

**The Decline of Modern Western Liberal Democracy: Algarchy &  
Neurocratic Determinism.**

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines the historical development and possible future transformation of modern Western liberal democracy. It defines democracy as popular participation in the authorisation, contestation, and revision of collective power, and liberal democracy as that principle institutionalised through rights, constitutional limits, pluralism, representation, and accountability. The essay traces a genealogy from classical Athens and Roman republicanism through Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Mill, Weber, Schumpeter, Dahl, and Habermas. It then evaluates contemporary democratic decline through evidence concerning autocratisation, declining freedom, public dissatisfaction, political trust, platform power, and automation. The argument distinguishes evidence from speculation: current research does not establish that algorithmic systems uniformly cause polarisation, nor that automation inevitably destroys employment. It does attempt to establish that political visibility, administrative decision-making, and economic power are increasingly mediated by data-intensive systems. The essay's speculative conclusion proposes that liberal democracy may evolve toward Neurocratic Determinism, in which the political mediation of the citizen moves into the technologically conditioned interiority of the Systemised Self. At its possible terminus, the population becomes the Hollow Demos, the infrastructure owning elite becomes the Algarchy, and their integrated order at the societal level becomes the Hollow Absolute.

## **Introduction: From Liberal Democracy to Neurocratic Determinism**

Modern Western liberal democracy is often treated as though it were a settled political achievement rather than a historically contingent arrangement. Its institutions are familiar: elections, parties, parliaments, courts, rights, constitutions, public debate, and the peaceful transfer of power. Yet familiarity can obscure fragility. A political order may preserve its visible procedures while losing the social conditions that make those procedures meaningful. The central question of this essay is therefore not whether elections will survive, but whether the citizen will remain the effective author of political preference once attention, information, identity, and decision-making are increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems (transformer based large language models).

The essay uses ‘decline’ in a qualified sense, it does not claim that Western liberal democracy has uniformly collapsed, that every institution is corrupt, or that technology has a single predetermined political effect. It argues instead that liberal democracy is under pressure from converging developments: executive concentration, political distrust, economic inequality, nationalist reaction, fragmented public spheres, platform dependency, automation, and the privatisation of informational infrastructure. Recent comparative data support concern about democratic regression, while also showing that the empirical condition is uneven and reversible (Freedom House, 2026; V-Dem Institute, 2026).

The argument proceeds from factual genealogy toward speculation. Democracy is first defined historically and institutionally; its origins and variations are then traced; its present difficulties are examined through empirical evidence; and only then is the Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) framework applied. Neurocratic Determinism is proposed here as a political concept, not as an established scientific theory. It describes a speculated future condition in which

political power increasingly operates through the prediction, conditioning, and mediation of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes by which citizens form preferences. The concept is intentionally neurological and political at once: the location of mediation moves from institutions external to the subject toward the mediated interiority of the subject itself.

### **Defining Democracy and Liberal Democracy**

Democracy is best understood not as a single institutional device but as a contested principle concerning who is authorised to rule and how that authority can be challenged. At its minimum, democracy requires some form of popular participation in collective decisions. A fuller definition includes political equality, meaningful contestation, access to alternative information, accountability, and the possibility that rulers can be removed without violence. Dahl's (1971) concept of polyarchy is useful because it treats modern democracy as an arrangement of participation and public contestation rather than as the literal rule of every citizen on every question.

Liberal democracy combines this democratic principle with liberal restraints on power. Constitutional rights protect speech, association, conscience, privacy, and minority status. Independent courts, divided institutions, and a free press limit the capacity of temporary majorities or executives to convert electoral victory into unlimited authority. Liberal democracy therefore contains a productive tension: democracy asserts collective self-rule, while liberalism restricts what any majority or government may legitimately do.

