Sub-theme 61: New Rules of the Game? Re-organizing Democracy in an Illiberal Age

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Call for Papers (3000 words short papers by 15th January 2027, 12:00 CET)

Democratic institutions are radically transformed as organizational, technological, and political dynamics restructure how authority, legitimacy, and participation are enacted. Traditional assumptions about pluralism, civic autonomy, and accountability are questioned by shifts in power relations, communication infrastructures, and economic governance. Corporate actors exert influence through platforms, supply chains, and financial systems; states expand authority; and public digital infrastructures mediate access to information, public discourse, and collective action. Concurrently, social movements, civic initiatives, and experimental organizations seek to invent alternative democratic futures. Democracy is becoming a contested field of struggle in which diverse actors attempt to define, appropriate, or transform the rules of the game.

Organization scholars have shown how democratic erosion is entangled with transformations in communication systems, media legitimacy, institutional arrangements, elite and expert influence, and the political economy of global capitalism (Adler et al., 2023; Castello et al., 2025; Crouch, 2020; Scherer et al., 2014). Digital platforms reshape what counts as credible information, whose voices are amplified, and how public deliberation unfolds (Zuboff, 2019) through algorithmic curation that privileges engagement over epistemic quality (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Corporate executives and political regulators increasingly rely on discretionary authority and governance-by-exception, altering the distribution of power within and across organizations. This suggests examining democracy not merely as a political condition but as an organizational one, embedded in infrastructures, routines, and power relations.

Within this context, illiberalism has emerged as an ideological and political project reshaping public, organizational, and communicative life (Adler et al., 2023; Laruelle, 2024; Sajó et al., 2022). Illiberal politics seeks to weaken institutional checks, restrict civic autonomy, and redefine democratic legitimacy in hierarchical and exclusionary ways. Research on illiberal public spheres shows how they are cultivated through media ecosystems that amplify polarization, manipulate opinions (Woolley & Howard, 2016), delegitimize opponents, and erode shared epistemic foundations (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). Connective action, platform logics, and data-driven mobilization enable illiberal actors to bypass traditional mediating institutions and engage publics directly through emotional and affective cues (Bennett & Livingston, 2025; Habermas, 2022). Organizationally, this can manifest in politicized public agencies, clientelist corporate-state alliances, manipulated information flows, constraints on academic freedom, and the normalization of partisan narratives across institutional settings. Moreover, geopolitical dynamics interact with domestic democratic struggles, as state and nonstate actors deploy information warfare, foreign interference campaigns, and strategic platform manipulation to destabilize democratic institutions across borders. Understanding illiberalism requires examining how organizations and communication systems become central instruments in processes of democratic backsliding.

Despite these challenges, however, democratic innovation is flourishing with various attempts at organizing democracy for the better. Alternative organizing experiments—cooperatives, commons-based initiatives, platform cooperatives, participatory budgeting, civic-tech assemblies, and workplace democracy initiatives—pursue institutional designs that redistribute power, deepen participation, and cultivate collective capacities (Bloom, 2017; Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Parker et al., 2014; Reinecke, 2010). These initiatives reveal how new rules and practices can emerge from below, expanding the repertoire of democratic governance by experimenting with deliberation, direct participation, power-sharing, and collective ownership (Davies, 2022; Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Huang & Liu, 2022). They demonstrate that democracy is not simply eroding but also being reinvented through organizational creativity, social innovation, and prefigurative politics (Castello et al., 2025).

This sub-theme invites scholars to explore how the rules of the democratic game are constructed, contested, and transformed through organizational practices, political-economic structures, and sociotechnical systems. We welcome research on how illiberal and oligarchic tendencies become embedded in organizational life; how corporate, institutional, and digital infrastructures reshape democratic participation; how gamification and play influence political agency; and how alternative organizational models cultivate democratic resilience. We also invite normative inquiry into the ethical foundations and institutional commitments required to sustain democracy in times of complexity and uncertainty. We encourage interdisciplinary contributions drawing on organizational theory, critical management studies, political CSR, business ethics, institutional theory, political economy, digital sociology, democratic theory, and communication studies. Submissions may be conceptual, theoretical, empirical, or historical.

Suggested topics are:

Democratic Erosion and Illiberal Transformations

- How do illiberal political logics manifest in organizational culture, governance, and communication (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Bennett & Livingston, 2025)?
- How do organizations contribute—intentionally or not—to democratic backsliding?

Oligarchy, Elite Power, and Rule-making

- How do elite networks and corporate structures shape institutions and oligarchy?
- What institutional innovations can counter oligarchic capture? (e.g., Vergara, 2020)

Rules, Rule-making, and Rule-breaking

- Who defines and enforces organizational rules of participation and legitimacy?
- How do organizations reinterpret, circumvent, or remake democratic rules?

Democracy as Game: Play, Performance, and Symbolic Power

- How do playful or competitive logics shape organizational and political behavior?
- How do gaming cultures reconfigure civic imagination? (Huang & Liu, 2022)

Gamification, Playbour, and Political Manipulation

- How does play become instrumentalized for political manipulation, harassment, or radicalization? (Koehler et al., 2022)
- How do workplace gamification and playbour reshape autonomy, solidarity, and dissent? (Ferrer-Conill, 2018; Haiven, 2025; Kim, 2018)

Digital Capitalism and Algorithmic Governance

- How do algorithms structure democratic agency, attention, and consent?
- How do platform governance and data extraction reshape public spheres?

Geopolitics, Information Warfare, and Democratic Sovereignty

- How do geopolitical rivalries and foreign interference campaigns reshape domestic democratic processes and public discourse?
- Are platform governance decisions—such as content moderation policies and algorithmic transparency—effective in countering these dynamics?

Democratic Innovation and Alternative Organizing

- What organizational forms enable democratic experimentation and power-sharing?
- How do commons, cooperatives, and platform cooperatives challenge rule systems?
- How can democratic innovations scale and endure?

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Andreas Georg Scherer is Professor of Business Administration and Theories of the Firm, University of Zurich, Switzerland. He explores business ethics, corporate social responsibility, global governance, and the political role of the firm. Drawing on deliberative democracy, critical theory, and political economy, his work examines how corporations influence political processes, public discourse, and social welfare. He has published in journals including 'Academy of Management Review', 'Journal of Management Studies', 'Business Ethics Quarterly', and 'Organization Studies'.

Peter N Bloom is Professor of Management at Essex Business School, University of Essex, United Kingdom. Bloom explores the intersections of democracy, digitalization, and organizational power, examining how alternative economic and political futures can be built through innovative forms of collective organizing. He is the author of 'The Ethics of Neoliberalism' (Routledge) and other influential books. His work, published in leading journals such as 'Organization', 'Organization Studies', 'Human Relations', and 'Theory & Event', develops concepts such as the digital democratic imagination, post-capitalist entrepreneurship and prefigurative organization.

Elanor Colleoni is Associate Professor at IULM University, Milan, Italy. Colleoni studies topics at the intersection of social evaluations, organizational legitimacy, and communication. She has published on social evaluations in digital media in leading management journals, such as 'Academy of Management Review', 'Academy of Management Perspectives', 'Business & Society', and the 'Journal of Management Studies'. She is currently Associate Editor of 'Business & Society'.

Links with important information

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43st EGOS Colloquium in Liverpool, July 8–10, 2027

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Guidelines for Short Paper Submission

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