

**Cancel Culture: COVID-19, (Un)Democratic Mobilization, and Political Participation**Anugo Samuel Obiefuna <sup>[1]</sup> and Paul Ani Onuh <sup>[2]</sup><sup>[1]</sup>Department of Theology, Uppsala Universitet, Sweden<sup>[2]</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, Nigeria

**Abstract.** In recent times, the battles of ideologies in our multicultural world have assumed new dimensions. Some of the dimensions include the censorship of thought and speech. While this is not a new phenomenon in human history, it has emerged as a new challenge to multiculturalism, freedom and democracy in Europe and other places. Though censorship of free thought and speech has always been a challenge to participation, the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease in 2019 and the efforts by governments, organisations and groups across the world to contain the pandemic led to further escalation of censorship in the form of ‘cancel culture’. This study examines how cancel culture, as a form of (un)democratic mobilization, has impacted political participation and democratization in Europe during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our argument will be hinged on the conceptual framework of ‘right of dissent.’ The study generally relies on data from secondary sources and adopts qualitative descriptive method of data analysis.

**Keywords:** Cancel Culture, Political Participation, Democratization, COVID-19 Pandemic, Right of Dissent

**Introduction**

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic which broke out in 2019 caused numerous degrees of damages and unravelled new threats to global health, economic, and political systems (Tisdell, 2020). According to World Health Organisation (WHO), there have been 500,186,525 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6,190,349 deaths globally, as of 14 April 2022 (World Health Organisation, n.d.a). As of April 3, 2022, Europe has reported 199,654,096 confirmed COVID-19 cases (Statista, 2022a), and 1,936,677 deaths resulting from COVID-19 infection (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2022). Report by Statista (2020) indicates that global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined by 6.7 percent in 2020, while the Gross Domestic Product of Advanced Economies declined by 6.5 percent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond the impact on the public health system and global economy, the coronavirus pandemic, unravelled new threats to social ecosystems and political systems across Europe (Bonotti & Zech, 2021).

The political challenges thrown up by the pandemic include domestic political challenges (Onuh, 2021; Onuoha et al, 2021) and challenges in the international political stage (Volkov, 2021). At the domestic level, the pandemic revealed policy challenges and administrative inefficiency which reflected in the poor preparation by many countries to contain a health emergency of such scale. Apart from the policy preparedness and policy implementation efficiency challenges that nations faced in response to the pandemic, there was also the challenge of sustaining the business of governance (Martínez-Córdoba et al, 2021; Council of Europe, 2020). In some parts of the world, poor preparedness for a global health emergency both in terms of adequate public and health emergency policy, and enforcement readiness, were major challenges to the COVID-19 containment efforts (Afulani et al, 2021). Low income countries, particularly, were considered more vulnerable because of their poor financial strength and poor capacity (Jensen & Molina, 2020). Moreover, governance corruption also constituted an impediment to coherent policy formulation and implementation readiness (Monday, 2022).

The pandemic unleashed unprecedented pressure on political systems across the globe to deliver on the most vital demands of governance on an emergency basis (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021). One of the major challenges that governments across the world had to deal with was how to continue to sustain governance and fundamental functions of political systems. As against the conventional considerations of whether a state is autocratic or democratic, the major governance factors that underlie the success or failure of governance of political systems were, whether a political system is adequately prepared, if public trust had been established over the course of time, and if the state had an degree of governance capacity (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).

At the international political stage, political rivalries and hegemonic contestations between power blocs were recurrent themes in the world's efforts to present a common front against the pandemic (Bahi, 2021). The politicization of the pandemic was a major challenge to the response to the pandemic that impacted the global response to the pandemic. The politicization of the pandemic reflected political and economic rivalries of ideological nature. Arguments arose to where the pandemic escalated from, who is to be blamed for it, and for what reasons the pandemic came at the time it did, if it was deliberately engineered by one ideological bloc to slow down or undermine another. The United States' leadership under the presidency of Donald Trump blamed China for the virus (Bahi, 2021). It is noteworthy that all these were happening at a time that when the economic rivalry and competition between the United States and China was escalating. Also, the politics of responses approach was another international dimension of the challenges associated with the pandemic. While the leading economies and developed polities were at the front of ensuring a universal implementation of containment mechanisms like lockdowns, developing economies and low and mid-income countries were reluctant to shut down their political and economic systems, due to the implications of doing so. Additionally, access to protective gears, medications, and vaccines also unravelled new spectrums of political challenges at the international stage. The race to stock up protective gears, medications, and vaccines (when they were eventually developed) pitted rich countries against rich countries, and poor countries against poor countries, leading to trade-offs and concessions.

