Call for Proposals

The Conservative Dilemma: Digital Surrogate Organizations and the Future of Liberal Democracy

OVERVIEW

Center-right political parties occupy a precarious position in liberal democracies. On the one hand, their core identity and policy positions tend to align with economic elites. On the other hand, center-right parties must compete in democratic elections where majorities matter. Political historian Daniel Ziblatt calls this circumstance the "conservative dilemma." The dilemma is deepened during times of rising socioeconomic inequality, demographic change, and social justice activism. As political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson put it, "How (are conservative parties) to side with the elites who were winning big, yet attract the support of voters losing out?"

Historically, the answer has involved 1) finding emotionally compelling issues that cut across class divides and 2) developing manageable relationships with allied surrogate organizations to help champion cross-cutting issues. Yet what happens when cross-cutting issues are radicalized—or involve narratives unanchored by reality—and party surrogate organizations become unmanageable? And what happens when this process moves online?

From QAnon to Breitbart to r/thedonald, digital surrogates may have unique properties that make them distinct from traditional, "offline" surrogate organizations, even as they overlap, intersect, and interact. Moreover, the sui generis nature of what Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg call "communication as organization" may make them even more difficult to control with traditional party levers, especially as traditional institutions are met with declining legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In this context, conspiracy theories and disinformation thrive.

This workshop invites submissions that address the potential radicalizing effects of online surrogate organizations championing highly emotive and sometimes demagogic cross-cutting issues. Have digital surrogate organizations complicated the logic of the conservative dilemma? Have they further contributed to the erosion of liberal democratic institutions? Do digital surrogate organizations play similar kinds of roles in liberal parties, and how do their functions compare across different geographic and political contexts? We encourage responses that investigate digital surrogates in comparative perspective and across disciplines.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

This workshop is convened by the Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics (IDDP) at the George Washington University and the Social Science Research Council’s Media & Democracy program. The goal of the workshop is to catalyze and develop rigorous research and public-facing scholarship, and to chart a research agenda for studying the causes, effects, and mechanisms by which digital surrogate organizations shape party politics in liberal democracies. The workshop will provide participants an opportunity to give and receive feedback from their peers on early-stage essays on this theme, and to connect with others who work on similar topics across disciplines.
We particularly encourage applications from emerging and underrepresented scholars; early-career scholars are encouraged to apply. We welcome applications from all relevant social science and humanities fields, including political science, history, anthropology, sociology, STS and media studies, communication, and journalism, as well as computer science, data science, informatics, and related fields. Applications with an emphasis on interdisciplinary work—that seek to answer questions that can’t be solved from one discipline alone—are especially welcome.

Applications are due on March 22, 2021.

Participants will be expected to participate in a two-day virtual workshop, to be held May 3-4, 2021. Each participant will prepare an essay of not more than 1000 words related to the workshop themes, which will be circulated to peers in advance of the meeting. During the meeting, participants will offer substantive feedback to their peers with the goal of developing a longer essay, a project for public circulation, or chapter in an edited volume.

**WORKSHOP THEMES**

We welcome proposals for research that will foster interdisciplinary dialogue on the role of digital surrogate organizations in liberal democracies. Proposals should consider, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- How are digital surrogate organizations constituted? How do they differ from traditional surrogates in their processes and effects? How are they connected (to each other and to traditional surrogates) both domestically and internationally?
- What role have digital surrogate organizations played in the rise of illiberalism and/or “competitive authoritarianism”?
- Are there specific “cross-cutting” issues that animate digital surrogate groups? How do these differ from those mobilized by traditional surrogates? How do cross-cutting issues vary across national and cultural contexts?
- How is the role of digital surrogate organizations shaped by variation in political or institutional factors, such as electoral institutions, media systems, or legal and regulatory frameworks? What are fruitful ways for thinking about this phenomenon comparatively?
- Why don’t digital surrogates appear to have similar polarizing/radicalizing effects on center-left parties? What can we learn from scholars of digital surrogates on the left (e.g., social movement scholars)?
- How can liberal democracies confront the challenge presented by digital surrogate organizations while upholding core principles such as pluralism and free speech?

**TO APPLY**

Applications may be submitted through the [SSRC’s application portal](https://www.ssrc.org) by March 22, 2021. Applications will require the following:

- Current C.V. of the author who will participate in the workshop (maximum two pages).
- An abstract of up to 250 words. The abstract should clearly outline the main theoretical and/or empirical contribution of the proposed essay, project, or approach.
- A short statement (up to 250 words) detailing your interest in the workshop and how it will advance your research agenda, including your interest in interdisciplinary work. If you have publications or projects that are related to the research detailed in your abstract, please feel free to list up to three citations in this document.

_Covid-19. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this workshop will be held virtually._