This tension has always generated disagreement. Schumpeter (1942) defines democracy in relatively procedural terms as competition among elites for the electorate's vote. On this account, citizens select governing teams rather than directly formulate policy. Dahl expands

the picture by emphasising pluralistic participation and contestation, while Habermas (1989) insists that legitimacy depends upon communicative processes through which citizens can exchange reasons in a public sphere. If democracy is only periodic elite competition, algorithmically targeted elections may appear sufficient. If democracy also requires a shared and contestable public world, the fragmentation of attention and the private control of visibility become more serious.

A simple example illustrates the distinction. Two states may both hold competitive elections. In the first, citizens encounter a relatively common set of claims through independent media, public institutions, and open debate. In the second, each voter receives a different political reality, assembled from behavioural data and ranked by opaque systems. Both states possess elections, but the second has weakened the conditions under which citizens can recognise one another as participants in a common political judgment. Formal democracy remains; substantive democratic communication is diminished.

### **The Origins of Democracy: Athens, Republicanism, and Popular Sovereignty**

The word democracy derives from *demos*, the people, and *kratos*, rule or power. Classical Athens provides the canonical early example, especially through the assembly, citizen participation, rotation of offices, public speech, and the use of lot. Athenian democracy was not universal: women, enslaved people, resident foreigners, and children were excluded from citizenship. Its historical importance therefore lies not in offering a complete model but in making collective self-rule a visible political problem. The *demos* could govern, but it could also be volatile, exclusionary, and vulnerable to persuasion.

Aristotle's (ca. 350 B.C.E./1998) analysis in the *Politics* distinguishes forms of rule according to whether they serve a common interest or the interest of the ruling group. His treatment of democracy is ambivalent. Rule by the many can express political equality, yet it can also become factional rule when the poor or majority govern solely for themselves. The lesson is not that democracy is illegitimate, but that popular rule requires institutions and civic practices capable of connecting particular interests to a common world.

Roman republicanism contributed a different inheritance: law, office, representation, civic duty, mixed government, and the idea that political liberty depends upon not being subject to arbitrary domination. The later liberal-democratic tradition combined this republican concern with the protection of individual rights. Democracy consequently developed through variations rather than a straight line. It moved from direct participation toward representative government; from restricted citizenship toward mass suffrage; from local civic association toward national institutions; and from relatively bounded publics toward societies mediated by mass communication.

The genealogy also contains a permanent problem of scale. Athenian citizens could meet in an assembly, whereas modern states govern millions of people across extensive territories. Representation became necessary, but representation created distance between citizens and power. The larger and more complex the polity, the greater the role of parties, bureaucracies, experts, media, and administrative systems. The modern question is therefore not whether mediation exists, but who controls it and whether citizens can contest the conditions through which they are represented.

## **The Early-Modern Genealogy of Liberal Democracy**

The modern liberal-democratic vocabulary emerged through arguments about consent, rights, sovereignty, institutional restraint, and individual judgment. Locke (1689/1988) grounds legitimate government in consent and natural rights, particularly life, liberty, and property. Government is fiduciary rather than absolute: when it violates the purposes for which it was constituted, citizens possess a right of resistance. This establishes a foundation for modern democratic accountability, although Locke's own political order remained limited by property, empire, and exclusion.

Montesquieu (1748/1989) develops the institutional problem by arguing that liberty requires the separation and balancing of powers. The significance of this principle is not simply architectural. It assumes that power must be divided because concentrated authority tends toward abuse. Rousseau (1762/1997), by contrast, emphasises popular sovereignty and the general will. His work exposes the difficulty of representing a collective subject: a government may claim to speak for the people while actually substituting its own will for theirs.

Tocqueville (1835/1840/2000) identifies a distinctive danger within democratic societies. Equality can liberate individuals from inherited hierarchies while also producing isolation, conformity, and a desire for central direction. His account of 'soft despotism' is especially relevant to the Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) because domination need not appear as spectacular violence. Citizens may be managed through comfort, dependence, administration, and the gradual transfer of responsibility to an apparently benevolent centre.

Mill (1859/1977) defends individuality, free expression, and experiments in living. For Mill, liberty is not only a protection against the state; it is a condition of intellectual and moral

development. A society that prevents disagreement may achieve social calm while losing the capacities required for judgment. This concern becomes central in an algorithmically curated environment: personalisation may give each person a more agreeable informational experience while weakening exposure to difference, common deliberation, and independent thought.

