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POST-TRUTH ERA OF POLITICAL MARKETING: MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES AND THEIR IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE USA

Jessica Kriška – Branislav Kováčik*

ABSTRACT

The study focused on the phenomenon of political marketing, political communication, and their application in world politics during the post-truth era with an emphasis on the territory of the United States of America. The aim of the study was to identify several aspects of these disciplines during the dynamic technological progress which makes it possible to develop misleading manipulative techniques and spread disinformation. The emerging issues of the current state of the online sphere such as abuse of personal data for one's own political gain, dissemination of false news that radicalizes the public and threats to the security of free and fair elections and a democracy relate to other concerns such as a polarized society and electoral integrity. Politics has always been, and will continue to be, an infinite number of shades of grey. Absolute honesty and elimination of negative advertising or propaganda is neither realistic nor desirable, though we consider it important to strive for more ethical election campaigns. The conclusion of this article can be applied to other studies that will continue the research on the given topic and will respond to the current challenges of democracy.

Key words: Political Marketing, Post-Truth Era, Political Participation, Manipulation Techniques, Disinformation, New Media, Voting Behaviour, Electoral Integrity

Introduction

The issue of the deliberate integration of manipulative techniques into the political decision-making process is a current and frequent topic which is not discussed only in the media. The polarization of society and electoral integrity at

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an unprecedentedly low level are one of the main motivations of scientific research focusing on the context of the origin, course, and impact of the threats that democratic systems are currently facing. Political discourse scholars are calling for increased attention to matters causing a significant decrease of citizens' trust in their political leaders, government institutions, and even electoral system in today's post-truth era. They are concerned with the acuteness of the problem, the underestimation of which can have serious consequences for democracy and democratic processes. We provide a theoretical definition of political participation and electoral behaviour, a brief characterization of the post-truth era, and the phenomenon of disinformation. The study also provides an overview of the current state of electoral integrity in the United States of America.

1. Political participation

Political participation in a narrow sense, according to sociologists, is "the participation in the election of political representatives and the efforts of citizens to influence those in power in traditional ways during the election cycle" (Sopóci, 2004, p. 120). Experts' opinions differ in terms of the scope of political participation activities. One view presents the multidimensionality of political participation, including the phenomenon of the so-called "electronic republic," which provides a space for making connections, sharing views, and influencing opinions. This argument does not place the digital environment above the electoral process in the traditional sense but draws attention to a sphere that is proving to be a new form of political participation. There is a considerable number of indications that political participation is gradually adapting to new conditions. The communication ecosystem is a complex of messages circulating in online and offline public space, and these messages may reach millions of people, or only a fraction of them, and just as equally some of them may lead to activity and action and some may not. One of the main research questions remains to be the extent to which the digital era affects democratic processes and related political participation activities (Koc-Michalska - Lilleker, 2020).

Voting or electoral behaviour is part of political behaviour, which is understood as "any form of behaviour of individuals or social groups related to political power in society," (Sopóci, 2004, p. 145) but also a form of citizens' participation in political life. The study of political participation focuses on the extent to which the available opportunities are used, and on the factors that influence the methods, intensity, and effectiveness of citizens' political participation. Political participation can be manipulated in such a way that disadvantages both democracy and the

citizens themselves, especially those who are insufficiently informed. One of the influential factors are psychological factors, which include voters' trust in political parties and politicians or political candidates. In the absence of trust, political participation and interest in the political environment decreases (Sopóci, 2004).

Digital technologies are creating and continuously refining new possibilities for electoral activities that have the potential to lead citizens to unconventional forms of democratic participation. Social media are pushing the boundaries of those traditional, conventional means of participation that include participation in elections, petitions, or demonstrations. Social media platforms are creating and connecting communities of people who are among other activities also engaged in supporting national, as well as global political organizations and political parties. Such support is welcomed by political parties as it contributes to increased interest in their election campaign. However, marketers also use the Internet in ways other than self-presentation. Complex cognitive processes and communication to persuade are regularly applied in the online space by political parties, with the aim of strategically mobilizing supporters during election campaigns (Lilleker - Koc-Michalska, 2020).

An important aspect of the political environment for both politicians and scientists is public opinion along with the process of shaping and influencing it. Many sociologists assume that public opinion is "an expression of people's basic values, opinions, knowledge and attitudes" (Sopóci, 2004, p. 136) which are formed by many aspects. One of such aspects is mass media, which belongs to the category of opinion forming entities. It is the mass media that has one of the most significant influences on public opinion, especially through the spread of propaganda and advertising. One of the reasons for the media's strong influence is the assumption of its credibility and the resulting trust of the public. Research focusing on the American environment demonstrates that the influence of the media does not have to be only direct. A more frequent case is the influence mediated by various groups or organizations, including political parties. Politicians and marketing experts pay increased attention to the issue of influence, given that during election periods they are dependent on current public opinion, and influencing it with effective tools is attractive to them. Voting behaviour is characterized by forms of rationality, emotionality, and spontaneity in response to stimuli, and thus it differs from political action (Sopóci, 2004).

