

How does the secret manipulation of votes by AI alter democratic accountability and reshape power structures in governance?

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Executive Summary

The secret manipulation of votes by AI primarily reshapes power structures in governance by concentrating influence over information flows within a few dominant private technology platforms, effectively turning them into unaccountable gatekeepers of public discourse [6, 10]. These platforms leverage AI-driven algorithms to curate content, amplify specific narratives, and microtarget voters, thereby engineering political outcomes and attitudes [2, 6, 9, 10]. This structural shift fundamentally alters democratic accountability by degrading shared epistemic foundations, making it difficult for elected officials to discern genuine constituent sentiment amidst a flood of synthetic content and for citizens to hold governors accountable to a common, verifiable reality [4, 6].

Key Findings

Reshaping Power Structures Through Algorithmic Control

The degradation of shared epistemic foundations and the reshaping of power structures result from the interplay between the volumetric overload of AI-generated synthetic content and the structural control exerted by private platform algorithms. Western big tech companies, including Meta, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Google, hold near-monopoly power over AI, social media, and big data analytics, giving them outsize influence over public discourse [6]. These platforms' algorithmic curation mechanisms structurally prioritize manipulated engagement metrics over truthful discourse, actively engineering political outcomes [2, 6]. For instance, TikTok's algorithms have been shown to amplify content favorable to specific political candidates, such as a far-right, pro-Kremlin presidential candidate in Romania [6]. Similarly, research indicates that X's (formerly Twitter) feed algorithm can shift political attitudes [10, 11].

AI-driven algorithms intensify societal polarization by reinforcing echo chambers on social media [9]. Platforms utilize "demos scraping" to collect citizens' digital footprints and

deliver tailored narratives that exploit individual biases, making personalized disinformation significantly more effective at persuasion than generic propaganda [2, 6]. This targeted approach yields a threefold higher conversion rate for personalized ads compared to traditional methods [2]. The concentration of power in these private technology platforms means they control which information reaches voters, effectively placing unaccountable tech executives in control of the public sphere and monetizing the confusion they create [2, 6].

Erosion of Democratic Accountability Through Epistemic Degradation

AI fundamentally alters democratic accountability by dissolving the shared epistemic foundation necessary for legitimate representation. Generative AI produces enormous volumes of synthetic content that flood media landscapes, making it increasingly difficult for humans to verify information [4]. By 2024, AI-generated news sites experienced a tenfold increase, with over 1,200 such sites identified, capable of flooding the information sphere with low-cost propaganda [2]. Over 12.8 million fake personas have been deployed in disinformation campaigns, and nearly 50% of all web traffic is non-human, with 30-37% attributed to "bad bots" [2]. Meta, for example, reported disabling over 1.3 billion fake accounts quarterly [2].

This volumetric noise overwhelms human verification limits, directly impacting democratic accountability by distorting genuine constituent sentiment [4]. State legislators have struggled to distinguish human-written advocacy letters from GPT-3-generated ones, demonstrating how easily fabricated feedback can mimic real public opinion and skew legislative perceptions of public opinion [4]. When public comment processes are flooded with limitless unique AI-generated comments, agencies find it nearly impossible to learn about genuine public preferences, severing the link between representation and actual voter sentiment [4]. This distortion occurs at a scale and speed that can cause elections to cease providing a genuine mechanism of accountability, even if the physical counting of ballots remains mechanically sound [4].

Limited Efficacy of Persuasion and Regulation

While AI manipulation can engineer measurable attitude shifts in voters, its impact primarily amplifies historically limited persuasion capabilities rather than causing a permanent restructuring of democratic accountability. Deepfakes, for instance, influence public perception even when viewers are explicitly warned they are fake; 53.3% of

participants in one study still believed a fictional local official was guilty based on a deepfake video despite receiving transparency warnings [1]. AI-driven microtargeting is more effective at persuasion than generic propaganda, with personalized ads yielding a threefold higher conversion rate [2].

However, a meta-analysis of 40 field experiments found an average persuasive effect of zero in general elections, indicating that mass persuasion remains inherently difficult regardless of the tools used [8]. Voters are generally resistant to changing their views, with socioeconomic, cultural, and personal factors typically outweighing the influence of AI-generated content [8].

