

Democratic Resilience and Post-truth in the Contemporary Era: The Role of the School

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of democratic resilience and its vital importance in preserving the integrity of democracy and guaranteeing its future sustainability. The examination of democratic resilience is especially pertinent when the state allocates substantial resources to propaganda and other forms of deception, including post-truth, to undermine its democratic aims and purposes. The post-truth phenomenon profoundly influences moral and democratic principles, along with citizens' attitudes and perceptions. Individuals in contexts characterized by a pronounced post-truth phenomenon often exhibit heightened skepticism towards political and institutional authorities, potentially undermining democratic norms and eroding trust in institutions. The rapid dissemination of information through digital media intensifies this trend, making it more challenging to verify sources and distinguish between misinformation and truth. The post-truth phenomenon exacerbates misinformation by eroding ideals like impartiality and critical thinking, supplanting scientific and historical knowledge and reality. Consequently, the function of education, particularly that of schools, is essential in addressing the phenomena of post-truth. A comprehensive awareness of media operations, particularly in the realm of digital literacy, enables students to identify and counter misinformation, thereby fortifying democratic resilience.

Keywords: democracy, democratic resilience, post-truth, education

1. Introduction

Despite the current prevalence of recognized democracies being the highest in history, the prerequisites for extensive democratic advancement and enhancement must be examined and nurtured, particularly inside established democracies (Burnell & Calvert, 1999). The primary difficulty facing contemporary democracy is its progressive deterioration. The daily pressures on democracy, especially from political leaders with anti-democratic or authoritarian inclinations who usurp power and enhance their privileges at the detriment of parliaments and independent judicial bodies, render democracy inherently fragile (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In this context, the matter of democracy's resilience is vital to its quality and its capacity to endure, both presently and in the future (Merkel, 2020). Misinformation constitutes one of the most significant challenges to democracy right now. Citizens, particularly the youth, as engaged users of digital media, are especially susceptible to misinformation, conspiracy theories, and information manipulation. Post-truth supplants scientific and historical knowledge and reality, compromising values such as objectivity, information verification, source comparison, and critical analysis (Farkas & Schou 2018). The proliferation of misinformation and the entrenchment of post-truth erode the fundamental principles of democracy, which necessitate an educated and accountable citizenry capable of exercising logical critique of political processes. The manipulation of post-truth, primarily by political leaders, confuses citizens and restricts their capacity to make educated judgments on governance and society (McIntyre, 2018).

Addressing the post-truth issue is a significant concern for contemporary states (Jandric, 2018) to enhance citizens' capacity, particularly among youth, to recognize and counter misinformation. Specifically, it is vital to educate students through both formal and informal methods regarding manipulation strategies in public discourse, the importance of cross-checking information, finding credible sources, and comprehending propaganda techniques (Legg, 2024). Schools play a vital role in educating students about misinformation phenomena, such as post-truth, by implementing critical pedagogy that enables students to cross-check information, identify credible sources, and understand propaganda strategies. The relationship between schools and democratic resilience is essential and reciprocal, as schools provide the foundation for cultivating the values and skills needed to strengthen democracy. Schools, especially democratic ones, serve as the educational and institutional framework that promotes active student participation in decision-making, equal communication, respect for diversity, and the development of critical thinking. Through processes such as student assemblies, collaborative learning, and dialogic teaching, students experience democracy as an everyday practice rather than an abstract concept (Mendonca & Ayala, 2024). Therefore, schools play a pivotal role in fostering engaged students and enhancing democratic culture and resilience within the school community, as students become increasingly aware and less susceptible to manipulation. (Giroux, 2018).