2. New media and fake news

The continuous rise of new media and social networks, described as the most

effective weapon of mass communication, has revitalized political advertising, which is undergoing changes and adapting to the dynamic nature of modern campaigns. Social networks are one of the most transformative advertising tools for marketing-based campaigns. The use of social networks by election campaigns can no longer be defined as a novelty, but the use of data for microtargeting and the creation of personalized ads is still a relatively recent change in election campaign strategies. The personalization of specific issues on social networks has elevated political advertising. This method makes voters co-creators in addition to receivers of information. On social networks, there is frequent interaction between voters and their content, including political advertising in the form of commenting on or sharing the posts of political candidates and political parties. Consequently, political advertising becomes more relevant and resonates more strongly than advertising on television. The voter is no longer just a passive participant, but often an active one. Social networks have a great deal of power, which can have both a positive and a negative impact, even on the authors of the advertisements themselves. The downside can be voters that personalize the campaign in their own context, thereby negatively influencing the candidate. As an example, we mention the image form of an online attack, whose main aim is mockery or irony - the so-called "*meme*." The way information is received and processed has changed significantly during the information-intensive period of recent years. Influencing emotions has come to the fore as a strategic tool that is particularly functional with the young and millennial generation. The importance placed on information during elections is a trend in modern political advertising which adapts to current voter tendencies (Hughes, 2018).

Information is critical to political life. This statement is not only valid for today's modern times but can be applied also to the ancient period. From time immemorial, those who possessed information were valuable players in the political arena, using manipulative power to potentially confuse their enemy, or better said for our present conditions, their opponent. The information-based manipulation as a tool for influencing public opinion by elites, politicians, election campaigns, or terrorist and radical groups has undergone many changes. Dynamic developments in response to emerging new technologies have caused the absolute professionalization of manipulation techniques, including propaganda and disinformation. Disinformation can be categorized as part of a larger concept, which is propaganda. Professor **O'Shaughnessy** states that "*not all propaganda is disinformation, but all disinformation is propaganda*" (Gregor -

Mlejnková, 2021, p. 12). There are several types of disinformation, and their main goal is not necessarily persuasion. Disinformation may seek to gain political control by continually widening the divisions within a political party or coalition. More broadly, disinformation can be used as an advantage in an international conflict. Often this manipulative technique is used to increase confusion, uncertainty, or doubt. Disinformation includes *"a broad scale of false, fake, inaccurate, or misleading information or messages which are generated, presented, and disseminated with the aim of confusing the recipient of the information or causing public damage"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 13). Any disinformation must meet three characteristics: *"it is information representing some part of the world as being a certain way; it creates false beliefs; and it is not accidental in its misleading nature. The deliberate dissemination of false information is crucial to the characteristic because it differentiates disinformation from other forms of inaccurate messages, such as misinformation. Intention is also reflected in the term disinformation campaign, which refers to the systematic usage of misleading information and the series of acts leading to desired goals"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 13). Many politicians use the term disinformation incorrectly or consider it a convenient term for discreditation of their opponent's statements. Not all false information is disinformation, given that it does not have to be disseminated with the aim of misleading. However, if similar information described as an accidental falsehood becomes sufficiently widespread, it may eventually become disinformation. Satire, sarcasm, and jokes designed to amuse an audience are not disinformation, but they can become disinformation over time. The main categories of disinformation include:

- Malicious lies
- Audio-visual disinformation (modified images and videos - "deepfakes")
- True disinformation
- Side-effect disinformation
- Adaptive disinformation
- Altruistic disinformation (it does not matter whether the spread of disinformation was well-intentioned)
- Detrimental disinformation (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 15).

Disinformation is quite often confused with the term fake news, which became popular during the 2016 presidential election campaign. Donald Trump referred to media criticism of him as fake news. Fake news is still considered a new concept, the exact definition of which has not yet been agreed upon by the expert

community. The definitions are similar in meaning, drawing attention to falsity as a fundamental characteristic of fake news that presents itself as factually true. Fake news or false news can be defined as *"the deliberate creation and dissemination of false stories and news which are claimed to be serious news by their author"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 15). The year 2016 registered a decrease in people's concern for verified truth and facts and, on the contrary, an increased acceptance of conspiracy theories. This phenomenon of the post-truth era can be assessed as *"a manifestation of a qualitatively new dishonesty on the part of politicians who appear to make up facts to suit their narratives"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 23). A similar trend can be observed in other countries, but the USA, including the global media coverage of its presidential campaigns and elections, proves to be the most suitable analytical example.

