

“The Algorithmic Campaign: Social Media Dynamics in Contemporary U.S. Elections”

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Abstract: *Over the past decade, U.S. electioneering has undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting from broadcast-centric persuasion to an algorithmically mediated competition for attention. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok now function as central infrastructures for political communication, shaping information flows, amplification dynamics, and audience segmentation. This paper develops a conceptual framework of algorithmic campaign dynamics to explain how perceived algorithmic influence affects political communication and engagement in contemporary U.S. elections. Drawing on classical media effects theories, agenda-setting and framing and integrating recent scholarship on algorithmic amplification, selective exposure, and echo chambers, the framework traces a causal chain linking perceived algorithmic influence to misinformation exposure, echo chamber formation, affective polarization, and political engagement. The study contributes to the literature by (1) bridging traditional media theories with algorithmic mediation, (2) integrating psychological and behavioral outcomes within a single model, and (3) highlighting platform-specific differences in political communication dynamics. A proposed quantitative survey design is outlined to guide future empirical testing, with potential for complementary experimental and computational approaches. By offering a theoretically grounded roadmap, this paper provides scholars, practitioners, and policymakers with a structured lens for understanding how algorithmic environments shape electoral behavior and democratic resilience.*

Keywords: algorithmic campaign dynamics, social media, misinformation, selective exposure, echo chambers, affective polarization, political engagement, U.S. elections

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, U.S. electioneering has shifted from broadcast-centric persuasion to an algorithmically mediated competition for attention. Social media platforms, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and more recently TikTok, now function as arenas where candidates bypass legacy gatekeepers, mobilize supporters, and test messages at scale (McGregor, 2020). Algorithmic curation structures what citizens see, how fast content travels, and which narratives gain salience, transforming agenda setting, framing, and mobilization into data-driven, real-time processes (Bastos, 2021). The increasing centrality of algorithms in shaping political communication has led to what some scholars describe as an “algorithmic public sphere” (Napoli, 2021), in which virality, personalization, and engagement-based ranking influence which political actors and frames dominate public discourse. These transformations are particularly salient in the U.S., where digital platforms have become integral to campaign strategy and electoral behavior.

This paper examines, how these platform dynamics shape political communication and voter behavior in contemporary U.S. elections, arguing that algorithmic amplification, network effects, and audience segmentation jointly redefine the structure of campaigns and the informational environments in which electoral choices are made (Gjerazi & Tomja, 2025). The 2016 election cycle marked a watershed for data-driven microtargeting and networked propaganda in the United States (Johnson, 2017). Revelations surrounding Cambridge Analytica demonstrated how large-scale Facebook data were harvested and leveraged for psychographic targeting, raising profound concerns regarding voter privacy, manipulation, and democratic accountability (Brannen, 2023). Cambridge Analytica’s methods involved exploiting personality-based profiling to deliver highly personalized political advertisements to segmented audiences, thereby amplifying emotional appeals and reinforcing partisan identities (Koc-Michalska et al., 2024).

In parallel, official investigations and academic studies documented coordinated foreign information operations, most notably by Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA), aimed at inflaming polarization, sowing distrust, and influencing voter perceptions through tailored social media content and targeted paid advertising (Linville & Warren, 2020). IRA activities spanned multiple platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, using fake accounts, memes, and divisive narratives to manipulate public discourse and mobilize communities around polarizing issues. These events collectively established social media not merely as campaign tools, but as contested infrastructures that shape exposure, engagement, and belief formation across tens of millions of users (Kreiss, 2021).

A rapidly expanding literature has traced how information diffuses on platforms and why certain narratives outperform others. Large-scale analyses of Twitter cascades show that false political news spreads faster, farther, and more broadly than verified information, differences largely attributed to the novelty and emotional arousal of false stories rather than both activity alone, highlighting the human drivers of virality within algorithmic feeds (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Such dynamics interact with engagement-optimized ranking systems, potentially heightening the visibility of sensational content and reinforcing homophonous networks and “echo chambers,” where ideologically consistent information circulates within like-minded groups (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Barberá et al., 2018).

