

METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN THE ERA OF DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose The contemporary debate on the state and future of democracy must address the issue of public opinion. This becomes particularly crucial in the context of so-called problematic democracies - political systems exhibiting symptoms of democratic regression. In a digital environment that is dynamic and susceptible to manipulation, the traditional understanding of public opinion proves insufficient. Contemporary digital societies face increasingly complex mechanisms governing the formation and circulation of public opinion. The public sphere, once shaped primarily by institutional media, is now co-created by network users, becoming a dynamic arena where various actors - politicians, journalists, experts, non-governmental organizations, and citizens themselves - compete. This context raises fundamental research questions: How should public opinion be studied today? How can its formation, transmission, and suppression be captured within the digitalized public sphere, especially in countries affected by symptoms of democratic regression?

The aim of this presentation is to outline the research assumptions and methodological proposals for an international project dedicated to analyzing contemporary public opinion. The starting point is to identify both theoretical and practical challenges related to the conceptualization and measurement of public opinion amidst digital transformation, the fragmentation of public debate, the polarization of societies and media, and the weakening of traditional democratic institutions. This methodological proposal thus situates public opinion research at the intersection of democracy, digitalization, and the evolving dynamics of global economic behavior. It highlights how shifts in democratic legitimacy and technological innovation reshape not only the way citizens express their preferences but also how institutions and markets respond to collective attitudes in a rapidly transforming world.

This presentation will reflect on the changing nature of public opinion. As previous research indicates (e.g., Zaller, 1992; Crespi, 1997; Noelle-Neumann, 1974), public opinion is not merely a collection of individual attitudes, but a complex, dynamic process that requires considering mechanisms of social influence and media representation. Foundational works on the crystallization and shifting of the public sphere emphasize that public opinion formats within historically specific communicative and institutional frameworks (Habermas, 1991; Fraser, 1990). Today, the logic of digital platforms reconfigures these frameworks by redefining visibility, authority, and participation within networked spaces. In turn, the contemporary digital environment - encompassing social media, video platforms, and news aggregators - enables rapid information circulation but also introduces new barriers, such as algorithmic reach, content personalization, and the phenomena of polarization and radicalization.

A particularly interesting area for this project is Central and Eastern Europe. The starting point for reflecting on the condition of public opinion in this region is the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, observed for over a decade, whose scale and dynamics have been meticulously captured by projects such as the international V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project. This project, based on several hundred indicators of democratic institutional quality, allows for cross-country comparisons while considering their political and media environments. The Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), a synthetic measure of democratic quality, illustrates the diverse situations within the studied countries, for example:

- Poland (LDI, 2023: 0.45, electoral democracy): Problems include the politicization of public media, limited judicial independence, and the strong polarization of public debate.
- Hungary (LDI, 2023: 0.34, electoral autocracy): Monopolization of the media market, restrictions on the opposition, and systemic electoral abuses are observed.
- Serbia (LDI, 2023: 0.26, electoral autocracy): A country plagued by censorship, political pressure on the media, and electoral manipulation.
- Czech Republic (LDI, 2023: 0.80, liberal democracy): A positive example, with free media, an independent judiciary, and strong political pluralism.

In 2009, all the above-mentioned countries were considered liberal democracies – their status indicates dynamic, regressive systemic changes. This phenomenon is increasingly referred to as illiberalism, which – as Štětka and Mihelj (2024) point out – is characterized by:

- a paradoxical attitude towards liberalism – the use of democratic procedures while simultaneously undermining liberal values (e.g., equality, pluralism, freedom of speech);
- ambiguity – existing as both a political ideology and an institutional practice;
- processuality – variability and scalability, which can lead to both a further deepening of authoritarianism and attempts to rebuild democracy.

Furthermore, Uitz and Sajó (2017) note that illiberal systems maintain the pretense of democracy, primarily through elections, while consistently undermining media independence, judicial autonomy, and the activities of civil society institutions. The selected countries represent varying trajectories of democratic backsliding and radicalization within comparable historical, cultural, and media contexts, allowing for a nuanced comparative analysis of how illiberal transformations shape the formation and circulation of public opinion.

