# The Internet, populism, and deliberative democracy: A panel study of 167 countries from 2000 to 2018

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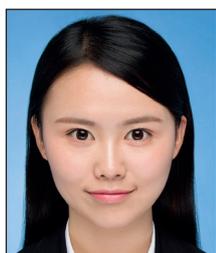
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## Abstract

The wide adoption of the Internet gave rise to populism, which is regarded as a critical threat to deliberative democracy. This paper was a cross-national panel study to explore the Internet's populist impacts on deliberative democracy. It had two specific objectives. One was to examine whether or to what extent Internet penetration has populist impacts on deliberative dimensions, including reasoned justification, common good, respectful counterarguments, range of consultation, and engaged society. The other was to examine how Internet penetration moderates a country's formal deliberative process, referring to the interaction among state institutions, the public sphere, and civil society. Using data from *Varieties of Democracy* (*V-Dem*) and the *United Nations*, we run panel analyses with a sample of 3,173 units in 167 countries from 2000 to 2018. The results showed that Internet penetration increased calls for the common good, disrespected counterarguments, narrowed the range of consultation, and expanded engagement in public deliberation. In addition, Internet penetration strengthened the effects of public sphere on reasoned justification and range of consultation, but weakened the effects of civil society on reasoned justification, common good, respectful counterarguments, and range of consultation.

## Keywords

Deliberative democracy; Internet; Populism; Panel data; Public sphere; Civil society; State institutions; Cross-nation; Deliberative system; Country-level.

## 1. Introduction

As one of primary sources of political legitimacy, deliberation is essential to democracy (**Manin**, 1987). Normatively, deliberative ideals embody the basic values of democracy, such as equality, respect, reason, non-coercion, and common good (**Rasmussen**, 2016). Through deliberation, instrumentally, popular support can be won, social divides can be mended, and democratization can be achieved (**Kuyper**, 2018).

As a communicative activity, deliberation is dependent on media technologies and is responsive to the technological development. The wide adoption of the Internet attracted an increasing number of studies to explore its impacts on public deliberation. A variety of findings came out and converged into the concept of populism. However, the existing studies were limited to individual levels or sites of deliberative activities, which are informal, rooted in everyday life, and participated by ordinary people. They studied neither a country's overall status of deliberative democracy nor the formal deliberative process.

In this paper, we conducted a cross-national panel study to investigate the Internet's populist impacts on a country's deliberative democracy. It had two specific objectives. One was to examine whether and to what extent the Internet penetration has populist impacts on deliberative dimensions, including reasoned justification, common good, respect counterarguments, range of consultation, and engaged society. The other was to examine how the Internet penetration moderates a country's formal deliberative process, referring to the interaction among state institutions, public sphere, and civil society. Using country-level data from *Varieties of Democracy* (*V-Dem*, **Coppedge** *et al.*, 2019b) and the *United Nations*, we run panel analyses with a sample of 3,173 records in 167 countries from 2000 to 2018.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Deliberative democracy

The theory of deliberative democracy flourished in the last decade of the 20th century as the latest development in Western political philosophy. According to **Bächtiger** *et al.* (2018), deliberation is defined as

> "mutual communication that involves weighting and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern."

Putting deliberation at the heart of democracy, deliberative democracy

> "is grounded in an ideal which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives" (**Bächtiger** *et al.*, 2018).

**Mansbridge** *et al.* (2012) argued that deliberative democracy has three major functions –epistemic, ethical, and democratic. The epistemic function is to make decisions that are grounded in truth and rationality. Rationality stays at the heart of public deliberation (**Stromer-Galley**, 2007). It takes truth as the basis and is open to be judged, argued, or defended. **Habermas** (2009) pointed out that an argument is rational when it is grounded in the evidences that can be empirically verified or when it appeals to a shared normative ground. Likewise, **Steenbergen** *et al.* (2003) introduced two core properties of rational arguments. First, they have to be justified by reasons. Second, they would refer to the common good including the interests of those to be convinced.

The ethical function is to promote mutual respect among deliberative participants. Mutual respect is not only a means to lubricate effective communication but also an end to be achieved in deliberative democracy (**Mansbridge** *et al.*, 2012). Prudentially, being open to counterarguments can help accommodate competing perspectives and settle disputes in public deliberation (**Rishel**, 2011). Ethically, respecting counterarguments is to treat the other as an autonomous source of reasons, claims, and perspectives, rather than a passive subject to be ruled, which is the moral basis for mutual respect (**Gutmann**; **Thompson**, 2004).

