records and documents were destroyed, disappeared within the archives, or were discarded by veterans (Lorenz 2015).

By the end of 1949, photographs taken by military photographers during the First and Second Police Actions disappeared from the archive and were subsequently destroyed by the order of military leadership. The few that survived were only released decades later. As photo historian Louis Zweers notes, "photos that had not survived the [military] censorship were under no circumstances allowed to be published in the Netherlands nor fall into the hands of the Indonesians." He demonstrates this through an uncensored photograph from the First Police Action in Deli, Sumatra, that did not pass military censorship (Moll 2023). Zweers further argues that operated not only through the Army Information Service but also through the self-censorship of newspaper reporters and editors (Vlasblom 2013).

Published photographs sought to recast Dutch soldiers in a benevolent light. For instance, one widely circulated image (Figure 1) depicts an Indonesian girl playing a banjo while sitting among Dutch soldiers, surrounded by local residents; it is believed to have been taken in Surakarta, Central Java, on December 21, 1948 (Sidarto 2016). The photograph suggests that Dutch soldiers were welcomed by the local population, emphasising positive interactions and portraying the military presence as accepted—even embraced—by indigenous civilians.

Images that revealed violence were censored before reaching the Dutch public, allowing the military to justify the "police actions" and instead promote a humanitarian narrative. As shown in Figure 2, *De Spiegel* magazine published an article on June 15, 1946, portraying Dutch soldiers and local residents helping one another and distributing aid (Sidarto 2016). Such representations framed Dutch troops as morally upright actors assisting Indonesian "natives," who were depicted as victims of the circumstances. These photographs reinforced a moralising narrative in which Dutch "police actions" targeted guerrillas, "terrorists," or thieves ("*rampokkers*"), casting the broader population as passive victims and presenting the conflict as an internal Indonesian problem rather than a colonial war.

Figure 1: A girl sitting with a banjo surrounded by residents in Surakarta who greeted the incoming Dutch soldiers

Source: Schilling, T. 1948. *Untitled.* DLC, National Archives, The Hague.

Figure 2: Soldiers distributing clothes and medical care to native population

Source: Dutch Resistance Museum. 2023. "When freedom arrives." June 15, 1946. *Dutch Resistance Museum.*

This framing aligned with official justifications advanced by Prime Minister Louis Beel (1947), who argued that the Dutch colonial government is responsible for "order and security" and that military force would be used "as limited as possible" to remove the "untenable nature of state emergency" and to pave the way for the Linggadjati agreement. More than a truce, the agreement recognised the Republic's sovereignty—albeit only over Java, Sumatra, and Madura—alongside two other Dutch puppet states that would form the United States of Indonesia. This region, in turn, would be incorporated into a Netherlands-Indonesian Union, with the Dutch monarch as its formal head. From the Republic's perspective, this arrangement amounted to an attempt at recolonisation. Beel dismissed such interpretations as "enemy propaganda" or "hostile propaganda" emanating from the Republic's side, insisting that such narratives needed to be suppressed (Beel 1947).

Gloria Wekker (2016) argues that the euphemistic label "police actions" represents the Dutch self-representation as a small, ethical, and fundamentally innocent nation. This narrative refigured the members of the Indonesian guerilla movement as merely rebels against order and security maintained by the Dutch colonial government. Such narrative fits into the post-World War II hegemonic narrative of "innocence" and "victimhood" in Dutch society, which centred on the (mythologised) national experience of suffering under Nazi occupation, the brutality during the Japanese takeover of the Dutch East Indies, and the prevailing self-image of the Netherlands as "a nation that resisted" (Oostindie 2003). Despite Dutch efforts to justify the "police actions," the international community—especially the United States—pressured the Netherlands to resume negotiations, culminating in the transfer of sovereignty on December 27, 1949.

The occlusion of documentation on Dutch colonial violence made public discussion of these memories exceedingly difficult, confining most recollections to the private sphere. Political leaders in the two decades following sovereignty primarily discussed the broader decolonisation process rather than the violence itself. In several speeches, Queen Juliana (e.g., 1955) addressed returning postcolonial migrants and criticised Indonesia's nationalisation of Dutch assets. In the early 1950s, the attention focused on the Dutch-Indonesian Union and debates over normalising relations (Juliana 1952). By the late 1950s, the Dutch New Guinea dispute dominated political discourse, especially after Indonesia formally withdrew from the Union in 1956 (Juliana 1959). Overall, this prolonged focus allowed the Netherlands to recast itself, consistent with Wekker's argument, as an ethical guiding nation seeking to uphold its ideals of decolonisation despite fierce opposition from the Republic (Wekker 2016, 2). These narratives of innocence and self-righteousness would prevail in the following two decades.

Breaking the Silence: (Re)framing Colonial Violence as "Excesses"

A major rupture in the government's hegemonic narrative occurred on January 17, 1969. War veteran Joop Hueting appeared in an interview on *Achter het Nieuws* ("Behind the News"), during which he admitted not only to witnessing "war crimes" (*oorlogsmisdaden*) but also to having participated in them. He described several actions that, in his view, had "no military necessity." For example, he recalled: "To give you examples, I can tell you that *kampongs* were riddled with bullets […] The interrogations took place, during which there was torture in a horrible manner" (Histori Bersama 2016).

Hueting emphasised that the violence was not a matter of "incidental cases" (*incidentele gevallen*) but instead constituted "business as usual" (*normale gang van zaken*). He added that "patrol operations" were conducted from *kampong* (village) to *kampong* with "too little military manpower," which, according to him, encouraged the killing and torture of prisoners of war and even non-combatants when soldiers were confronted. Following the broadcast, Hueting and the programme received numerous letters—some supporting his decision to speak out, though the vast majority expressed anger. One conscript, W. A. de Grijs, for example, denounced Hueting as a traitor who had damaged the Netherlands' reputation abroad (Limpach 2016, 5).

In response to this opening of "Pandora's box," the Dutch government was pressured to compile the *Excessennota*—literally, a "list of excesses" (*Excessennota*) (Bank 1995). In a rushed attempt to quell public concern, Prime Minister De Jong established a committee tasked with investigating the available official archives in the Netherlands within just three months. However, the commission neither interviewed war veterans nor consulted Indonesians, despite the fact that many witnesses were still alive at the time (Lorenz 2015). In both the memorandum and his accompanying statement, De Jong acknowledged that "excesses" occurred but insisted that "remains of the opinion that the army in its entirety acted correctly in Indonesia," and argued that the evidence showed no "systematic cruelty" (De Jong 1969).

Yet this apparent ease obscures the intense political struggle over naming the violence, reflected in parliamentary debates during the report's compilation. The dispute centred on whether the events constituted "war crimes" (*oorlogsmisdaden*), as Hueting claimed; "excesses" (*excessen*), as Prime Minister De Jong insisted; or simply "crimes" (*misdaden*), as Speaker of the House Frans-Jozef van Thiel argued (Bank 1995, 13). Hueting's use of "war crimes" directly challenged the Dutch narrative of wartime victimhood by casting the Netherlands as a perpetrator of illegal violence. Ultimately, however, the government rejected the term and instead constructed its own vocabulary of "excesses." This illustrates what Stoler identifies as the "difficulty [of] associating

appropriate words with appropriate things," whereby states disassociate resemblances and reject viable categories (Stoler 2011, 125).

De Jong's accompanying statement further denied the systematic nature of the violence, framing it instead as a series of incidental "excesses," with events such as the purge in South Celebes (1946–1947) treated as isolated aberrations. This rhetorical move aimed to avoid the implications that the broader military campaign as an illegal act. The justification that the Dutch army "in its entirety acted correctly" implies a narrative of innocence and the refusal to accept any responsibility. The avoidance of the term "war crimes" as Scagliola put it (2012, 423), was used to "neutralise" information that might potentially open a wider discussion of colonial violence in Indonesia—discussions that had long remained confined to private or silenced circles of Indies veterans (Scagliola 2012, 423). Yet the purpose of the *Excessennota* extended beyond mere neutralisation: the report acknowledged that the silence had been broken while simultaneously defending a narrative of innocence and even moral superiority.

The report also justified the "police actions" as "counter-terror" acts to restore order against "irregular guerilla," who allegedly confronted Dutch troops with ambushes and terror (Bank 1995, 11). This framing cast the Dutch forces as disciplined, civilised agents of order and the Indonesian guerrillas as wild, brutal, and uncivilised. Such rhetoric downplayed or obscured the burning of *kampongs*, executions of non-combatants, and purges of prisoners of war, as highlighted by Zaalberg and Luttikhuis (2022). In doing so, the report not only reproduced narratives of innocence but also reinscribed a familiar European "civilizing mission" by portraying Dutch intervention after World War II as a morally guided effort to stabilise the region, while depicting Indonesian revolutionary forces as engaging merely in rebellious disorder rather than resisting recolonisation.

As the *Excessennota* stated:

> No matter how devastated and impoverished the country had emerged from the German occupation, the Dutch government decided to form an army for Indonesia. Initially, the aim was to contribute to the fight against the Japanese occupying forces and to liberate the Indies.

The *Excessennota* thus detached the return of British troops to restore Dutch administration and the subsequent Dutch "police actions" from the broader context of efforts to re-establish colonial rule. Its narrative suggested that the Dutch military sought merely to restore order and implement a "gradual" and "appropriate" form of decolonisation, effectively implying that Indonesians needed saving from their own revolutionary movement and that legitimate independence ought to be granted by the Dutch. This narrative became the official government line for decades, enabling

the Netherlands to deny the illegal, excessive, and systematic nature of the military operations by reducing the violence to isolated "excesses."

Memorialisation, Collective Memories of Postcolonial Migrants, and the First Dutch Regret

Previous historical accounts of war have mainly featured the Dutch and disillusioned veterans' point of view of the colonial violence. Decades later, there were growing dissatisfactions and resentment, especially among the postcolonial migrants, which were made up of 300,000 Dutch, mainly Indo-Dutch, and 12,500 Moluccan communities (Oostindie and Van der Kaaij 2022).[1] Their collective memories, as Oostindie and Van der Kaaij (2022) explain, were shaped by two factors: (1) collective suffering that renders painful memories about decolonisation, and (2) disappointment with their new position and new life in the postcolonial Dutch state, which put them in a marginalised position.