At the same time, platform use patterns vary significantly: Americans increasingly encounter political information across multiple services. Pew Research Center data indicate that X (formerly Twitter) is used distinctively for “keeping up with politics,” whereas TikTok plays a growing role among younger cohorts (Bestvater, 2024). This underscores the importance of platform-specific analysis when assessing the informational and mobilizing effects of social media.

Evidence on downstream electoral effects is nuanced. A prominent quasi-experimental study suggests that Twitter access modestly reduced Republican and specifically Trump vote share in 2016 and 2020, consistent with exposure to more liberal content persuading moderates (Fujiwara, Müller, & Schwarz, 2021). Meanwhile, large-scale randomized field experiments conducted in partnership with Meta around the 2020 U.S. election found that altering Facebook and Instagram feeds and exposure influenced users’ information diets and political knowledge but had limited short-run effects on core attitudes and polarization (Guess et al., 2023; Allcott et al., 2020). Together, these findings imply that social media may be decisive less by changing entrenched attitudes wholesale and more through agenda setting, mobilization and turnout dynamics within closely contested electoral environments especially when amplified by targeted advertising, influencer ecosystems, and cross-platform spillovers (Benkler et al., 2018; Kreiss 2021). Building on this literature, the present study synthesizes platform-comparative evidence from recent U.S. electoral cycles to articulate a framework of *algorithmic campaign dynamics* centered on three mechanisms: **Amplification**, how ranking systems and social cascades prioritize emotionally engaging and identity-consistent content, **Segmentation**, how microtargeting and influencer networks tailor frames to niche publics and **Coordination/contestation**, how campaigns, influencers, and adversarial actors exploit platform affordances (Tufekci, 2015; Aral, 2020; Tucker et al., 2018).

We outline implications for campaign strategy and democratic resilience, identify conditions under which social media effects are most electorally consequential, and propose measurement strategies that integrate observational traces with experimental variation across platforms (Guess et al., 2023).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Agenda- Setting & Framing in the Digital Environment

Classical theories of political communication emphasize the media’s role in shaping the salience and interpretation of political issues. The agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1974) posits that media do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about, by prioritizing specific topics in public discourse. The framing perspective (Entman, 1993) further explains how the presentation of issues affects how audiences interpret them. In the digital environment, social media platforms have assumed many of these agenda-setting and framing functions (Meraz, 2009; Weeks et al., 2017). Through a combination of algorithmic curation and user interaction, platforms determine which political narratives become prominent, how they are contextualized, and how they spread (Tucker et al., 2018; Chadwick, 2017). Unlike traditional mass media, these functions are not centrally controlled but emerge through the interplay of algorithmic ranking systems, user engagement, and network structures.

Algorithmic Amplification & Selective Exposure

One of the defining features of social media is the role of algorithmic amplification, whereby engagement-optimized ranking systems selectively boost content that elicits strong emotional reactions or fits users' pre-existing preferences (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). These dynamics can accelerate the diffusion of emotionally charged or novel political information (Vosoughi et al., 2018), while simultaneously narrowing users' exposure to diverse perspectives, a phenomenon often described as selective exposure (Stroud, 2008). Algorithms personalize each user's informational environment, effectively functioning as automated gatekeepers (Napoli, 2021). This personalization can lead to information silos and the privileging of sensationalist narratives over balanced reporting, shaping not only what information people encounter but also the emotional tone and speed of political discourse (Bakshy et al., 2015; Flaxman et al., 2016).

Networked Public & Echo Chambers

Aral (2006) describes the emergence of networked publics, in which citizens interact and deliberate within distributed online networks. Social media allow political messages to circulate horizontally through user-to-user sharing, giving rise to new forms of bottom-up political influence (Chadwick, 2017; Barberá et al., 2018). However, these same dynamics foster echo chambers, defined as homophonous online environments where individuals predominantly encounter information and opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2001; Flaxman et al., 2016). Echo chambers contribute to affective polarization by amplifying in-group identification and out-group hostility (Iyengar et al., 2019). In the U.S. context, these mechanisms have been linked to the rapid spread of misinformation, the reinforcement of partisan divides, and the transformation of campaigns into networked propaganda systems (Benkler et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2018).