2. The Concept of Democratic Resilience

In political science, the limited explicit references to democratic resilience typically characterize it as a dedication to democratic principles and values. Burnell and Calvert (1999)

define democratic resilience as the commitment to democratic ideals, notwithstanding opposition to formally established values and laws, as well as the apparent apathy of many societal groups. In his book on Japan's foreign policy, Teo (2019) characterizes democratic resilience as the Japanese populace's reverence for the constitution and democratic principles. Moreover, Guasti (2020) defines democratic resilience as the capacity of institutional obstacles and civil society to withstand the attempts of technocratic populists to erode accountability.

Conversely, in physical terms, resilience refers to the capacity of a stressed body to regain its dimensions and form following deformation induced by compressive stress, as well as the ability to recover or adapt readily to adversities or alterations. In psychology, resilience refers to the capacity to effectively adjust to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or substantial stressors (Berkes & Ross, 2012). In organizational theory, resilience is defined as a system's capacity to endure environmental changes and maintain functionality (McCarthy et al., 2017).

By applying insights from several scientific fields to the realm of political regimes, democratic resilience can be defined as the capacity of a political regime to avert or address problems while maintaining its democratic essence (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). Nevertheless, definitions remain inadequate as analytical constructs or effective "focused theoretical frameworks" (Rueschemeyer, 2009) that enable the simplification of the intricate realities of existing phenomena, their classification into types or categories, and the formulation of hypotheses regarding the causal influences of key dimensions in their interactions with the external environment (Goertz, 2006).

3. The Facets of Democratic Resilience

Democratic resilience is associated with three potential responses of political regimes to internal and external challenges (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021: 872): a) the capacity to persist without substantial alteration, b) the capacity to adapt via internal transformation, and c) the capacity to recuperate following initial harm and disruption. The three "capabilities" of resilience are not all essential for a democracy's resilience, nor are they mutually exclusive; instead, they can coexist in many combinations. Nonetheless, they serve as functionalist components for developing a viable conceptual framework of democratic resilience. It is essential to highlight that the aspect of functionality, specifically the ability for resilience, adaptation, or recovery, is merely one facet of democratic resilience, rather than the sole element. It must be supplemented by two additional dimensions: structural and factor-centered viewpoints (Scharpf, 1997).

Initially, we must meticulously analyze the regulations and institutions pertinent to the regime's sustainability and democratic integrity, particularly the institutional interactions among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Secondly, we must meticulously analyze the status of the most pertinent political entities, specifically political parties: those that are democratic, semi-democratic, or non-democratic, which influence political competition. The stronger the influence of semi-democratic or non-democratic parties on competition and associated policies, the more pronounced the centrifugal dynamics of the party system and the diminished democratic resilience. The dominance of democratic parties

and actors in the competitive dynamics of the party system enhances the resilience of democracy (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021: 873).

Subordinating to constitutional authority and political parties is a tertiary level, specifically political culture and civil society. The dispositions and actions of citizens are crucial for democratic resilience. The more prevalent and entrenched democratic principles and attitudes are within a society, along with a more dynamic and engaged citizenry, the more robust democracy becomes against external shocks and challenges. In the renowned chapter on customs in his work “Democracy in America”, Tocqueville contended that customs, viewed as the absorption of democratic principles within a society's collective consciousness, can serve as a safeguard against undemocratic inclinations (Merkel & Kneip, 2018).

Moreover, Maletz (2005) asserts that these norms, when modified to suit new conditions, might enhance the efficacy of democratic practices. He asserts that the deeper the democratic ideas are embedded in a society's traditions and habits, the more effectively they manifest in open, participatory, and efficient institutions. A democratic regime will be more robust when elite consensus on fundamental democratic principles is stable and when voters perceive political outcomes as equitable. If consensus has diminished, as observed in the contemporary United States, the outcome hinges on the robustness of institutions to withstand the anti-democratic actions of influential political figures.

The fourth and most essential level pertains to the political community of citizens. A more cohesive, less uneven, conflictual, and polarized political society facilitates the acceptance of concessions by political elites and adherence to the fundamental principles of democracy. Polarization intensifies and divisions exacerbate as the collective sense of belonging among citizens erodes, jeopardizing political communities (Guasti, 2020).

