

# **The Rise of the Populist Algorithm as a Threat to Free and Fair Democratic Politics**

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## Abstract:

Digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped the structure of democratic politics. Whereas traditional democratic systems relied on party-based representation, policy alignment, and institutional accountability, contemporary political communication is increasingly governed by algorithms that prioritise engagement over deliberation. This shift has transformed politics into a system driven by visibility, emotion, and identity, where leaders operate as brands and citizens engage as followers.

This paper argues that social media platforms incentivise a form of ‘*algorithmic populism*,’ in which emotionally charged, simplified, and polarising content is systematically amplified. As a result, complex policy discourse is structurally disadvantaged, while political actors who adopt performative, conflict-driven communication styles gain disproportionate visibility and influence. The rise of performance politics is further reinforced by the ability of leaders to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with mass audiences, creating continuous feedback loops in which messaging is constantly adapted to maximise engagement.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks, including Max Weber’s distinction between charismatic and legal-rational authority, the paper demonstrates how digital environments have transformed political legitimacy. Charismatic authority, once episodic and unstable, is now sustained through constant online visibility and algorithmic reinforcement. Across diverse political contexts, from the United States and the United Kingdom to Brazil, India, and El Salvador, a consistent pattern emerges: the personalisation of power, the erosion of institutional mediation, and the growing centrality of emotional identification in political life.

These dynamics extend beyond leadership and reshape citizen behaviour. Social media ecosystems contribute to rising affective polarisation, where political affiliation becomes a core component of identity and opposition is framed as a moral threat. At the same time, the same platforms that sustain charismatic leadership also facilitate rapid mobilisation, amplifying grievances and accelerating collective action. In this environment, politics becomes increasingly structured by emotional intensity, viral momentum, and continuous visibility.

The implications for democratic governance are significant. Traditional mechanisms of accountability, including media scrutiny and institutional oversight, are weakened as scandals and criticism become sources of visibility rather than constraint. Political competition shifts away from policy-based debate toward identity-driven conflict, while governance itself risks being subordinated to perception management and short-term responsiveness. Rather than collapsing outright, democratic

systems face the risk of gradual erosion, in which formal institutions persist but lose substantive effectiveness.

To address these challenges, this paper calls for a combination of platform regulation, institutional adaptation, and civic intervention. Key recommendations include increasing algorithmic transparency, strengthening independent media ecosystems, regulating digital political communication, and investing in media literacy to reduce susceptibility to manipulation. Ultimately, preserving democratic governance in the digital age requires recognising that the rise of populism is not merely a shift in communication, but a structural transformation in how political power is produced, performed, and sustained.

## **1. The Problem**

Contemporary democratic politics is increasingly shaped by digital platforms whose underlying architectures prioritise engagement over deliberation. In contrast to earlier models of political communication, where information flowed through mediated and relatively structured channels, today's information environment is dominated by algorithmically curated feeds designed to maximise visibility, interaction, and retention. This shift has transformed political behaviour at both the elite and citizen level, restructuring not only how politics is communicated, but how it is understood, evaluated, and enacted.

A growing share of the global public now accesses political information through social media. By 2018, there were approximately 4.1 billion internet users worldwide - around 53% of the global population - and 3.2 billion social media users, representing roughly 42% of the world (Flew and Iosifidis, 2019; We Are Social, 2018). Of these, 39% were active mobile users, meaning that political content is not only widespread but constantly accessible (and mostly unfiltered or without expert review). As a result, virtually every contemporary election cycle unfolds within an environment where information flows are shaped by a few-click, share-driven logic. Political messaging is no longer encountered primarily through structured formats such as party manifestos, televised debates, or print journalism, but through personalised, rapidly updating feeds in which visibility is determined by engagement metrics.

This transformation accelerated sharply in the early 2010s with the global spread of smartphones and mobile broadband. These developments fundamentally altered the conditions of political communication by making 'share-worthiness' the primary metric through which content is ranked and distributed. In this environment, content that provokes immediate emotional reactions, such as outrage, fear, or affirmation of identity, gains a structural advantage over more complex,

nuanced, or policy-oriented discussion. The result is not simply a change in tone, but a reconfiguration of incentives: political actors are rewarded not for clarity or accuracy, but for their ability to generate attention and interaction at scale.