Platform – Specific Political Communication Dynamics

While the general mechanisms of algorithmic amplification and networked publics apply across platforms, political communication dynamics differ by platform affordances and user base. X (formerly Twitter) functions as a real-time political agenda-setter, disproportionately used by journalists, politicians, and politically engaged citizens. Facebook and Instagram are more socially oriented but have been central to microtargeting and mobilization strategies, especially during the 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal (Isaak & Hanna, 2018; Kreiss, 2021). TikTok, meanwhile, plays an increasingly important role among younger cohorts, with distinctive participatory and influencer-driven dynamics (Theocharis et al., 2023). These platform-specific characteristics shape both the reach and nature of algorithmic campaigns, underscoring the importance of comparative, multi-platform analyses.

Hypotheses Development

Algorithmic Influence and Misinformation Exposure

The personalization of content through algorithmic curation plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' political information environments. When users perceive that platform algorithms determine what political content they encounter, they are more likely to be exposed to emotionally engaging or sensational information, including misinformation, due to

engagement-based ranking systems (Gillespie, 2014; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Algorithms privilege content that is likely to generate clicks and shares, regardless of accuracy, creating environments where users perceive reduced control over information selection (Napoli, 2021). We assume that:

H1: *Higher perceived algorithmic influence is positively associated with users' exposure to political misinformation on social media.* (Aral, 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018)

Selective Exposure and Echo Chambers

Algorithmic personalization encourages selective exposure to ideologically congenial content (Stroud, 2008). Over time, this pattern contributes to the formation of echo chambers, in which individuals predominantly encounter information that reinforces their existing views and avoid opposing perspectives (Sunstein, 2001; Flaxman et al., 2016). This process can intensify belief polarization and decrease perceived informational diversity. Based on the above, we assumed that:

H2: *Selective exposure to ideologically consistent political content is positively associated with the formation of online echo chambers.* (Stroud, 2008; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Flaxman et al., 2016)

Echo Chambers and Affective Polarization

Echo chambers do not simply reduce informational diversity; they also amplify in-group/out-group dynamics, leading to affective polarization, the tendency to hold increasingly negative feelings toward political out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2019). Exposure to homogeneous content environments strengthens group identity and hostility toward opposing groups, a phenomenon particularly evident in U.S. elections where partisan divides are sharp (Benkler et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2018). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Participation in online echo chambers is positively associated with affective political polarization.* (Iyengar et al., 2019; Benkler et al., 2018)

Polarization and Political Engagement

While polarization is often viewed as a democratic challenge, polarized affective states can also motivate political participation and engagement. High levels of affective polarization have been shown to increase individuals' willingness to vote, share political content, and participate in partisan actions (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015). In the algorithmic campaign environment, polarization may thus function as a mobilizing mechanism. Based on the above, we assumed that:

H4: *Higher levels of affective polarization are positively associated with political engagement on social media.* (Huddy et al., 2015; Bail et al., 2018)

Platform Differences as Moderating Effects

Political communication dynamics vary significantly across platforms. X (formerly Twitter) functions as a political agenda-setter among elites and politically engaged citizens, whereas TikTok and Instagram have more entertainment-oriented dynamics (Sunstein, 2001). Algorithmic amplification mechanisms operate differently depending on platform affordances, which may moderate the strength of the relationships between algorithmic influence, exposure, echo chambers, and engagement. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: *The relationships among algorithmic influence, misinformation exposure, echo chambers, and political engagement vary across platforms, with stronger effects expected on X compared to TikTok and Instagram.*(Aral, 2020)

