

Digital technology is fundamentally changing politics. Discuss.

Digital technology has touched nearly every aspect of modern life, with politics being no exception. The rise of social media, big data and artificial intelligence has introduced new tools for political campaigns, governance, activism, and state control. However, while these advancements have transformed the contexts within which age-old political processes play out, the core fundamentals of politics remain the same.

Politics is an expansive concept, encompassing various societal interactions, from the familial to the workings of government. Therefore, the extent to which politics has a capacity to change fundamentally depends firstly on how it is defined. In its broadest sense, “politics happens wherever there is power¹” – in particular in the power dynamics between the public and government. Accordingly, for politics to fundamentally change, the way people exert power over the state, and vice-versa, must change. Digital technology (including the Internet and social media) has decentralised soft power by facilitating the efficient coordination of vast groups of people in ways that were impossible before the Internet or widespread access to mobile phones. However, in most cases (excluding transformative upheavals such as the revolution in Egypt during the 2011 Arab Spring) the underlying hard power underpinning governmental structures has largely persisted unchanged.

Three dimensions of politics have been touched by these technologies, yet none have undergone a fundamental transformation: the mechanisms through which people shape government through elections; the power dynamics between the state and the public through protest and control; and the process of governance itself.

¹ Swift, Adam (1996). *Political Philosophy, A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians*, pp. 23

1) Election campaigns

For many, politics begins and ends on election day. Therefore, the changes that digital technology brings to elections, which represent the “collective choice” of the public², are central to the wider changes of the political sphere. The digital technologies of personal computers, the Internet and social media have meant that voters are now arguably better informed about candidates and their policies than ever before. If the public is more informed, they will, in theory, make more enlightened choices, enabling individuals to select the most competent candidate by recognizing the broader implications and complexities of their decisions. In a 2022 poll, 73% of people in 19 countries said they are more informed about current events in their own country because of social media³.

However, digital technology, and those who misuse it, has also undermined democracy at elections by obscuring the truth to voters. The technology most culpable for this is social media. Unlike traditional media, there are very few regulations on the veracity of social media posts, so misleading fake news can spread rapidly and lead voters to make irrational decisions based on lies, as well as reducing trust in electoral outcomes. Apple’s CEO Tim Cook famously proclaimed in 2017 that “Fake news is killing peoples’ minds⁴”. This is especially dangerous as, according to a study by the Oxford Internet Institute, fake news spreads up to six times faster on social media than accurate news, thanks to algorithms that actively promote shocking content that appeals to our biases⁵. Meanwhile, deepfake technology is eroding trust in political discourse by enabling the creation of convincing false videos, which can be weaponized to spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, and

²Weale, A (2004). *Politics as Collective Choice in What is Politics?*

³ Pew Research (2022). *Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier*. [Link to report](#)

⁴ D’Ancona, M (2017). *Post Truth*

⁵ Aïmeur, E., Amri, S. and Brassard, G (2023). *Fake news, disinformation and misinformation in social media: a review*. [Link to report](#)

undermine the credibility of legitimate leaders. The credibility of our electoral systems depend on how these technologies can be kept in check.

Beyond misinformation occurring organically, digital technology has been harnessed to influence voters, a considerable threat to democracy. This was seen very clearly in the US presidential election in 2016, in which the Internet Research Agency, a Kremlin-backed organization, created thousands of fake accounts, reaching an estimated 126 million Americans on Facebook and 1.4 million on Twitter⁶. These accounts spread divisive content to polarize voters, undermining trust in democratic institutions.

Therefore, politics during election campaigns has indeed changed as now entities can manipulate power in new ways, undoubtedly in this case for the worse. However, it is difficult to argue that these changes are fundamental; they are perhaps modern manifestations of age-old tactics of propaganda and rumour mongering. While digital technology has the potential to shape voting behaviour, its impact remains confined to the boundaries of existing electoral systems. Unless it drives a fundamental shift in constitutional frameworks - a change that currently lies consigned to the future - its influence will be limited to altering how votes are cast, not the foundational structures of governance itself.