Rather than facilitating informed choice based on policy preferences, social media environments incentivise forms of communication that are emotional, simplified, and conflict-driven - to the point that unbiased information isn't even recognized, let alone trusted. Messages that reduce complexity, emphasise moral binaries, or frame issues in terms of '*us versus them*' are more likely to circulate widely. At the same time, these platforms contribute to the personalisation of political authority. Leaders are no longer mediated primarily through institutions or parties, but are instead presented directly to audiences as individual figures whose visibility and relatability become central to their legitimacy. This dynamic encourages the development of leader-centric political identities, where loyalty is directed toward personalities rather than programmes.

In parallel, there is a gradual displacement of institutional trust by forms of leader-based loyalty. As political communication becomes increasingly direct and continuous, citizens engage with leaders in ways that resemble ongoing relationships rather than periodic evaluation. The authority of institutions, such as parliaments, parties, and traditional media, becomes less central in shaping political perception, while the perceived authenticity and visibility of individual actors gain importance. In this sense, the structure of political engagement begins to resemble a system of followership, where attachment is sustained through repetition, familiarity, and emotional resonance.

This logic of followership does not only extend to conventional political actors. When institutional credentials, policy expertise, and mediated gatekeeping lose their authority as filters for political relevance, visibility and perceived authenticity become transferable currencies. Celebrities, influencers, and entertainment personalities with large followings cultivated outside politics can find their political opinions treated as commentary worthy of consideration, their candidate endorsements amplified as meaningful political signals, and in some cases their own candidacies taken seriously, not despite their lack of political experience, but because outsider status reads as authenticity within a system that increasingly values performative connection over institutional qualification or expertise. The same platform dynamics that allow political leaders to bypass traditional media and build direct, parasocial relationships with their followers also enable figures whose fame was earned through lifestyle content, sport, or popular culture to carry that audience into the political domain, further dissolving the distinction between political leadership and general public visibility.

As a result, politics shifts from a system grounded in representation and accountability to one increasingly organised around performance, identity, and spectacle. Visibility and narrative begin to outweigh competence and substantive policy outcomes as criteria for political success. Political actors

operate within a continuous performance cycle in which messaging is constantly adapted in response to audience feedback, while citizens encounter politics as a stream of content competing for attention alongside entertainment, lifestyle, and personal communication. The boundaries between information, persuasion, and performance become increasingly blurred and civilians still pay the price.

This transformation introduces a fundamental structural tension. Democratic governance, in its ideal form, depends on complexity, negotiation, and long-term decision-making. It requires the capacity to weigh competing interests, engage with detailed policy trade-offs, and sustain institutional processes that may not produce immediate or emotionally satisfying outcomes. By contrast, digital platforms reward immediacy, emotional clarity, and polarisation. They privilege content that can be quickly understood, easily shared, and strongly felt, often at the expense of nuance and deliberation.

The implications of this are significant. When the visibility of political content is determined by its capacity to generate emotional reactions rather than its substantive value and veracity, the informational environment in which citizens make decisions becomes systematically distorted. Complex policy issues are less likely to gain traction, while simplified and emotionally charged narratives dominate public discourse. In such a context, political competition risks shifting away from debates over policy and governance toward contests over attention, identity, and narrative control - politics becomes about personality and not ideology, let alone change and improvement.

Ultimately, the problem is not simply that social media changes how politics is communicated, but that it reshapes the conditions through which political power is produced, obtained, and sustained. As engagement-driven systems become the primary arena for political interaction, they redefine what it means to be an effective political actor and an informed citizen. The challenge, therefore, is not only one of communication, but of democratic integrity: whether systems designed to maximise attention can coexist with the requirements of deliberative, accountable governance.

## **2. Key Evidence / Findings**

### ***A. Algorithmic Incentives Favour Populist Communication***

Platform design systematically favours populist communication by making visibility contingent on engagement rather than informational value. Metrics such as clicks, shares, and watch time structurally advantage messages that provoke immediate emotional reactions over those requiring reflection or analytical depth. This produces what can be described as algorithmic populism - an environment in which emotional clarity, moral polarisation, and simplified narratives consistently outperform reasoned argument.