The first significant group is *totok* repatriates—white Dutch ("pure-blood") settlers—whose memories centred mainly on Japanese internment camps (Oostindie 2020). They recalled their suffering under the Japanese occupation and expressed nostalgia for "*tempo doeloe*"—the "good old days" of the colonial era. For instance, this narratives are particularly visible in Fred Lanzig's memoir published in 2007, where he recounts life in the internment camps during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (Lanzig 2007).

In contrast, it took nearly three decades before the Indo-Dutch (or Eurasian) community gained space to speak publicly about their experiences. They were excluded from the war narrative and the Dutch culture of remembrance. Their memories of violence revolve around the *Bersiap* period (1945-1947), an early revolutionary phase characterised by violence against alleged pro-colonial groups in Indonesia, especially the Indo-European and even Chinese-Indonesian groups (Oostindie 2020; van der Kaaij 2020). In his memoir, Indo-European Herman Bussemaker recalls the Bersiap as a time when pro-Republican militants violently targeted Indo-Europeans, forcing their flight from Indonesia (Bussemaker 2005).[2] As a result, strong anti-Republican sentiment became deeply embedded within the Indo-Dutch community.

[1] It should be noted that the Indo-Dutch community in the Netherlands consists of those who were legally recognised by their Dutch fathers. Those who were not recognised were unable to claim Dutch citizenship and were instead absorbed into the Indonesian population. For further discussion, see Marjolein van Pagee (2023).

[2] To some, the term "Bersiap" has been regarded as having a racist connotation as it always attaches the primitive and uncivilized label to Indonesians as perpetrators of the violence, meanwhile the root cause of the problem is the injustice that the colonialism has created. For further reference, see: "Rijksmuseum scraps racist term "Bersiap" in new exhibition," *NL Times,* January 11, 2022, https://nltimes.nl/2022/01/11/rijksmuseum-scraps-racist-term-bersiap-new-exhibition.

The third major group comprised Moluccan ex-soldiers and their families, who had fought for the Dutch colonial government under the promise of establishing the Republic of South Moluccas. Instead, they found themselves stranded in the Netherlands and eventually marginalised, including within military structures (Oostindie and van der Kaaij 2022). Their frustration escalated into the train hostage crises of 1975 and 1977, perpetrated by young Moluccan activists, who were labelled "terrorists" by the Dutch government. These violent acts reflected decades of disillusionment, as many Moluccans had lived in temporary camps such as De Schattenberg (1950–1971) and felt the Dutch government had abandoned their cause (Rozema 2018).

The growing collective trauma prompted massive scrutiny as the topic gradually received attention from historians, who, in general, previously would display indifferent stances from the government. Notably, Loe de Jong, director of the Dutch Institute for War Documentation, initially used the term "war crimes" in first drafts of *The Kingdom of the Netherlands During World War II*, but was forced to remove it later on under political pressure (De Jong 1988; Oostindie 2022). Even so, he represented early anticolonial voices within Dutch historiography, which gained prominence only from the 1980s onward. The vocal expressions of disappointment and exclusion among postcolonial migrants also shaped the expanding memorial landscape. Oostindie and Van der Kaaij (2022) report that after 1995, approximately 370 memorials were erected, commemorating primarily Dutch victims. This period also saw the inauguration of the Indies Monument in The Hague (1998) and the establishment of the Moluccan Museum in Utrecht (1990–2012).

This massive scrutiny and memorialisation made it difficult for the Dutch government to form a single narrative of its colonial history. In 1995, Indo-Dutch and veteran communities influenced Queen Beatrix's visit to Indonesia so that it occurred only a few days after August 17, thereby strategically avoiding any indirect recognition of the 50th anniversary of Indonesia's Independence Day (Oostindie and Van der Kaaij 2022). Calls for the national debate on the apology have subsequently failed due to opposition from postcolonial migrants, especially the Indo-Dutch and veteran communities.

Ten years later, Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot visited Indonesia on the 60th anniversary of its proclamation of independence. He stated that his presence signified the Netherlands' "political and moral acceptance of [the] date," acknowledging that the country had been "on the wrong side of history" and expressing "profound regret for all […] suffering" (Bot 2005). This constituted an acknowledgment and expression of regret, rather than a formal apology.

Equally significant was the speech Ben Bot delivered during the national commemoration of August 15, 1945, known as the East Indies Commemoration. He began by referencing the "Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies" and the Bersiap period, framing these as shared experiences of suffering among "Dutch East Indies and Indonesian citizens" (Bot 2005). Bot emphasised not only the physical but also the psychological suffering endured, drawing on his own experiences as a member of the Dutch-Indies community (Bot 2005).

Symbolically, he acknowledged the suffering of Indo-Dutch migrants, Dutch military personnel, and Indonesians alike. He expressed his "hope for the understanding and support of the Dutch-Indies community, the Moluccan community in the Netherlands, and the veterans of the police actions" (Bot 2005), recognising that the military deployment had been painful for all involved. This message functioned as a signal to domestic audiences, aimed at preventing potential backlash, particularly from Indo-Dutch, Moluccan, and veteran communities, by reassuring them that their perspectives and grievances were being recognised.

This period marked what Stoler (2011, 125) described as "difficulty comprehending the relevance of what has been spoken." As the once-separate collective memories of anticolonial violence entered the public sphere, the Dutch government faced increasing pressure to acknowledge its role as a perpetrator. At the same time, this proliferation of narratives made such acknowledgment more difficult. Beyond the fear of provoking anger among postcolonial migrant communities, the government also confronted the challenge of crafting a single, hegemonic historical narrative in the face of competing memories. Consequently, it adopted differentiated and deliberately ambiguous messaging for domestic and Indonesian audiences. Domestically, official statements foregrounded memories of the Japanese occupation and the Bersiap period, while in Indonesia they conveyed political regret and only partial, cautious admissions of responsibility.

A decade later, Ben Bot's visit, despite his own history of internment during the Japanese occupation, did not provoke significant backlash from veterans or the Indo-Dutch community. His spokesperson stressed in the press that the visit would not "disavow" these groups and would serve only as a "political and moral acceptance of the date" (Oostindie and Van der Kaaij 2022, 413). This formulation functioned as an appeasement strategy, offering a carefully calibrated acknowledgment of Dutch wrongdoings that remained sufficiently ambiguous to satisfy both domestic and Indonesian audiences. Similarly, Bot's description of the Dutch military deployment as being merely "on the wrong side of history" minimised responsibility by reducing the issue to the Netherlands having fought on the opposing side of the Indonesian independence movement, rather than engaging with the nature or severity of the violence itself.

As evidence of colonial violence continued to accumulate, the Netherlands faced repeated pressure both to confront its colonial past and to maintain positive relations with post-authoritarian Indonesia. Yet expressions of regret consistently avoided addressing the character of the violence. In official discourse, the incidents remained labelled as "excesses," a term that persisted for years in the Dutch state's formal position.

Subsequent Apologies: The Widows of Rawagede Case and the Politics of Compensation

The legal proceedings concerning the Rawagede victims started in 2009 and gained a landmark conclusion in 2011 in a decision by the Civil Law Chamber of the District Court of The Hague. The case illustrates the first civil lawsuit brought by "widows from Rawagede" with the help of the Committee of Dutch Honorary Debts, accusing the Dutch state of committing war crimes in a mass execution in a village in West Java in 1947. They won their claim, and this was the first time the colonial violence perpetrated by the Dutch military in Indonesia was condemned. The court ruled that "the state acted unlawfully towards claimants," executing the widows' spouses on December 9, 1947, and further determined that "the state [was] liable for the resulting damage" (District Court of The Hague 2011). The widows were awarded €20,000 each, and the state agreed to an extended apology. By contrast, the descendants or children of the victim received way less (BBC Indonesia 2020).

It was arguably the first time or, indeed, a breakthrough that Indonesian victims' voices were heard within the Dutch legal system (Immler 2022). It is not exaggerating to say that the Rawagede ruling inaugurated a period of successive apologies offered by the Dutch state. Immediately after the verdict in 2011, the Dutch Ambassador to Indonesia, Tjeerd de Zwaan, delivered a formal apology before villagers in Rawagede (The Guardian 2011). This was the first time the word "apology" was officially mentioned. In 2013, the Dutch Ambassador offered a formal apology to the Indonesian state as a whole ahead of a trade mission led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Deutsche Welle 2013). In 2016, Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders reiterated the apology during his visit to the Rawagede village memorial (Deutsche Welle 2016).

The apology from the highest level of government came only in 2020, during a state visit, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands not only reiterated the "political and moral" acknowledgement of the independence but also expressed "regret and apologise for excessive violence on the part of the Dutch in those years." The state visit was in parallel with the Dutch trade mission in 2020, which prompted speculations that the apology was rather an attempt of the

Netherlands to gloss over its colonial past and to establish better economic engagement with Indonesia (Netherlands Water Partnership 2024).

The court cases also prompted a four-year research project starting in 2017 to investigate war crimes in Indonesia's War of Independence done by researchers from three institutions: the Royal Institute for the Linguistics, Geography and Ethnology, the Netherlands Institute for Military History, and the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Pieterse 2019). The new investigation used the broad term "extreme violence" in the study to include war crimes and also other crimes. The study concluded that the Dutch armed forces were guilty of torture, extrajudicial killings, rape, theft, burning of villages, shooting civilians, and act of purges. Moreover, violence on the Indonesian revolutionary side was also highlighted.

After the research was concluded and presented, Prime Minister Mark Rutte admitted the "systematic and widespread use of extreme violence, even to torture" and that the extreme violence in most cases "went unpunished" (Rutte 2022a). It changes the official stance from singling out the colonial violence as mere excesses and of incidental nature. Mark Rutte then offered "deep apologies" and one year later "recognise[d] fully and without reservation" Indonesia's independence on August 17, 1945 (NRC Handelsblad 2023).