It is generally accepted that politicians sometimes lie and that this has always been the case. However, in the past, within the political game during election cycles, there were some unwritten rules and boundaries that, if a politician crossed, he or she was accountable to his or her electorate and tried to set the record straight. The perception and desire for truth has altered among both politicians and voters. The term post-truth era may evoke that something continues after (prefix post) the truth, but in fact, it indicates that *"truth is no longer essential and has been superseded by a new reality,"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 25) that is advantageous for its creator. In the post-truth era, pre-existing beliefs and prejudices come to the fore, moving objective, science-based truth to the background. This phenomenon, called *"alternative facts,"* manages to successfully survive due to the apathy that arises in society. Some groups of people are uninterested in facts and prefer to reinforce their own beliefs. Moreover, this attitude is strongly supported by politicians, who demonstrate their power by the continuous use of manipulative methods. In 2016, we observed how disinformation in social media in a period of information overload can affect voters. The election was won by an authentic candidate whose posts on the Twitter platform were visually and emotionally more attractive than the conscious objective reasoning. Social media's efforts to verify posts cause a debate. Opponents point to the right of free speech and the potential damage to the political entity. However, it is now unquestionable that disinformation systematically undermines and destabilizes citizens' loyalty in democratic regimes (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021).

Misleading techniques in the online space are constantly improving. The current sophistication of manipulative tools that can simulate facial expressions

based on data collection and analysis is extremely dangerous. Deepfakes are a product of artificial intelligence and fake news. An audiovisual deepfake is nowadays unrecognizable to the average observer and there is no software that can detect a deepfake with speed and accuracy. The escalating quality of deepfakes is a threat not only to election cycles but also to national security. Manipulating the minds of voters can have a negative impact on trust in the media, social networks, electoral processes and, ultimately, on democracy itself. Deepfakes can be designed to discredit a particular politician, an election campaign, or a political party. Experts are concerned as the credibility of all audio and video recordings is compromised (Pavlíková - Šenkýřová - Drmola, 2021).

Various methods to monitor and detect manipulative and fake activities or messages include:

- Fact-checking
- Recognizing manipulative language style
- Source credibility analysis
- Information flow analysis

The term fact-checking came to people's attention after social networks started checking and visibly marking posts as verified or false, due to the unprecedentedly increased circulation of disinformation. This method is semi-automated, which means that an algorithm selects the facts, which are then verified by a team of annotators. Experts believe that manipulative and deceptive language can be detected based on certain characteristics of the content of the message. They draw attention to the used vocabulary, the sentiment, or the angry tone. Investigation of the source's credibility assumes that unreliable accounts or websites that are labelled as spam are more likely to publish unreliable content. The goal is to identify automated accounts that show signs consistent with the online activity patterns of spam users or bots. Information flow analysis examines how information and posts move between different sources. Attention is focused on the manner and frequency of interaction with a given message. Analytical tools detecting fake news and manipulative content operate based on data that is often incomplete, and therefore the results may also reflect an effort that is still in the development stage, and one that is not reinforced by legislation. The threat posed by disinformation requires standardization and certification of the methods being developed (Horák - Baisa - Herman, 2021). This argument is supported by the following eloquent statement: *"Artificial intelligence is needed to recognise materials produced by artificial intelligence"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 257).

On the one hand, the emergence and rapid development of technology is a step forward for democratic societies, offering a virtual space to raise awareness of various initiatives, allowing different nationalities to collaborate and individuals to gather an endless amount of information. However, it is precisely these that have become a stumbling block, particularly in recent years. The dark side of the virtual world has brought, in addition to positive improvements in the quality of our lives, a part of the population whose intentions are not honest. The aim is to gain power or profit through the manipulation of people's minds and emotions. People's behaviour can be observed online in a way that has not been possible before. At the same time, behaviour and reactions can be tested against different stimuli. The analysis of human opinion allows manipulators to influence thinking without people realizing it. Contemporary democracies face several major challenges arising from the facts described above:

- Cognitive resilience
- Institutional arrangement
- Technological operation
- Legal framework

Cognitive resilience differs from the other three challenges since it is *"the only level directly connected with the individual and with one's ability to interpret social reality"* (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021, p. 258). Cognitive resilience depends on education and training. The other challenges of democratic societies mentioned above are systematic efforts of states or communities that can directly support human and social cognitive resilience and influence its quality (Gregor - Mlejnková, 2021). Year 2024 is the ultimate election year and so it is more suited than ever to research these issues. Experts are concerned with the question of how many of the 76 elections that are held this year will be free and fair.

