

Is a successful democracy compatible with social media?

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Two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism

E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951)¹

Democracy, it would seem, is all things to all people. At the end of the Cold War, John Dunn termed it the “cant of the modern world,” as valorised in the constitution of the People’s Republic of China as it is professed as the sole standard of political legitimacy in the West.² Democracy is at once ubiquitous and imperilled: its collocation with capitalism displaces the foundational political equality on which many conceptions of it rest, and satisfaction with democracy even in putatively ‘consolidated’ democracies is in precipitous decline.³ Social media, too, promises to be all things to all people: to confirm what we believe and gather us into tribes of the likeminded across barriers of place and circumstance, against the grain of territorially-bounded democratic politics. Within a decade, what Larry Diamond called ‘liberation technologies’ able to “expand political, social, and economic freedom” are charged with the opposite, in volumes entitled *Antisocial Media*, *The People vs Tech*, and *The Myth of Digital Democracy*.⁴

In weighing this compatibility I draw not only on its modern sense of coexistence but on the older meaning of its Latin root, *compati*: to suffer with, bearing or enduring alongside.⁵ Democracy is itself a form of

¹ Forster, E.M. (1951) ‘What I Believe’, in *Two Cheers for Democracy*. London: Edward Arnold, p. 84. The epigraph is the source of the volume’s title.

² Dunn, J. (1993 [1979]) *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1; *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China* (1982, as amended 2018), Arts 1 and 2; and Fukuyama, F. (1989) ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, no. 16, pp. 3–18, expanded as Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.

³ On the first, see Dahl, R.A. (1985) *A Preface to Economic Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity; and Dahl, R.A. (1998) *On Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, esp. chs. 13–14, on how market-capitalism’s inequalities undermine political equality. On the second, see Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and Collins, R. (2020) *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*. Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, finding dissatisfaction at an all-time high (47.9% in the mid-1990s to 57.5%), sharpest in high-income democracies.

⁴ Diamond, L. (2010) ‘Liberation Technology’, *Journal of Democracy*, 21(3), pp. 69–83; the definition quoted is at p. 70. The volumes charged with the opposite are Vaidhyathan, S. (2018) *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press; Bartlett, J. (2018) *The People vs Tech: How the Internet Is Killing Democracy (and How We Save It)*. London: Ebury Press; and Hindman, M. (2009) *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁵ Harper, D. (n.d.) ‘Compatible’, *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Available at: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/compatible> (Accessed: 22 June 2026). ‘Compatible’ derives from Medieval Latin *compatibilis*, from Late Latin *compati*, from *com-* (‘with, together’) and *pati* (‘to suffer’).

‘suffering with’: the sharing of a political community and a common fate with a *body politic* we did not choose, bound to decisions we abhor until the next election. To be a citizen is to suffer the friction of self-rule, which social media offers to relieve, supplying in its stead a voluntary belonging. The first question is one of compatibility in its modern, aspirational sense: can democracy and social media flourish together? The answer is no, because democracy rests on capacities that social media diminishes: a common factual world, the power of a people to ‘kick the bastards out,’ and the ability to want things of our own rather than have them chosen for us. The second is the older, etymological question: can they suffer together? Here the answer is yes, though in ways that deform each without either flourishing. Which answer we accept depends on what we mean by ‘successful.’

Democracy is commonly understood as *rule by the people*. Rule needs an object as well as a subject, and since the only object available is the people themselves, ruler and ruled are one: democracy resolves into the people ruling themselves.⁶ Ross Harrison calls this the “problem of reflexivity”: self-rule looks empty, since a people doing what it wants leaves no one ruled, yet paradoxical, since for one body to rule itself some part must rule the rest, the very rule-over self-rule was meant to escape.⁷ Democracy can thus be specified in many ways, more *minimal* or more *maximal* in what it demands of citizens. At the minimal end, the competitive elitism of Schumpeter and Weber renders democracy a method of choosing between elites, the “competitive struggle for the people’s vote,” with no reference to any ‘will of the people.’⁸ The citizen here only selects and dismisses leaders, removing governments without bloodshed.⁹ At the maximal end, the deliberative tradition associated with Habermas imagines self-legislation among equals, where “the compelling force of the better argument” prevails, asking more of us.¹⁰ What a ‘successful’ democracy amounts to depends on the conception one adopts.