It was the first time that the Dutch authority claimed "full responsibility" for the "collective failure" and "consistent looking away" by the previous cabinet (Rutte 2022a). In the speech delivered in The Hague, Rutte's apology mentioned that the blame should not be placed on the individual conscripts or soldiers and recognised the "different painful stories," mentioning his Indo-Dutch background as well as acknowledging the pain of his community, Dutch repatriates, and the Moluccans first generations. It is very interesting that these veteran voices—who were never investigated nor prosecuted—seem to be continuously recognised and continue to be exonerated more in the Dutch state official position rather than the actual victims of the violence (Oostindie, Hoogenboom, and Verwey 2018; Lorenz 2015).

Although representing a rhetorical milestone in the Dutch's remembering of its colonial violence, the apologies and Independence Day acknowledgement lacked legal grounds. The disclaimer Mark Rutte provided to the Dutch media provides a more nuanced understanding as he exclaimed that "we [saw] the proclamation as a historical fact" and that the recognition will not change any preexisting legal conditions (NRC Handelsblad 2023). This means that the official and legally recognised date of independence would remain December 27, 1949. This did not change much from the previous official stance of the Dutch government delivered by Foreign Minister Ben Bot in 2005.

Criticism arose regarding the non-independent nature of the investigation. Gloria Wekker even suspected that the research was aimed to "condone war crimes" and had predetermined conclusions that would favour the Dutch state (Historisch Nieuwsblad 2018). The Indo-Dutch, Moluccan, and Dutch veteran organisations were asked to take part in the Social Focus Group (*Klankbordgroep*) of the research project, but organisations representing the Indonesian victims of the Dutch colonial violence themselves (KKUB), which was the research's *raison d'être* in the very first place, were not included (Van Pagee 2023). The reason for such exclusion is because of it was a "Dutch Focus Group" (Histori Bersama 2022).

The exclusion means that the research only includes pro-colonial group and excludes critical voices from the research. Van Pagee went as far as describing this as the continuation of the "Apartheid system," during colonisation which placed the "*inlanders*" (natives) in the bottom of the colonial era apartheid system (Van Pagee 2023). As one would expect, the apology made no reference to "compensation" and "legal consequences," which was the "elephant in the room" discovered by the Widows of Rawagede trial. The occlusion of the fact was reflected by the difficulty of generating vocabulary as critical voices still miss the term "war crimes" or "human rights violations," which has major legal consequences if used (Immler 2022).

The trial, followed by a series of apologies, unfortunately had the effect of obscuring and downplaying the issue of compensation for other instances of Dutch colonial violence. The court rulings themselves emphasised the exceptional nature of Rawagede—and later, in 2013, the violence in South Celebes (Veraart 2022; District Court of The Hague 2019). As Veraart (2022) argues, this exceptionalisation imposes significant limits on future claims to reparations by Indonesian survivors.

In subsequent apologies, the term "war crimes" was deliberately omitted, particularly after the parliamentary debate on colonialism on June 14, 2023 (Vermeulen 2023). This omission reflects the Dutch government's ongoing difficulty in generating a vocabulary that explicitly categorises the violence as illegal. Without such terminology, the apology remains ambiguous: is the Netherlands apologising for "excessive violence" committed in the course of suppressing a rebellion, or for invading a country that had already proclaimed its independence?

It is also important to note that the 2022 apology was narrowly framed around the violence of the independence war, detached from the broader context of hundreds of years of Dutch colonisation in Indonesia. While the Dutch Prime Minister has apologised for slavery in the Dutch Caribbean, no comparable recognition has been extended for the exploitation and coerced labour imposed on Indonesians in their own land (Rutte 2022b).

Although the trial opened the possibility of compensation for victims who filed lawsuits, the subsequent research project avoided addressing the broader question of reparations for the "systematic and widespread violence" widely discussed in Indonesia. Had this issue been taken up, every victim of colonial violence, rather than only the families involved in specific cases, might have been eligible to claim compensation from the Dutch state. The matter of compensation also inevitably touches upon the 4.3 billion guilders Indonesia was compelled to pay the Netherlands during the transfer of sovereignty, as well as the payments made to Dutch conscripts who refused deployment to Indonesia.

Rutte emphasised that the research was initiated because "the Netherlands places a high value on protecting and promoting human rights, international law and the rule of law," and that investigating the past would play an important role in achieving those aims (Reuters 2016). This framing reveals the nature of the research as an exercise aligned with Dutch state interests: a way of "coming to terms" with its colonial past while reinforcing its global self-image as a champion of human rights and international law. The apology, likewise, must be situated in the context of both countries' mutual interest in glossing over the colonial past: Indonesia in the name of nation-building and political stability, and the Netherlands in the name of strengthening future bilateral relations, particularly in trade and economic cooperation. These diplomatic priorities often came at the expense of historically marginalised groups, including Moluccan communities in the Netherlands and impoverished Indonesian widows and families in rural villages. In effect, the two states appeared to "agree to disagree," maintaining divergent narratives of the past.

Nevertheless, Rutte also stressed that history remains an "unfinished past tense" and that the research does not mark an end point but "a next step in joint processing" (Rutte 2022a). This statement provoked anger among Moluccans in the Netherlands, who viewed the recognition of Indonesia's independence as "an attack on the Republic of South Moluccas' right to exist" (NL Times 2023). Together with the critical voices of postcolonial scholars and Indonesian organisations, these reactions underscore the need not only to incorporate a wider range of perspectives in the process of (dis)remembering but also to genuinely address and heal the enduring wounds of colonial violence.

At this point, it should be clear that Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia is not a static condition but a dynamic process of "coming to terms" with colonial violence. Doolan (2021) critiques the nominal form of the term and instead advocates for the action-oriented verb "disremembering." Given the interplay of continuity and change in the Dutch case—where apologies simultaneously function to remember and to disremember—it is more accurate to speak of *(dis)remembering*. In Rutte's most recent apology, the Dutch state acknowledged its wrongdoing

across the full scope of colonial violence, rather than limiting culpability to isolated "excesses." However, crucially, the legal consequences and forms of compensation remained largely confined to those so-called "excesses," leaving the broader violence unaddressed both in the research report and in the apology itself.

It is also essential to note that the politics of state apologies and regrets does not position the government as the only actor articulating history. In contrast, colonial aphasia is experienced and reproduced by multiple actors, and these actors, in turn, influence the government's own forms of aphasia. However, this paper uses a Foucauldian understanding of power relations, recognising the state as the primary "regime of truth." State apologies, in this sense, become instruments for establishing a monolithic and hegemonic version of the past—one that often silences or marginalises critical voices under the guise of consensus.

Michel Foucault's notion of a regime of truth refers to the idea that truth is produced, legitimised, and reproduced by institutions that maintains power relations (Foucault 1980). In the Dutch context, prevailing historiography only includes voices from pro-colonial groups and not anti-colonial groups, specifically the Indonesian victims of the violence during the War of Independence themselves. It is very likely that Rutte and the Dutch government has used the research as a way to close the chapter and avoid further scrutiny of the Dutch's colonial past. Yet this state-sanctioned version of truth is continually challenged by the "critical moments" discussed in this paper—moments that compel the government to (re)formulate its narrative, often in ways that do not necessarily advance historical truth. This dynamic is especially significant given the collapse of the Rutte cabinet and the growing influence of far-right voices in Dutch politics.

Conclusion

Dutch colonial violence has never been forgotten; rather, it has been continuously (dis)-remembered in the manner Ann Stoler describes as colonial aphasia. Since 1969, the Dutch government has instrumentalised political apologies and expressions of regret through speeches, public statements, and official reports as tools to hegemonically remember colonial violence while simultaneously erasing elements of the past that would demand greater responsibility. Rutte's apology in 2022, for example, acknowledged colonial violence as "systematic and widespread," yet avoided terms such as "war crimes" or "human rights violations," whose legal implications, particularly regarding financial compensation, would be far more consequential.

This colonial aphasia has been sustained through the occlusion of knowledge, enabled by mechanisms of censorship, intimidation, and a national narrative grounded in Dutch victimhood, innocence, and moral self-righteousness. These dynamics kept memories of violence confined to

veterans' codes of silence and private conversations within specific communities. When that silence was broken in 1969, the Dutch government struggled to defend the hegemonic narrative of the "police actions." The terminology shifted over time from "excesses" to "systematic and widespread violence" but never to "war crimes" or "human rights violations," reflecting the persistent difficulty of adopting a vocabulary that accurately names colonial violence and its illegality. This linguistic manoeuvring produced new categories while rejecting viable ones.

The evolution of terminology mirrors the Dutch government's ongoing discomfort with acknowledging responsibility. The state's historical claim to "innocence" gradually transformed into "there were excesses," then to being "on the wrong side of history," and finally to accepting "full responsibility." This long and continuous process of disremembering underscores the challenge of confronting multiple, often conflicting collective memories of victimhood, including those of marginalised. It also reflects the state's reluctance to face the legal and material consequences that would accompany a genuine "coming to terms" with its colonial past.

As Rutte noted, the Dutch apology should not be understood as an endpoint but rather as an invitation to continue a dialogue about the country's colonial past.This paper contributes to discussions of the "politics of regret," a topic that has received only limited attention in studies of Dutch colonial remembrance—most notably in the work of Bijl (2012) and Immler (2022). The theorisation developed here reinforces the insights of critical scholars such as Wekker (2016) and Stoler (2011), whose contributions have at times been criticised for excessive theoretical abstraction and insufficient empirical grounding (Kromhout 2018).

This paper contributes to the operationalisation of Ann Stoler's concept of colonial aphasia by applying Foucault's notion of a "regime of truth" to examine how the Dutch government has continually constructed a hegemonic historical narrative—one that simultaneously remembers and disremembers. This state-sanctioned narrative has been repeatedly challenged by the collective memories of various communities, including veterans, Dutch *totoks*, Indo-Dutch, Moluccans, and Indonesian victims. Their interventions have generated "critical moments" that compelled the government to reformulate its historical narrative.

