

CfP for a Special Issue of *European Political Science*: "The Political Challenges Facing the World Today"

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"The Rise of Dysfunctional Democracy: Toward a Research Agenda on Democratic Malperformance"

The Special Issue addresses a central political challenge: democratic regimes that continue to hold elections and preserve formal democratic institutions yet increasingly fail to perform the core tasks of democratic political rule (Kaina & Karolewski 2025). When democracies do not function, they prepare the ground for autocrats (Naím 2022, p. 152). But when do democracies become dysfunctional? "A democracy becomes dysfunctional once its structures no longer work as intended and bring about detrimental effects to the core principles of democratic political rule" (Kaina 2022). As a result, dysfunctional democracies fail in both their systemic and democratic performance: (1) they no longer solve the collective problems of their societies, and (2) their institutions are less and less conducive to fulfilling their intended purpose of realizing democratic political rule.

While research on democratic backsliding, populism, institutional stalemate, and performance deficits has expanded rapidly (e.g. Karolewski & Sata 2025), these strands remain largely disconnected. The notion of dysfunctional democracy offers a cross-cutting lens that integrates these developments by focusing on how democratic structures and processes systematically fail to achieve their intended purposes. The Special Issue would focus primarily on the symptoms and causes of dysfunctional democracy, but would also examine its consequences. In doing so, it would adopt the triad of symptoms–causes–consequences:

- Symptoms: how dysfunction manifests empirically (e.g., deadlock, norm erosion).
- Causes: processes, institutions, actors, and culture.
- Consequences: resilience, autocratization, regime transformation.

The Special Issue will focus on contemporary democratic regimes, including established and newer democracies, while treating hybrid or non-democratic regimes chiefly as outcomes or contrast cases in trajectories of dysfunction.

The topic is timely because many democracies face mounting pressures, including institutional blockage, impaired problem-solving capacity, declining political trust, executive aggrandizement, norm erosion, and intensified political fragmentation. A

special issue on dysfunctional democracy would offer an analytically focused approach to studying how democratic systems fail to realize their intended purposes, even before they regress. This makes the theme directly relevant to current debates on democratic resilience, institutional reform, legitimacy, and political representation.

Against this backdrop, the proposed Special Issue would contribute to *European Political Science* by advancing an explicit agenda-setting intervention on an emerging concept with broad disciplinary relevance. Its aim is not merely to collect case studies of democratic malaise but to develop a common language for identifying, comparing, and explaining dysfunctions across political systems and levels of governance.

The call for contributions invites papers addressing, for instance, one or more of the following questions:

- Which political processes most clearly indicate democratic dysfunction?
- How do institutional arrangements enable, amplify, or mitigate dysfunction?
- Which actors benefit from democratic dysfunction, and how do they maintain it?
- How do cultural orientations and normative expectations shape perceptions of and the reproduction of dysfunction?
- Under what conditions does democratic dysfunction prepare the terrain for autocratization or regime transformation?

The Special Issue would be particularly valuable in three ways:

- It would clarify the concept's analytical utility and distinguish it from related notions such as democratic crisis, democratic erosion, backsliding, or poor governance.
- It would shift attention to the structural causes of democratic decay, as democracies can fail not only under external and internal pressures but also because they may produce unintended, problematic outcomes themselves.
- It would provide the basis for a future research agenda, including theoretical, empirical, and normative lines of inquiry.

The CfP invites contributions in the following areas:

1. Process

This cluster would examine dysfunctions in democratic decision-making and political intermediation. Possible topics include legislative deadlock, distorted responsiveness, failures of representation, declining governability, implementation gaps, permanent campaigning, and excessive bureaucratization.

2. Institutions

This cluster would analyze how democratic institutions fail to serve their intended purpose. Contributions might address executive dominance, judicial politicization, erosion of checks and balances, institutionalized polarization, constitutional hardball, party-system decay, or institutional arrangements that undermine democratic problem-solving capacity.

3. Actors

This cluster would focus on the roles of political elites, parties, movements, bureaucratic and technocratic actors, and other organized actors in producing or exploiting dysfunctions. Relevant themes include illiberal practices, anti-system mobilization, party cartelization, strategic obstruction, mobilization of veto power, fan politics, and the ways in which democratic failure creates space for autocratic narratives. Moreover, the cluster is interested in the role of populist strategies in the context of new communication technologies (e.g., social media, memes, AI), as well as in the role of social ostracism, which political and societal actors use against their opponents but also against people with divergent views.

4. Culture

This cluster would address the cultural and normative foundations of democratic dysfunction, including the rise of consumer-like expectations among citizens and the decline of democratic literacy. Further potential contributions may examine affective polarization, conspiracy thinking, informational ecosystems, weakened commitment to democratic norms, or shifting expectations regarding political authority and institutional performance.

Submissions of Abstracts

Abstracts for papers should be submitted by **September 30, 2026**, at the latest, and should not exceed 500 words. Please send the abstracts by email to both editors of the planned special issue, Viktoria Kaina and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski.

Editors

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References

Kaina, Viktoria. 2022. Can liberal democracy survive our fervor? Signs and origins of dysfunctional democracy. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft (German Journal of Comparative Politics)* 16 (2): 199–220.

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