

What effect does  
facebook have on  
democracy?



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## **Abstract**

We are living in the world of innovative technologies and where tech giants can affect social and economic conditions of people and even political structure of states and reforms taken. In this thesis, I will discuss the effect of Facebook on world's democracy and pros and cons of social media and its handling of personal data of users. Moreover, I write more about Facebook's new policies, which have to be perfect after Cambridge Analytica data scandal and US Congress hearings. Out of that, possible effects of online collective communication platforms will be sorted in this piece.

What is Democracy?

What is democracy? People who live in various communities may understand this term differently. In a basic explanation, democracy is a system of government where the citizens have a voice in ruling the state, either directly or through political bodies with elected representatives. We do not have many examples of direct democracy, but there are many countries where electing government officials is being practiced. In these democratic societies, most people are not members of the state rule, and they do not have direct control over the decisions, which are being made by elected officials, that affect citizens lives, but still must act accordance with those decisions.

Ancient Greek philosophies believed that the direct democracy should be practiced in every city or polis. But, nowadays, the electoral democracy is in decline. According to the Washington Post, 113 of the world's 117 democratic countries offer their citizens legally or constitutionally

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established rights to bring forward a citizens' initiative, referendum or both. But people are more proponent to rule the state via the elected representatives rather than do it directly. And, the government officials, who were elected to serve the country are trying to avoid people's vote, only allowing to practice directness in local and regional levels. For example, major democracies — Germany, the United States and India — do not permit popular votes on substantive issues nationally. As the author notes in the Washington Post, direct democracy is dying because elected officials are becoming authoritarian-leaning leaders. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and, even, U. S. President Donald Trump are among them. (Kaufmann, 2018)

### Direct Democracy

Despite the fact that, there are some countries where direct democracy is a method for the state rule. Switzerland is known for its system of democracy rather than its chocolate bars, financial institution and Alpes among the political experts. In this confederative European country, every citizen can be a part of government and its decision-making process. They can be proponent or opponent and give their opinion on decisions made by the parliament or government and propose amendments to the Federal Constitution. If, in other democratic countries, to do referendums is rare action, Swiss people organize referendums before decide to change something, no matter of its national or regional level. That is why Switzerland is not a part of European Union, where government officials have more power than citizens.

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Fathers of direct democracy were Ancient Greek Philosophers and they definitely did not about modern digitalization and its possible effect to the way of ruling the state. Here, we come to the social media, which appeared 2 decades ago and already a tool of reaching individuals for political issues and votes.

What is Social Media?

Nowadays, majority of the world's population cannot have a life without social media platforms. People define social media as apps on their smartphone or tablet, but the truth it has become a communication tool and platform to promote agenda or popularize ideas and public figures, as they are designed to have collective communication, to reach people quick and to share content. And every social media has its followers based on their sharing style and content production. For example, they offer microblogging, forums, instant messaging etc.

In the era of dotcoms, an instants messaging was a miracle and people accepted it easily and quick as they tired of periodically checking emails in 1990's PC world. And instant messaging programs helped people to interact through the internet as it would pop up right away,

whenever someone sent a message. In 1990s, people dreamed of universal instant messaging programs to get rid of using different email conversations in various platforms. But in 2000s, new ideas came like Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Vkontakte, Instagram to crossroads of instant messaging. The main idea of these social media apps was not to set people's mind on microblogging and sharing content and making a product to substitute the

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idea of instant messaging. From the very first point, founders of these giant social networking companies started to create their version of instant messaging tools both inside and outside of their social media platforms. For example, Facebook started with having a messenger inside the Facebook platform, later then, it became separate app to use. When the world switched from PC to smartphones, instant messaging became popular again and startups like WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram, Viber and Facebook Messenger gained popularity among active users of social media platforms.