2) Governments and the people

Politics is more than just elections - it encompasses the broader relationships between governments and citizens. Therefore, it is important to consider the changes that digital technology has had on wider political sphere and assess whether they can be viewed as fundamental. Access to social media has meant that communities are more able to coordinate and organise protests to hold the government accountable, beyond the scope of traditional pressure groups like trade unions. Digital platforms such as Telegram played a critical role in

⁶ New Knowledge (2018). *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*

the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests against a proposed extradition bill by enabling secure coordination among protesters and by amplifying their message globally⁷. Furthermore, in the UK, digital technologies have allowed citizens to play a greater part in politics in other ways. The online petition system allows people to highlight issues that they feel should be discussed in Parliament. As of the 2019 general election, there had already been 23 million unique signatures to online petitions under this provision.⁸

Conversely, the added power of communication enabled by digital technology can sometimes be more of a curse than a blessing. The National Academy of Sciences highlighted the dangers of “echo chambers” on social media in their study in 2021, describing the phenomenon that social media platforms “favor the formation of groups of like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative”.⁹ This, perhaps counter-intuitively, leads to people becoming even less exposed to countervailing opinions than they would have without the existence of digital technology. Such ‘echo chambers’ can breed hatred and divisions within a society, undermining democratic processes and stifling healthy debate. 79% in the U.S. say access to the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions, a Pew poll found.⁹ This political polarisation can sometimes even provoke violence, such as in the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, which was escalated by Facebook’s algorithms that amplified hate speech and misinformation and fuelled ethnic hatred.

Yet, this increased participation in the politics of protest (for good or for ill) does not equate to a fundamental change in the relationship between citizens and governments. Democratic engagement through digital platforms remains contingent on existing political structures. For

⁷Shao, G (2019). *Social media has become a battleground in Hong Kong’s protests*. [Link to article](#)

⁸ House of Commons Library 2019. *House of Commons Trends: E-petitions*. [Link to article](#)

⁹ Cinelli, M, De Francisci Morales, G, Galeazzi, A, Quattrociocchi, W, and Starnini, M (2021). *The echo chamber effect on social media*.

instance, while petitions and online campaigns can influence policy debates, the ultimate authority to enact change lies with elected officials or state institutions. Moreover, digital engagement often mirrors traditional power imbalances. Those with greater access to technology, resources, and digital literacy are better positioned to influence political discourse, perpetuating inequalities rather than eliminating them.

For certain interpretations of ‘politics’, the state’s use of *force* over the public is central¹⁰. Digital technology has touched this sphere by facilitating more pervasive surveillance and censorship by the state. In China, the government monitors all Internet access and blocks many websites, including information that criticises the government or is in favour of democracy. In this sense, digital technology has changed politics by allowing the state to exercise more political “force” over the people, at the same time as strengthening the public’s ability to push back with protest. In his book *Digital Technology’s Evolving Role in Politics, Protest and Repression*, Steven Feldstein argues technology can be used and misused by both protestors and those stifling protests, in a “cat and mouse struggle between autocrats who seek to exploit communication technologies for political gain, and civic and opposition members who will leverage the same tools against these regimes¹¹”.

However, until protests lead to a change in government, the state still possesses a monopoly of political ‘force’ to control the public, namely control over the justice system. Fundamental change would imply a structural transformation in these power relations. For instance, the transition from monarchies to democracies fundamentally changed politics by shifting sovereignty from rulers to the people. If digital technology merely modifies how these

¹⁰ Weber, M (1978). *Politics as a Vocation*, in W.G. Runciman (ed.), E. Matthews (tran.) *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*.

¹¹ Feldstein, S (2021). *Digital Technology’s Evolving Role in Politics, Protest and Repression*. [Link to article](#)

relations are *enacted* without altering their underlying structures, then its impact, while significant, is not fundamental.

3) A tool for government

Governance, a critical but often overlooked aspect of politics, has been affected by digital technology to an extent that will only increase as artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more capable. It can optimise decision-making and resource allocation, as seen in the NHS's use of AI during the COVID-19 pandemic to predict virus spread and distribute resources efficiently. However, even as AI influences governance, decisions about its deployment, scope, and regulation rest with traditional political authorities. Furthermore, concerns about algorithmic bias and a lack of transparency highlight that AI's integration often reinforces existing power structures rather than transforming them. A fundamental change to governance could only take place if AI was allowed full control of the state's allocative decision-making.

Digital technology will undoubtedly continue to shape the global political landscape as social media becomes even more widespread and emerging technologies like AI play a larger part in the way we are governed. Despite this, until these technologies facilitate a complete overhaul of the political system that dramatically alters the relationship between the people and the state, or transforms methods of governance, they have not yet fundamentally changed politics. Instead, they should be viewed merely as tools that can be used or misused by the public and states alike. It is only with regulation by national and international institutions that technology's democracy-aiding potential can be maximised, and its democracy-hindering side can be limited.