The democratic function is to achieve inclusion of multiple and plural interests, voices, and concerns on terms of equality. **Brown** (2018) suggested that being inclusive takes two forms. One is representation, referring to elite deliberation in the representative legislature, where elected representatives act on behalf and in place of the represented (**Urbinati**, 2006). Representative inclusiveness requires that the decision-making process should entail a wide range of consultation at elite levels, covering all parts of the political spectrum and all politically relevant sectors (**Coppedge** *et al.*, 2019b).

The other is participation, which means to engage large numbers of non-elite groups and ordinary people in public deliberation (**Coppedge** *et al.*, 2019b). Participatory inclusiveness requires that deliberative rights should be granted to all citizens of interest, regardless of their origin, social status, and resource wealth (**Elstub**, 2018). Every citizen, if he or she wishes, has equal opportunity to participate in public affairs. In particular, vulnerable groups should be given a platform to express their voices and improve their disadvantaged social status (**Bächtiger** *et al.*, 2018).

> One objective was to examine if and to what extent the Internet penetration has populist impacts on deliberative dimensions, including reasoned justification, common good, respect counterarguments, range of consultation, and engaged society

According to **Mansbridge** *et al.* (2012), these functions ensure that reasonably sound decisions can be achieved in an inclusive process in the context of mutual respect among citizens. These functions reveal five core dimensions of deliberative democracy:

- reasoned justification,
- common good,
- respect counterarguments,
- range of consultation,
- engaged society (**Coppedge** *et al.*, 2019b).

They denote that the normative ideal can be realized when deliberative practitioners use reasoning to justify their positions in terms of common good, acknowledge and respect counterarguments, seek a wide range of consultation, and engage a large number of ordinary citizens in deliberation.

## 2.2. Deliberative system

**Curato** and **Steiner** (2018) advocated a systemic approach to study the complexity of deliberative democracy. According to **Mansbridge** (1999), a deliberative system is composed of a variety of talks in multiple spaces, which consist of a continuum with everyday talk at one end and decision-making in political institutions at the other. Although a deliberative system can be conceptualized in different ways, prior studies generally agreed that its organizational structure includes three key components – state institutions, public sphere, and civil society (**Dryzek**; **Hendriks**, 2012; **Mansbridge** *et al.*, 2012).

State institutions take a central position in a deliberative system, as they are where ultimate binding decisions are made and implemented (**Mansbridge** *et al.*, 2012). At the periphery are public sphere and civil society, where common concerns are discussed and public opinions are formed (**Mansbridge** *et al.*, 2012). According to **Habermas** (2006), they are the critical conditions for deliberative democracy in state institutions. A self-regulating media system in public sphere can maintain independence and effectively link state institutions and civil society. An inclusive civil society can empower citizens to participate in and response to public issues.

The systemic approach offers a couple of advantages for cross-national studies (**Dryzek**, 2009; **Mansbridge** *et al.*, 2012). First, it upgrades the level of analysis from individual sites where deliberation happens to a national scale as a whole. We could compare the degree of deliberative democracy across countries. Second, it maps out connection and interaction among the components of a deliberative system. We could compare the way and the degree to which components are interdependent across countries.

## 2.3. The Internet and public deliberation: The rise of populism

The Internet changed the way in which public issues are deliberated. Prior studies generally illustrated a controversial role it plays. On the one hand, the Internet significantly expands the range of sources of facts and opinions for public discussion (**Schudson**, 2006). The self-generated contents of individual users reframe public agenda (**Chadwick**, 2013; **Esser**; **Strömbäck**, 2014). It also facilitates such civic activities as campaigns, protests, and debates (**Maia**, 2018). They are horizontal, circulating across the populace and without monitors (**Dányi**; **Sükösd**, 2003).

On the other hand, the Internet exacerbates fake news, hostility, and inter-group conflicts (**Fawcett** *et al.*, 2017). Due to anonymity and a lack of social cues, false information, vulgar words, and verbal attacks are prevalent in everyday online discussion to subvert normative standards that are derived from authoritative interpretations (**Rowe**, 2015). In the meanwhile, using the Internet erodes civil society and transforms it into monadic clusters of close relationships, where users talk to like-minded people and tend toward mutual affirmation (**Conover** *et al.*, 2011). As a result, the Internet users are likely to have polarized attitudes and become intolerant of interfering or opposing opinions outside clusters (**Sunstein**, 2009).

The Internet's various impacts can be summarized into the concept of populism. Populism is defined as a set of ideology that "the pure people" and "the corrupted elite" are divided into two homogeneous and opposite factions (**Mudde**; **Kaltwasser**, 2018). It has three characteristics:

- the people-centrism to uphold the popular sovereignty for common interests and common will,
- the antagonism between different social classes,
- the homogenization and unity inside "the people" and "the elite" respectively (**Canovan**, 1999).

As a communicative style, populism favors charismatic leaders and their direct communication with people (**Kriesi**, 2014). Populist arguments are featured with simplified relations, emotional appeals, and demonized "others" in order to attract attention and win popular support (**Engesser**; **Fawzi**; **Larsson**, 2017).