If we ask whether democracy is compatible with social media, we presume that the latter as much as the former is ontologically stable, which I wish to contend it is not. It is neither continuous with older media, such that in McLuhan’s terms its effect would follow from its form rather than democratic agency, nor a neutral tool, since technology, as

⁶ Harrison, R. (1993) *Democracy*. London: Routledge, p. 3.

⁷ Harrison, *Democracy*, pp. 10–11.

⁸ Held, D. (2006) *Models of Democracy*. 3rd edn. Cambridge: Polity; and Przeworski, A. (1999) ‘Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense’, in I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón (eds) *Democracy’s Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The phrase quoted in the text is Schumpeter, J.A. (2006 [1942]) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Routledge, p. 269; competitive elitism descends from Max Weber’s account of leadership democracy.

⁹ Riker, W.H. (1982) *Liberalism Against Populism*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, p. 9. The Popper phrase quoted in the text is endorsed by Przeworski, ‘Minimalist Conception’, p. 23.

¹⁰ Barber, B. (1984) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 134; and Habermas, J. (1996) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 103.

Kranzberg put it, is “neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.”¹¹ It is, rather, a set of affordances (experience rendered countable, storable, traceable) that fold “within existing socio-technical configurations.”¹² How they bear on politics depends on the ways in which they are organised, which is presently through the commercial logic of what Zuboff terms ‘surveillance capitalism’. What troubles us most are not generic properties of networks more broadly but what follows from surveillance capitalism’s logic of advertising: platforms watch platforms watch their users because targeting needs data, they optimise for engagement because attention is what they sell, and they record what users do.¹³ What results is a conception of capitalism in which “human experience as free raw material”; the same affordances might otherwise serve a non-commercial commons.¹⁴ Most of its harm is therefore contingent, deriving from its being run for profit. I do not want to dismiss the ‘liberation technology’ promise out of hand, though, because networks have indeed lowered the costs of coordination, exposed powerful individuals and groups, and amplified otherwise silenced voices.¹⁵ The power to assemble online and be heard are not, however, the same thing as self-rule, and, as the following sections argue, tends instead to corrode the prospects for that.¹⁶

I turn now to three aspects of democratic self-rule. In each case my claim is that social media weakens what even a minimal (Schumpeterian) democracy requires rather than construing democracy in maximal, deliberative terms. The first is the existence of a ‘common world’ that a ‘people’ share. If democratic politics is a matter of disagreement, then

¹¹ The first allusion is to McLuhan’s ‘the medium is the message’: McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (ch. 1). The words quoted are Kranzberg’s First Law: Kranzberg, M. (1986) ‘Technology and History: “Kranzberg’s Laws”’, *Technology and Culture*, 27(3), pp. 544–560, at p. 545.

¹² Kaufmann, M. and Jeandesboz, J. (2017) ‘Politics and “the digital”: From singularity to specificity’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 20(3), pp. 309–328; the phrase quoted at p. 315, and the affordances list (‘numeric, countable, computable, material, storable, searchable, transferable, networkable and traceable’) at p. 319.

¹³ Wu, T. (2017) *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads*. London: Atlantic Books; and Andrejevic, M. (2009) ‘Privacy, Exploitation, and the Digital Enclosure’, *Amsterdam Law Forum*, 1(4), pp. 47–62.

¹⁴ Benkler, Y. (2006) *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press; and Zuboff, S. (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile Books, p. 8, the source of ‘surveillance capitalism’ and of human experience as raw material. That the harm follows from the commercial model rather than the technology is Fuchs’s: Fuchs, C. (2021) ‘The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere’, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 16(1), pp. 9–26, at p. 12; and Fuchs, C. (2023) *Digital Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere*. Abingdon: Routledge.