3. Post-truth as a defining concept of our time

Campaigns currently heavily supported by technological advances would probably not provide the expected results if people's involvement was not present. In general, it can be stated that people's emotions and intuitive reactions to received online content take precedence over critical observation and truth-checking (Smolik, 2019). As the most widely used phrase of 2016, the post-truth or post-factual era becomes known at the same time as **Donald Trump's** victory in the presidential election or the Brexit campaigns and referendum. In both cases, we can observe an overlap with the notions of propaganda, manipulation,

fake news. The phrase "fake news" is a mantra for many politicians which only highlights the reasons for the emergence of the post-truth era, with *"populists denying the Enlightenment idea that there can be such a thing as objective knowledge, scientific evidence, or impartial journalism"* (Norris - Cameron - Wynter, 2019, p. 7). According to **Katherine Connor Martin**, a member of the Oxford Dictionaries team, the term post-truth refers to *"circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief"* (Flood, 2016). The editors noted that the term post-truth first appeared in 1992, but its meaning was not as relevant as it is now. At the same time, they argue that post-truth could easily become a defining term of our time given that its meaning and frequent occurrence is not fading, but on the contrary is becoming more prominent. The use of the word has multiplied by as much as 2000% in 2016 compared to the previous year. The prefix post in this case indicates that the concept of truth is irrelevant in the current period (Flood, 2016).

Online media feed often provides unverified information. One of the reasons is the oversaturation of sources and a transition period, during which society relies less on facts or statistics and more on data. The difference between facts and data is that data, based on algorithms, can perceive voters' attitudes towards specific politicians. They are also able to perceive the situation from a much larger perspective, such as the change in overall *"public sentiment,"* which we recognize from the scientific point of view as *"sentiment analysis."* For example, monitoring the audience during a presidential debate and analysing the mood swings, or reactions to statements of individual candidates (Davies, 2016). Sentiment analysis can be used in a positive sense, but on the contrary, we come across conspiracy theories by which people are very easily influenced. Based on the investigation of voters' emotions and the subsequent manipulation, the citizen is convinced that the opinion he formed is his own. Such manipulation is not exercised through violence or threats, but through new media, especially social networks. The form of manipulation in question should not be easily recognizable, because if these intentions were to be identified, the effect of trying to influence people's minds would be lost.

Ideally, the voter should think about the content of all received text posts, cartoons, photos, or videos. Even in seemingly harmless content, there may be manipulative messages hidden in the subtext that can influence our emotions. Humans naturally focus first on their emotional reaction rather than on logical judgement, which manipulators cleverly exploit through mass media. Given that

misleading or fake news is in many cases difficult to prove, we can assume that political groups often use it consciously. Fake news, and the amount of it floating unobtrusively around the online space, is one of the most serious threats to society. We have been seeing new media used as a tool of political marketing intensively since the election campaign of **Barack Obama**, who became marketer of the year. However, at that time, the online space was not as saturated with unreliable data. According to an analysis by Avaaz, unless there will exist an initiative by all parties involved in the democratic electoral process soon, we can expect an even greater intensification of the problem described above. From January to the end of October 2019, as many as 158.9 million "views" of politically relevant disinformation were registered on social media in the US (Avaaz, 2019), a number that has only tended to rise since the 2016 election.

We can observe the initiative of social platforms, in particular Twitter, which has banned the publication of a significant part of political advertising. However, other social networks have not followed the progressive start in the fight against misleading the public so vigorously, arguing for the right to freedom of speech. Experts point out that the benefits of political ads on social media do not outweigh the negatives caused by their current misuse. Social networks face two major problems in their efforts to control the content of political ads: *transparency* and *fact-checking*. Although Facebook and Google have created databases that allow them to monitor political ads, they may not be sufficient. Researchers at New York University have found that databases are missing a significant amount of the total volume of political ads. Social networks do not have experts who can distinguish reality from fiction, which would fall under the need for credible regulation. A complete ban on the publication of political advertisements appears to be the most effective way forward (Goldman - Raicu, 2021), although modern technology and social networks are still not reaching their full potential, which could help to make the electoral process more transparent. According to an October 2020 survey by global polling firm Avaaz, *"65% of registered American voters have seen political disinformation on their Facebook message boards, and 25% have believed these false claims."* The majority of those surveyed have spotted fake news on Facebook. In the weeks leading up to the 2020 presidential election, as many as 85% of voters have been exposed to disinformation about mail-in ballots being the reason for voter fraud. 35% of those surveyed believed this claim. 84% of registered voters confirmed that they are concerned about deceptive messages being spread with the aim to deliberately influence the outcome of an election (Avaaz, 2020). The Internet, with its endless possibilities

of information and communication platforms, is still mainly a tool of political and digital marketing in the process of influencing voters in favour of whichever political candidate fighting for victory. The importance of promoting political campaigns and their candidates must be preserved, but under a universally fair system guaranteeing the reception of truthful information without interfering with privacy and without influencing the subconscious of voters by analysing their online space.