### **Literature Review**

Two contrasting debates have emerged, in literature, on the phenomenon of 'cancel culture': that it is used for engendering social change to correct systemic social injustices, and that it has been abused to stifle debate. Clark (2020) interrogated the evolution of digital accountability praxis of callout as performed by Black Twitter and noted that cancel culture originated from the 'call out', a strategy that evolved in black vernacular culture in the course of history and that has been deployed by the Black queer Twitter community or queer community of colour on social media as a socially mediated phenomena to cancel a person, place, or thing. The original idea of 'cancelling', according to Clark, was "often a critique of systemic inequality rather than an attack against specific, individualistic transgressions" that was originally, "reserved for celebrities, brands, and otherwise out-of-reach figures" as a last-ditch appeal for justice which has now been seized upon by outside observers, particularly journalists with an out-sized ability to amplify their gaze.

Ahuja and Kerketta (2021) noted that cancel culture has been applied to some uses and abuses. The uses to which it has been applied include in global revolutionary campaigns aimed at countering sexism, racism, and all other forms of social injustices and abuses. They also noted that the individualization of its application has also been associated with damages to the mental health, self-esteem, and image of the cancelled individual. Cancel culture has also been viewed as a form of counter speech to regulate hate speech online (English, 2021). Strossen (2020) and of Parry-Giles (2021) examined how cancel culture is being abused to

undermine dialogue, debate, and free speech. Thus, Parry-Giles (2021) argued that cancel culture is increasingly manifesting in the silencing of voices which is slowly and steadily eroding the principles of a pluralistic democracy. While the studies by the numerous scholars referenced so far threw up cogent discourses on the subject of cancel culture, not much attention has been done to understand how cancel culture impacts political participation and democratization, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe.

Thus, this study examines how cancel culture has impacted political participation and democratization in Europe during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our argument is hinged on the conceptual framework of 'right of dissent.' Our study will be significant for Europe's democratic culture's introspection on the phenomenon of 'cancel culture', a form of (un)democratic mobilization, as it navigates the challenges of securing public health and preserving democratic rights. In the introductory section of this study, we first presented background information on our subject of inquiry. We also advanced a summary of literature on the subject matter in order to clearly articulate a point of departure. In the section that follows, we discussed our methods. Thereafter, we explained the conceptual framework that guides this study. In the rest of our presentation, we advanced the argument for our central thesis under themes and headings. Our conclusion summarised the arguments that we pursued throughout the study and our contribution to literature.

### **Methods**

We relied on documentary data from secondary sources such as official documents, websites and blogs, and other published works (Payne & Payne, 2004). To sieve out themes and patterns from data collected for this study and to make inferences, we conducted our analysis using the qualitative descriptive method of analysis (Nassaji, 2015). Though the phenomenon of 'cancel culture' and its impact on political participation and democratization since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is a continuous issue, our study relies on data from incidents that have taken place and that have been documented. The 'after the fact' nature of our research design is scientifically adequate to address our research question. Moreover, the design orientation links up well with the documentary method of data collection and the qualitative descriptive method of data analysis.

### **Right to Dissent**

This study relies on concept of 'right to dissent' as the conceptual framework. One of the hallmarks of democracy is the assurance and the preservation of the right for people to dissent. To dissent is to publicly disagree or to hold a position that is at variance with an official position on a public issue, an opinion, a decision, or set of beliefs, particularly popular beliefs (Britannica, n.d.). Dissent is the holding or expression of opinions at variance with those commonly or officially held (Cambridge, n.d.). Thus, to dissent is to think differently. The right to dissent, is invariably the right to hold an opinion or to take a position that is at variance with those commonly held by a group or those officially held by either a group, and organization, or political system.