Democratic resilience refers to the capacity of a democratic system, including its institutions, political actors, and citizens, to foresee or react to external and internal challenges, pressures, and assaults via one or more of three potential responses: to persist unchanged, to adapt through internal modifications, and to recuperate while maintaining the democratic essence of their regime and its core institutions, organizations, and processes. The greater the resilience of democracies at all four levels of the political system (political community, institutions, actors, and citizens), the less susceptible they are to vulnerabilities both now and in the future. Democracies exhibit resilience when they sustain an equivalent or comparable standard of democratic quality across all principal aspects in the face of significant obstacles (Boese et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, equivalent quality does not inherently imply the same processes, institutions, and individuals. Most democracies must modify and adapt their old processes and strategies to evolving surroundings to fulfill the democratic functions established by their constitutions (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Can education, particularly civic education, enhance democratic orientation, political involvement, and consequently resilience in vulnerable democracies? If this were true, we would have discovered a crucial element of self-reproducing democratic resilience.

4. Post-truth and Democratic Resilience

The term "post-truth" refers to situations where objective facts exert a diminished effect on public opinion compared to emotional appeals and personal convictions. It has attained significance subsequent to occurrences such as the Brexit referendum and the United States presidential election. Jandric (2018) was one of the first scholars to define post-truth as an ambiguous space that exists between truth and falsehood, as well as between rationality and intuition. Post-truth is characterized as a narrative disorder (Foroughi et al., 2019), a peril to democracy and democratic resilience, a populist tactic, and a propaganda instrument wherein subjective claims or emotional appeals can supersede objective facts, resulting in polarization, skepticism, and distrust towards institutions, including education (Mohammed et al., 2024).

Post-truth is a socio-political phenomenon wherein objective factual reality is subordinated to emotive and belief-based narratives, frequently manipulated for political or ideological ends. The term refers to the manner in which media distort public perceptions of truth by undermining scientific data, expertise, and established information sources in favor of alternative facts and misinformation, frequently for political ends (Foroughi et al., 2019; Mohammed et al., 2024).

The rapid proliferation of the post-truth phenomenon is attributable to sociological, technological, and psychological aspects. The decline of public faith in institutions, politicians, specialists, and the media has facilitated the emergence of post-truth politics (Foroughi et al. 2019). Post-truth ecologies arise in contexts marked by diminished social capital and heightened inequality, during periods of societal crisis (Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017), and within institutional settings defined by mistrust (Fuller, 2018; Achterberg et al., 2017).

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and the phenomenon of post-truth have generated environments where various narratives, including misinformation and conspiracy theories, vie for attention, obscuring the boundaries between information, theory, and narrative (Foroughi et al., 2019). Ultimately, on a psychological level, the virulence of the post-truth phenomenon is likewise anchored in individuals' psychological desire to exert control. Individuals' psychological requirements significantly influence the allure of post-truth tales. Cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, selective exposure, and the backfire effect, cause individuals to prefer information that corroborates their pre-existing ideas while disregarding opposing data (Fuller, 2018).

Lewandowsky and Van Der Linden (2021) assert that a defining characteristic of a post-truth era is the capacity for individuals to select their reality, where facts and objective data are overshadowed by preexisting ideas and biases. The post-truth phenomenon has significant implications, especially in the political realm. Politicians frequently endeavor to evoke the emotions of the populace, resulting in a diversion from the truth and the proliferation of falsehoods. The proliferation of misinformation and the entrenchment of post-truth erode the fundamental principles of democracy, threatening its durability and viability.