4. Electoral integrity in America

Elections, as one of the basic and fundamental tools for demonstrating the will of the citizens can be considered a test of democracy. The election cycles of the last decade in the United States of America show a reduced confidence of citizens in the fairness of electoral processes and, on the contrary, an increased percentage of threats undermining the integrity of the electoral system. The current era highlights the shortcomings of America's electoral system more intensely than ever before. Public trust is on a downward trend, which is exacerbated by allegations of electoral fraud by the Republican Party in the US, by news channels whose impartiality does not seem to be a given, and by online disinformation campaigns. The 2016 presidential election highlighted the flaws and problems of the US electoral system and cast doubt on its integrity. The complicated fight between **Hillary Clinton** and **Donald Trump** caused a division of opinion in society, which began to struggle with terms such as fraud, manipulation of votes or suppression of voting rights associated with procedural imperfections of elections in the USA. **Pippa Norris** is a founder of the nonpartisan, independent Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) with a research team based at Harvard and Sidney Universities. The EIP defines the idea of electoral integrity as *"the presence of a set of agreed-upon international conventions and global norms, applying universally to all countries worldwide through the election cycle, including during the pre-election period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath"* (Norris, 2017, p. 24-25). According to their initial research, the 2012 and 2014 US elections were the most problematic of all Western democracies. Without effective reform, problems in the electoral system will continually undermine the legitimacy of elections and citizens' trust in political parties and political institutions. EIP monitors and documents electoral process problems around the world. Fragile democratic systems often result in violent protests and demonstrations during elections because of a myriad of procedural weaknesses and shortcomings. Non-transparent voter information, ballot manipulation,

rejection of election results, outdated voter registries and machines, the absence of political finance rules, incompetent local officials, legal conditions targeted at suppressing voters' rights, or the inaccessibility of polling stations are just a few examples of the problems that some countries encounter (Norris, 2017). The term "*electoral integrity*" is being gradually expanded. The practicality behind the phrase is proving to be a useful way to "*conceptualize many of the desirable practices in conduct of elections*" (Norris - Cameron - Wynter, 2019, p. 13).

The 2016 US presidential election exposed the problematic nature of the electoral system. Based on observation of the presidential election, the following disputed areas threaten electoral legitimacy in the US:

- party polarization caused by disagreements over electoral processes
- low public confidence following widespread allegations of fraud
- manipulation of the electoral vote and suppression of electoral rights
- risk of hacker attacks
- the consequences of campaign finance deregulation
- lack of professional standards in election management

Reform efforts are emerging mainly in areas of broad consensus, which include streamlining administrative and procedural steps. These include the use of technology, online information about polling stations, and creating opportunities for people with disabilities (Norris, 2017). The 2000 election (candidates **George Bush** versus **Al Gore**) has also gone down in history as controversial. The state of Florida came close to a statistical tie with its election results. The results were inconclusive until the end of election night, followed by a recount and a Supreme Court challenge, which a month later ruled in favour of **Bush**, who thus received enough electoral votes to win the election. 25 electoral votes from the state of Florida were decisive for the election results. It was the fourth election in a row at the time in which the winner did not win the *popular vote*. The same case followed 16 years later when **Donald Trump** defeated **Hillary Clinton** even though she won the most votes. A part of the American population began to lean towards changing the system and abolishing the Electoral College (History.com, 2023).

The stagnation of the reform is caused by the difference of opinions. Overly strict rules on registration and voting processes can lead to low voter turnout, greater administrative burdens, and a lack of inclusiveness of voting rights. Overly lenient requirements may lead to an increased risk of identity theft and multiple voting, resulting in invalid results and undermining confidence in an electoral system that has become highly politicized in recent years. Voter doubt and

disorientation are caused by the different rules in different states and the opposing views of political parties on adequate conditions for voter registration and voting. Republicans believe in the stricter rules that would require additional verification of identity. The opposing view, however, points to the negligible number of cases of duplicate voting, which is largely due to human error and cannot affect the outcome of an election. The study found that out of a billion votes over a fourteen-year period, only 241 were found to be potentially fraudulent. Democrats encourage voter turnout by creating opportunities for early, absentee, weekend, and mail-in voting, which reduces costs and facilitates access for citizens living in remote areas. Based on a 2014 survey, one in four Americans voted before Election Day. Responsibility for the conduct of elections rests with agencies at the local and state levels, which means that the form and design of the ballot, polling places and operating hours, or other administrative, technical, and procedural aspects of elections vary from state to state. Electoral management regularly experiences minor or major shortcomings, including website outages, several hours of waiting outside polling stations, late arrival of voting lists, and registration system failures. The 2016 presidential election deepened partisan polarization, especially after **Donald Trump** made public allegations of intentional ballot manipulation in several key electoral states like Pennsylvania. Polls on voter confidence in the election outcome have shown a notable difference of opinion from a decade ago, especially among Republicans and **Donald Trump** supporters (Norris, 2017).

