

THE INFLUENCE OF BIG TECH COMPANIES ON POLITICAL PROCESSES

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The influence of Big Tech companies such as Google, Meta (formerly Facebook), and Twitter (now X) on political processes has become a defining feature of modern democracy. These companies control the flow of information, collect vast amounts of data, and shape public discourse through algorithmic content curation. While these platforms have enhanced political participation and accessibility, concerns over misinformation, censorship, algorithmic biases, and privacy violations raise serious questions about democratic integrity. To understand the rise of Big Tech's political influence, we must look back at the early days of the Internet. Initially, digital platforms were seen as tools for democratizing information, giving every user a voice. However, as companies like Google and Facebook expanded, they transformed into digital monopolies, controlling vast amounts of data and influencing user behaviour through complex algorithms. The shift from open-source platforms to profit-driven ecosystems has led to concerns about their impact on democracy. Social media platforms and search engines have become the primary means of accessing news and political information. According to a Pew Research Center study, around 62% of U.S. adults get their news from social media, and similarly in India, a 2022 Reuters Institute report found that over 50% of Indians get their news from digital platforms, with WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube leading the way. This shift has granted Big Tech companies enormous control over public discourse. The "filter bubble" effect, a term coined by Eli Pariser in his book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding*

from You (2011), highlights how algorithms designed to personalize content often reinforce users' preexisting beliefs, leading to political echo chambers. A study by Harvard's Berkman Klein Center found that Facebook's algorithm prioritizes engagement over accuracy, increasing the spread of sensationalist and polarizing content. The influence of Big Tech on electoral outcomes has been a topic of global debate, particularly following major controversies such as the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, content moderation decisions in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, and the spread of misinformation during India's 2019 general elections. The Cambridge Analytica case revealed that over 87 million Facebook users' data were harvested without consent to create targeted political advertisements, influencing voter behaviour in the 2016 U.S. election and Brexit referendum. Similarly, during the 2020 U.S. election, Facebook and Twitter flagged or removed misleading posts, including those from then-President Donald Trump, prompting debates over political bias and censorship. In India, WhatsApp-driven misinformation during the 2019 elections was widely exploited by political parties, leading to the mass circulation of fake news and propaganda. Reports showed that WhatsApp was flooded with fake news, some of which incited violence and communal tensions. Beyond the United States and India, the global nature of these issues is evident. In Europe, concerns about digital sovereignty have grown as American and Chinese tech giants dominate the region's digital landscape. For instance, during elections in several European countries, social media platforms were used to manipu-

late public opinion through targeted ads and fake news campaigns. The European Union has responded by introducing regulations like the Digital Services Act (DSA) to increase transparency and accountability among tech companies. In Africa and South America,



social media platforms serve as primary sources of news for large segments of the

population, making them particularly vulnerable to misinformation campaigns and algorithmic biases. During Kenya's 2017 elections, Cambridge Analytica was accused of using Facebook data to micro-target voters with divisive content aimed at influencing electoral outcomes. Similarly, in Brazil's 2018 presidential election, WhatsApp was flooded with false information that shaped voter behaviour. Several major concerns arise from the growing influence of Big Tech on political processes. Algorithmic decisions about content visibility and moderation remain largely opaque, raising transparency issues. The dominance of a few tech giants reduces competition, preventing alternative platforms from gaining traction. The mass collection and use of personal data without explicit consent pose severe privacy risks and enable the manipulation of public opinion. Both conservative and liberal groups have accused Big Tech companies of suppressing content that contradicts their ideological leanings. Additionally, foreign influence in elections, such as Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, highlights how these platforms can be exploited by external actors to disrupt democratic processes. In response to these issues, governments worldwide are considering or implementing regulations to curb Big Tech's unchecked power. The European

Union's Digital Services Act aims to increase transparency in content moderation and reduce misinformation. In the United States, debates over Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act focus on whether platforms should retain immunity from liability for third-party content. India's IT Rules require social media companies to comply with government content removal orders. The country is also pushing for data localization laws, requiring tech giants to store Indian user data within the country to prevent foreign misuse. The Competition Commission of India (CCI) has also fined Google for abusing its market dominance. Meanwhile, the rise of artificial intelligence further complicates the landscape. Generative AI tools like ChatGPT, DeepSeek, and Grok have the potential to enhance electoral efficiency but also pose risks by enabling the creation of deepfakes and other forms of disinformation that can undermine trust in democratic processes. To truly understand the implications of Big Tech's influence, we must go beyond regulatory debates and reflect on its role in shaping the future of governance. Is democracy in its current form equipped to handle the challenges posed by digital monopolies? Should new models of digital governance emerge? If we wish to see a world where technology enhances rather than hinders democratic ideals, then we must take bold steps in shaping policies that hold these corporations accountable while fostering an internet that remains an open and accessible space for all.

Big Tech companies wield significant influence over modern political processes, shaping public discourse, electoral outcomes, and policymaking. While their platforms encourage democratic engagement, their unchecked power poses risks to election integrity, privacy, and political fairness. Addressing these concerns requires a combination of regulatory oversight, increased transparency, and public awareness to ensure that technology serves rather than subverts democracy. By balancing innovation with accountability, societies can harness the benefits of Big Tech while mitigating its dangers to political processes worldwide.