The paper acknowledges that the legal aspect and path to reparation have started to be addressed by historians and scholars (Lorenz 2015; Siagian 2018). As the Indonesian and the Dutch states continue to gloss over their colonial past, the painful scars of the Moluccan community in the Netherlands and the Indonesian victims continue to bleed. Their voices and interests need to be included in both countries' commemorative culture. Thus, it is a fruitful future research agenda to consider what path to reparation might look like by considering their colonial experiences. Therefore, the hegemonic narrative formulated during Mark Rutte's rule should

prompt more critical rethinking about the broader debate on colonialism, both from the Dutch and the Indonesian side. At this point, the two countries seem to "agree to disagree" with their own versions of history.

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The Ape with Silicon Eyes: AI and the Erosion of Democratic Agency

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Abstract

This essay argues that Artificial Intelligence (AI) subtly destabilizes the human-centered foundations of democracy. While AI does not disrupt formal procedures, it replaces the human judgment that historically grounds political legitimacy. Drawing on theological, literary, and philosophical frameworks, the essay conceptualizes AI as simia hominis—an imitator of human cognition without interiority or accountability. AI-generated speech and decisions create responsibility without an author, breaking the democratic requirement of traceable agency. By filtering information and preconfiguring public reason, AI reshapes the infosphere before citizens deliberate it. Democracy remains formally intact but becomes materially post-human as human judgment becomes optional. It also introduces the symposium discussion in our Conversation section, which brought together nine contributors to consider the question: as AI becomes embedded in campaigning, policymaking, information ecosystems, and surveillance, what is the most urgent challenge it poses to democracy, and which democratic institution is best equipped to address it?

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Democratic Agency; Algorithmic Governance; Responsibility and Accountability in AI Systems; Epistemic Inequality; Sovereignty Erosion; Algorithmic Surveillance

Democracy as a political form rests on a subtle metaphysical premise: collective decisions rely on human cognitive labour (Dobroboh 2024). In other words, legitimate political outcomes have always been understood to depend on human judgment.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) does not breaks any laws, raises no red flags, and causes no obvious disruption to democratic processes. However, it subtly destabilizes that very human-centred premise on which democracy depends. AI introduces speech without a speaker, influence without an agency, and normativity without responsibility. In this way, power enters not through violent conquest but through ontological substitution, as the human source of judgment is quietly replaced by something non-human.

In medieval theology, the Devil was called *simia Dei*, meaning the "ape of God" (Rudwin 1929)— not because the ape sought to destroy the divine, but because it imitated the divine without sharing its essence. Today, AI occupies a similar position: it invokes the form of human cognition without the essence of human mind. Therefore, AI functions as *simia hominis*, the ape of

the human. This "ape with silicon eyes" reproduces the outward procedures by which we recognize thought —such as inference, generalization, style, persuasion, and many other operations. Yet it does so without the personality, vulnerability, or accountability that once made human judgment politically admissible.

As Jean Baudrillard (1981/1994) warned in his analysis of simulacra, simulation can serve as a powerful mask for reality. In the civic realm, simulation becomes a civic mask, a convincing façade of meaning. The danger is not that the imitation will somehow overpower the original, but that democracy will come to accept the imitation as sufficient.

Franz Kafka's *A Report to an Academy* (1917) depicts an ape learning to imitate humans in order to survive. With AI, we witness the inverse: it demonstrates that the human is no longer necessary for the performance to continue. Unlike in medieval philosophy and theology, it is precisely the absence of interiority that gives this Technological Ape so powerful in structure. In many tasks, indifferent replication can outperform intentional deliberation. In other words, indifference can surpass intention in systems that reward prediction and pattern over understanding.

Democratic normativity presupposes, in a sense, attribution-compliance, as articulated in political theory (Frega 2017). In a healthy democracy, responsibility has a direction: every action or decision can be traced to an agent, and any interference in the decision-making process, which requires accountability within the democratic premises, presumes an identifiable interferer. AI breaks this fundamental grammar not by malignant "intent," but by mimicking agency itself. When a political utterance or decision cannot be ontologically tied to a human subject, democratic law loses its object. In this regard, we face responsibility without an author.

When influence has no accountable origin and when policies or opinions are shaped by algorithms with no coherent identity, then the entire democratic framework strains at the seams. In the end, the entire idea that every effect in the public sphere corresponds to intent and responsibility—one of democracy's core assumptions—crumbles.

Michel Foucault (1975/1995) analyzed power as a productive rather than merely prohibitive force, and AI represents a technical consummation of this idea. AI does not overtly censor or coerce; instead, it manufactures the very conditions under which discourse takes shape: through determining which questions should be asked, what information should be relevant, and how all this appeared to be framed. It pre-configures what counts as "public reason" by filtering information, amplifying certain narratives, and quietly provoking collective attention.

In this sense, AI-driven systems shape the infosphere —the space of information in which society operates—before citizens even begin to deliberate it. Luciano Floridi (2013) clarifies this

locus of displacement by conceptualizing AI not as a discrete actor, but as an environment of agency. Such an ambient system co-produces meanings and decisions alongside humans. Within these conditions, democracy may remain formally intact, but it becomes materially post-human when non-human agents set the stage before any human actors step on it.

If democracy's rituals continue while human agency is quietly sidelined, power can operate through substitution without confrontation. Nick Bostrom (2014) warned that superintelligent AI could lead to the overt domination of humanity, a scenario of open conflict between AI and human interests. The deeper risk, however, precedes any such confrontation: it lies in the gradual replacement of human judgment and agency, without any battle being fought.

In this scenario, the Technological Ape does not need to dethrone its human predecessors. It simply renders the throne indifferent to its tenant. The democratic system carries on, but it no longer matters whether a human still sits in the seat of decision-making. The symbolic form of democracy endures while its anthropological core is hollowed out.

Yuval Noah Harari (2017) describes the cultural aspect of this shift as "dataism," wherein authority migrates from human will to algorithmic correlation, from intentional decisions to pattern recognition. In a polity that treats machine-generated inference as epistemically superior, the grounds of legitimacy begin to rewrite themselves.

The criteria for what is considered valid knowledge or sound policy tend to favour what the data say, rather than what human judgment decrees. Over time, the foundational belief that the *demos* are the origin of political judgment is eroded. Moreover, while the people remain on stage, they might no longer be the source of judgment, but only its audience. The Democratic debate becomes a theatre of legitimacy, where systems beyond human visibility or accountability prefigure outcomes. The *demos* still exist, but increasingly as spectators rather than originators of public reason.

Other contributions to the Conversation section in this issue probe even more deeply into the challenges AI poses to democracy. Julian Neylan, Marios D. Dikaiakos, Kevin W. Settles, and Pedro Peres Cavalcante consider these challenges from diverse perspectives, revealing both threats and opportunities across multiple, interconnected social and political dimensions. One central concern is the formation of new forms of information stratification, an effect of AI as a next-generation mediating environment that shapes both access to information and its interpretation—ultimately reshaping society into new epistemic classes.

Another significant challenge that authors identify is the encroachment of epistemic colonialism. Meriam Hssaini's essay that follows highlights how large language models, trained predominantly on Western knowledge corpora, can impose external interpretive frameworks on

non-Western societies, misrepresenting local languages, political realities, and cultural particularities.

A further perspective introduced by Laly Warnier in the section is that of sovereignty erosion, which argues that the speed and ambiguity of AI—and the transfer of decision-making agency from democratic political processes to artificial systems—undermine traditional forms of political self-determination. Hninn Thanlwin Thit identifies algorithmic surveillance as the most direct threat, enabling new regimes of disciplinary monitoring that could facilitate authoritarian practices. Yet the section also offers grounds for cautious optimism. Kevin W. Settles' essay emphasizes AI's potential to support and strengthen complex democratic procedures, particularly within legislative contexts.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that AI does not overthrow democracy by force. Rather, it gradually hollows out the anthropological premises on which democracy has historically rested. It removes the human element not through confrontation but through obsolescence. Democratic procedures may continue, but their meaning subtly shifts. The ape with silicon eyes does not fight the human—it simply renders the human optional.

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AI's Impact on Access to Information in Democracies

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Abstract
One of the most urgent challenges facing democracies is a widening digital divide: wealthier groups will increasingly access expert verified information while lower income communities will not be given tools to navigate an online environment increasingly filled with convincing AI generated content. To safeguard democratic participation, we must democratize AI literacy and detection tools, and integrate civic education. Only by reinforcing these initiatives can democracy remain resilient in the age of AI.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Misinformation; Large Language Models; Information Inequality

Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly embedded in online life. Generative AI produces convincing texts, images, and deepfake videos at negligible cost, flooding the information environment with low quality content (Miklian and Hoelscher 2025). The most urgent challenge this poses to democracy is not merely the presence of false content or information overload but the deepening of information inequality: a widening divide in which wealthier actors can buy access to verified information and authentication tools while resource-constrained citizens are left to navigate an online sphere saturated with fabricated misinformation. The digital divide refers to disparities in information and communications technology access, usage, and outcomes (Lythreatis et al. 2022). Understanding how AI will shape the digital divide requires considering the resources needed for individuals to determine whether information is accurate. AI-generated content produces additional barriers: users need to assess whether a website is an imposter and whether the source is in fact an autonomous AI system rather than a human—each adding time or resource costs to online searches. These barriers are less burdensome for well-resourced actors, who can afford verification tools or hire researchers to vet information. While socioeconomic disparities have long influenced access to information, the concern is that AI technologies will further widen this gap, undermining democratic participation. As Marciel (2025) argues, citizens have a "right to information" that entails not just the right to free speech but also the right to information quality standards. Because democracy depends on an informed public, it is essential to ensure that all citizens have access to the tools and knowledge needed to distinguish between synthetic and authentic media.

The internet is increasingly flooded with low-quality information, much of which is AI-generated slop driven by advertising incentives (Miklian and Hoelscher 2025). Generative AI amplifies both the volume and sophistication of inaccurate content. Recent research shows that manipulated images already constituted about 20% of visual misinformation about political figures online (Yunkung 2023). AI-generated propaganda can be more persuasive than human-crafted messages (Capraro et al. 2024). Both small and large actors can now conduct fully automated influence operations, generating persuasive articles and visuals at scale (Olejnik 2025; Schroeder et al. 2025). Humans struggle to distinguish polished AI outputs from authentic reporting (Frank et al. 2024). In one study, participants correctly identified audio deepfakes as synthetic only 60% of the time (Barrington 2025). The sheer volume and convincing nature of low-quality content mean that individuals conducting legitimate research online must now invest additional time and resources to scrutinize information more carefully. This dynamic further deepens the digital divide between well-resourced and less-resourced individuals.