Empirical synthesis of 188 studies confirms that populist actors strategically exploit these affordances through slogan-like messaging, memes, live video, and highly personalised formats, each well-suited to triggering high-arousal emotions. The analysis shows that roughly 27% of the content centres on emotional appeals and political mobilisation. Within this cluster, anger emerges as one of the most significant predictors of populist support and the most commonly used rhetorical strategy among populist actors (Bliuc et al., 2026). Additionally, algorithmic recommender systems, which are designed to prioritise content that is likely to be shared, intensify these patterns. Content that provokes strong emotional reactions is more likely to be promoted, whereas more nuanced or information-dense material tends to receive less visibility (therefore less comments, less likes, and pushed less towards users' feeds).

This algorithmic gatekeeping contributes directly to political polarisation, the rapid spread of misinformation, and pressure on journalistic practices as news organisations adapt to the same attention economy. Feedback loops between user behaviour and platform optimisation reinforce these outcomes: users engage with emotionally resonant material in ways that signal preferences to the system, which in turn promotes similar content, accelerating echo chamber formation. The emotional logic of populist communication operates across three interrelated levels: contextual polarisation, actor-driven affective narratives, and audience-based collective emotions, and these dynamics hold consistently across platforms regardless of ideological orientation or even ownership of the platforms themselves. Without interventions such as greater algorithmic transparency, redesigned engagement metrics, and media literacy initiatives, the current trajectory points toward continued entrenchment of systems that privilege emotional intensity over deliberative quality.

### ***B. Rise of Performance Politics***

Leadership is now judged less on governance outcomes than on the capacity to generate visibility, shape narratives, and sustain audience attention, with political capital measured through impressions, shares, and follower counts rather than legislative success. With approximately 4.1 billion internet users and 3.2 billion social media users globally, politics unfolds within a mediated, attention-driven environment where platforms enable direct leader-to-citizen communication that bypasses traditional gatekeepers such as journalists and institutional intermediaries. This dynamic was vividly illustrated during the 2016 US presidential election campaigns, when Donald Trump's personal Twitter account generated billions of impressions in a single month while his formal policy proposals published through institutional channels attracted significantly lower engagement (Lacatus, 2018). The 2016 U.S. presidential campaign marked the rapid and highly unusual ascent of Donald J. Trump, a development arguably unmatched in American political history in both its style and its direct,

consistent appeal to a loyal support base large enough to secure an Electoral College victory. This mode of communication was most closely associated, though not exclusively, with the social media platform Twitter (Stolee and Caton, 2025). The disparity reflects a structural reality: audiences consistently respond more strongly to personalised, immediate, emotionally resonant content than to detailed policy information.

The result is a continuous performance cycle in which leaders produce a steady stream of content, monitor real-time engagement metrics, and adjust messaging accordingly, often prioritizing short-term responsiveness over long-term policy coherence. Within this cycle, the appearance of attentiveness becomes as consequential as actual effectiveness; symbolic gestures, posts, and performative interactions increasingly substitute for institutional responsiveness. Platform algorithms amplify this logic by rewarding emotional, identity-driven, and conflict-oriented messages, encouraging leaders to cultivate distinct online personas designed to sustain audience loyalty. As performance becomes central to political life, the boundary between governance and communication blurs, and institutional processes struggle to compete within the attention economy. Leadership is ultimately evaluated not through the lens of competence or substantive outcomes, but through the ability to perform visibility, responsiveness, and connection in a digital environment where narrative coherence and audience engagement can outweigh substantive policy.

### ***C. Transformation of Political Authority (Weber Updated)***

Political authority is shifting from legal-rational legitimacy toward a form sustained through digitally mediated charisma. While traditional democratic systems ground power in institutional rules and formal accountability, legitimacy is now increasingly derived from a leader's ability to remain continuously visible, emotionally resonant, and personally engaging within digital spaces. This updates Weber's concept of charismatic authority: charisma is no longer an inherent or stable trait but something continuously produced and reinforced through algorithmic systems, where visibility metrics and audience feedback construct and validate a leader's appeal in real time. Authority thus becomes continuous and performative, requiring ongoing reaffirmation through digital interaction rather than being anchored in office.