**Engesser**, **Fawzi** and **Larsson** (2017) pointed out a perfect match between the Internet and populism. First, the Internet empowers ordinary people to achieve popular sovereignty through direct contact with political leaders. Populists inform people online in a direct channel, avoiding the interference or delay of the institutionalized system (**Krämer**, 2014). The Internet is instrumentalized by populists to motivate the masses and consolidate its legitimacy in a more simplified man-

ner (**Abts**; **Rummens**, 2007). Second, the Internet fertilizes "counter publics" and "alternative media" by encouraging personalized and non-mainstream communication online (**Kruikemeier** *et al.*, 2013). Third, the inclination of in-group homogeneity and out-group resentment manifests significantly online. The algorism technology amplifies filter bubble, homophily, and echo chamber, especially in social media context (**Flaxman**; **Goel**; **Rao**, 2016). As a result, hate speech and fake news are proliferated online, where simplification and emotionalization are often employed to paint elites and others in black (**Engesser**; **Fawzi**; **Larsson**, 2017).

# 3. Research design

The review above illustrated two gaps in prior studies. First, they focused on individual levels or sites of public deliberation, and failed to explore a country's overall status of deliberative democracy. Second, they focused on how the Internet mediates ordinary people's deliberative activities, which are informal and rooted in everyday life. They rarely examined the formal deliberative process, which is above everyday life of ordinary people and involves the interaction among social institutions, such as the state, mass media, and civil society.

To fill the research gaps, we did a country-level analysis to explore if or to what degree the Internet adoption has populist impacts on a country's overall status of deliberative democracy as well as the formal deliberative process. Specifically, the Internet penetration rate was employed to describe the degree to which the Internet is used in a country. The deliberative degree of state institutions was adopted to represent a country's overall status of deliberative democracy, as state institutions take a central position in a country's deliberative system. The formal deliberative process referred to the interaction among three deliberative levels, including state institutions, public sphere, and civil society.

The Internet's populist impacts were examined in two ways. One was to test if the Internet penetration has direct effects on the deliberative degree of state institutions, consisting of five dimensions – reasoned justification, common good, respect counterarguments, range of consultation, and engaged society. The Internet bypasses gatekeeping of traditional mass media and elite opinion leaders, and allows decision-makers to have fast, direct, and unmediated communication to the people (**Vaccari**; **Valeriani**, 2015). Thus, online populism is supposed to have direct influence on the policy-making process in state institutions.

According to **Engesser**, **Fawzi** and **Larsson** (2017), simplification and emotionalization characterize the style of populist communication. They violate the fundamental principle of rationality as the core of deliberative democracy. Prior studies reported that most online discussions failed to use reasoning for argumentation and justification to settle disputes and facilitate discussion (**Maia**, 2018).

> H1: The Internet penetration is negatively related to reasoned justification.

Populists claim to be representatives and mouthpieces of the people (**Canovan**, 1999). The empowering potential of the Internet advocates the populist call for the general will of ordinary people (**Jagers**; **Walgrave**, 2007). Thus, common good is adopted by political leaders to justify their policies.

> H2: The Internet penetration is positively related to common good.

The Internet penetration helps disseminate hate speech and verbal attacks, resulting in excluding others and painting their opponents in black (**Moffitt**; **Tormey**, 2014). The principle of respect counterarguments is ignored, as the Internet penetration lowers down the moral status of public deliberation.

> H3: The Internet penetration is negatively related to respect counterarguments.

As the primary antagonist in populist ideology, political elitism is inhibited by the Internet penetration, which circumvents the traditional hierarchical structure of political representation and promotes the direct, unmediated contact between political leaders and ordinary people. Thus, populist politicians are reluctant to consult other political elites in the policy-making process.

> H4: The Internet penetration is negatively related to range of consultation.

The Internet penetration expands horizontal connections among ordinary people. It improves participatory inclusiveness by engaging a wide range of citizens in public deliberation.

> H5: The Internet penetration is positively related to engaged society.

Besides the direct effects, we examined the moderating effects of the Internet penetration on a country's formal deliberative process, referring to the interaction among state institutions, public sphere, and civil society. The following research questions were asked to study how the Internet penetration moderates the effects of public sphere and civil society on the deliberative degree of state institutions.

> RQ1: How does the Internet penetration influence the relationship between public sphere and deliberative dimensions in state institutions?