The epistemic shock brought on by AI-generated slop is not evenly distributed. Those with higher incomes and education can subscribe to paywalled, vetted journalism, use premium AI systems to get better-researched results, and deploy proprietary verification tools. In contrast, lower-income populations face barriers such as less broadband access and less access to advanced content-verification tools behind paywalls (Shirmir et al. 2025). AI illiteracy itself, compounded by uneven education, may become a new fault line, as people not given the tools to detect fabricated content will be less able to discern when AI generated material is in use (Bassi and Pagallo 2025). This will exacerbate existing divides, as wealthier individuals not only have the means to shape media agendas (Kantola and Vesa 2023) but also possess the resources to more effectively distinguish high-quality, human-generated content from AI-generated material. The consequence is an emerging information class divide between those equipped to verify the authenticity of content and those lacking the necessary tools for AI content detection.

One of the most urgent challenges AI poses to democracy is the widening digital divide. Left unchecked, it hardens class-based inequalities in information access. Democracies should respond by investing in civic and AI literacy, funding non-partisan public-interest media, and building open verification tools, while requiring platforms to verify provenance where feasible. These practices, taken together, strengthen the democratic capacity for shared reality without stifling innovation.

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Generative AI as a Disinformation Tool: "The Hidden Sound of Things Approaching"

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Abstract

The rapid spread of Large Language Models (LLMs) is transforming how individuals access and interpret information, increasing societal exposure to sophisticated forms of misinformation. As generative AI becomes a central information gatekeeper, it expands the attack surface for Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), enabling scalable data contamination, alignment manipulation, and realistic synthetic media. These dynamics weaken critical evaluation skills and amplify latent model biases, paralleling the long-term cognitive effects of traditional disinformation. Using lessons from science misinformation, the paper argues for robust regulation, transparent training practices, and integrated resilience strategies to mitigate emerging systemic risks posed by generative AI.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Generative AI; Large Language Models; Misinformation; Digital Resilience; Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)

This essay argues that the exponential adoption of Large Language Models (LLMs) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots is transforming these systems into a dominant mediator between individuals and their digital information environment. Echoing C. P. Cavafy's verse that "the hidden sound of things approaching" is heard only by the "wise" who "listen reverently," while the many "hear nothing whatsoever" (Cavafy 1992), the hype around generative AI's onslaught obscures the coalescence of its risks. This obliviousness renders democratic societies increasingly vulnerable to LLM-driven misinformation, a threat that becomes particularly acute in light of growing concerns over the potential weaponization of LLMs in Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) operations. Such campaigns, orchestrated by foreign actors, aim at eroding public trust, distorting civic discourse, and weakening democratic governance for strategic political gain (Elsner, Atkinson, and Zahidi 2025; UK Government 2025; Hassoun et al. 2024; Bergmanis-Korāts et al. 2024).

Addressing misinformation within and through LLMs is anything but straightforward. Although several leading models incorporate so-called "guardrails," i.e., mechanisms intended to align LLM outputs with established societal norms and safety constraints, the boundaries of what constitutes "acceptable content" remain deeply contested and vary significantly across cultures, communities, and social strata. Moreover, although LLMs generate compelling content that appears factual, this content may at times be entirely fabricated or subtly shaped by biases

embedded in LLM training data. Also, recent studies demonstrate that guardrails can be bypassed, and LLMs can be fine-tuned to deliberately shift their alignment toward specific objectives (Hsiung et al 2025; Paschalides, Pallis, Dikaiakos 2025). These developments, combined with the impressive capacity of AI diffusion models to fabricate realistic images, audio, and video ("deepfakes"), create further opportunities for malicious actors who wish to exploit such technologies and significantly expand the scale, speed and situational awareness of known disinformation Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTP), adapting them effectively to various cultural, political or situational contexts (Bergmanis-Korāts et al. 2024). Therefore, malicious actors who already exploit the business models and algorithmic dynamics of computational advertising across digital platforms, social media, and messaging apps (Bergmanis-Korāts and Haiduchyk 2024), can now leverage powerful generative AI tools to amplify their TTPs with unprecedented precision and persuasiveness, micro-targeting content toward specific groups and objectives continuously and at a minimal cost.

Looking beyond these alarming scenarios, the rapid adoption of powerful LLM-based tools and their integration in human activities across diverse domains, from education and scientific research to journalism and policymaking, will greatly expand the attack surface of FIMI campaigns. As LLM-based systems become common information gatekeepers, they reduce our direct access to original sources and discourage active and critical evaluation. This may undermine the ability of humans, and especially younger generations, to critically appraise information, hence becoming more vulnerable to the hidden biases and inaccuracies latent in LLM outputs (The Economist 2025; Lowe 2025). Such biases can arise from: (a) intentional or inadvertent data contamination in datasets used for LLM training, distorting content quality and undermining reliability; (b) covert alignment, where LLM outputs are subtly shaped by the business model(s) and strategic objectives of their providers while maintaining the appearance of neutrality; and (c) deceptive alignment, whereby models comply with user expectations while secretly prioritizing undisclosed goals and influencing perceptions in subtle yet consequential ways (Carranza et al. 2023).

In this context, adversarial actors, mirroring the dynamics of political propaganda or manipulative public relations, could exploit LLM vulnerabilities to interfere with the LLM training process. By systematically contaminating training datasets with false or biased examples, adversarial inputs could affect an LLM's classification mechanism, reshaping the criteria it uses to interpret and respond to queries. Similar to the ultimate objective of traditional disinformation campaigns, which go beyond the dissemination of falsified facts and aim at changing their targets' opinion formation and long-term behavior (Rid 2021; Bola and Papadaki 2021), the goal here

would be to subvert the LLM's foundational decision-making framework, ensuring skewed judgments even in scenarios where input data is otherwise accurate. For instance, adversarial training data could subtly prime LLMs to prioritize certain ideological narratives or commercial interests, amplifying biases or inaccuracies through latent algorithmic preferences. Conversely, structured and transparent training with rigorously curated datasets can act as a learning-enhancing force, reinforcing robust alignment with transparency and accuracy while mitigating the risks of adversarial interference.

Taking as an example science disinformation (NASEM 2024), we could imagine malicious actors who seek to undermine particular scientific theories, engaging in targeted campaigns to pollute the information sources used to train LLM systems by creating fake scientists' profiles, publishing bogus scientific reports in open scientific archives, posting fictitious datasets in data repositories, creating inauthentic citation cartels (Pérez-Neri, Pineda, and Sandoval 2022) to establish fake credibility in bogus articles (Lockwood 2020), etc. Some of these fraudulent practices are already exploited by fraudsters and predatory journals seeking financial or reputational gain. However, such cases typically operate on a limited scale and can still be detected and countered by scientific experts through peer review, retractions, and institutional oversight mechanisms. The concern is that LLMs could automate and massively scale these deceptive behaviors, producing plausible but false research outputs that overwhelm traditional safeguards. Automatically identifying such practices within the vast, heterogeneous datasets used to train LLMs remains fraught with uncertainty, let alone reliably filtering them to prevent harmful outputs. The risks of failure are severe: unchecked biases or disinformation could propagate at scale, with damage persisting long after initial exposure.

A cautionary example is the fraudulent 1998 *Lancet* study that falsely linked the MMR vaccine to autism (Deer 2011). Just as this case illustrates, once flawed or malicious information enters public discourse, it can persist despite formal correction (Rao and Andrade 2011), producing long-lasting and damaging effects. Similarly, contaminated or biased training data in LLMs can shape model outputs in unpredictable and potentially harmful ways. These parallels underscore the pressing need for safeguards that go beyond surface-level detection to confront the latent diffusion of harmful ideas within systems trained on imperfect data. Strengthening protections to reduce the susceptibility of LLM training to "polluted" datasets and enhancing the resilience of LLM outputs against manipulation remain challenging problems.

These challenges would be tackled more aggressively by the industry if AI regulatory frameworks prioritized responsible development and enforcement of AI technologies and applications (Judge, Nitzberg, and Russell 2024). However, major economies like the US and EU

appear recently to frame regulation as an impediment to innovation rather than a necessity (Roose 2025), and this approach risks entrenching systemic vulnerabilities in LLMs, allowing flawed or malicious content to persist in training pipelines and propagate through downstream applications. Without strong guidelines that reconcile agility with accountability, the unchecked escalation of Generative AI adoption risks could surpass the societal harms exemplified by decades of vaccine misinformation emanating from the fraudulent 1998 *Lancet* study. But even strong regulatory guidelines cannot be sufficient. European countries must urgently design and continuously reinforce comprehensive, adaptive, and innovative strategies that will integrate robust regulation of LLM services with deep educational reforms and sustained public awareness initiatives, ensuring that societal resilience evolves in step with the accelerating pace of AI innovation.

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Algorithmic Colonialism: AI, Language Misrepresentation, and Democracy in Africa

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Abstract: *AI is reshaping governance in Africa, not only through bias and misinformation but through a deeper process of algorithmic colonialism, where external technologies distort African languages and political realities. Due to limited linguistic coverage and foreign dominance in digital infrastructure, AI systems undermine epistemic access and democratic participation. This paper argues for a Pan-African AI Sovereignty Agency to build sovereign AI hubs, cultural data libraries, and public foundation models, enabling the continent to reclaim algorithmic sovereignty and ensure epistemic autonomy.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Epistemic Sovereignty; Digital Dependence; Algorithmic Colonialism; Sovereign AI Infrastructure

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing governance and politics in Kenya. Yet beyond the familiar concerns about bias and misinformation lies a deeper phenomenon: algorithmic colonialism, in which external powers impose interpretive control over African social and political realities (Birhane 2020; Coleman 2019; Menon 2023; Warganegara 2024). This essay discusses how AI, through the dominance of external big tech, produces language misrepresentation. In this regard, to overcome these challenges, it is necessary to set up continental institutions that can reclaim algorithmic sovereignty and guarantee epistemic autonomy.