Political leaders increasingly function as individualised brands rather than representatives of broader institutions; their communication styles and visual identities are curated to foster relatability and loyalty, shifting the locus of trust from abstract institutions toward individual figures who appear accessible. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which prominence itself becomes a source of legitimacy: leaders who successfully capture attention are further amplified by platform algorithms, consolidating influence regardless of governance outcomes. Citizens engage with politics in ways similar to consumer behaviour: following, endorsing, and interacting with leaders through

personalised, affective attachment rather than through representation and accountability. Legal-rational structures remain formally intact, but they are increasingly complemented, and at times overshadowed, by a model of authority sustained through the dynamics of digital visibility.

#### ***D. Global Empirical Patterns (Yilmaz et al., 2026)***

This pattern is not confined to any single national context. Systematic cross-national research spanning the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, India, El Salvador, and European democracies reveals a consistent logic beneath varied ideological surfaces. In the United States and Western Europe, right-wing populists compress messages into concise, adversarial narratives and rely on platform-native formats such as memes and live video to sustain attention. In Brazil, leaders deploy leader-centric "politainment," (politics and entertainment) blending religious symbolism with entertainment-style broadcasts to construct cultural boundaries around 'the people.' In India, online political mobilisation is driven by narratives centred on Hindu identity and majority-based moral authority, working with coordinated digital networks linked to ruling political structures. In contexts from Turkey to Eastern Europe, the same structural incentives produce state-aligned trolling and securitisation appeals. Despite these local adaptations, the underlying mechanism is identical: leaders bypass traditional gatekeepers, communicate directly through emotionally charged, personalised formats, and frame politics as a moral struggle between ordinary people and a corrupt elite. Whether the ideological content is nationalist, religious, or anti-establishment, platform incentives reward the same communication style - visibility depends on engagement, and engagement depends on affective intensity rather than policy substance. Across all examined contexts, loyalty is cultivated through identity and emotional resonance, not governance outcomes, producing a convergent model of personalised, media-driven political authority despite diverging ideological starting points.

#### ***E. Political Fandom and Affective Polarisation***

Citizen behaviour has shifted from policy evaluation toward identity-based attachments that resemble fandom. Political allegiance is experienced as an extension of personal identity rather than a rational choice, reinforced by algorithmically curated content that continuously affirms existing beliefs and strengthens in-group cohesion. This produces defensive loyalty: supporters justify or dismiss actions by their preferred leaders not on substantive merit, but on perceived implications for group identity, treating criticism as a personal attack.

Simultaneously, political opposition is moralised, as opponents are framed as threats to core values rather than holders of different views, reducing the space for compromise. Politics increasingly functions as a site of group-based alignment and hostility, where unwavering support, emotional investment, and antagonism toward rivals mirror the behaviours of fan cultures. Disagreement,

fundamental to democratic politics, becomes difficult to sustain constructively as the boundary between political preference and personal identity blurs.

### ***F. Digital Mobilisation and Feedback Loops***

Digital platforms have reshaped political mobilisation by accelerating information circulation and lowering barriers to collective action. Visibility of injustice, through images, videos, and narratives of grievance, triggers strong emotional reactions such as anger and moral outrage, which motivate individuals to engage, share, and organise rather than retreat into apathy. Platforms serve a dual function: they reinforce the presence of charismatic leaders through constant visibility and direct communication, while simultaneously providing infrastructure for decentralised protest movements to emerge without formal leadership structures. Both dynamics are governed by feedback loops: content that generates strong engagement and is algorithmically amplified, increasing its reach and its capacity to provoke further response. Political momentum becomes tied to virality and emotional intensity rather than sustained deliberation or organisational capacity, producing rapid cycles of reaction and amplification that can determine political impact more decisively than conventional organising.