> RQ2: How does the Internet penetration influence the relationship between civil society and deliberative dimensions in state institutions?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Sample

The sample came from two sources. One is the *United Nations*, which offer the data about a country's income, education, and the Internet penetration rate. The other is *Varieties of Democracy* (*V-Dem*), one of the largest social science databases:

*https://www.v-dem.net*

As a collaborative international project with approximately 2, 500 experts over the world, *V-Dem* contains over 350 indicators on democracy and political systems in 177 countries since 1900. In its dataset, about half of the indicators are factual indicators that are based on existing official sources, such as constitutions, laws, and government records. The others are evaluative indicators that are based on multiple ratings provided by country experts. The coded data are processed by a sophisticated measurement model in order to reduce coder errors and improve comparability across countries and over time (see **Coppedge** *et al.*, 2019a).

We matched and merged the data from *V-Dem* and the *United Nations* to construct a balanced panel sample with 3,173 records in 167 countries[1] from 2000 to 2018. The countries under study include most of the regions in the world, covering all the continents except Antarctica. In the process of merging, a dozen of countries or regions were removed due to a lack of data.

Panel data are a kind of longitudinal data that are collected prospectively by following a group of subjects over time. A balanced panel means that all countries are observed at every time point (167 countries × 19 years = 3173 observations), avoiding the missing value problem. **Hsiao** (2005) pointed out that panel data excel in combining inter-subject differences and intra-subject dynamics. On the one hand, panel data incorporate more degrees of freedom and less multicollinearity than cross-sectional data, leading to a more accurate inference. On the other hand, panel data are suitable for testing complicated hypotheses and uncovering dynamic relationships. In this study, panel data allowed us to consider intertemporal dynamics and individualities of 167 countries, and minimized estimation biases that are derived from simply aggregating countries by year or averaging indicators across time by country.

### 4.2. Measurement

The indicators in *V-Dem* were adopted to measure *reasoned justification*, *common good*, *respect counterarguments*, *range of consultation*, *engaged society*, *public sphere*, and *civil society*[2]. They were all evaluative indicators coded by country experts. The original scales were all ordinal and converted to interval by the measurement model. *Reason justification* was measured by the extent to which political leaders give reasoned justifications for their positions before a decision is made on an important policy. *Common good* was measured by the extent to which political leaders justify their positions in terms of common good for society, understood either as the greatest good for the greatest number or as helping the least advantaged in a society. *Respect counterarguments* was measured by the extent to which political leaders allow, acknowledge, and value counterarguments. *Range of consultation* was measured by the range of political elites or representatives who are consulted before a decision is made on an important policy. *Engaged society* was measured by the extent to which ordinary people are involved in public deliberation before a decision is made on an important policy.

According to **Habermas** (2006), *public sphere* is defined as a communication structure based on mass media and a self-regulating media system in public sphere is critical for deliberative democracy. In this study, *public sphere* was measured by "freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index", which specifies the degree of freedom of mass media-based public sphere, including press and media freedom, the freedom of public deliberation, and the freedom of academic and cultural expression. According to **Coppedge** *et al*. (2019b), *civil society* refers to a variety of social organizations through which ordinary citizens pursue their collective interests and ideals. In this study, *civil society* was measured by "core civil society index", which describes the degree to which autonomous citizens organize freely and actively to pursue civic goals.

> Other objective was to examine how the Internet penetration moderates a country's formal deliberative process, referring to the interaction among state institutions, public sphere, and civil society

*Internet penetration* was measured by the number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants in a country. We also controlled a country's *income* and *education*, which are supposed to affect deliberative democracy (**Dryzek**, 2009). They were measured respectively by the Income Index and the Education Index in the *Human Development Reports* published by the *United Nations*. In addition, *Internet control* was included in the statistical models. It describes the degree to which the state regulates the Internet and may confound the relationship between Internet penetration and deliberative democracy. *Internet control* was measured by combining two indicators in *V-Dem* – "government Internet filtering in practice" and "government Internet shut down in practice"[2].

### 4.3. Analysis

With a balanced panel sample of 3, 173 records, we first run descriptive statistics about all the variables used in this study (see Table 1). We also diagnosed potential multicollinearity between the independent variables – Internet pe-

netration, public sphere, civil society, Internet control, education, and income. The maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) was 6.746, less than 10, indicating no serious problem of multicollinearity.

Then, we run the xtreg function in *Stata 15* software to analyze data. There are two regression models that can be used – fixed effects model (FEM) and random effects model (REM). We started with the Hausman specification test to determine which model is needed. The result supported fixed effects model.