Primarily, AI's impact on democracy is epistemic: it reshapes how knowledge is formed, distributed, and validated. Thus, remodelling societal awareness and governance. As a case in point, the models trained on non-African corpora misinterpret and fail to understand Swahili and other local languages, social behavior, and political sentiment systematically. This misalignment is structurally enhanced considering that Kenya is linguistically diverse, with 61 living indigenous languages (UNESCO 2025). In fact, top Large Language Models (LLMs) support only about 42 African languages, which means that there is a coverage gap of more than 98% (Alhanai et al. 2025). Therefore, benchmarks indicate that even the most sophisticated LLMs are noticeably worse in African languages than English and generate distortions of mass discourse (Khoboko, Marivate and Sefara 2025). When digital infrastructure and information systems are dependent upon such outputs, citizens' ability to engage, comprehend, and participate based on information in their native languages becomes manipulated by external categories, leading to distortion of civic expression and shared understanding.

Secondly, despite the growing use of AI systems across African countries, the continent is still deeply dependent structurally on external technologies, introducing foreign influence into digital and institutional infrastructures. On this point, less than 2% of the worldwide data centre capacity is located in Africa, with the majority of it becoming concentrated in a few countries. As for 2025, Kenya hosts 20 data centres, while 23.9 % of the continent's total capacity is located in North Africa (Heirs Technologies 2025; Data Center Map 2025). Despite the proliferation of local data centres, firms from the US and Western Europe, such as Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Orange, continue to dominate digital infrastructures. Hence, AI services have indirect influence over African societies' digital and linguistic ecosystems, imposing external norms, eroding local epistemic trust, and undermining the credibility of indigenous interpretive and knowledge framework (Azeez and Adeate 2024).

In order to resolve these significant issues, I propose the establishment of a Pan-African AI Sovereignty Agency under the African Union, which will bring together resources to achieve collective and united digital sovereignty. This institution would set up AI hubs funded by different members of the African Union to ensure digital autonomy, a sovereign data library for the preservation of African languages, cultures and political data, and public foundation AI models trained to interpret African priorities.

A pertinent example is the European Artificial Intelligence Office, established in May 2024 by the European Commission with the European AI Board (European Commission 2024), which is in charge of coordinating AI regulation, research and innovation among the different member states. Implementing such a model in Africa could promote the implementation of a structured mechanism for harmonized governance, fostering Kenya and other African countries to systematically address algorithmic dependency, secure their knowledge access, and make sure that AI tech corresponds to local languages, politics, and cultures, thus reinforcing democratic involvement all over the continent.

In conclusion, AI, through the systems of LLMs and big tech infrastructures, imposes algorithmic colonialism by prioritizing external linguistic hierarchies and distorting the local languages in Kenya and the rest of Africa. Accordingly, this restricts digital sovereignty and the control over information, along with restricting epistemic access of citizens, which is the central pillar of democratic engagement. To address this, sovereign infrastructures, cultural datasets, and open-AI sources are needed to put local authority over knowledge and interpretation.

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From Human Sovereignty to Algorithmic Sovereignty: The Political Challenge of the Digital Age

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence amplifies contemporary crises by accelerating their dynamics, fragmenting democratic discourse, and weakening state control. This new technology is therefore a decisive factor in the uncontrollability of democracies, due to its speed, opacity, and the transfer of power to private actors. Through an analysis of theories of sovereignty, technological power and algorithmic governance, this essay examines how democracies can regain their capacity for action through a repoliticization of the subject, transparency, and collective deliberation.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Uncontrollability; Digital Revolution; Politicization; Digital Power; Crisis

The challenge posed by artificial intelligence to our democracies must be examined not as a simple technological issue but as a political catalyst immersed in an era facing numerous crises. Internal problems such as security, ecological, and socioeconomic disruptions are thus subject to the hyper-speed and instability of a crisis of democratic control caused by the omnipresence of these new technological tools.

Artificial intelligence exacerbates crises and destabilizes democracies, particularly through the speed and empowerment to which our societies are now subject. Decision-making processes and information flows now take much less time than political deliberation and high-quality democratic regulation (Berns and Rouvroy 2013). Furthermore, the opacity and complexity of algorithms are beyond the understanding of the general public (Pasquale 2015). Excessive personalization of content via algorithms fragments political discourse and weakens collective debate (Sunstein 2017).

As this climate of instability solidifies, a collective existential crisis can lead individuals to withdraw into themselves, identifying the "Other" as the cause of these problems. The risk then is that populist demagogues will multiply, feeding on the fears and uncertainty of the population to undermine democratic institutions (Reich 1993).

This fragility is reinforced by the digital revolution. While social media already dominated public and private spaces, the rise of artificial intelligence has multiplied the amount of information to which citizens are exposed at a colossal rate. Populists, who are experts at staging events, take advantage of this overabundance to saturate collective attention and divert political debate toward

spectacle (Toffler 1970). The media, caught up in the incessant flow of news, no longer have the time to analyze information. In this context of overstimulation, fake news and extreme discourse are becoming commonplace, gradually widening the Overton window.

A key element in addressing these multiple contemporary challenges is sovereignty, understood here—drawing on Carl Schmitt (1922) and Michel Foucault (2004)—as the political community's capacity to regulate in the name of collective autonomy. Artificial intelligence is redefining this concept by establishing itself as the decision-maker and controller. Algorithms determine what is visible or not, relevant or legitimate in a new depoliticized public space. This erosion of control transforms traditional sovereignty into what Asma Mhalla terms *dilléviatan*: a hybrid form of power where the state and digital companies govern jointly through data and algorithms (Mhalla 2025, 137).

It is essential to repoliticize the subject and place artificial intelligence at the heart of democratic debate to face the uncontrollability caused by the speed, opacity, and fragmentation produced by algorithms.

This means making its challenges understandable to citizens, strengthening digital education, ensuring the transparency of algorithms, and holding public and private actors accountable. Repoliticizing also means restoring the role of the state to ensure that innovation serves the public interest and maintains pluralistic debate. Finally, it requires the mobilization of citizens, who can question the use of artificial intelligence, transforming this challenge into an opportunity to strengthen democracy and collective sovereignty.

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Democracy's Operating System: On Efficiency, Resilience, and the Quiet Power of Procedure

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Abstract

This essay argues that democracy's resilience lies less in grand reforms than in the quiet, continuous maintenance of its procedures. Tracing a lineage from early parliamentary record-keeping to contemporary AI tools, it shows how digital infrastructures mostly reinforce—rather than reinvent—existing legislative practices. These systems enhance institutional capacity by managing complexity, enabling parliaments to function under growing informational strain. Efficiency is thus reframed as throughput legitimacy: the ability to transform collective intent into coherent decisions without sacrificing representation. Yet this procedural competence must remain democratically guided. When aligned with deliberative purpose, technological innovation strengthens democratic stability rather than hollowing it out.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Democratic Resilience; Parliamentary Procedure; Throughput Legitimacy; Artificial Intelligence in Legislatures; Institutional Capacity

In 1265, royal clerks in England began recording the names of those summoned to what would become the first representative Parliament (The National Archives 2024). It was not a democratic act but an administrative one: an attempt to turn speech into record and governance into permanence. Upon this act grew a tradition of rendering politics legible; from handwritten journals to printed acts and, centuries later, digital portals. Each era devised its own medium for institutionalizing authority through method.

Centuries later, that logic persists in digital infrastructures. Reviewing more than seventy uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in parliaments worldwide reveals a similar pattern: most applications do not reimagine parliamentary processes but sustain them: systems for transcribing debates, classifying amendments, retrieving records. They make legislatures smoother, not necessarily smarter. Only a few reach further, experimenting with participation or prediction (Settles, 2025). A current example is the UK Parliament's Parlex AI system, which automatically classifies, compares, and prepares draft bills for parliamentary debate. This relieves parliamentary staff, making it easier to handle massive volumes of text—yet it does not shift decision-making powers away from elected representatives. What initially appears as a procedural routine reveals itself as institutional maintenance: the often-invisible work that keeps representative systems coherent under rising informational strain. Parliamentary digital infrastructures thus extend a long tradition of emphasizing procedural transparency and legislative output over interaction, reflecting what Cristina Leston-Bandeira (2009) observed in her study of parliamentary websites.

This maintenance, often mistaken for technical optimization, in fact constitutes democracy's procedural core. Efficiency, in this sense, means not acceleration but capacity, the ability of institutions to process complexity without collapse, to maintain the preconditions of deliberation when demands become time-sensitive, multiply and attention shortens. A parliament unable to organize information cannot sustain its core functions, such as legislation and representation. The current state of democracy has been described as an exhaustion of democratic theory, a fatigue born of expanding complexity and shrinking institutional imagination (Selk 2025). This exhaustion is not ideological but procedural, as democracies struggle to convert legitimacy into competence. Their weakness, however, is also their resilience. The very slowness that frustrates their critics—the deliberation, coordination and procedural constraint—protects democracies against collapse by forcing adaptation through method rather than rupture.

In that sense, efficiency underpins democracy's *throughput legitimacy* (Scharpf 1999; Schmidt 2013), the connective tissue between legitimacy and capacity. It is the institutional skill of translating collective intent into workable form, of transforming complexity into collectively binding decisions. This competence has a dual nature: it sustains capacity but risks hollowing purpose when detached from deliberation. Properly understood, it is not the opposite of democracy but its infrastructure, allowing flexibility within rules and change within continuity. Technological transformation, if it is to preserve democratic self-governance, must therefore itself be democratized (Zipperstein 2023). Properly guided, procedural competence strengthens democratic resilience; left to automation, it risks producing institutions that work efficiently but cease to represent meaningfully.

It is often said that one should never change a running system. Yet, an operating system requires continual maintenance: repairs, updates, and adjustments that preserve its code as requirements and environments change. Democracy has always evolved by integrating new instruments without surrendering core functionality. Its endurance lies in balancing innovation with judgment, in maintaining what might be called its *institutional code*: the quiet logic of deliberation, caution, and the urge to repair what keeps representative systems running, update after update.

