

# How do algorithmic political inferences reshape democratic accountability and individual agency by preempting self-identified partisan alignment?

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## Executive Summary

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Algorithmic political inferences reshape democratic accountability and individual agency by preempting self-identified partisan alignment through a continuous feedback loop of prediction and identity formation. Evidence suggests these algorithms diminish individual agency by bypassing deliberative reasoning and actively shaping an "algorithmic self" that voters may mistake for their own authentic identity [2, 12]. This process creates a net democratic deficit by reducing cross-party empathy and undermining institutional trust, even as broader partisan structures largely remain intact and micro-targeting primarily supplements, rather than replaces, traditional coalition-building [1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 11].

## Key Findings

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### Algorithms Preempt by Predicting and Constituting Identity

Algorithms preempt self-identified partisan alignment by both predicting latent traits and constitutively shaping political identities. On the predictive side, political campaigns use extensive data from social media, public records, and data brokers to create detailed voter profiles that infer psychological characteristics, attitudes, and interests beyond basic demographics [5, 8, 9]. For example, data brokers categorize voters with labels like "Voter Fraud Belief" or generate "Covid concern scores" by analyzing cell phone location data [5]. On the constitutive side, AI systems actively participate in the formation of individual identity, where personal awareness and preferences are shaped by continuous feedback from algorithmic systems [2]. This "Algorithmic Self" emerges as content curation directly alters political attitudes; switching to an algorithmic feed on X shifted users' policy opinions toward more conservative positions [1]. Another study found that algorithmic exposure to antidemocratic attitudes and partisan animosity cooled feelings toward opposing parties by approximately two points within just one week, a shift comparable to three years of natural change [4].

## Psychographic Inference Diminishes Individual Agency

Psychographic inference diminishes individual agency by bypassing deliberative reasoning and appealing directly to non-rational vulnerabilities [8, 11, 12]. The causal chain from raw behavioral data to altered voting choices, which voters later mistake for their own, involves several stages:

1. **Data Collection:** Campaigns gather raw data from online behavior, social media, public records, and data brokers like Acxiom and Experian [5, 12].
2. **Psychographic Profiling:** Algorithms analyze this data to infer psychological traits, attitudes, and latent interests [8, 9].
3. **Targeted Persuasion:** Hyper-personalized political messages are delivered, designed to resonate with specific psychological vulnerabilities [5, 8, 12].
4. **Unconscious Influence:** These messages influence voter choices at an unconscious level, bypassing deliberative reasoning [8, 11, 12].
5. **Formation of the "Algorithmic Self":** Continuous feedback loops from AI systems actively shape personal awareness and preferences, which voters internalize as their authentic identity [2].
6. **Altered Voting Choices:** This shaping leads to measurable shifts in political attitudes and voting behavior, perceived as self-identified alignments rather than manipulated outcomes [1, 2, 4, 8].

## Algorithmic Feeds Actively Reshape Political Attitudes

Algorithmic feeds actively reshape users' policy attitudes and specific political feelings. Experiments on X (formerly Twitter) during 2023 and 2024 found that activating algorithmic feeds substantially shifted attitudes on policies and current political news toward more conservative opinions [1]. These feeds also altered feelings toward opposing parties by about two points within a single week, a change comparable to shifts typically observed over three years [4]. This indicates that inferred alignments can preempt self-identified partisan views and directly influence voter choices [8, 12]. In contrast, a large study of the 2020 US election on Facebook and Instagram found that replacing algorithmic feeds with chronological ones did not produce detectable effects on overall polarization or broad political attitudes [1, 7]. This suggests platform-specific effects or evolving algorithmic impacts over time.

## Algorithmic Inferences Create a Democratic Deficit

Algorithmic inferences create a net democratic deficit by trading personalized political relevance for reduced cross-party empathy, significantly undermining institutional trust. The personalization of political messages, driven by inferred psychological traits, directly reduces cross-party empathy; a 2024 study on X found that increased exposure to algorithmic partisan animosity cooled feelings toward opposing parties by about two points within one week [4]. Algorithms exacerbate this segregation by prioritizing like-minded and emotionally charged content, creating filter bubbles that restrict information diversity [1, 3, 11]. This trade-off is large enough to undermine institutional trust, as psychographic profiling appeals to non-rational vulnerabilities at an unconscious level [8, 11, 12]. The spread of algorithmically amplified misinformation and deepfakes further erodes public trust [9, 11, 12]. Additionally, higher algorithmic awareness among young adults leads to "algorithmic cynicism," causing resignation and disengagement from opposing viewpoints [3].