### **Constitutional, Representative, and Mass Democracy**

Modern liberal democracy was consolidated through constitutional government, the expansion of suffrage, the development of parties, national citizenship, organised labour, mass education, and welfare institutions. This history was neither linear nor peaceful. Women, workers, racial minorities, colonised peoples, and other excluded groups had to force the political community to expand its definition of the citizen. Democracy's legitimacy has repeatedly depended upon making its own exclusions visible and contestable.

The growth of the administrative state introduced a second transformation. Weber (1922/1978) describes bureaucracy as a technically rational form of organisation based on files, expertise, offices, rules, and specialised competence. Bureaucracy can make rights more consistent and public services more reliable, but it can also distance decision-making from ordinary political judgment. Citizens increasingly encounter the state through forms, classifications, eligibility tests, databases, and professional procedures.

This tension appears in everyday life. A social benefit may be legally available, yet access depends upon an administrative classification that the citizen cannot easily understand or challenge. A migration decision may be made through a risk assessment that appears objective because it is numerical. A credit, insurance, or employment decision may be influenced by a model whose variables remain opaque. These examples are not proof that democracy has



ended. They show how political power can be exercised through apparently neutral systems that translate persons into categories.

Schumpeter's (1942) elite-competition model captures one aspect of mass democracy: citizens periodically choose between organised political teams. Dahl's (1971) polyarchy adds ongoing contestation, association, and alternative information. Habermas (1989) adds the requirement that legitimacy be generated through public communication. Together, these accounts suggest that democracy requires more than a vote. It requires institutions through which citizens can recognise power, question reasons, organise collectively, and alter governing arrangements.

### **The Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy**

Current evidence indicates that liberal democracy is under measurable strain. V-Dem's Democracy Report 2026, using data through 2025, identifies nearly one-quarter of the world's countries as undergoing autocratisation and reports that several newly autocratising states are established democracies in Europe and North America (V-Dem Institute, 2026). Freedom House (2026) reports that global freedom declined for the twentieth consecutive year in 2025, with 54 countries deteriorating and 35 improving. Its United States country assessment declined from 84 to 81 out of 100, although the United States remained classified as free.

Public dissatisfaction is another indicator, though it must be interpreted carefully. Pew Research Center reported in 2025 that, across 12 high-income countries surveyed consistently since 2017, a median of 64% of adults were dissatisfied with how democracy was functioning (Wike et al., 2025). Dissatisfaction does not mean that citizens have rejected democratic ideals. It may instead indicate that citizens continue to value democracy while judging their

institutions incapable of delivering accountability, equality, security, or effective collective action.

Several theoretical diagnoses illuminate this gap. Wolin (2008) describes a form of managed democracy in which formal participation coexists with limited popular control. Crouch (2004) uses ‘post-democracy’ to describe a condition in which elections persist while political initiative is increasingly concentrated among professional elites and corporate interests. Mair (2013) describes the ‘hollowing’ of Western democracy as parties become less rooted in social membership and more closely integrated with the state. Brown (2015) argues that neoliberal rationality converts citizens and public institutions into economic calculations, weakening the democratic vocabulary of common purposes.

An illustrative contemporary pattern is the relationship between electoral politics and institutional capacity. A government may win a mandate but be unable to regulate a global platform, stabilise housing, protect a local industry from automation, or control data held in foreign cloud infrastructures. Citizens then experience a mismatch between the formal location of sovereignty and the practical location of power. Populist movements can exploit this mismatch by promising to restore control, while technocratic institutions respond by claiming that complex systems require expert management. The result is a cycle in which democratic institutions appear both too weak to govern and too powerful to trust.

### **The Algorithmic and Automated Transformation of Political Life**

Algorithmic governance introduces a new form of mediation. Just and Latzer (2016) describe algorithmic selection as a process through which digital systems participate in the construction of social reality. Danaher (2016) uses ‘algocracy’ to analyse governance through algorithmic

decision-making and its implications for legitimacy. Zuboff (2019) shows how surveillance capitalism converts behavioural experience into data that can be used to predict and shape future conduct.

Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality helps explain why this power need not operate principally through prohibition. Modern government acts by organising the conditions under which populations conduct themselves. Deleuze's (1992) account of societies of control similarly anticipates forms of continuous modulation that replace confinement within a single institution. A citizen whose welfare eligibility, employment prospects, insurance costs, political information, and mobility are repeatedly adjusted through connected assessments experiences power as an environment of changing permissions rather than as one visible command.

The political significance of these systems should not be reduced to the claim that algorithms directly control beliefs. The empirical evidence is more cautious. Hu et al. (2025) found that short-term exposure to filter-bubble recommendation systems on YouTube had limited effects on polarisation. Other experimental research has also found that replacing or modifying feed-ranking systems does not uniformly produce large changes in political attitudes. Conversely, Gauthier et al. (2026) reported evidence that X's algorithmic feed increased engagement and shifted some political opinions in a more conservative direction, while finding no significant effect on affective polarisation or self-reported partisanship. The responsible conclusion is that effects are conditional: they depend on platform design, content, ownership, political context, duration, and the characteristics of users.

Even limited attitudinal effects do not make algorithmic mediation politically insignificant. A platform may not convert every citizen, yet it can determine which claims are visible, which actors receive attention, which controversies appear urgent, and how quickly emotional material circulates. A user who receives ten thousand possible political messages does not encounter a public sphere in the abstract; the user encounters a ranked sequence. The sequence is a form of practical power.

Automation adds an economic dimension. The IMF estimates that artificial intelligence may affect almost 40% of jobs globally and a larger share in advanced economies (Cazzaniga et al., 2024). The ILO's 2025 update estimates that approximately one in four workers worldwide is in an occupation with some exposure to generative AI, while emphasising transformation rather than inevitable replacement (Gmyrek et al., 2025). These findings do not prove mass unemployment. They do establish that labour, expertise, and occupational identity are likely to be reorganised.

The democratic issue is ownership and distribution. If automation increases productivity while concentrating income, data, and decision-making capacity, citizens may retain formal equality while losing economic leverage. If states respond by expanding automated eligibility systems, surveillance, or behavioural management, social insecurity may be administered rather than politically resolved. Data sovereignty could protect democratic communities from foreign dependence, but it could also provide governments with a rationale for intensified domestic control over infrastructure and information.

### **From External Representation to Mediated Interiority**

The preceding sections describe external transformations: parties, bureaucracies, platforms, databases, models, and states. The Systemised Self argument adds a phenomenological claim about how these systems may be experienced. The subject increasingly encounters the world through recommendations, prompts, rankings, predictive suggestions, automated reminders, and personalised environments. The issue is not that every decision is made by a machine. It is that the conditions under which decisions become salient are increasingly prearranged.

This development can be illustrated by a simple sequence. A person begins with an open field of possible interests. The platform records clicks, pauses, purchases, searches, emotional reactions, and social associations. It infers a preference profile, presents content likely to generate engagement, and then uses the person's response to refine the profile. The preference appears personal because it is experienced internally, yet its formation has been partly organised by an external system. The distinction between expression and production becomes difficult to maintain.

The neurological pathway insinuated is not a claim that technology automatically damages the brain. It is an interpretive pathway: repeated external mediation may weaken confidence in unaided judgment, encourage dependence upon system-generated cues, and contribute to identity ambiguity or emotional alienation. These are hypotheses requiring careful empirical testing, not established diagnoses. An Algorithmic Alienation Index (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) can therefore be used as an empirically informed framework for examining perceived loss of freedom, self-distancing, decision-making erosion, and emotional alienation, while the Systemised Self remains a speculative terminal construct.