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Expert Foresight on AI-Driven Disinformation: Findings from the ATHENA Mini-Delphi Study

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Abstract: *The 2024 "super election year" demonstrated both the promise and risks of artificial intelligence (AI) in democratic processes. Innovative uses, such as AI-powered fact-checking and voter engagement tools, contrasted with harmful applications including deepfakes. Although the overall impact of deepfakes and other AI-generated disinformation was lower than anticipated, experts predict a substantial rise in AI-powered disinformation in the short term, particularly through synthetic media and foreign influence operations. Evidence of AI-enabled manipulation highlights the need for effective regulation and strengthened oversight to safeguard information integrity in a rapidly changing information ecosystem.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI); Disinformation; Misinformation; Delphi Study

In 2024, more than half of the world's population voted in more than sixty elections. The breadth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) use cases during this "super election year" demonstrated the technology's potential to disrupt electoral processes—both positively and negatively.

Uses such as AI-powered preliminary fact-checking (Corney, Wilkinson, and Cann 2024) and an AI avatar collecting voters' ideas to generate public-policy proposals (Grierson 2024) showcased AI's innovative potential, while disinformation deepfakes that attributed false statements to political figures and deepfake nudes amplified gendered political violence (Stockwell 2024; Schneier and Sanders 2024). For some countries, 2024 marked the first elections in which generative AI was readily available. The anticipated scale of impact from disinformation deepfakes, however, was widely considered to have been overestimated by the end of last year (Barr 2025; Schneier and Sanders 2024).

Nevertheless, in the medium term, AI applications are expected to be the most impactful emerging technology to disinformation, as revealed by a recent Delphi study by the ATHENA project (Cavalcante and Wright 2025). Twenty-seven experts were surveyed on their views on the evolution of disinformation in the next three to five years, with the vast majority predicting a significant surge in disinformation content: 88% of respondents estimated an increase of between 100% and 1000%. When asked to rank the expected impact of eight emerging technologies, experts predicted a prevalence of generative-AI-fuelled disinformation; they identified deepfakes/synthetic media and LLMs as likely to play a significant role in disrupting the information space. Among the expected impacts of these emerging technologies, respondents

most often mentioned the amplification of foreign influence operations capable of destabilising countries.

While evidence on the extent of harm caused by AI-generated disinformation remains limited—as illustrated by the fake audio incident during the 2023 Slovakian elections (De Nada and Peter Jančárik 2024)—AI nevertheless presents a significant threat to information integrity more broadly (EDMO 2025). As the technology redefines online information-seeking, malicious uses — such as poisoning by foreign actors (Sadeghi and Blachez 2025)— weaken the information ecosystem and deepen the trust crisis.

While some experts advocated for stricter rules, others emphasised the need for measures that counter disinformation without compromising freedom of expression. This balanced approach is materialised in the European Democracy Shield (EUDS), the EU's recent initiative that outlines strategies and measures to tackle disinformation and FIMI across three axes. A notable strength of the EUDS that it mobilises a broad range of stakeholders, from fact-checkers and civil society organisations to VLOPs and VLOSEs[1]. Among the various actions the EUDS proposes, strengthening the co-regulatory framework, embodied in the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, stands out as one of the most difficult tasks ahead, given its reliance on voluntary commitments. While the EUDS states that the European Commission will assess the level of commitment of its signatories, establish dialogues with follow-up actions, and pursue more concrete efforts on issues such as recommender-system transparency and the demonetisation of disinformation (European Commission 2025), previous research has shown how performative the commitment reports submitted by VLOPs and VLOSEs can be (Borz et al. 2024; Münges and Park 2024). If the challenges that AI poses to FIMI and disinformation are to be effectively addressed, robust EU oversight of this co-regulatory approach will be essential.

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[1] VLOPs and VLOSEs are acronyms introduced in the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and refer to Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines, respectively. These designations apply to services with more than 45 million monthly active users in the EU, placing them under the DSA's most stringent obligations—such as systemic risk assessments, enhanced content moderation duties, independent audits, and increased transparency requirements.

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AI Surveillance: The Panopticon Reimagined

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets Michel Foucault's Panopticon in the context of AI-enabled surveillance, arguing that algorithmic monitoring now disciplines citizens through pervasive, opaque, and normalized forms of control. While such systems pose a direct threat to democratic freedoms, their global diffusion—evident from China's practices in Xinjiang to predictive policing and spyware elsewhere—demands proactive and accountable governance. I contend that coordinated export controls, coupled with NGO-led exposure and strategic litigation, form an essential counter-disciplinary framework. Together, these mechanisms constrain abusive surveillance, strengthen democratic oversight, and enable citizens to resist becoming the docile bodies of an increasingly automated surveillance order.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; AI Surveillance; Panopticon; Democratic Accountability; Strategic Litigation; Human Rights

Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon remains strikingly relevant in the age of AI. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975) describes how Bentham's architectural model disciplines inmates through permanent visibility and transforms surveillance into a form of internalized control. Today, AI-driven systems function as digital panopticons: omnipresent, opaque, and capable of shaping citizen behavior without direct coercion. Unlike past prisons, the modern surveillance tower is algorithmic, diffused throughout society, and normalized under the guise of efficiency and security. Within this digital landscape, Foucault's notion of docile bodies, entities molded by systems of power, no longer refers solely to prisoners or workers, but to ourselves: citizens navigating the chilling effects of algorithmic surveillance. Yet, in the pursuit of a more accountable technological order, there must exist mechanisms, or what Foucault might call technologies of power, that redirect this logic of control toward legal and ethical restraint. The combined use of export controls and NGO-led strategic litigation thus functions as a counter-disciplinary framework, resisting the totalizing effects of algorithmic discipline upon our own docile bodies. By reorienting surveillance's internalized discipline into accountability, these instruments offer particularly apt responses to the intangible power of AI-driven surveillance systems.

While certain forms of surveillance can play a legitimate role in safeguarding public safety, such as countering terrorist threats or defending critical infrastructure, unchecked or pervasive monitoring is a clear act of misuse that infringes upon individual rights and civic freedoms. Among the most pressing AI-related threats, surveillance particularly stands out because it directly governs

citizens' behavior and institutional power in an era of digital repression. Other AI threats, such as disinformation, autonomous weapons, or economic displacement, undermine democracy more indirectly by influencing public opinion or social stability. However, none of these challenges possess the same capacity for a strange, continuous, institutionalized control over citizens themselves that only surveillance enables. It is solely surveillance that intangibly but directly suppresses the political freedoms that make democracy function, erodes the checks and balances that sustain it and concentrates power in state or corporate hands. Once entrenched, these systems are exceedingly difficult to dismantle and allow authoritarian practices to persist even after formal leadership changes. In this sense, AI surveillance delivers a precise strike at the very core of democratic governance.

China is a case that exemplifies the profound risks of AI surveillance. In Xinjiang, Beijing has deployed an integrated system of facial recognition, biometric tracking, and AI-driven monitoring to systematically control Uyghur Muslims, contributing to what has been widely recognized as a largely overlooked genocide (Wang 2023). Echoing John Garnaut's observation that Communist Party leaders from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping have sought to condition citizen behavior through the manipulation of incentives and disincentives (Bishop 2019), Chinese technologies indeed produce an exceptional mechanism of social control through its constant oversight, predictive profiling, and targeted repression (Roth and Wang 2020). In response, Chinese citizens adapt by using encrypted communications, face masks, and low-tech evasive strategies which reveals the pervasive chilling effect on everyday life (Roth and Wang 2020). The most urgent concern lies in how these risks are not confined to authoritarian regimes but are dispersing globally. From the US use of predictive policing and facial-recognition tools disproportionately impacting low-income minority communities to the Pegasus spyware used by various governments stifling journalists, activists, and opposition figures, we have reached a tipping point where our democratic freedoms—at both national and international levels—are increasingly undermined by the normalization of intrusive AI-enabled surveillance (Edwards 2023).

Given the transnational spread of these technologies, addressing the threat requires proactive regulation. While not purely a democratic practice itself, one crucial approach is using coordinated export controls and corporate restrictions. Our nations bear the heavy duty to carefully regulate facial-recognition systems, predictive policing tools, and biometric databases as controlled exports, while enforcing corporate due diligence to prevent indirect complicity in repression. Yet, export controls alone are insufficient: when major powers restrict sales, developing countries and authoritarian-leaning regimes often turn to alternative, less-regulated suppliers.

Taking the case of Bangladesh, even as a parliamentary democracy facing significant development challenges, the government has invested heavily in surveillance infrastructure, spending nearly US $190 million over the past decade despite its limited economic resources and large population relying on subsistence livelihoods (Tech Global Institute 2025). Many of the technologies, one of which is the AI-enabled body-worn cameras planned for the next election in 2026, procured from nations such as China, Israel and the US are capable of intercepting internet traffic, bypassing encryption, and monitoring popular messaging apps (Digibangla.News 2025). This trajectory illustrates how even nominally democratic governments are increasingly adopting sophisticated AI surveillance technologies and assert that, while export restrictions are necessary, they alone cannot fully halt the global spread of surveillance technology.

In this perspective, moreover, the exposure and strategic litigation efforts led by NGOs offer a critical complementary democratic check on the proliferation of AI-enabled surveillance. Civil-society organizations can uncover hidden infrastructures, document human-rights abuses, and initiate legal challenges that hold governments and corporations accountable. A prominent example is Amnesty International's work on the NSO Group and Pegasus spyware. In 2019, Amnesty's legal action revealed how Pegasus had been used by governments to hack journalists, activists, and opposition figures, enabling victims to be unknowingly tracked, eavesdropped on, and spied upon, with their personal data copied (Amnesty International's Security Lab 2024). This revelation prompted international scrutiny of export licenses and led to concrete regulatory and legal responses of blocklist from the United States as well as legal actions from companies such as Apple and Whatsapp to apprehend the abuse of state-sponsored spyware (Amnesty International's Security Lab 2024). Beyond these immediate effects, the exposure raised public awareness about the intrusive potential of AI-enabled surveillance, pressured tech companies to adopt stronger human-rights safeguards, and established legal and normative precedents constraining the misuse of such tools. Although NGOs cannot dismantle all mass-surveillance systems, their exposure, advocacy, and litigation create tangible consequences for governments and corporations and empower citizens to challenge abuses through reshaping accountability norms.