Hacking attempts to influence the course, public confidence or outcome of elections are categorized as serious threats. Evidence suggests that Russia-based hackers were behind the attack on the Democratic National Committee's server. Stolen emails were published in the media the day before the Democratic National Convention. Attempts to hack into two registration databases were recorded in September 2016. One incident involved the state of Illinois, with 200,000 voting records stolen. An attempted hacking attack in Arizona caused online voter registration to be suspended for several days. The outdated equipment and software on many electronic voting machines and the low level of security of voting records make them an easy target for foreign powers and terrorist groups, which have the power to undermine the credibility of elections (Norris, 2017).

Based on an evaluation of the integrity of elections (2012 and 2014) in 153 countries, the United States ranked 52nd. The survey confirms the high scores of Nordic countries, such as Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, which have

been leaders in the evaluation of the quality of elections (Norris, 2017). In 2017 (research based on the 2012-2017 parliamentary and presidential elections), the US ranked 55th out of 164 countries (Norris - Cameron - Wynter, 2019). Conducting elections is one of the most *"complex, delicate, and challenging activities undertaken by governments"* (Norris - Cameron - Wynter, 2019, p. 15). Given the many contested elections and close results, it is essential to avoid any mistakes and protect the overall electoral process both internally and externally. By implementing reforms and streamlining official management, achieving citizen trust in the electoral process is possible. Recommendations for practical steps toward improving electoral integrity include:

- reform of electoral regulations
- the creation of independent, impartial, and professional electoral management bodies
- controlling and monitoring performance, increasing transparency
- strengthening dispute resolution mechanisms and related agencies

In countries of partisan polarization, specifically polarization regarding ideologies and the electoral system, the risks of undermining the trust and confidence of the public in representative institutions may be heightened. Doubts can result in weaker political participation and massive protests. The perception that the legitimacy of electoral processes is weakened may jeopardize future election cycles. Human error or an unintentional procedural oversight during some of the official procedures is a natural part of such a complex process. These otherwise overlooked and fixable errors may automatically support conspiracy theories of fraud and deliberate manipulation. However, in an era of partisan battles and constant incitement of doubts, even the smallest mistakes can make citizens feel anxious and insecure about exercising one of the most important human rights - the right to vote. In such a case, trust in government and in democracy itself is threatened (Norris - Cameron - Wynter, 2019).

Electoral integrity is becoming a frequently discussed topic. The period of the post-factual and digital age is defined by false, misleading news and algorithms built based on the use of personal data, which influence the perception of voters and, ultimately, the outcome of the election. Conspiracies and fake news contribute to paranoia and distrust of the electoral process among citizens. Countries around the world share the issues of the electoral integrity and its universal standards. In many cases, free elections are being challenged or even failing. At such moments, distrust in elections and elected government officials

grows, fuelling riots, protests, or low voter turnout. Moreover, in the United States, this problem is exacerbated by the current strong partisanship of the citizens and a deeply divided country. Election cycles are filled with disinformation, half-truths, and verbal attacks. *"Polarization in public opinion constitutes a political climate that activates intolerance,"* (Zhu - Skoric - Shen, 2020, p. 114) especially in the case of opinionated opposition groups. Protest organizers or the protesters themselves can share real-time updates about the protest or coordinate and mobilize supporters of the protest movement through social media (Zhu - Skoric - Shen, 2020). Based on research in the US conducted by the Pew Research Center, *"about 18% of social network site users report to have blocked, unfriended, or hidden someone for political reasons, among which 9% did so because they disagreed with others' posts about politics"* (Zhu - Skoric - Shen, 2020, p. 113). The given selective action can be considered as an activity of political participation, which represents a positive relationship between social networks and participation, although it would be beneficial to increase the given percentage through systematic education and awareness about the threats in the online space.

