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## **The detrimental effect of low political truth literacy on democratic systems**

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Dear Editors,

We are pleased to submit this paper for consideration.

**The democratic backsliding problem:** The problem addressed is the global backslide from democracy to authoritarianism. Democracy is in crisis, as seen by the rise of authoritarians in China, Russia, the United States, India, Turkey, Israel, Brazil, and more. Since authoritarian leaders put their own interests first, the backslide has severe implications for common good problems like climate change, as demonstrated, for example, by President Donald Trump pulling the US out of the Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation. Authoritarians also tend to provoke military conflict, as seen for example by Russia and China's recent actions, as well as those by past authoritarians like Hitler. Consequences like these arguably make the democratic backsliding problem the world's most important current political problem.

A mixed methods approach of root cause analysis and system dynamics was used.

### **Main findings:**

1. Prior research on the democratic backsliding problem has been unknowingly limited to the superficial layer of the problem, where only intermediate causes and low leverage points can be found. This explains why past solutions to reverse the decline have failed.
2. The main root cause is low *political truth literacy*, which is the ability to tell truth from falsehood in political statements meant to influence voters and to make correct voting decisions based on that information. Now that the root cause is known, high leverage point solutions can be rationally designed, tested, and implemented. The high leverage point is: *raise political truth literacy from low to high*.
3. An empirical study confirmed the main root cause exists (political truth literacy is currently low) and that a person's political truth literacy can be raised from low to high with a short amount of training. This finding has enormous consequences, as it provides initial evidence that what appears to be an intractable wicked problem may not be so intractable after all.

## **Novelty of this work:**

1. Presently the literature offers no theoretical framework explaining “why democracies break down.” The paper fills this gap by presenting a comprehensive analysis that explains why backsliding occurs and how the backslide can be corrected.
2. System dynamics modeling has been successfully applied to numerous problem domains. However, to our knowledge system dynamics has never been combined with formal root cause analysis to analyze a member of the class of difficult large-scale social problems, aka wicked problems. The paper demonstrates how this can be done for democratic backsliding, a problem so difficult it has resisted successful analysis for over fifty years. If the method and analysis presented here is confirmed by others, then system dynamics can now begin to achieve its full potential, i.e., its unmatched ability to insightfully model the key causal behavior of any dynamic problem where aggregated behavior and feedback loops play essential roles.
3. The Truth Literacy Training solution element and study break new ground in a number of areas: A broadly effective Personal Truth Test that can be learned with one hour of online training, use of a catalog of fallacies and the Personal Truth Test to achieve pattern recognition so fast and reliable it can potentially nullify the deceptive power of motivated reasoning, and discovery that vote training is required for voters to respond correctly to political falsehoods.
4. The hypothesis that a certain average minimum democratic truth quotient (aka political truth literacy) is required for a healthy sustainable democracy, defined as one that can consistently achieve its top common good governance goals indefinitely.
5. The hypothesis that once a democracy is established, the key requirement for its health is the electorate’s average democratic truth quotient. If this is sufficiently high, the system automatically improves all other factors as needed, because the system self-manages itself in the preferred direction of optimizing the common good of all.

**Comments:** While the paper runs long at 14,500 words and 36 pages, it covers a root cause analysis, a system dynamics model, and an empirical study to test the key analysis finding. We feel all three are required for a convincing and complete analysis, and have thus combined all three into a single paper.

All authors have approved the submission of this manuscript.

Most sincerely,

Jack Harich and Montserrat Koloffon Rosas