Dissent is a very fundamental force which serves as tool for developing effective public reasoning, which is necessary for determining the legitimacy of the actions of, particularly, governments and the state. Shiffrin (1999) defines dissent as "speech that criticizes existing customs, habits, traditions, institutions, or authorities." Dissent is closely associated with critical thinking. Critical thinking, or thinking for oneself and questioning conventional concepts of authority, truth, and significance, has long been connected with dissent (Britannica, n.d.). Critical thinking has long been regarded as an activity that must, in some way, entail dissent. To think for oneself often entails taking positions or holding opinions that are at odds or at variance with official or publicly held belief in a society.

Robert Dahl (1971) held that contestation and participation are fundamental features of democracy. Contestation capture the right to compete, to hold a different view, and to reserve the right to compete with your idea in spite of it being different, the right to challenge an incumbent or an incumbent idea, the right to freely express, and the right to freely associate, among others. Thus, participation mirrors the right to vote, the right to question government programmes and narratives, and the right to dissent.

Scholars have pondered on the concept of the ‘right to dissent’ as being central to democracy and to the continuous development and preservation of democracy. Schochet (1971), Shiffrin (1999), Leppänen (2016), Walker (2010), Feldman (2012), among others, have presented arguments that explore the primacy of the right to dissent in a democratic system. Schochet (1971) advanced an argument for the normalization of civil disobedience giving that it is an expression of the right to dissent. For Schochet, civil disobedience is a valid extension of the democratic right of dissent which is an activity that is consistent with democracy itself. The implication of his argument is that right to dissent is an indispensable component of democracy as a system of governance. Thus, without the guarantee of the right to disagree with a popular or official position by any member of that political system that is democratic, the validity of that political system as democratic system becomes questionable. The argument on dissent by Schochet was extended by Shiffrin (1999). Shiffrin’s “Dissent, injustice, and the meanings of America” localized the argument for the right to dissent by examining the linkage between the right to dissent and the exercise or protection of the constitutionally guaranteed First Amendment provisions in the United States of America. The summary of Shiffrin’s contribution is that dissent is an expression of free speech which is an integral part of democracy. Moreover, he noted that there is much to be gained from allowing dissent than from stifling dissent. He further noted that dissenters foster community engagement with the political system which will push back atomistic individualism. More so, dissent has some progressive implications, like the improvement of the market place of ideas and endearing engagements with the political system in such a manner that the system is, each time, better off as a result.

Walker (2010) showed the extent of the danger that dissenters expose themselves to in an effort to enhance the democratic system. The study by Walker examined the cost of dissenting in some European democracies, particularly, countries that emerged from the ashes of the defunct Soviet Union. Some of the dangers for dissenting include persecution, bodily harm, imprisonment and death. However, Walker also noted instances where the judicial system made itself a willing enabler to the persecution of dissenters by the government. This endangerment of dissenters and dissent in a democratic system undermines the entire ideals and foundations upon which the democratic system is foisted.

Leppänen (2016) sought to extend the frontiers of the debate on democracy and dissent. Leppänen argues that dissent is a component of radical democratic theory, not just any form of democracy. The author’s argument is based on the view that liberal democracy and radical democracy are different views of the concept of democracy, and that radical democracy is the form of democracy that has been critical of liberal democracy. Thus, dissent should be associated with and form the core of radical democracy theory.

There have also been scholars who have argued against the concept of ‘right to dissent’ being fundamental to the proper functioning of a democracy. At the risk of being considered a retrogressive figure in all the intellectual efforts to advance democracy, Kampelman (1970) disagrees with the universality of the ‘right to dissent’ or of it being fundamental or essential for the proper functioning of a democracy. Kampelman (1970) summarized his position thus:

The most essential ingredient of a democratic society is not the right to dissent. It is its ability to survive as a democratic society. The right of dissent is important, but it must give way if its alternative is the demise of the system as a viable

vehicle by which men may govern themselves and solve their problems within a democratic framework.

