



Polarization and Divide in the Digital Age

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American democratic process is facing an imminent threat, not from foreign influence, but rather, from internal dysfunction. Particularly, the decline of genuine discourse and the unchecked influence of social media platforms have affected the way we approach political conversations. This brief explores how digital polarization, fueled by algorithmic bias, undermines electoral fairness and proposes solutions through legislation. It argues that transparency in digital campaigning is essential for a functional democracy, particularly as tech companies increasingly shape the political narrative.

II. OVERVIEW

In a time when our society is more connected than ever, the quality of communication has somehow deteriorated dramatically. Public discourse has been replaced by shouting matches and echo chambers, especially online. While political division isn't a new concept, the mechanics behind it have changed. Social media platforms—through algorithms, questionable content moderation, and targeted messaging—are exacerbating these divides and may even be influencing elections. Research indicates that these algorithms tend to amplify extremist voices and controversial messages, thus distorting public debate and limiting exposure to diverse

perspectives. This brief evaluates how digital polarization threatens democratic engagement and examines the potential of policy action like the Digital Election Integrity Act to bring much-needed transparency and fairness to online political discussion.

A. Relevance

The art of listening, the cornerstone of democracy, is becoming endangered in the digital age. Social media platforms prioritize engagement over integrity, creating breeding grounds for misunderstandings. The power of tech giants like Meta (Facebook), Google, and X (Twitter) extends far beyond advertising; their algorithms can shift conversations and subtly favor specific political narratives. A study by Dominik Bär of the University of Munich from the 2021 German federal elections found that social media algorithms disproportionately promoted extremist messages even when ad budgets were the same, raising red flags for American democracy, where many people primarily receive their news from social media platforms. The implications are clear: unchecked algorithmic control over political content may erode the public's trust in elections, discourage civil discourse, and distort democratic processes. To rebuild that trust, reforms ensuring digital transparency are urgently needed.

III. HISTORY

IV. Current Stances

The regulation of political messaging in the U.S. traditionally focused on television, radio, and print. However, with the digital revolution, these regulations have not kept pace. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, passed in 1996, shields platforms from liability for content users post, a law designed for early internet forums, not for the modern day. Similarly, the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 was designed to operate in a pre-digital world. While those laws ensured fairness and accountability in older media, today's online platforms operate in a largely unregulated environment. This lag allows corporations to indirectly shape public opinion and electoral outcomes through targeted ads and curated content feeds, without disclosure or accountability.

There is growing bipartisan concern over how tech companies influence democratic processes. While conservatives have focused on claims of content censorship, progressives have emphasized algorithmic transparency and the spread of disinformation. Both perspectives highlight a shared unease: the immense and largely invisible power of digital platforms over political engagement. Experts and lawmakers alike are calling for legislative intervention. The Digital Election Integrity Act is a step in the right direction. By preventing certain targeted political communications, such as campaign contributions, it subjects technology corporations to federal disclosure requirements and limits their influence on elections. Specifically, it mandates transparency in how users are targeted, what content is shown, and which candidate or issue benefits from the ad. Just as television

advertisements must include disclaimers and financial disclosures, digital platforms must be held to a similar standard. With this policy, the U.S. could set a precedent in restoring electoral integrity in the digital age.

V. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Key stakeholders include American voters, particularly the youth and the digitally active, who consume most of their news via social media. These individuals are directly influenced by algorithmic content and targeted political advertising. Additionally, social media companies such as Meta, Google, and X (formerly Twitter) are central players, given their control over content moderation and algorithm design. Policymakers and electoral bodies like the Federal Election Commission (FEC) are also stakeholders, as they are responsible for ensuring transparency and fairness in elections. Civil society organizations concerned with digital literacy, media ethics, and democratic integrity also have a stake in shaping and advocating for appropriate reforms.

B. Risks of Indifference

Neglecting the growing influence of algorithmic political content risks eroding public trust in democratic processes. If left unchecked, social media will continue to polarize discourse, spread disinformation, and promote extremist rhetoric. This could result in lower voter turnout, increased political violence, and disillusionment with democratic institutions. Furthermore, the lack of accountability from tech companies can normalize undisclosed biased algorithms, diminishing electoral fairness and the ability of

voters to make informed choices. A failure to act now could cement these trends into the democratic environment of our nation for generations to come.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because digital election integrity affects not just politicians but the very structure of America's democracy, it is imperative that nonpartisan intervention takes place. The benefits of such intervention include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) Protection of democratic legitimacy: Ensuring transparency in political advertising and regulating algorithmic influence preserves the trust that citizens place in democratic institutions. When voters can clearly see who is funding advertisements or how their social media feeds are being shaped, they are incentivized to make more informed and trustful decisions. This clarity promotes a healthier democratic process and fosters confidence in civics, something both major political parties rely on equally to function effectively.
- 2) Restoration of civil discourse: Echo chambers, driven by social media algorithms, contribute to polarization, often pushing extreme narratives to the forefront. By regulating digital platforms and requiring accountability, public discourse can shift toward a more balanced and respectful dialogue. This, in turn, benefits communities and individuals across the aisle, regardless of ideology.