### ***G. Erosion of Democratic Accountability***

The digital age has transformed political communication in ways that weaken democratic accountability. Traditional mechanisms such as investigative journalism and institutional oversight are now filtered through platforms and algorithms that don't favour critical evaluation. As a result, political scandals are often treated as content, spreading quickly but gaining attention based on their emotional impact rather than their seriousness.

Outrage, once a force for holding leaders accountable, can now increase their visibility, as algorithmic systems amplify highly engaging content, even when it is negative. This allows political actors to benefit from controversy instead of being penalised. At the same time, leaders with large online followings can bypass traditional scrutiny, challenge critical narratives, and mobilise supporters to defend them.

Consequently, accountability becomes more performative than substantive, where public reactions create the appearance of scrutiny without necessarily leading to real consequences or meaningful change.

## **3. Implications**

Digital political environments are reshaping democracy in several significant ways. First, decision-making is increasingly driven by emotion rather than reason. Instead of evaluating policies based on evidence or long-term impact, voters are more likely to rely on identity, personal values, and emotionally resonant narratives. This makes political behaviour more predictable and less responsive to new information, while also enabling political actors to strategically target emotions such as fear or anger to reinforce support.

Second, institutional power is weakening. Authority is shifting from formal structures, like parliaments and political parties, towards individual leaders with strong - especially digital - presence. These leaders can bypass traditional oversight, challenge criticism, and mobilise loyal audiences, reducing the effectiveness of institutional accountability.

Third, political discourse is becoming more polarised and hostile. Opposing views are increasingly framed as moral threats rather than legitimate disagreements, limiting opportunities for compromise. As a result, politics becomes more adversarial, with individuals and groups entrenched in rigid positions.

Fourth, digital platforms incentivise low-quality communication. Content that is simple, emotional, and engaging is amplified, while complex, evidence-based discussions receive less attention. This undermines the overall quality of political information available to the public.

Fifth, governance itself is being reshaped. Political leaders are incentivised to prioritise visibility and engagement over effective policy-making. Short-term reactions and media presence often take precedence over long-term planning and institutional reform.

Finally, these dynamics contribute to a gradual 'hollowing out' of democracy. While formal institutions remain in place, their ability to meaningfully influence political outcomes declines. Democratic systems may continue to function in appearance, but their core principles - representation, accountability, and informed participation - are increasingly weakened.

#### **4. Additional**

While much of the literature highlights the potentially corrosive effects of algorithmically mediated political communication on democratic processes, several scholars urge a more cautious and conditional interpretation of these dynamics. For instance, Metzler and Garcia (2023) argue that the relationship between algorithms, echo chambers, and political polarisation is not straightforward, noting that "evidence neither shows that algorithms cause echo chambers, nor that echo chambers cause polarization," and emphasising that "the role of algorithms in these phenomena is far from

straightforward”. Similarly, Yilmaz et al. (2026) stress the limitations of existing research, pointing out that “the evidence base remains largely correlational, and causal links between online populist communication and democratic backsliding are still underdeveloped,” while also arguing that “digital populism is neither inherently democratic nor inherently anti-democratic, but contingent on ideological orientation, institutional context and position vis-a-vis power”. In addition, work by Bliuc et al. complicates the emphasis on negative effects by showing that digital political mobilisation also relies on positive emotions such as hope and pride, suggesting a more varied emotional repertoire than commonly assumed - e.g. anger and rage. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that the relationship between algorithms, emotion, and democratic outcomes is more contingent and less deterministic than a purely harm-focused account implies.

## **5. Policy Recommendations**

The aforementioned analysis demonstrates that the transformation of democratic politics is not the result of a single technological shift, but the convergence of algorithmic incentives, personalised authority, and emotionally driven communication systems. Together, these dynamics restructure how political power is produced, legitimised, and contested. Addressing this requires interventions that operate simultaneously at the level of platforms, institutions, political actors, and citizens. The objective is not to reverse digitalisation, but to recalibrate its effects so that democratic deliberation is not structurally displaced by engagement-driven logic.