Kampelman clearly laid out the circumstances under which the right to dissent becomes meaningless and insignificant in a democracy. For him, one of the instances where dissent becomes unacceptable for a political system is when it will lead to the demise of the democratic system as a viable system for governance. His argument is that the argument of the democratic system is more important than the right to dissent. In effect, when the right to dissent comes against the viability of the democratic system, the right to dissent gives way and the democratic system remains sacrosanct. This argument assumes that the democratic system of governance is in a state of perfection, where all members' rights are met and that the justification for the dissent cannot bring about a value more significant than the democratic system in practice. A viable democratic system should always be able to accommodate the right to dissent, which is at the core of the democratic ideal, otherwise, it will mean that that democratic system is not living up to its ideals. Dissent enhances a democracy, and reduces the chances that members will want to dismember it, as their rights will continually be improved and guaranteed in such a system.

Deepak Gupta (2020) succinctly captures the place of 'right to dissent' in a democracy, thus:

Dissent is essential in a democracy. If a country has to grow in a holistic manner where not only the economic rights but also the civil rights of the citizen are to be protected, dissent and disagreement have to be permitted, and in fact, should be encouraged. It is only if there is discussion, disagreement and dialogue that we can arrive at better ways to run the country.

### **Forms of Responses to the COVID-19 in Europe**

The first COVID-19 case in Europe was confirmed in Bordeaux, France, on 24 January 2020 (World Health Organisation, n.d.b). Thereafter, the virus quickly and dramatically spread widely across the continent. By the end of March 2020, every country in Europe had confirmed a case of COVID-19. Europe's Health Emergencies Programme reacted promptly, in coordination with the World Health Organisation to trigger region-wide health emergency response mechanisms. The region wide health emergency mechanism which benefits of years of preparedness and experience stimulated a framework within which individual region countries implement their responses. Europe's COVID-19 response benefited from the extensive infrastructure that were in place for influenza which was swiftly repurposed for the COVID-19 response. To ensure the quick detection, confirmation, and description of the first cases of COVID-19 in the European Region, regional networks which were co-led by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) were activated, and they contributed significantly to a better understanding of the virus, its clinical signs, transmission routes, and infection severity (World Health Organisation, n.d.c). There were 212,902,166 confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) cases across Europe as of May 15, 2022 (Statista, 2022b).

Though World Health Organisation and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) oversaw the global and regional coordination to the responses by member countries to contain the spread and impact of the virus, individual countries reserved the authority to adapt and localize lessons and information on the best course of action, that were daily, disseminated by the WHO and ECDC. While some European countries implemented a tough response in the form of a hard lockdown and other related measures, others adopted a soft response in their efforts to contain the spread of the virus within their domain. Beyond advising the public to adhere to regulations such as self-isolation, social distancing, restriction of public events and closure of schools, some countries like Austria, Italy, and

France imposed strict lockdowns that significantly restricted movements (DW, 2020). The violation of the strict lockdown attracted penalties such as fines or jail terms. Other strict measures implemented include mandatory vaccination. In some other countries like Sweden, however, the response to the pandemic were considered to be soft, as the citizens were largely expected to adhere to certain safety regulation.

Nevertheless, as political leaders across Europe began to make the call for urgent and strict response to the pandemic by implementing measures such as restriction of movements, closure of public places, imposition of lockdown, prohibition of gatherings (social and religious), and mandating vaccines, opposition to this measures also escalated (BBC, n.d.). The disagreement over how to respond to the pandemic and the measures to adopt in containing the spread of the virus created an ideological divide leading to confrontations between those who are for the universal containment measures such as lockdowns and vaccine mandates, and those who want to be exempted from the measures. In effect, the ideological contestations between the opposing sides of the COVID-19 pandemic response measures centred on both public health safety and civil rights. In most countries, the pro COVID-19 containment measures (lockdown, vaccines, etc.) were considered to be on the majority while those against these measures were considered a minority (Picheta, 2022) and labelled fringe elements (Ariza, 2020). In Europe, opponents of the COVID-19 response measures organized protests against both lockdown and mandatory vaccine measures, while others refused to comply with the vaccine mandates. Due to their resistance to the COVID-19 containment response measures, they were both called out for their views or shut down because of their views. In effect, a culture of de-legitimization and cancellation became a popular measure for pushing back on opponents of the pandemic containment response measures (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022).