Emerging regulatory and detection frameworks, such as mandatory watermarking and platform transparency mandates, aim to restore epistemic conditions but risk creating a verification dependency that consolidates power among proprietary infrastructure controllers [2, 5, 6]. The effectiveness of transparency measures is limited, as explicit warnings about deepfakes are only partially effective [1]. The race between AI generation and detection is fiercely competitive, with generation frequently outpacing detection capabilities [6]. Many advanced detection tools are not publicly accessible to avoid empowering malicious actors, meaning interpretive standards and verification mechanisms remain controlled by a handful of Western big tech companies [6]. This reliance on proprietary systems and the limited efficacy of simple transparency warnings suggest that these frameworks may further erode democratic trust by shifting structural accountability toward corporate algorithmic arbiters [4, 6, 9].

Regulatory Responses and Challenges

Between 2024 and 2026, several jurisdictions have enacted or proposed measures to address AI-generated synthetic content in elections:

- The **EU AI Act**, adopted in 2024 and largely enforceable starting in 2026, classifies AI systems intended to influence elections as "high-risk," mandating transparency by requiring generative AI providers to disclose when content is AI-generated [2, 5, 9].
- **South Korea's Public Official Election Act**, amended in December 2023 and effective for the April 10, 2024 general election, bans the production, editing, distribution, screening, or posting of deepfakes for election campaigning during the 90 days prior to voting [9]. Enforcement involves legal changes, resourcing national regulators, and engaging social media companies for rapid takedowns [9].
- The **United Nations** adopted a resolution in March 2024 promoting "safe, secure,

trustworthy" AI systems to mitigate foreign information manipulation and domestic election interference [5].

- **Australia** released a paper in September 2024 acknowledging that existing regulatory tools are not fit for purpose for AI risks in elections, with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) pursuing non-legislative options like a digital literacy campaign and a Defending Democracy Unit [9].

- In the **United States**, the Protect Elections from Deceptive AI Act was introduced in December 2023, and California's Digital Content Provenance Standards bill proposes mandating watermarks for AI content [6, 9].

Despite these efforts, the challenge remains significant. The inability of governing bodies to effectively filter digital noise means that synthetic flooding successfully distorts the informational foundation upon which democratic accountability relies [4].

Implications

The secret manipulation of votes by AI has profound implications for governance, primarily by shifting the locus of power to private technology platforms and eroding the foundational mechanisms of democratic accountability. The concentration of control over information flows within a few dominant tech companies means that these entities, rather than elected governments, increasingly dictate the terms of public discourse and influence political outcomes through opaque algorithmic curation [6, 10]. This creates a governance model where unaccountable private actors hold significant sway over democratic processes, challenging the traditional understanding of who holds power in a representative system.

For democratic accountability, the primary implication is a severe degradation of the feedback loop between citizens and their representatives. When AI-generated content can mimic genuine constituent sentiment and flood communication channels, policymakers struggle to discern authentic public opinion, leading to decisions based on manipulated data rather than the true will of the people [4]. This epistemic fragmentation undermines the very premise of representation, as citizens cannot effectively hold officials accountable if the shared reality upon which accountability depends is constantly being distorted [4]. Furthermore, the limited effectiveness of transparency warnings and the proprietary nature of detection tools mean that voters remain dependent on the very platforms that facilitate manipulation, reinforcing the power imbalance and potentially fostering deeper distrust in democratic institutions [1, 6].

Limitations and Caveats

The available research extensively documents the mechanisms and potential impacts of AI manipulation on democratic accountability and power structures. However, there are limitations regarding specific, named historical cases where AI-generated volumetric overload or algorithmic curation measurably distorted policymaker perception of constituent sentiment and directly altered a legislative outcome [3, 7]. While instances of AI use in campaigns are numerous, direct causal data linking specific campaign-level AI flooding to subsequent polling shifts or policy outcomes for those parties is not consistently available [4, 8, 9]. The closest example, the 2017 FCC net neutrality public comment period, involved significant bot activity, but regulators detected and uncovered the "astroturfing" effort, preventing it from measurably distorting the legislative outcome based on that specific deception [3, 7].

Additionally, while the research identifies specific private technology platforms as dominant in algorithmic curation, precise current market valuations or user penetration rates relevant to recent election cycles were not consistently provided across all sources. Similarly, detailed information regarding the specific cost structures or precise detection accuracy rates of proprietary verification frameworks deployed by these platforms is largely absent from the reviewed literature.

Sources

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