> ' The normative ideal can be realized when deliberative practitioners use reasoning to justify their positions in terms of common good, acknowledge and respect counterarguments, seek a wide range of consultation, and engage a large number of ordinary citizens in deliberation '

Model 1 was first created to test the main effects of the Internet penetration on five dimensions of deliberative democracy. Besides the main effects, Model 2 was created to examine the moderating effects of the Internet penetration on the interaction between public sphere / civil society and deliberative dimensions. Since the moderator was a continuous variable, the mean centering was implemented for the independent variables to make sure that zero is a meaningful value.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

| Variable | N | Mean (SD) | Min, Max | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reasoned justification | 3173 | 0.684 (1.065) | -2.500, 3.308 | The higher the score, the higher the degree of reasoned justification |
| Common good | 3173 | 0.673 (1.109) | -3.184, 3.548 | The higher the score, the higher the degree of common good |
| Respect counterarguments | 3173 | 0.908 (1.188) | -3.012, 4.455 | The higher the score, the higher the degree of respect counter arguments |
| Range of consultation | 3173 | 0.977 (1.187) | -3.086, 3.984 | The higher the score, the higher the degree of range of consultation |
| Engaged society | 3173 | 0.344 (1.430) | -3.703, 3.261 | The higher the score, the higher the degree of engaged society |
| Internet control | 3173 | 0 (0.723) | -3.575, 1.345 | The higher the score, the higher the degree of internet control |
| Internet penetration | 3023 | 0 (29.250) | -30.180, 69.820 | 0 - 100, 0 being the lowest level |
| Public sphere | 3173 | 0 (0.272) | -0.678, 0.296 | 0 - 1, 0 being the lowest level |
| Education | 3126 | 0 (0.187) | -0.490, 0.340 | 0 - 1, 0 being the lowest level |
| Income | 3173 | 0 (0.183) | -0.419, 0.331 | 0 - 1, 0 being the lowest level |
| Civil society | 3173 | 0 (0.321) | -0.740, 0.260 | 0 - 1, 0 being the lowest level |

## 5. Results

For the main effects, the Internet penetration is positively related to common good ($\beta$ = .002, *SE* = .001, *p* < .01) (Table 3) and engaged society ($\beta$ = .004, *SE* = .001, *p* < .001) (Table 6), and is negatively related to respect counterarguments ($\beta$ = -.004, *SE* = .001, *p* < .001) (Table 4) and to range of consultation ($\beta$ = -.001, *SE* = .001, *p* < .1) (Table 5). Thus, H2, H3, and H5 are supported, H4 is mildly supported, and H1 is rejected. For the moderating effects, the Internet penetration strengthens the positive effects of public sphere on reasoned justification ($\beta$ = .020, *SE* = .004, *p* < .001) (Table 2) and range of consultation ($\beta$ = .012, *SE* = .004, *p* < .01) (Table 5), and the positive effect of civil society on engaged society ($\beta$ = .011, *SE* = .004, *p* < .01) (Table 6). The Internet penetration weakens the positive effects of civil society on reasoned justification ($\beta$ = -.009, *SE* = .004, *p* < .05) (Table 2), common good ($\beta$ = -.021, *SE*=.004, *p* < .001) (Table 3), respect counterarguments ($\beta$ = -.012, *SE* = .003, *p* < .001) (Table 4), and range of consultation ($\beta$ = -.015, *SE* = .003, *p* < .001) (Table 5).

Table 2. Fixed effects on reasoned justification

| Items | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $\beta$ | SE | $\beta$ | SE |
| Internet penetration | 0.000 | 0.001 | 0.000 | 0.001 |
| Public sphere | 0.946*** | 0.150 | 1.206*** | 0.155 |
| Civil society | 0.546*** | 0.104 | 0.453*** | 0.107 |
| Income | 0.100 | 0.415 | 0.116 | 0.414 |
| Education | 1.230*** | 0.318 | 1.257*** | 0.315 |
| Internet control | 0.160*** | 0.020 | 0.117*** | 0.021 |
| Public sphere × Internet penetration | | | 0.020*** | 0.004 |
| Civil society × Internet penetration | | | -0.009* | 0.004 |
| Constant | 0.704*** | | 0.680*** | |
| R² | 0.119 | | 0.132 | |
| F-test | 63.106*** | | 53.398*** | |

Note: unstandardized coefficients
N = 3,173, Countries = 167
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 3. Fixed effects on common good

| Items | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | SE | β | SE |
| Internet penetration | 0.002** | 0.001 | 0.002** | 0.001 |
| Public sphere | 2.871*** | 0.158 | 2.746*** | 0.161 |
| Civil society | 0.768*** | 0.109 | 0.628*** | 0.111 |
| Income | 2.131*** | 0.438 | 2.401*** | 0.429 |
| Education | -2.010*** | 0.335 | -2.035*** | 0.327 |
| Internet control | -0.199*** | 0.021 | -0.096*** | 0.022 |
| Public sphere × Internet penetration | | | 0.004 | 0.005 |
| Civil society × Internet penetration | | | -0.021*** | 0.004 |
| Constant | 0.680*** | | 0.716*** | |
| R² | 0.270 | | 0.305 | |
| F-test | 172.842*** | | 153.604*** | |