### **Cancel Culture: the Forms and Implications of an (Un)Democratic Mobilization**

The debate around the response measures to the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe evolved a culture of cancellation, particularly, against the opponents of the predominant COVID-19 containment measures such as lockdown and vaccine mandates. The cancel culture against the opponents of the measures were in the form of ‘call out’ and ‘shut down.’ Call out is a process of de-legitimization which involves framing the views of an individual or a group from one’s ideological context and throwing it up to one’s ideological group for the purpose of influencing a particular perception of the original owner of the view, with the purpose of having them ostracized from a political or social community. Apart from ostracizing targets from their political or social community, ‘call out’ also seeks to ostracise an individual from their professional and economic cycle. ‘Call out’ involves ‘name calling’ that is designed to put the person being called out in bad light. For instance, opponents of some of the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures were framed in the media (EuroNews, 2021) and tagged ‘pandemic deniers’ (Karnitschnig, 2020) and ‘antivaxxers’ (Verseck, 2021). This name calling or ‘call out’ often, does not put the opposition to the response measures in the contexts of debate of those who oppose the measures. It does not quite say if there could be justification for their opposition to the measures. Thus, with ‘call out,’ people who oppose the COVID-19 containment response measures are shamed for their views.

The other form of cancel culture that was prevalent in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic is ‘shut down.’ The idea of ‘shut down’ is to de-platform, contain or restrict dissenters. Opponents of the measures were restricted from legitimate political means of dissenting such as protests. Restriction of movement and COVID-19 vaccine compliance as a condition for access to public places and a prerequisite in both work places and engaging in economic activities (Horowitz, 2021). An instance of official application of this strategy is

when Emmanuel Macron, the president of France expressed his determination to “piss off” people who refuse to comply with the vaccine mandate in France, by making it difficult for them to go about their normal lives so much so that they will be left with no option than to take the vaccine (Aljazeera, 2022).

Cancel culture is a form of undemocratic mobilization that is used, in most cases, to stifle dissent (Fire, 2022). The implications of cancel culture on political participation and democratization is far reaching (McKenna, 2021). Contrary to the principles of democracy, cancel culture demands that the opposing view yield or be ostracized (Corbin, 2021). The resort to cancel culture against dissenters on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe has far reaching implications for political participation and democratization in Europe. Acceptable vehicles for political participation such as reason based debate, civil disobedience and protest, were framed as negative behaviour based on ignorance. More so, cancel culture in response to dissenting views on the management of the Coronavirus threatens to imperil such fundamental components of democracy such as freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom of association.

One of the democratic freedoms most impacted by the political fallouts from the pandemic is the freedom of thought. Freedom of thought is a fundamental freedom upon which most other freedoms find expression. Freedom of thought is the freedom to think differently and the freedom to not be compelled to conform to a popular thinking perspective. The freedom of thought, in effect, finds expression in the right to dissent. Views that dare to dissent from the official positions or the popular views were often derided and framed as extremist far right views which should not be allowed to find expression in public space. The endangerment of freedom of thought by the culture of cancelling dissenting views was also extended to expression.

One of the most derogated democratic freedom due to the COVID-19 pandemic is the freedom of movement and the freedom of association. European countries implemented different forms of lockdown and in different phases. These lockdowns were accompanied by uncertainties, in most cases, as to how long it may last. In some places, stringent penalties such as fines and prison terms were prescribed as punishment for violation. In Austria, like in other places, unvaccinated people were prohibited from moving out of their homes, even after the lockdown had been lifted. Unvaccinated persons caught in violation are fined up to 3,600 euros (Falor, 2022). Additionally, a violator can be punished for up to four violations in a year (Falor, 2022). Similarly, in Italy, the New York Times reported that under new COVID-19 containment rules, those who do not have a Green Pass, which is Italy’s health pass, must take unpaid leave. Workers who do not comply risk being fined up to 1,500 Euros.

### **Conclusion**

Our study advanced an argument on how cancel culture has impacted political participation and democratization in Europe in the era of COVID-19. Our argument which was based on the democratic principle of the right to dissent shows that the frenzy to quickly contain the COVID 19 pandemic created new conditions under which cancel culture rolled back democratic freedoms of participation such as right to dissent. The stifling of discourse in a democracy will naturally breed distrust and undermine the capacity for collective response to public health emergency.

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