- 3) Fairness and equity in elections: Both liberal and conservative politicians have raised concerns about perceived digital bias: Democrats often cite conservative control of platforms like X, while Republicans accuse Meta of liberal favoritism. This mutual distrust highlights the need for clear and consistent rules governing the role of technology in election campaigns. When platforms are held to equitable standards, the political playing field is leveled, which would garner support from both parties.

VI. TRIED POLICY

Existing U.S. policy has not kept pace with digital transformation. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 was designed for print and broadcast media and does not effectively regulate digital political communication. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, passed in 1996, grants social media platforms broad immunity from content liability, a sentiment that is increasingly seen as outdated. Attempts to regulate digital political ads have surfaced, such as the Honest Ads Act introduced in 2017, which sought to apply existing disclosure requirements to digital platforms. However, it failed to pass through Congress. These failures illustrate both the need and challenge of regulating a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Thankfully, this time is different. Public awareness of the dangers posed by algorithmic bias, foreign interference, and opaque political advertising has grown significantly, especially in the wake of recent high-profile elections, namely the 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential elections. Bipartisan concern over the unchecked power of

social media platforms has created a moment of rare political alignment, with lawmakers on both sides of the spectrum recognizing that inaction threatens the very integrity of democratic processes. Additionally, the upcoming midterms in 2026 and the proliferation of AI-generated content, especially using deepfake technology, have added urgency to the matter, making it impossible to continue ignoring digital regulation. There is now a stronger political will and public demand than ever to implement meaningful reform.

VII. POLICY OPTIONS

Enact the Digital Election Integrity Act

This proposed legislation would require digital platforms to disclose political advertising sources, targeting criteria, and funding. It aims to apply similar transparency standards as those used in television or radio ads. The act also proposes restricting microtargeting for political purposes, ensuring that digital manipulation does not remain hidden from public scrutiny.

Reform Section 230

Modifying Section 230 to distinguish between neutral platforms and those that algorithmically amplify content could create clearer accountability structures. This would encourage social media companies to be more responsible for the consequences of their algorithmic choices, especially when those choices shape political discourse. In today's day and age, the content that has surfaced on social media platforms has a large influence on public perceptions of the government. The spread of misinformation and disinformation online has contributed to the breakdown of election integrity, and technology companies should not be let go with a slap on the

wrist; instead, enforcing accountability and liability will persuade companies to take a stronger stance against false information.

Establish a Federal Digital Oversight Body

As digital platforms continue to play a dominant role in shaping public discourse and electoral behavior, the absence of centralized oversight leaves critical gaps in democratic safeguards. Establishing a Federal Digital Oversight Body or expanding the role of the Federal Election Commission or Federal Communications Commission would serve as a comprehensive and long-term response to the challenges posed by algorithmic bias, opaque data practices, and political disinformation online. Platforms would be required to disclose how their algorithms rank and display political content, and how these choices may advantage or disadvantage specific viewpoints or candidates. The FDOB would have enforcement authority to fine or restrict platforms that do not meet transparency standards or knowingly allow misinformation to propagate unchecked. The creation of such a body would ensure long-term accountability in the digital space and align with global efforts in democratic countries like the European Union's Digital Services Act. It would also respond to bipartisan concerns, offering a nonpartisan mechanism for safeguarding electoral integrity without infringing on free speech.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The digital age demands a digital response. Polarization and election interference are no longer confined to foreign threats; instead, they stem from the very platforms Americans use every single day. Enacting the Digital Election Integrity Act along with reforming existing

legislation such as Section 230 and expanding the power of federal oversight commissions offers the most balanced and immediate path forward. It targets the core problem, a lack of transparency, while simultaneously allowing platforms to continue operating freely under clear standards. A functioning democracy requires voters to trust the information they receive, and to do that, the information environment must be held to democratic standards. Through meaningful, bipartisan legislation, the U.S. can safeguard electoral fairness in the digital age.

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