Note: unstandardized coefficients
N = 3,173, Countries = 167
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 4. Fixed effects on respect counterarguments

| Items | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | SE | β | SE |
| Internet penetration | -0.004*** | 0.001 | -0.004*** | 0.001 |
| Public sphere | 2.960*** | 0.139 | 2.941*** | 0.145 |
| Civil society | 0.712*** | 0.096 | 0.627*** | 0.100 |
| Income | 0.399 | 0.386 | 0.534 | 0.385 |
| Education | -0.827** | 0.295 | -0.835** | 0.293 |
| Internet control | 0.053** | 0.018 | 0.097*** | 0.020 |
| Public sphere × Internet penetration | | | 0.005 | 0.004 |
| Civil society × Internet penetration | | | -0.012*** | 0.003 |
| Constant | 0.926*** | | 0.939*** | |
| R² | 0.377 | | 0.384 | |
| F-test | 282.742*** | | 218.691*** | |

Note: unstandardized coefficients
N = 3,173, Countries = 167
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 5. Fixed effects on range of consultation

| Items | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | SE | β | SE |
| Internet penetration | -0.001^ | 0.001 | -0.001^ | 0.001 |
| Public sphere | 3.682*** | 0.133 | 3.741*** | 0.138 |
| Civil society | 0.487*** | 0.092 | 0.370*** | 0.095 |
| Income | 0.597 | 0.369 | 0.744* | 0.368 |
| Education | -0.047 | 0.282 | -0.047 | 0.280 |
| Internet control | 0.034^ | 0.017 | 0.067*** | 0.019 |
| Public sphere × Internet penetration | | | 0.012** | 0.004 |
| Civil society × Internet penetration | | | -0.015*** | 0.003 |
| Constant | 0.982*** | | 0.989*** | |
| R² | 0.419 | | 0.425 | |
| F-test | 337.019*** | | 259.329*** | |

Note: unstandardized coefficients
N = 3, 173, Countries = 167
^$p < .1$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 6. Fixed effects on engaged society

| Items | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | SE | β | SE |
| Internet penetration | 0.004*** | 0.001 | 0.005*** | 0.001 |
| Public sphere | 2.500*** | 0.155 | 2.589*** | 0.160 |
| Civil society | 0.806*** | 0.107 | 0.876*** | 0.110 |
| Income index | 0.288 | 0.428 | 0.140 | 0.426 |
| Education index | 0.841* | 0.327 | 0.857** | 0.325 |
| Internet control | -0.726*** | 0.020 | -0.786*** | 0.022 |
| Public sphere × penetration | | | -0.001 | 0.004 |
| Civil society × penetration | | | 0.011** | 0.004 |
| Constant | 0.344*** | | 0.322*** | |
| R² | 0.432 | | 0.441 | |
| F-test | 355.880*** | | 277.161*** | |

Note: unstandardized coefficients
N = 3, 173, Countries = 167
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

# 6. Discussion

The supported hypotheses (H2, H3, H4, and H5) indicated the significant main effects the Internet penetration has on common good, respect counterarguments, range of consultation, and engaged society. The rejected hypothesis (H1) showed that the policy-making of state institutions is still a rational-critical process and is capable of resisting populist simplification and emotionalization.

This study also reported the significant moderating effects, referring to how the Internet penetration moderates the effects of civil society and public sphere on state institutions. The statistical results showed that both public sphere and civil society have significant positive main effects on all deliberative dimensions in state institutions. These effects are moderated by the Internet penetration. Specifically, the Internet penetration weakens the effects of civil society on reasoned justification, common good, respect counterarguments, and range of consultation, but strengthens the effects of public sphere on reasoned justification and range of consultation.

Civil society is where citizens organize to pursue their collective goals. It is held together by social norms that presume equality, rationality, respect, and common good (**Lash**, 2002). In this study, these norms are expressed in the significant positive main effects of civil society on state institutions. The moderating results showed that they are sabotaged by the Internet penetration. On the one hand, the solidarity of civil society is built upon the common good of society under the principle of equality. It is undermined by online flows of information, which break civil society down into small-scale tribes that are affectively bonded by shared cultural values rather than social norms (**Castells**, 1996). Different from the traditional civil society, the tribes are more concerned with their own demands and tend to ignore the common good as well as the different opinions of the others (**Lash**, 2002). On the other hand, civil society is organized on the ground of ethics and rationality (**Lash**, 2002). They are subverted by online populism, which favors emotion over rationality and disrespects counterarguments (**Caiani**; **Graziano**, 2016; **Hameleers**; **Bos**; **De-Vreese**, 2016). As the Internet penetration increases, the traditional civil society contributes less to common good, range of consultation, reasoned justification, and respect counterarguments.