Including this context in the analysis of public opinion is essential to understand why and how citizens' opinions can be deformed, blocked, or instrumentally used by dominant political and

media actors. Thus, the proposed research model involves not only mapping content and behaviors but also identifying systemic mechanisms influencing opinion circulation and the quality of public deliberation.

Against this backdrop, the analysis of "blocking" public opinion takes on particular significance - referring to situations where citizens' opinions have no chance of entering public debate due to self-censorship, disinformation, the dominance of powerful actors, or the inaccessibility of communication spaces. Therefore, the research project proposes conceptualizing public opinion as a relational communication network and analyzing the activities of four key groups: experts, journalists, politicians, and social organizations - along with audiences/citizens as co-participants in this interplay. Treating citizens as participants rather than mere audiences requires methodological grounding in the concept of participatory communication and networked publics (Papacharissi, 2010; Couldry and Hepp, 2017). In this project, citizens are understood as active nodes in the opinion network—engaged not only in content consumption but also in its circulation, commentary, and reinterpretation. This approach will be operationalized through a mixed-method design combining survey data (capturing self-reported participation patterns) with qualitative materials (interviews and focus groups revealing experiential dimensions of participation).

Design/methodology/approach We propose that the study encompass four main opinion-forming groups: (1) experts (scientists, think tank leaders), (2) politicians, (3) journalists, and (4) NGO representatives. Citizens were considered separately as participants (not just audiences) in the public debate. Each of these groups was treated as a separate research component.

To capture the complexity of the relationships between these actors, the project utilizes diverse research methods. The proposed model is based on a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods, enriched with network analysis and a comparative approach.

- A. Surveys: Targeted at citizens and, to some extent, at NGOs and journalists. This will allow for mapping declared attitudes, sources of information, levels of trust, and self-perceptions of participation in public debate.
- B. In-depth interviews: Conducted with representatives of all four main opinion-forming groups. This will serve to further explore motivations, barriers, practices, and perceptions of the state of public debate.
- C. Focus groups: Organized among NGOs and citizens of all ages. This will enable the interactive and contextual understanding of opinion-forming mechanisms.

The network analysis will serve as an integrative layer linking qualitative and quantitative data. On the quantitative side, it will map relational ties (e.g., interaction structures) derived from surveys. On the qualitative side, it will be used interpretively to identify clusters of meaning and influence among experts, journalists, politicians, and NGOs, thus bridging structural and discursive dimensions of opinion formation.

The study will be conducted in selected countries of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, considering their specific political contexts, media culture, history, and current political processes. Comparative analysis could be useful to identify common and local patterns in public opinion formation. At the same time, the study aims to answer the question of whether it is possible to develop a universal model of public opinion research that will also be applicable in imperfect or regressive democracies.

Findings The project aims to produce a new, realistic framework for public opinion research, considering the complex relationships between opinion elites (experts, politicians, media) and society. This model will be based on three levels:

1. Micro-level: individual opinion formation (attitudes, emotions, exposure to content),
2. Meso-level: group interactions (media, NGOs, relationships with opinion leaders),
3. Macro-level: dominant narratives, institutional frameworks for debate.

The culmination of the project will be a methodology combining the tools of sociology, political science, and media studies, also useful in future studies of complex sociopolitical processes.

Originality/value In the problematic democracies - characterized by increasing polarization and distrust in media and state institutions - the ongoing information processes determine the quality of public debate, which forms the foundation of socio-economic stability. Therefore, reflecting on who influences opinion formation, how opinions are transmitted or blocked, and how citizens participate (or are excluded) from information circulation is essential. This understanding is vital not just for comprehending the future of politics, but also for grasping social relations, brand reputation, and the attitudes of citizen-consumers.

Keywords: *Public opinion, Methodology, Democratic regression, Digital transformation*

JEL classification: *D71, D72, O33*

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