

How does the deployment of coordinated fake grassroots crowds distort the feedback loops of democratic governance, thereby shifting political power structures from organic public consensus to manufactured legitimacy?

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Executive Summary

The deployment of coordinated fake grassroots crowds fundamentally distorts democratic feedback loops by replacing organic public consensus with algorithmically amplified synthetic signals, thereby shifting political power from genuine constituent needs to manufactured legitimacy. This process hijacks algorithmic visibility, triggers human bandwagon effects, and compels policymakers to prioritize fabricated mandates, ultimately eroding institutional trust and fostering political polarization. While these campaigns consolidate political power by creating synthetic mandates, they simultaneously degrade the long-term quality of democratic governance by fragmenting shared reality and making governance dependent on continuous information campaigns rather than organic deliberation.

Key Findings

Replacement of Organic Consensus with Synthetic Signals

Coordinated fake grassroots crowds fundamentally replace organic public consensus with algorithmically amplified synthetic signals, forcing elites to prioritize fabricated mandates over genuine constituent needs [5, 10]. This "manufactured legitimacy" involves hidden information campaigns that simulate genuine citizen behavior through incentivized human agents and AI bots, creating the impression of widespread support for specific issues even when it is fabricated [2, 3, 10, 12]. By flooding platforms with synchronized messages, these campaigns distort social media discourse and artificially manufacture public opinion [2, 10]. This process inverts the causal direction of governance, as synthetic signals influence policymakers to favor specific political agendas under deceptive pretenses, rather than public sentiment driving policy [10]. Social bots, for instance, have been shown to sway elections by inflating candidates' popularity and

undermining democratic discourse, ensuring political outcomes reflect algorithmic amplification over authentic voter preferences [9].

Hijacking Algorithmic Visibility and Triggering Bandwagon Effects

Fake crowds successfully distort democratic feedback loops by first hijacking algorithmic visibility and then triggering human bandwagon effects. This begins with synchronized posting and bot networks that flood platforms with identical messages to jumpstart viral momentum [2, 7, 8]. Automated accounts aggressively spread links from low-credibility sources early in an article's life cycle, exploiting platform algorithms that prioritize engagement and ensure users encounter similar views [1, 7, 11]. For example, during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election, 159 coordinated actors operated across multiple networks to amplify specific narratives and manufacture artificial engagement [6]. These amplified signals then trigger human bandwagon effects by bombarding users with high volumes of fake content that exploit existing psychological orientations [8]. Humans unwittingly reshare this bot-jumpstarted content, creating a false impression of widespread grassroots support or dissent [7, 10]. This exposure fosters group polarization, where moderate attitudes become more extreme after interacting with coordinated content, leading to stauncher commitment to specific political groups [1]. A March 2016 algorithm change on Twitter, for instance, shifted timelines to prioritize popular content, increasing likes by 20% and retweets by 15% within 30 days, which caused users to conform to dominant viewpoints [15].

Compelling Policymakers with Synthetic Mandates

The manufactured consensus compels policymakers to treat synthetic signals as reliable mandates. Astroturfing deceives the public about their own views and directly influences policymakers to favor certain political agendas under deceptive pretenses [10]. This enables "legitimacy politics," where elites manufacture the popular legitimacy of policies and bypass organic public consensus, ultimately shifting political power structures and degrading democratic decision-making [5, 10]. The distortion of democratic feedback is driven by both the sheer volume of coordinated accounts and their strategic placement at key information bottlenecks [7, 11]. Automated accounts aggressively spread links from false or low-quality sources early in an article's life cycle to jumpstart viral momentum, which humans then unwittingly reshare [7]. This strategic targeting creates content incubators on alternative platforms like Gab and Minds, where information originates before being distributed to broader audiences via networks like Telegram and the

Fediverse [6]. By concentrating fake crowds at these early bottlenecks, astroturfing campaigns hijack algorithmic visibility and trigger human bandwagon effects, creating a false impression of widespread public support [10].