5. The Trump effect

After winning the 2016 election, **Donald Trump** has integrated social networks and in particular the Twitter platform into his four-year presidency in Washington and the 2020 election campaign. Many of his posts during presidency were insulting, accusatory and conspiratorial. The innovative use of social networks and new media in political marketing has been discredited. Manipulation of voters through fake news can have a huge impact on election campaigns and their strategies. **Trump's** posts have increased fact-checking efforts, as his misleading claims have been regularly exposed publicly, not only by traditional media outlets, which have created fact-checking links on their websites, but also by the social networks themselves, in particular the Twitter platform, which branded the former president's statuses as false. However, awareness of this problem does not reach a sufficient part of the population, as **Trump** has built up a strong and stable base of voters. This trend can also be seen in the events surrounding the 2020 US presidential election, which was won by the Democratic Party nominees **Joe Biden** and **Kamala Harris**. **Donald Trump** has claimed that the election is rigged and stolen. No relevant evidence has been found to support even part of his allegations of widespread fraud. The president created a similar scenario back in 2016. According to him, he lost the popular vote because of a

million illegally cast ballots. Trust in the media has declined significantly among Americans. As an example, a poll conducted by Gallup World Poll found that in 2016, only 30% of Americans believed in the fairness of the process and outcome of the election. A decade earlier, it was 52% (Norris - Cameron - Wynter, 2019).

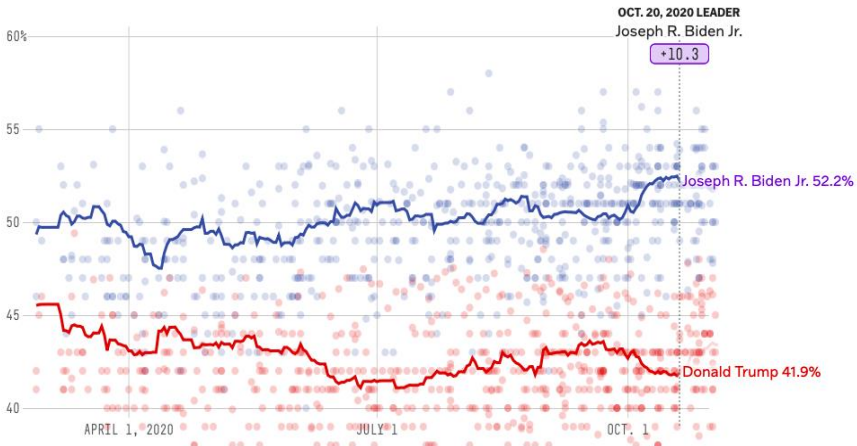
Trump refused to accept the outcome of the 2020 election, obstructed a peaceful transition of executive power, and reinforced in his supporters the belief of a stolen and rigged election. According to polls after the November 2020 election, as many as 78% of **Trump** voters agreed with the alleged unfairness of the electoral process. The president threatened and coerced officials to change the outcome of the election. The conspiracies of electoral fraud, stolen elections and votes have had devastating consequences, undermining voters' confidence in the government and creating protests that, at their worst, incite violence. Many statesmen and even the courts have stopped **Trump's** efforts and refuted his accusations (Norris, 2020). A YouGov America poll whose data was collected between 3-5 January 2021 showed that up to a third of Americans and three-quarters of **Trump's** supporters disapproved of handing power to Biden (Sanders - Smith - Ballard, 2021). Experts' predictions about possible violent protests came true on the day of the official counting of the electoral votes by both chambers of the US Congress.

Every four years, Congress counts and authorizes the electoral votes. This act officially certifies the victory of the new president. However, on January 6, 2021, this process did not take place in a standard and formal manner. The attack, which was described as unprecedented, occurred after supporters of President **Donald Trump** stormed the Washington Capitol building, forcing the adjournment of the session. Initially peaceful protests by **Trump** supporters ended with the assaults, injuries and even two bombs seized and a death. After speaking at a rally of protesters, **Donald Trump** urged his supporters not to give up and to continue trying to reverse the stolen election. He repeatedly said that he had won the election and would not back down. After the attack on the Capitol and the calm but firm challenge from **Biden** and other administration officials, **Trump** shared the video sending protesters home, but continued to express certainty about the fraudulent election results despite the situation (Gambino - Strauss, 2021). Social media promptly responded to the speech. Twitter blocked the president's account for 12 hours in response to a violation of their rules. YouTube and Facebook also removed the videos. The social networks have repeatedly branded **Trump's** posts as fake, but this has mainly been true in cases of messages encouraging protests and violence, which the platforms in question did

not want to be associated with. Social networks are often singled out as the culprit and mediator of acts of aggression. They are criticized for their slow reactions and lack of systematic regulation. Twitter redoubled its efforts to combat disinformation before the election, yet it still took the platform one hour to label the president's misleading video as false. In the meantime, the video was forwarded up to 70,000 times (Paul, 2021). Social networks eventually decided to suspend the president's profiles until further notice. Researchers in the field of disinformation recalled that they had stressed the potentially dangerous impact of online rhetoric a long time ago (Romm - Dwoskin, 2021). Despite the incident and several objections from congressional representatives, the session was successfully concluded, and a new President and Vice President of the United States of America were declared. **Trump** did not accept defeat but confirmed that he would leave office voluntarily.