Public sphere functions to produce public opinions, which originate from various sources in a society and attempt to influence the policy-making process in state institutions. First, the Internet penetration enhances the visibility of a wide range of issues and voices, especially marginalized ones. They have opportunities to be discussed in public sphere by elites. Consequently, an expanded range of public agenda and public opinion is provided for state institutions to take into consideration when making policies. Thus, the Internet penetration strengthens the effect of public sphere on range of consultation. Second, rationality is emphasized in public sphere. As the Internet penetration increases irrational populism, a well-developed public sphere functions to restore rationality by effectively filtering irrational voices through mass media system. The Internet penetration spotlights the role of public sphere in feeding rationalized opinions to the state's policy-making. Thus, the Internet penetration strengthens the effect of public sphere on reasoned justification.

The moderating effects above indicated how the Internet penetration influences a country's formal deliberative process. On the one hand, civil society is anchored in everyday life and is composed of ordinary people, who are more susceptible to online populism. Thus, the Internet penetration sabotages social norms of civil society

‘ We matched and merged the data from *V-dem* and the *United Nations* to construct a balanced panel sample with 3,173 records in 167 countries from 2000 to 2018 ’

and weakens its contribution to deliberative democracy. On the other hand, public sphere is composed of elite opinion leaders, who are less susceptible to populist calls and are more capable of using the Internet to achieve their ideals. Thus, the Internet penetration not only expands the participatory base of public sphere but also highlights its strength of rationality.

> " The supported hypotheses (H2, H3, H4, and H5) indicated the significant main effects the Internet penetration has on common good, respect counterarguments, range of consultation, and engaged society "

## 7. Conclusion and limitations

This paper contributed a couple of insights. First, it offered the solid quantitative evidences for the widespread worry that the Internet brings populism to deliberative democracy. On the Internet, populism was expressed as a communicative style, for example, calling for common good, disrespecting counterarguments, narrowing the range of elite consultation, and expanding grassroot deliberation. Second, it was the first time to explore online populist influence on a country's deliberative process. The findings not only supported the previous arguments about how the Internet undermines civil society but also shed a new light on the role of public sphere in resisting online populism and protecting deliberative democracy.

Despite of the valuable insights, this paper had several limitations. First, we analyzed the aggregated data of a total of 167 countries. On the one hand, using the aggregated data increased the potential risk of unobserved heterogeneity, which is a common problem in cross-national research. On the other hand, the results only presented a global tendency as a whole and failed to account for the differences between countries. We were aware that dividing countries into several homogeneous groups would produce more reliable results and allow us to compare them between groups. However, we worried that grouping countries would generate too many significant results, which are far more complicated and cannot be fully discussed in a single paper. Thus, we decided to present a general tendency in this paper and explore the differences between countries in the future studies.

Second, when coding deliberative dimensions, coders in *V-Dem* were asked to focus on the most typical performances of prominent national political leaders. Their assessments cannot fully represent the deliberative degree of state institutions. Third, "freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index" was employed to measure public sphere. It focused on freedom of speech and mass media system, but cannot cover the full range of dimensions the concept of public sphere has. Fourth, due to a lack of data, the statistical models cannot include relevant variables that influence deliberative democracy, for example, according to **Dryzek** (2009), shared language, political structure, political culture, religion, ideological conformity, and segmental autonomy.

> " The Internet penetration weakens the effects of civil society on reasoned justification, common good, respect counterarguments, and range of consultation, but strengthens the effects of public sphere on reasoned justification and range of consultation "

## 8. Notes

### 1. List of countries

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burma/Myanmar, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, France, Gabon, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lebanon, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Malta, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of the Congo, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, The Gambia, Timor-Leste, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

### 2. Codebook of evaluative indicators

#### 2.1. Reasoned justification

Question: When important policy changes are being considered, i.e. before a decision has been made, to what extent do political elites give public and reasoned justifications for their positions?

Responses:

0: No justification. Elites almost always only dictate that something should or should not be done, but no reasoning about justification is given. For example, "We must cut spending."

1: Inferior justification. Elites tend to give reasons why someone should or should not be for doing or not doing something, but the reasons tend to be illogical or false, although they may appeal to many voters. For example, "We must cut spending. The state is inefficient." [The inference is incomplete because addressing inefficiencies would not necessarily reduce spending and it might undermine essential services.]

2: Qualified justification. Elites tend to offer a single simple reason justifying why the proposed policies contribute to or detract from an outcome. For example, "We must cut spending because taxpayers cannot afford to pay for current programs."

3: Sophisticated justification. Elites tend to offer more than one or more complex, nuanced and complete justification. For example, "We must cut spending because taxpayers cannot afford to pay for current government programs. Raising taxes would hurt economic growth, and deficit spending would lead to inflation."