5. School and Democratic Resilience

Democratic resilience refers to a society's ability to resist authoritarian tendencies, maintain democratic institutions, and strengthen citizen participation, even during times of crisis. Therefore, democratic resilience is essential for the sustainability and proper functioning of schools as democratic institutions (Walz, 2025). Schools, as microcosms of society, play a critical role in building this capacity. Through democratic pedagogical practices – such as student participation in decision-making, the development of critical thinking, and the promotion of dialogue and tolerance – schools shape citizens who can recognize and defend human rights and democratic values (Boese et al., 2020). As John Dewey stated, democracy is not just a political system but a way of life that must be experienced daily at school. A school that operates democratically strengthens social cohesion, trust in institutions, and the capacity for collective action (Dewey, 2008); in other words, it strengthens democratic resilience.

Furthermore, cooperation between schools and the community enhances democratic resilience by increasing the participation of parents, local actors, and students in shaping the school environment. Schools serve as instruments of political socialization, providing environments where students recognize themselves as members of a political society. Through daily academic interactions, relationships with teachers and peers, and engagement with the broader school community, students gain experiences that clarify the importance of democratic participation. Therefore, investing in democratic schools is not only an educational priority but also a strategy for maintaining and strengthening democracy in society as a whole (Bunce et al., 2025).

From this perspective, education – and democratic education in particular – is a vital institution for strengthening democratic resilience. The integration of democratic practices into everyday school life is crucial for strengthening democratic resilience at the societal level. The democratic culture of the school fosters discussion, cooperation, and freedom of expression, while promoting critical thinking, participation, dialogue, and respect for the rights of others (Boese et al., 2020). Finkel and Lim (2020), in a study conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, concluded that civic education programs in schools can strengthen democratic participation and values, even in vulnerable or degraded democratic environments.

On the other hand, combating post-truth phenomena in schools is extremely important because of the risks they pose to democracy. These phenomena undermine students' objective knowledge, reinforce misinformation, and erode their ability to make informed decisions and participate meaningfully in dialogue. In such an environment, cultivating and strengthening a democratic school climate is essential. This requires critical educational approaches that go beyond information literacy to examine the dynamics of power and the politics of exclusion within the school community. Through these approaches, students are empowered to recognize and challenge dominant narratives, develop democratic skills, and actively participate in shaping a more just society, thereby strengthening their democratic resilience (Legg, 2024).

6. Discussion

Democratic resilience is a complex and evolving process by which democratic regimes, institutions, and citizens uphold their core values and practices in the face of internal and external crises. The emergence of post-truth politics and the systematic spread of misinformation have significantly distorted public discourse, eroding rational deliberation, institutional trust, and citizens' ability to make informed decisions. In this regard, post-truth signifies not merely an epistemological dilemma but also a moral and civic one, as it undermines the cognitive and ethical underpinnings essential for democratic existence. The deterioration of truth as a common societal standard undermines collective comprehension and diminishes the social structure that supports democratic legitimacy (Foroughi et al., 2019; Mohammed et al., 2024).

In this scenario, the significance of education, especially formal schooling, becomes paramount. Schools function as essential venues for political socialization and the development of democratic values, including critical thinking, open discourse, and epistemic accountability. By systematically promoting digital and media literacy, educational institutions can provide students with the cognitive and ethical resources required to recognize, analyze, and counter misinformation. Furthermore, a pedagogy based on critical inquiry and participatory practices allows students to assimilate democratic values not just as theoretical concepts but as tangible experiences within their school communities (Legg, 2024). Education serves as both a preventive measure against the deterioration of democratic culture and an active facilitator in the restoration of public trust.

Thus, the fortification of democratic resilience in the post-truth era necessitates a thorough and enduring commitment to education that goes beyond mere knowledge acquisition. It necessitates an educational framework that incorporates ethical judgment, civic duty, and digital proficiency as essential components of democratic citizenship. Fortifying these components inside the educational framework augments society's collective ability to resist epistemic manipulation, cultivates a culture of accountability and discourse, and solidifies the democratic ethos as a tangible and lasting reality. Democratic resilience is not a fixed state but an ongoing civic effort that requires deliberate cultivation through education, contemplation, and a shared dedication to truth and democratic principles (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021).

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