#### Different form of creating democracy

Since the world started to use social media programs and instant messaging apps, communication channels between people and business, and government had changed immensely. First and foremost, they have an effect on people's behavior as they started to spend more time online than meet friends face-to-face. In the other hand, it began to help people to save time and money, to collaborate with the community and to create fundraisers and promote businesses. It was not controversial until the power of social media was mishandled regarding the fake news and promoting far-right politicians and mislead users with political and religious views. There are so many political situations, where social media giants like Facebook helped to some authoritarians to win the elections or used to rebel and change the political rule of the states. Populist political figures can benefit from spreading falsehoods about their opponents, fomenting panics about minority groups, and undermining people's trust in the independent media. Both the 2016 US election and the 2018 Brazilian vote proved social media is a perfect tool for this kind of activity.

According to Larry Diamond (2012), Stanford University professor for democracy studies, technology is merely a tool, open to both noble and nefarious purposes. Just as radio and TV could be vehicles of information pluralism and rational debate, so they could also be commandeered by totalitarian regimes for fanatical mobilization and total state control.

Authoritarian states could commandeer digital ICT to a similar effect. Yet to the extent that innovative citizens can improve and better use these tools, they can bring authoritarianism down—as in several cases like Arab Spring. In the other hand, Dr. Diamond claims that Liberation Technology is also “Accountability Technology” in that “it provides efficient and powerful tools for transparency and monitoring.” (82)

So, how Facebook can affect on democracy?

Among the social media companies, Facebook has become an influential tech giant in less than a decade. At the same time, Facebook’s founder Mark Zuckerberg earned billions of dollars and gained authority to handle a personal data of billion users. But great power comes great responsibility. His company helped to democratize North African and Middle East countries, and also helped to populists to win elections and manipulate ordinary people’s opinions. That’s why Mr. Zuckerberg was nearly kicked off from his own company. Let’s go deeper to figure out how Facebook can affect on democracy.

During the US 2016 presidential election, organizations in Russia turned social media into an information weapon to undermine American Democracy. This was a new kind of threat and hard to predict. According to The New York

Times, Russian agents spread inflammatory posts on Facebook that reached 126 million users, published more than 131 000 microblogs on Twitter and uploaded over a thousand videos on YouTube. CEO's of these tech companies were required to come to congressional hearings as claimed they allowed to third parties to influence millions of Americans before the presidential election (Isaac, 2018). Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg were pushed to leave his post and required to contribute to special attorney Robert Mueller investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections. He did, and said " I'm sorry", but refused to leave as a CEO of the firm.

Manipulation of 2016 US presidential election was made mostly via Facebook platform. In short, Zuckerberg's tech giants exposed personal data of 87 million users of Facebook to Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm, which worked for the Trump campaign. How they are connected? The leak comes from a whistleblower named Cristopher Wylie, who worked for Cambridge Analytica. He told anonymously first, then called himself a whistleblower by telling that he made Steve Bannon's psychological warfare tool. Steve Bannon, a former Trump's chief strategist, worked as a vice-president at Cambridge Analytica. There is one more figure who stimulated the Trump campaign to work with Cambridge Analytica. His name is Robert Mercer and he is the biggest backer of Donald Trump in the 2019 US election. Mr. Wylie exposed that Cambridge Analytica mined personal data by making a loophole in Facebook via a quiz app to use them to target American citizens for the campaign promotion. Facebook prohibits to sell data collected with the help of quiz apps, but Cambridge Analytica

sold the data anyway. Cambridge Analytica data scandal illustrated the weakness of social media giants and its possible consequences to democratic world.

In 2018, Mark Zuckerberg went to the Congress hearings and testimonies regarding the Facebook scandal of mishandling personal data. He had managed to keep his position in the company as a CEO and co-founder of Facebook. Tech giants managing team set several reforms regarding collecting of personal data and its security. Now, the biggest social media in the worlds is trying to downsize the role of Facebook on democracy. Mr. Zukerberg's team is working on the third-party fact-checkers, who will help to find misleading or fake information to eliminate it as soon as possible. But, Cass R. Sustain, a Harvard Law professor, notes in his book “#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media” that Facebook had already become central to people's experience of the world and it will be challenging to be open and keep personal data from mishandling or targeting for political reasons. Harvard professor notes that Facebook probably knows your political convictions, and it can inform others, including candidates for public office. And he questions of how social media might the explosion of communications options, machine learning, and artificial intelligence alter the capacity

of citizens to govern themselves? (47)

#### Citations

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