### 2.2. Common good

Question: When important policy changes are being considered, to what extent do political elites justify their positions in terms of the common good?

Responses

0: Little or no justification in terms of the common good is usually offered.

1: Specific business, geographic, group, party, or constituency interests are for the most part offered as justifications.

2: Justifications are for the most part a mix of specific interests and the common good and it is impossible to say which justification is more common than the other.

3: Justifications are based on a mixture of references to constituency/party/group interests and on appeals to the common good.

4: Justifications are for the most part almost always based on explicit statements of the common good for society, understood either as the greatest good for the greatest number or as helping the least advantaged in a society.

### 2.3. Respect counterarguments

Question: When important policy changes are being considered, to what extent do political elites acknowledge and respect counterarguments?

Responses:

0: Counterarguments are not allowed or if articulated, punished.

1: Counterarguments are allowed at least from some parties, but almost always are ignored.

2: Elites tend to acknowledge counterarguments but then explicitly degrade them by making a negative statement about them or the individuals and groups that propose them.

3: Elites tend to acknowledge counterarguments without making explicit negative or positive statements about them.

4: Elites almost always acknowledge counterarguments and explicitly value them, even if they ultimately reject them for the most part.

5: Elites almost always acknowledge counterarguments and explicitly value them, and frequently also even accept them and change their position.

### 2.4. Range of consultation

Question: When important policy changes are being considered, how wide is the range of consultation at elite levels?

Clarification: Because practices vary greatly from policy to policy, base your answer on the style that is most typical of policymaking.

Responses:

0: No consultation. The leader or a very small group (e.g. military council) makes authoritative decisions on their own.

1: Very little and narrow. Consultation with only a narrow circle of loyal party/ruling elites.

2: Consultation includes the former plus a larger group that is loyal to the government, such as the ruling party's or parties' local executives and/or women, youth and other branches.

3: Consultation includes the former plus leaders of other parties.

4: Consultation includes the former plus a select range of society/labor/business representatives.

5: Consultation engages elites from essentially all parts of the political spectrum and all politically relevant sectors of society and business.

### 2.5. Engaged society

Question: When important policy changes are being considered, how wide and how independent are public deliberations?

Responses:

0: Public deliberation is never, or almost never allowed.

1: Some limited public deliberations are allowed but the public below the elite levels is almost always either unaware of major policy debates or unable to take part in them.

2: Public deliberation is not repressed but nevertheless infrequent and non-elite actors are typically controlled and/or constrained by the elites.

3: Public deliberation is actively encouraged and some autonomous non-elite groups participate, but it is confined to a small slice of specialized groups that tends to be the same across issue-areas.

4: Public deliberation is actively encouraged and a relatively broad segment of non-elite groups often participate and vary with different issue-areas.

5: Large numbers of non-elite groups as well as ordinary people tend to discuss major policies among themselves, in the media, in associations or neighborhoods, or in the streets. Grass-roots deliberation is common and unconstrained.

### 2.6. Government Internet filtering in practice

Question: How frequently does the government censor political information (text, audio, images, or video) on the Internet by filtering (blocking access to certain websites)?

Responses:

0: Extremely often. It is a regular practice for the government to remove political content, except to sites that are pro-government.

1: Often. The government commonly removes online political content, except sites that are pro-government.

2: Sometimes. The government successfully removes about half of the critical online political content.

3: Rarely. There have been only a few occasions on which the government removed political content.

4: Never, or almost never. The government allows Internet access that is unrestricted, with the exceptions mentioned in the clarifications section.

### 2.7. Government Internet shut down in practice

Question: How often does the government shut down domestic access to the Internet?

Responses:

0: Extremely often. It is a regular practice for the government to shut down domestic access to the Internet.

1: Often. The government shut down domestic access to the Internet numerous times this year.

2: Sometimes. The government shut down domestic access to the Internet several times this year.

3: Rarely but there have been a few occasions throughout the year when the government shut down domestic access to Internet.

4: Never, or almost never. The government does not typically interfere with the domestic access to the Internet.

### 2.8. Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index

Question: To what extent does government respect press and media freedom, the freedom of ordinary people to discuss political matters in the public sphere, as well as the freedom of academic and cultural expression?

Aggregation: The index is formed by taking the point estimates from a Bayesian factor analysis model of the indicators for media censorship effort, harassment of journalists, media bias, media self-censorship, print/broadcast media critical, and print/broadcast media perspectives, and freedom of academic and cultural expression.

### 2.9. Core civil society index

Question: How robust is civil society?

Aggregation: The index is formed by taking the point estimates from a Bayesian factor analysis model of the indicators for CSO (civil society organization) entry and exit, CSO repression, and CSO participatory environment.

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