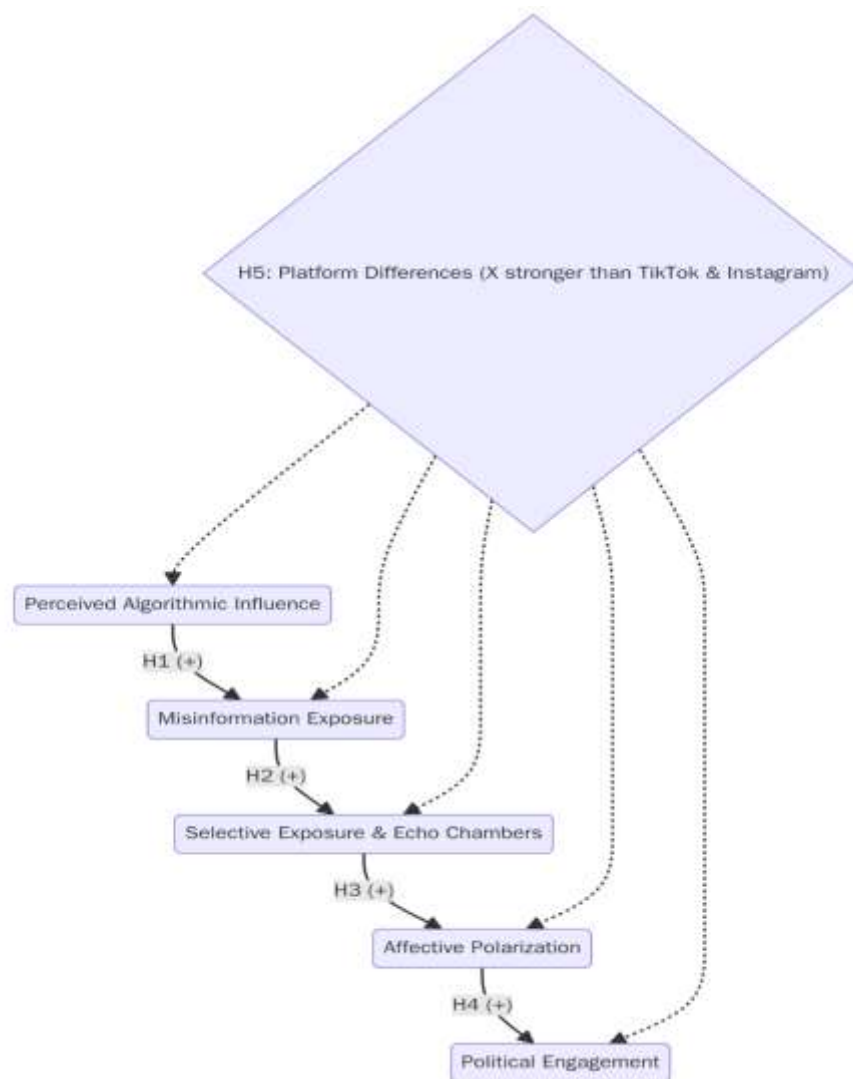


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Model of Algorithmic Influence, Misinformation, and Political Engagement. This conceptual model illustrates the hypothesized relationships between perceived

algorithmic influence, misinformation exposure, selective exposure and echo chambers, affective polarization, and political engagement (H1–H4). In addition, H5 proposes that these relationships vary across platforms, with stronger effects expected on X compared to TikTok and Instagram (Aral, 2020).

Proposed Methodology

To empirically examine the proposed conceptual model and test the hypotheses (H1–H5), future research could employ a quantitative survey-based design. The target population would consist of adult social media users who engage with political content online, with sampling focused on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which play distinct roles in political communication in the U.S. context. A convenience sample of approximately 300–500 respondents could be recruited through online panels or social media advertising. The survey instrument would include validated multi-item Likert scales adapted from prior research to measure key constructs:

- Perceived Algorithmic Influence (PAI) (e.g., Napoli, 2019),
- Misinformation Exposure (ME) (e.g., Vosoughi et al., 2018),
- Selective Exposure / Echo Chambers (SE/EC) (e.g., Stroud, 2008; Flaxman et al., 2016),
- Affective Polarization (AP) (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019),
- Political Engagement (PE) (e.g., Huddy et al., 2015).

Demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, education, ideology) and platform use (X, Facebook/Instagram, TikTok) would also be collected to allow for multi-group analysis or moderation tests. Data analysis could be conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) or covariance-based SEM to assess the measurement and structural models simultaneously. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for models involving latent constructs, indirect effects, and moderation, as in this case (Hair et al., 2022). Mediation analysis would examine the indirect pathways from PAI to PE through ME, SE/EC, and AP, while moderation analysis would explore platform-specific effects.