Erosion of Institutional Trust and Fostering Polarization

While manufactured legitimacy consolidates political power by creating synthetic mandates, it consistently erodes institutional trust and fosters polarization [2, 10]. By disguising the real sponsors of these campaigns, astroturfing diminishes faith in online platforms and political institutions [10]. AI-enabled tools systematically distort political information environments, which erodes public trust and fosters polarization, ultimately degrading democratic decision-making [7]. The accumulation of manufactured legitimacy creates a false consensus that masks societal divisions while simultaneously fragmenting shared reality to produce polarization [1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 10]. This synthetic support drowns out honest conversations and deceives the public about their own views, masking underlying societal divisions and delaying necessary policy corrections [10]. However, this process also actively fragments shared reality, leading to group polarization where moderate attitudes become more extreme [1]. The result is voters becoming more vigilant and entrenched in their respective camps, deepening political hostility and conflict [1, 10].

Shift to Centralized Data Strategists and Continuous Information Campaigns

The deployment of coordinated fake grassroots crowds shifts political power from decentralized civic organizations to centralized data strategists, making democratic governance structurally dependent on continuous information campaigns rather than organic deliberation [2, 5, 7, 10]. Astroturfing initiatives are centrally coordinated campaigns that use human agents and AI bots to simulate genuine citizen behavior and create the illusion of widespread grassroots support [2, 10]. These campaigns operate through synchronized posting, automation, and the deployment of millions of synthetic identities to flood digital platforms with biased information [2, 7, 10]. This structural shift makes governance dependent on manufactured legitimacy, as false news spreads six times faster than truthful news on social media [4, 7]. Digital platforms and algorithms amplify this dependency by creating echo chambers and prioritizing emotionally charged content, accelerating political polarization and eroding public trust [1, 7, 10].

Measurable Impacts on Policy and Elections

Coordinated fake crowds have measurably impacted policy outcomes and election results. In a 2020 analysis of Spanish political debates, astroturfed messages accounted for over 85,000 of 89,000 tweets, comprising 95.5% of total engagement and vastly exceeding the 4.5% organic share [10]. During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, algorithm-controlled bots constituted 8.64% of active, politically-oriented Twitter accounts [12], while broader estimates indicate that approximately 25% of all Twitter activity is bot-driven [7]. This manufactured volume correlates directly with altered election results, as bots inflate candidate popularity and shift public sentiments by drowning out honest conversations [9, 10]. The distortion of public opinion and the proliferation of AI-driven disinformation prompted the adoption of the EU's AI Act in 2024, which established a risk-based framework banning unacceptable AI uses and imposing strict transparency mandates enforceable starting in 2026 [7]. Canada also proposed its Artificial Intelligence and Data Act in June 2022 to address these challenges [7].

Implications

The pervasive deployment of coordinated fake grassroots crowds has profound implications for democratic governance. It fundamentally undermines the principle of public consensus as the basis for political legitimacy, replacing it with manufactured support that can be centrally controlled and algorithmically amplified. This shift means that policymakers risk responding to fabricated mandates rather than genuine constituent needs, leading to policies that may not reflect the true will or best interests of the electorate. The erosion of institutional trust and the acceleration of political polarization further destabilize democratic systems, making populations more susceptible to manipulation and less capable of engaging in constructive deliberation. Ultimately, democratic governance becomes structurally reliant on continuous, often deceptive, information campaigns, diminishing the role of organic civic engagement and empowering centralized data strategists and political actors who can effectively deploy these tools.

Limitations and Caveats

The provided research offers substantial evidence on the mechanisms and impacts of manufactured legitimacy, but specific quantitative details regarding the costs of these campaigns and precise bot-to-human cascade ratios remain unquantified. While the scale of synthetic identity fraud and the growth of AI-driven fake news sites indicate substantial financial investment and output [7], the exact dollar cost per "manufactured consensus

unit" compared to organic campaign spending is not specified. Furthermore, no explicit named platform audit or viral campaign was detailed that quantitatively tracked a specific "bot-to-human cascade ratio" to prove the bandwagon effect in practice [13]. Research instead quantified bot scale, algorithmic amplification, and simulated bot networks to demonstrate how manufactured legitimacy shifts public consensus [14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

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