¹⁵ The ‘liberation technology’ framing is Diamond’s (n. 4). On the mechanisms named, see Shirky, C. (2011) ‘The Political Power of Social Media’, *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), pp. 28–41, on lowering coordination costs (p. 35) and forcing official corruption into public knowledge (p. 36); and Tufekci, Z. (2017) *Twitter and Tear Gas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, on assembly at scale outside established hierarchies.

¹⁶ On assembly as not yet rule, see Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*, esp. chs. 3 and 8; and Shirky, ‘The Political Power of Social Media’, p. 35, that effective protest is ‘the end of a long process, rather than a replacement for it.’ On the participatory party concentrating authority in a ‘hyperleader’, see Gerbaudo, P. (2019) *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*. London: Pluto Press, esp. chs. 7–9.

disagreement itself depends on common factual ground: Arendt's recognition that "freedom of opinion is a farce unless [...] the facts themselves are not in dispute."¹⁷ One common argument is that social media destroys any common factual world by sealing us in echo chambers of likeminded people; this is, however, empirically mistaken. Evidence suggests that echo chambers are largely a myth, and that the online world contains *more* disagreement rather than less.¹⁸

Its damage issues, instead, from the distortion of disagreement rather than its absence as a whole. We see the other side through "a prism that bends and refracts" dissent, where platforms reward the loudest and most extreme voices and quiet moderates, so our image of our opponents is quite seriously distorted.¹⁹ More than this, we come to see the opponent *qua* opponent, once cross-cutting identities (faith, ethnicity, class) are subsumed under the auspices of a single mega-identity, so that conflict turns less on policy than "over who we think we are rather than over reasoned differences of opinion."²⁰ What is most deleterious to a common world is seeing others as enemies rather than opponents, where facts are pressed into the service of group identity and dismissed whenever they are unanchored to the worldview one holds. To wit: words become tools of partisan warfare.²¹ Social media did not cause this; it merely worsens a polarisation that afflicts American politics most pointedly. What it does is vitiate the first condition democracy needs, the one on which, as we shall see, the other two depend.

In turn, the second requirement for self-rule is the power to remove those who govern: that citizens can, in Popper's phrase, "get rid of governments without bloodshed." What matters is not that people choose wisely but that they can choose at all; removal supplies a modicum of accountability, keeping the powerful from becoming too entrenched. This is what Achen and Bartels call "retrospective accountability," the idea that even a voter ignorant of policy can discipline a government by judging its record, rewarding success and punishing failure at the polls. Voters may punish incumbents for droughts, shark attacks, and floods as readily as for malfeasance, which makes the mechanism imperfect, but it works though voters are "first and foremost members of social groups,"

¹⁷ Arendt, H. (1967) 'Truth and Politics', in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, p. 238.

¹⁸ Bail, C.A. (2021) *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁹ Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism*; the 'prism' is Bail's organising metaphor for this refraction of the other side.

²⁰ Mason, L. (2018) *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 4; and Bishop, B. (2008) *The Big Sort*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, on the decades-long geographic and cultural sorting that social media sharpens but predates.

²¹ The opponent/enemy opposition is Schmitt's: Schmitt, C. (1996 [1932]) *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, on the friend-enemy distinction; and Schmitt, C. (2007 [1963]) *Theory of the Partisan*. New York: Telos Press, on its hardening into 'absolute' enmity, the register toward which social media exaggerates partisan difference.

choosing the side that fits their identity and assembling reasons to suit it *post hoc*.²²

If the foundations of retrospective accountability are already shaky, the tribalism social media fosters weakens them further. For a failing government to be punished, enough of its own supporters must, past some threshold, defect or abstain; that turns on whether their side's failure outweighs the cost of the other side winning. Where that cost is bearable, poor governments are in real danger; where it is *unbearable*, they are in none, since no failure of one's own side outweighs handing the country to the enemy. What social media does is make the enemy unbearable. Its engagement economy rewards whatever provokes, and nothing provokes like the other side at its worst, so the feed fills with its most extreme voices.²³ Each side, kept in like-minded company, grows more certain of itself and more contemptuous of the rest, breeding "extremism, contempt for others".²⁴ The opponent turns from someone who might be tolerated in office into a danger to be kept from power at any price; politics becomes a "great re-tribalisation."²⁵ In such a contest a government's record, and the *forces majeures* for which it might be blamed, barely counts.²⁶