Alternatively, future research could complement the survey with content analysis of political posts and algorithmically curated feeds across platforms to triangulate self-reported perceptions with behavioral data. This mixed-method design would strengthen external validity and address self-report biases.

DISCUSSION

This study develops and articulates a *conceptual framework of algorithmic campaign dynamics* to explain how social media shape political communication and engagement in contemporary U.S. elections. By integrating classic communication theories, such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1974) and framing (Entman, 1993), with more recent perspectives on algorithmic amplification, selective exposure, and echo chambers (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Stroud, 2008; Flaxman et al., 2016), the framework offers a structured explanation of how algorithmically mediated environments shape electoral dynamics.

The model traces a causal chain starting with perceived algorithmic influence, which affects users' exposure to misinformation, their patterns of selective exposure, and the subsequent formation of echo chambers. These processes contribute to affective polarization, which in turn can drive political engagement. By focusing on perceived algorithmic influence, the model highlights users' subjective understanding of algorithmic mediation, an increasingly important factor in shaping political behavior (Napoli, 2019). This focus distinguishes the framework from earlier models that treat algorithmic processes as purely technical, emphasizing instead the interplay between human perception, algorithmic design, and network effects.

The proposed framework contributes to literature in several important ways. First, it bridges classical media effects theories with contemporary debates about algorithmic mediation, offering a theoretically coherent lens to analyze how personalization and ranking systems influence political information flows. Rather than treating algorithmic curation as external or opaque, the model integrates it into established media effects frameworks. Second, it incorporates both psychological (e.g., affective polarization) and behavioral (e.g., political engagement) outcomes within a single model, providing a more holistic understanding of how digital communication environments shape electoral behavior. This integration helps explain why algorithmic influence may not always change core political attitudes directly but can shape information exposure, emotional responses, and participatory behaviors, which together have substantial political implications (Huddy et al., 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019). Third, the framework emphasizes platform-specific dynamics. Different social media platforms (e.g., X, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram) operate with distinct affordances, user cultures, and algorithmic systems. By explicitly acknowledging these differences, the model allows for more nuanced analysis than platform-agnostic approaches, paving the way for comparative, cross-platform research.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the framework also has methodological and practical implications. Methodologically, it can guide the development of empirical research designs that combine surveys, experiments, and computational approaches to study algorithmic effects in a systematic way. For practitioners and policymakers, the model offers insights into how algorithmic systems shape political communication and how interventions, such as transparency regulations, algorithmic audits, or media literacy campaigns might mitigate negative consequences related to misinformation and polarization.

Future research can build on this conceptual foundation through multi-method empirical designs. Survey-based studies can validate individual-level perceptions and behaviors, while field experiments can test causal effects of algorithmic changes on exposure and engagement. Computational analyses of platform data, including content recommendation logs or network structures, could further illuminate the mechanisms of amplification and echo chamber formation. Moreover, longitudinal and comparative studies across electoral cycles and national contexts could shed light on the evolution and generalizability of these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

In an era where social media has become central infrastructures of political communication, understanding their algorithmic dynamics is essential. This study proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates classic media theories with emerging insights into algorithmic amplification, selective exposure, and polarization. By tracing the pathway from perceived algorithmic influence to political engagement, the model highlights how personalization and platform design shape the informational and emotional environments in which electoral politics unfold. The framework underscores that algorithmic systems are not neutral intermediaries but active shapers of political discourse. They influence not only which topics become salient, but also how citizens perceive, feel, and act politically. Recognizing these dynamics is critical for addressing democratic challenges associated with misinformation, affective polarization, and unequal access to political information.

Ultimately, this conceptual model provides a theoretically grounded roadmap for future empirical research on social media and elections. It invites scholars to examine how algorithmic environments shape political behavior across platforms, contexts, and time, and encourages policymakers and platform designers to consider the democratic consequences of algorithmic choices. As algorithmic mediation continues to evolve, rigorous theoretical and empirical work will be essential to understand and govern the intersection between technology and democracy.

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