### ***A. Platform Regulation and Algorithmic Accountability***

Given that algorithmic systems now function as de facto gatekeepers of political visibility, regulatory frameworks must focus on increasing transparency and accountability in content prioritisation. Platforms should be required to disclose the core criteria through which political content is ranked and distributed, particularly where engagement-based optimisation influences political exposure. Without such transparency, the mechanisms that shape public discourse remain effectively opaque to both regulators and citizens.

In parallel, independent oversight mechanisms should be introduced to monitor the amplification of political content, particularly where systemic biases favour emotionally extreme or misleading material. This does not imply direct content removal, but rather structural auditing of amplification patterns or equal amplification of all and any politically classified content. Finally, consideration should be given to limiting the algorithmic promotion of content that consistently demonstrates high correlation with misinformation or polarisation, thereby reducing the structural advantage currently granted to outrage-driven communication.

## ***B. Strengthening Independent Media Ecosystems***

The decline of traditional gatekeeping has not eliminated the need for mediation; instead, it has made it more contested. Strengthening independent media ecosystems is therefore essential to counterbalance the direct bypassing of journalistic institutions by political actors. This includes supporting the visibility of credible news organisations within digital environments where algorithmic ranking currently dominates exposure.

At the same time, mechanisms should be developed to reinforce trust in verified information sources, particularly in contexts where misinformation circulates rapidly and at scale. The goal is not to re-establish monopolistic control over information flows, but to ensure that professional journalism retains sufficient visibility to perform its democratic function of scrutiny, verification, and contextualisation. A potential punctual suggestion is the addition of verification badges as well as an opposite ‘unable to verify’ badge for content on politics, world news, local elections, and other relevant areas.

## ***C. Media Literacy and Civic Education***

Given the increasing centrality of emotional and identity-based communication in digital politics, media literacy must be treated as a core democratic competency. Citizens should be systematically equipped to recognise emotional manipulation, identify misinformation, and understand the basic logic of algorithmic bias. This includes awareness of how engagement-driven systems shape what content is seen and amplified.

Such interventions are not merely informational but structural in their democratic function. By reducing susceptibility to affect-driven persuasion, media literacy initiatives can help restore a degree of deliberative capacity within the public sphere, enabling citizens to engage with political content beyond immediate emotional resonance.

## ***D. Reform of Digital Political Communication***

Political communication itself requires regulatory adaptation. Transparency in digital campaigning and online messaging should be increased, particularly regarding targeting practices and data-driven persuasion strategies. Hyper-personalised political advertising, which fragments the public sphere into segmented informational environments, should be subject to clearer oversight and limitation.

In addition, normative standards for responsible digital engagement by political actors should be encouraged. While political expression must remain free, there is a growing need to distinguish

between legitimate communication and strategies that rely primarily on emotional amplification, misinformation, or deliberate polarisation.

### ***E. Institutional Adaptation***

Democratic institutions must evolve in response to the changing informational environment in which they operate. This includes modernising communication strategies to ensure that institutional processes remain visible, accessible, and understandable within digital ecosystems. Without such adaptation, institutional authority risks being overshadowed by more immediate and personalised forms of political communication.

Improving the clarity and visibility of accountability mechanisms is also essential. Citizens must be able to trace decision-making processes and understand how outcomes relate to institutional actions. Strengthening this link between governance and public perception is critical for maintaining institutional legitimacy in an attention-driven environment.

### ***F. Recentring Democratic Norms***

Finally, the long-term resilience of democratic systems depends on a broader cultural recalibration. Democratic norms must be actively recentred around deliberation rather than reaction, complexity rather than simplification, and accountability rather than loyalty. This is particularly important in environments where political communication is increasingly shaped by emotional immediacy and algorithmic amplification.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that contemporary democratic transformation is not simply a communication shift, but a deeper reconfiguration of political power itself. Social media algorithms structurally incentivise emotionally driven political communication, reinforcing performance-based authority, affective polarisation, and personalised leadership. In doing so, they weaken traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability and reshape the conditions under which political legitimacy is produced.

Responding to this transformation therefore requires a coordinated effort to realign technological systems, institutional practices, and civic norms so that democratic governance can persist in a digital environment where emotional engagement increasingly competes with, and often outweighs, deliberative exchange.

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