Furthermore, we find the inaccurate pre-election polls in the 2020 presidential election which systematically overstated support for **Biden** relative to **Trump** interesting, as they are an important indicator of voter preferences during the electoral processes. Opinion polls are a vital part of the election period because as a measurement tool they help understand what the public's view on many issues is and they help candidates with important campaign decisions. Although the imprecision in election polling has been recognized before, national polls in the 2020 election recorded the highest level of error in 40 years. Nowadays many argue that polling is flawed, and it cannot be trusted. The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) task force *"examined 2,858 polls, including 529 national presidential race polls and 1,572 state-level presidential polls. They found that the surveys overstated the margin between President **Biden** and **Donald Trump** by 3.9 points in the national popular vote and 4.3 percentage points in state polls. Polls understated the support for **Trump** in nearly every state and by an average of 3.3 percentage points overall"* (Balz, 2021). Graph 1 demonstrates development of pre-election polls during the 2020 presidential election. The highlighted part outlines percentage points for both candidates two weeks before Election Day. 52.2% of votes for **Biden** and 41.9% for **Trump**. **Joe Biden** won the election and received 51.3% of votes. **Donald Trump** received 46.9% of votes. **Trump's** support was, therefore, significantly underrated in the polls. Pollsters may need to make additional adjustments in polling to prove the credibility of the polls in the upcoming 2024 presidential election.

Graph 1: An updating average of 2020 presidential general election polls



Source: 538 ABC News

Electoral integrity reflects the democratic principles embedded in electoral processes, whereby the values of individuals are transformed into societal decisions. Elections held with a degree of periodicity, universality and equality represent an ideal integrity that is also supported by professional, independent, and transparent administrative preparation and management. Integrity has the power to reinforce voter certainty and confidence in the conduct and outcome of the election cycle. On the other hand, misconduct, whether deliberate or accidental, has the same power. It is important to maintain citizens' confidence throughout the election cycle, including the three main phases of the pre-election, election, and post-election. In the initial, exploratory phase, free and non-discriminatory access to information about the elections and electoral alternatives is essential. In this stage, voters exchange and process information that results into decisions. Voters translate their preferences into votes, which they implement during the second electoral phase. Access to the ballot paper is a precondition for success in accordance with the principle of equality. In the final stage, it is fundamental to avoid any discrepancy in the vote counting process (Latner, 2019).

Conclusion

Political marketing can be assessed as an ever-growing point of interest for politicians, marketers, and scholars in both theoretical and practical terms, finding

a stable role in many countries during election periods. The implementation of marketing techniques in political battles in electoral arenas and their continuous development is the basis for inspiring theoretical evaluations, research, and analysis. Election strategies are nowadays based on more sophisticated and precise research. This enables candidates to connect with voters in a close and, most importantly, precisely targeted way that, when used effectively, will get more votes at the polls. The continuous development of effective tools capable of targeting voters in a till now unrecognized way can take on negative tendencies such as manipulation. It is important to know the difference between fact and disinformation. It is important to reflect on this distinction and it is important to help expose the bubble of half-truths that has been created around us without us realizing it. A critical step in the fight against fake news and manipulation is, first and foremost, to raise awareness among citizens and to introduce rules to which political parties and their consultative teams will also fully commit. Experts stress the importance of strengthening citizens' trust in the electoral process by systematically raising its standards, thus preventing voter passivity, polarized societies, frustration with fragile democracy and violence.

The U.S. electoral system requires the implementation of reforms and changes in technical and procedural legal matters that could ensure resilience in the face of both existing and potentially new challenges that threaten the integrity and credibility of elections and, ultimately, democracy. It cannot be argued that the US does not have the resources to adopt new legislative rules. The problem appears to be a lack of public debate, recognition of the urgency of the problem, and initiative. Some of the electoral processes have been problematic for a long time, others have been exposed during the elections of recent years. Inconsistent voting standards are one of the most communicated areas in need of reform. Others include the need to independently determine the boundaries of individual electoral districts, given that they are often geographically divided to create an unfair electoral advantage for one political party by reducing the electoral strength of the opposition. Other aspects requiring attention are electoral administration, campaign financing, transparency of electoral processes, an international independent monitoring and review body, disinformation campaigns in the media in the post-truth era, and a re-evaluation of some historically deep-rooted electoral characteristics such as the Electoral College. Based on the research, the Election Integrity Project's experts assess that electoral integrity is important not only for elites but also for ordinary people, even though everyday issues such as employment or taxes might seemingly be more important than the technical

elements of problematic electoral procedures. The U.S. electoral system requires a comprehensive reform plan focusing on systemic and structural flaws. The attention of experts in the US is currently focused on the upcoming 2024 presidential election and the associated concerns about the emergence of even more sophisticated manipulative techniques and inadequate responses in the struggle to maintain a fair election process and an access to objective facts.

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