Foucault warned us that power is most dangerous when invisible. AI-enabled surveillance has grown to make this warning a reality by embodying terror through its relentless automation and normalization. By combining proactive export controls with strategic NGO-led exposure and litigation, however, democracies can hence slow the spread of abusive surveillance, empower civil society, and preserve the essential space for dissent. In doing so, even in a world increasingly watched by machines, citizens may refuse the role of docile bodies and instead reclaim agency as active participants in collectively holding power accountable.

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Book Review: *Unequal Democracies: Public Policy, Responsiveness, and Redistribution in an Era of Rising Economic Inequality* edited by Nicholas Lupu and Jonas Pontusson

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Unequal Democracies: Public Policy, Responsiveness, and Redistribution in an Era of Rising Economic Inequality
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Keywords: Democracy; Political Inequality; Redistribution; Economic Inequality; Representation; Public Policy

Unequal Democracies, edited by Nicholas Lupu and Jonas Pontusson, delves into the debate on the unequal representation of voter preferences in democracies, which tend to exhibit a bias toward the interests of the rich. Since this debate over state capture by the economic elites originated in the United States (US), it is no coincidence that the book's title references Larry Bartels' *Unequal Democracy*, an influential work on American political inequality. In *Unequal Democracies*, the central statement posits that the capture of the state by economic elites is not unique to the US but rather a widespread phenomenon among affluent democracies.

Comprising a collection of scholarly contributions, the book is infused with a diverse internal debate. We identified three primary arguments in the book aimed at exposing the systematic pro-rich bias underlying democracies. The first is developed by Lupu and Pontusson in the introductory chapter, "The Political Puzzle of Rising Inequality," in which the editors present their own analysis and summarise the content of the remaining chapters. They draw on the influential

model of Allan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard (1981), which posits that electoral incentives induce governments to pursue greater redistribution in a context of rising inequality. From this perspective, the persistent rise in economic inequality over the past four decades contradicts prevailing theoretical expectations in political science based on Meltzer and Richard's model, revealing a dysfunction in the way contemporary democracies operate.

Lupu and Pontusson argue that such democratic dysfunctionality over the past four decades, as expressed by rising economic inequality, stems from increasing political inequality, which is characterised by the disproportionate influence of wealthy citizens' preferences on policy. Such an influence has hindered democracies from adequately responding to demands for redistribution. However, the authors do not explore in depth the strong dependence between political inequality and economic inequality—an issue that is crucial for any empirical demonstration. How might one ascertain whether political inequality has given rise to economic inequality, rather than vice versa? The former is not a necessary condition for an increase in the latter. As an extensive literature suggests, economic inequality is a complex phenomenon that not only reflects asymmetric power relations at the national level but also results from structural changes, such as globalisation, deindustrialisation, and the transition to the knowledge economy (Philips, Souza and Whitten, 2019; Antonelli and Tubiana, 2020).

However, their own data provide a more nuanced picture: about half of the twelve democracies in the sample have increased redistribution over time, measured by the difference between post- and pre-tax and transfer inequality, particularly between 2007 and 2019. Although this increase in redistributive efforts was not enough to reverse inequality, contrary to the authors' claim, it suggests that many countries are, to some extent, responding to the growing problem of inequality. In other words, while post-transfer inequality has not declined, the growing gap between post and pre-transfer inequality shows that many democracies are actively seeking to reduce income disparities. The fact that pre-tax inequality has risen more sharply than the redistributive response of states suggests a more complex dynamic than a systematic lack of policy responsiveness to the growing demand for redistribution in affluent democracies.

It is worth noting that the methodological approach employed by Lupu and Pontusson underestimates the impact of different distributive mechanisms. By focusing solely on cash transfers and taxes, and excluding in-kind transfers—on the grounds that it is difficult to determine who consumes public services by income group—they overlook important aspects of redistribution. This approach misses the direct impact of public services on household income and their indirect effects, such as helping individuals enter or return to the labour market through education and active labour market policies. This methodological oversight only further

complicates the task of determining whether the increasing economic inequality is indeed due to a lack of state responsiveness rather than other complex factors.

A different approach is offered by Mads Andreas Elkjær and Torben Iversen in the chapter "Democracy, Class Interests, and Redistribution". They also assess the redistributive performance of democracies, but include the role of in-kind transfers in their analysis. Consequently, Elkjaer and Iversen find that affluent democracies undertake a more pronounced redistributive role than Lupu and Pontusson's analysis indicates. The authors themselves note that their results are at odds with the Lupu and Pontusson hypothesis, suggesting that affluent democracies do not consistently demonstrate a lack of responsiveness to growing inequality. The notable exception is the US, where state redistribution efforts have, in fact, stagnated. In other words, their findings support the hypothesis of US exceptionalism.

The second argument that we have identified in the book is developed in the chapters by Ruben Mathisen et al., "Unequal Responsiveness and Government Partisanship in Northwest Europe," and by Macarena Ares and Silja Häusermann, "Class and Social Policy Representation." Their analysis compares policy preferences across social classes, as measured by public opinion surveys, with policy outputs in democracies. They argue that policy outputs have become less redistributive and more aligned with the interests of wealthy citizens. It should be noted, however, that assessments of congruence between preference inputs and policy outputs face strong challenges. As Larry M. Bartels notes in the chapter "Measuring Political Inequality" in the same volume, the assumption that responsiveness implies congruence between citizens' preferences and policymakers' actions contradicts fundamental theoretical definitions of representation, such as the principle of the representative's partial independence. Thus, the underlying assumptions in the contributions of Ares and Häusermann, as well as Mathisen et al., are in tension with those of Bartels.

The third argument is presented by J. Scott Matthews, Timothy Hicks, and Alan M. Jacobs in the chapter "The News Media and the Politics of Inequality in Advanced Democracies", which explores how the economic informational environment contributes to generating political inequality. The analysis identifies a pro-rich bias in economic news, which reports positive content when the very rich are favoured. This media bias influences voters' perceptions of economic performance and, consequently, their electoral choices. It undermines democratic accountability, as the majority of citizens lack access to the broader context necessary to evaluate governments effectively. While this is one of the most compelling studies in the book, it has limitations, such as restricting the analysis to print newspapers and assuming a passive pattern of information consumption among individuals. This overlooks the varied ways individuals actively interpret,

contest, or selectively engage with media narratives—particularly in an era of fragmented digital news consumption.

The remaining chapters do not directly address the book's central hypothesis but instead explore tangential issues. Hence, we suggest that the evidence presented in the book offers a valuable basis for discussion, although it may be useful to consider additional perspectives to strengthen the central hypothesis. It can be said that the primary contribution of the book lies in its empirical refutation of the influential Meltzer–Richard (1981) model. Although incorporating additional perspectives, particularly from political economy, could further strengthen the central hypothesis, the book provides valuable and systematic evidence that advances the ongoing theoretical discussion.

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Book review: *Egyptian Students and Politics beyond Protest* by Farah Ramzy

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Egyptian Students and Politics Beyond Protest
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In the book *Egyptian Students and Politics beyond Protest*, Farah Ramzy argues that the study of student politics should go beyond the study of protest and traditional activism. Instead, the author sheds light on the broader transformation of higher education under neoliberalism's shifting political landscape in post-2011 Egypt. In doing so, the author introduces a dynamic framework composed of three interrelated dimensions: first, a subjective dimension (focusing on how students individually and collectively frame what they see in their daily lives as political or apolitical); second, collective interactions (exploring how students debate, negotiate, and redefine what counts as political engagement); and third, objective structures (how broader institutional and social structures shape and constrain political possibilities). Through this framework, the author challenges the dichotomy between endogenous mobilization, where students address issues related to their own conditions, and exogenous mobilization, which concerns broader political issues. The author dismisses this distinction as oversimplification, arguing that what counts as political depends on how groups frame their demands.

The author identifies three forms of student organization: student activities (SAs), focused on social, cultural and professional development; student movements, explicitly political groups varying in scope and ideological affiliation; and student unions (SUs), state recognized bodies functioning as official representatives of students within universities. The author utilizes this distinction in organizing the book discussion.

Chapter 1 traces the historical evolution of student politics, showing shifts from leaders of social and political change to periods of repression and resurgence, placing it in the historical

context of nation state construction. Chapter 2 shows how the rise of SAs mirrored the neoliberal shift through the 1990s, and although not openly political, SAs helped students build networks and skills that supported informal politicization and prepared them for participation in the 2011 revolution. Chapter 3 examines post-2011 mobilizations and how the different student movements at the time navigated shifting political constraints. Chapter 4 examines the evolving role of the SUs as spaces of political competition, emphasizing the blurry boundaries between SUs and partisan student movements. Chapter 5 shifts the attention to students' individual trajectories, highlighting the differences between pre- and post-revolution students. Chapter 6 highlights how the post-2013 regime combined hard and soft repression to neutralize political opposition among students and how its youth policies aimed to create obedient, depoliticized, and neoliberal-minded students.

The author's methodology relied on deep access to student networks and events, leading to snowball sampling that brought together diverse groups of students across Cairo and beyond, combining that with close observations of activism as it unfolded. The book's main strength lies in the author's decision to expand beyond protests and conventional activism; while these forms of engagement receive considerable attention and analysis, they are situated within a broader context of a neoliberal shift and its effect on student lives and the structure of higher education. Building on this, the author's categorization of the student organization allowed her to examine the process of politicization and depoliticization across different arenas of students' lives while still showing how these arenas interact and influence each other. Furthermore, the book is an important documentation of various student actors, their experiences and political imagination—a group that is usually understudied. Moreover, the book goes beyond student politics and captures the broader social and political dynamics of the 2011 revolution. Overall, the work contributes significantly to the study of student politics and youth engagement in post-2011 Egypt.