## **Impact on Broader Partisan Structures and Campaign Strategies**

While algorithms actively shape individual attitudes and optimize persuasion, broader partisan structures and human-led strategies remain largely intact. Algorithmic deployments primarily optimize turnout and persuasion through efficient targeting. For instance, during the 2021 German federal elections, over 70% of parties utilized user profiling, with far-right AfD ads performing almost six times more efficiently than competitors for the same budget [6]. Campaigns use psychographic profiles to deliver personalized messages that maximize engagement [5, 12]. However, the shift to preemptive alignment primarily supplements broad coalition-building rather than replacing shared policy mandates with micro-targeted promises [18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23]. Major campaigns still rely on human intelligence for strategy and emphasize broad, collective messages to unite voters, rather than solely on micro-targeted inferences [9].

## **Profiling Firms and Data Efficiency**

Several data brokers and profiling firms are identified as preempting partisan alignment through psychographic profiling and extensive data collection, including Acxiom, Experian, i360 (claiming data on 220 million voters), TargetSmart (claiming 171 million cell phone numbers), and El Toro (which identified over 130,000 IP-matched voter homes for targeted advertising) [5]. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is also cited as an example of AI-driven psychological profiling [5, 12]. While specific accuracy rates or error margins compared to traditional polling are not provided, the efficiency of algorithmic

targeting is evident. For example, AfD ads in the 2021 German federal elections were almost six times more efficient than competitors for the same budget [6].

## Demographic and Geographic Divergence

The divergence between algorithmically inferred partisan alignment and self-identified party affiliation varies across demographic cohorts and geographic regions. Younger generations, such as Generation Z, show higher rates of self-identified political independence (52% in 2022, rising to 56% in 2026 Gallup data) compared to Baby Boomers (33% in 2022) [10, 11, 14]. Despite this, algorithmic inferences based on voting records reveal that independent "leaners" demonstrate partisan loyalty equivalent to identified partisans [17]. Geographically, urban areas lean Democratic (53% Democratic/leaning), while rural areas lean Republican (41% Republican/leaning) [13]. Algorithmic tracking of residential sorting indicates that geographic partisan segregation is driven more by generational turnover, with young voters registering as Democrats in urban-trending counties, than by physical relocation of voters to match existing preferences [15, 16].

## Implications

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The pervasive use of algorithmic political inferences has significant implications for democratic processes. By actively shaping political identities and attitudes at an unconscious level, these systems challenge the traditional understanding of voter autonomy and deliberative democracy. The formation of an "algorithmic self" means that citizens' political preferences may be influenced by curated content rather than solely by conscious reflection, potentially leading to a less informed and more easily manipulated electorate. This shift necessitates greater transparency in algorithmic design and data usage to allow citizens to understand how their political identities are being constructed. The measurable reduction in cross-party empathy and the erosion of institutional trust suggest a need for regulatory frameworks that mitigate the negative societal impacts of algorithmic amplification of partisan animosity and misinformation. While algorithms enhance campaign efficiency and supplement coalition-building, their capacity to fragment shared realities and bypass conscious deliberation poses a fundamental challenge to the accountability of representatives to a truly self-identifying electorate.

## Limitations and Caveats

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Direct data for global, entity-agnostic, and period-agnostic conclusions is limited, with much of the evidence drawn from specific election cycles (e.g., 2020, 2021, 2023, 2024 US and German elections) or platform-specific experiments (e.g., X, Facebook, Instagram). While these provide analogous evidence, the generalizability to all global contexts and entities should be considered with caution. The research identifies several political profiling firms but lacks specific accuracy rates, error margins, or confidence intervals for their predictions compared to traditional polling methods. Furthermore, while campaigns heavily use psychographics, measuring the direct causal impact on individual voting behavior or the precise shifts in democratic accountability mechanisms (e.g., altered legislative roll-call behavior or measurable incumbency turnover) remains difficult, with some digital targeting strategies noted as imprecise and overstated [2, 4, 8]. The long-term effects of continuous algorithmic exposure on political identity and democratic stability are still emerging and require further longitudinal study.

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