The third requirement is that the will a people exercises be its own: that they want *what they want*, rather than being merely fed it. This is the *themselves* in Harrison's 'people ruling themselves.' A people may rule by actively deciding, forming a will and expressing it, or merely by getting what it wants, satisfied by others.²⁷ Even the second, weaker sense holds only if those wants are real: self-rule requires giving people "what they really want rather than just what they think they want."²⁸ A people whose wants have been manufactured does not rule itself, however substantially those wants are satisfied.²⁹ Wants of this kind have a structure: beneath each immediate desire lies the capacity James Williams calls 'daylight,' the power to "want what we want to want," to

²² Achen, C.H. and Bartels, L.M. (2016) *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. The logic of retrospective accountability—rewarding and punishing incumbents on the basis of performance—is set out in ch. 4 (pp. 90–115); the cases of droughts, floods, and shark attacks, in which voters punished governments for events beyond their control, are the subject of ch. 5, 'Blind Retrospection' (pp. 116–145). The description of citizens as 'first and foremost ... members of social groups' is at p. 16; the group theory of democracy is developed in chs. 8–9.

²³ Bail, *Breaking the Social Media Prism*, p. 92, on how engagement-based ranking amplifies the most extreme and provocative content.

²⁴ Sunstein, C.R. (2017) *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, ch. 3, on group polarisation—the tendency of like-minded discussion toward more extreme positions.

²⁵ Bartlett, *The People vs Tech*, p. 27.

²⁶ Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, p. 45, where electoral choice becomes a contest over which side prevails rather than a judgement on the government's record.

²⁷ Harrison, *Democracy*, p. 5.

²⁸ Harrison, *Democracy*, p. 10.

²⁹ Williams, B. (2005) *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 6; his 'critical theory principle' holds that an acceptance 'produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified' cannot legitimate it.

decide for oneself what to pursue.³⁰ This is where a will becomes one's own, and, in the end, what democracy rests on, since the only authority a people can claim is the authority of its will.

The attention economy works directly against this. A platform built to maximise engagement does not serve the goals we would, on reflection, set for ourselves; it competes to seize and hold attention, an industry that has "asked and gained more and more of our waking moments," by feeding whatever desire is most immediate, since that is what keeps us present.³¹ It addresses us not as citizens with ends of our own but as consumers to be captured and supplied; the citizen becomes the product. In holding our attention it does worse than distract: it works on what we want, the behavioural shaping Zuboff puts at the centre of surveillance capitalism, until it has eroded the very "capacities that are preconditions for self-determination."³² So 'the people ruling themselves' fails when the wants a people carries into politics are the ones the platform has cultivated: reactive, impulsive, made to be acted on rather than weighed. Getting what it wants is, then, not self-rule but the satisfaction of a will it did not form: the ruling self exchanged for the consuming one.

Is a successful democracy compatible with social media? Set against what self-rule needs—a world held in common, the power to remove those who fail us, a will of one's own—social media weakens each, and if 'compatible' means the capacity for mutual flourishing, the answer is an emphatic 'no.' Yet they do, presently, coexist: actually existing democracies have not died because of social media. In the word's older sense, *compati*, to suffer with, they are all too compatible, the one surviving the other, deformed but alive. None of this, however, is fixed. Most of the harm comes from how social media is run for profit, built to capture and sell attention; that can be changed, and with it most of the damage goes. One thing reform cannot reach: a number can register what people want, never why, so these platforms count preferences where democracy needs to weigh reasons. But even that is a pressure to resist, not a fate to accept. In short, then, the answer is conditional: *no* to social media as it is, *yes* to one that might be built differently, and an *unhappy yes* to the one we have. We should not mistake survival for success, however; to survive social media is not to succeed with it.

³⁰ Williams, J. (2018) *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 68.

³¹ Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, p. 6 (Introduction).

³² Williams, J., *Stand Out of Our Light*, p. 80. The behavioural shaping invoked here is Zuboff's; see n. 14.