The political consequence follows from the location of mediation. In classical liberal democracy, institutions stand between the individual and collective power: parties represent, parliaments deliberate, courts review, and media investigate. In the emerging environment, mediation is increasingly internalised. The citizen is not merely governed by an institution; the citizen's attention, preference, and self-understanding become part of the governing infrastructure. Political power approaches the subject from within the subject's own mediated experience.

### **Neurocratic Determinism, the Hollow Demos, and the Algarchy**

This essay proposes Neurocratic Determinism as the political system toward which the preceding trajectory may tend under the conditions of the Hollow Absolute. The term does not mean that human beings are biologically predetermined or that neuroscience has disproved free will. It denotes operational determinism: systems increasingly determine the prompts, incentives, classifications, predictions, and emotional environments through which human choices are formed.

Neurocratic Determinism is therefore a political concept with a neurological appearance by design. Its locus of power is the mediated interiority of the subject. The system does not need to command every citizen directly. It can predict likely conduct, shape the available field of attention, adjust incentives, personalise messages, identify risk, and intervene before a preference becomes a collective political demand. The citizen remains formally free, but freedom is exercised within environments increasingly designed around the probability of response.

At the collective level, this produces the Hollow Demos. The demos is hollow not because people disappear, but because the collective political subject is progressively reduced to data points, sentiment scores, behavioural profiles, electoral probabilities, and predicted preferences. A hollow demos may still vote, protest, consume political content, and express outrage. What weakens is its ability to constitute itself as a shared, deliberative, and self-directing public.

The Algarchy names the power elite that controls the infrastructure of this process. It includes those who own or command the platforms, cloud systems, data reservoirs, models, computational resources, and technical standards through which citizens become legible and governable. The Algarchy need not be a formal ruling class in the classical sense. Its power is infrastructural. It can shape the conditions under which governments, markets, parties, and citizens act.

The Hollow Absolute names the integrated order in which these elements converge. Unlike Hegel's Absolute, which seeks intelligible self-knowledge and reconciliation through conceptual development, the Hollow Absolute approaches practical totality without substantive meaning. It can connect systems, predict conduct, and coordinate populations, but it does not necessarily provide a common good. Its unity is operational and transactional.

The Hollow Absolutes political appearance speculated in the thesis Phase 3 by 2053 (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) is consequently hybrid rather than uniformly dictatorial. Elections, parties, constitutions, and courts may survive. Yet political participation is proposed to become continuous measurement; public policy may be increasingly delegated to technical systems; national blocs may seek sovereignty over data and computation; and citizens may be addressed

through personalised political realities. The question will not be simply whether people are allowed to choose. It will be whether they retain meaningful control over how choices are formed, which alternatives become visible, and who owns the systems that predict them.

### **Conclusion: The Future of Democracy After the Demos**

The historical record shows that democracy has always changed in form. It moved from direct participation to representation, from restricted citizenship to mass suffrage, and from civic assemblies to bureaucratic and mediated publics. Its speculated current crisis must therefore be understood neither as proof of inevitable collapse nor as a temporary malfunction that requires no structural response. However the proposed crisis is one of substance rather than form.

The factual evidence is proposed to support a cautious diagnosis: established democracies are experiencing autocratising pressures; freedom and trust have declined in many settings; citizens are dissatisfied with institutional performance; and algorithmic and automated systems are assuming a larger role in communication, administration, labour, and prediction. The evidence does not establish that algorithms inevitably polarise citizens, that automation inevitably eliminates employment, or that liberal democracy must end.

The speculative claim is that these pressures may converge into what is proposed as Neurocratic Determinism. In this condition, the democratic subject is increasingly governed through the mediated interiority of the Systemised Self. The collective result is the Hollow Demos; the infrastructural elite is the Algarchy; and the encompassing societal order is the Hollow Absolute. Liberal democracy does not necessarily disappear. It becomes an institutional shell whose substantive political mediation has migrated into systems capable of anticipating and shaping preference.



The future of democracy is proposed therefore to depend upon whether societies can preserve contestable public worlds, democratic ownership of infrastructure, meaningful privacy, institutional accountability, and human capacities for unassisted judgment. If they cannot, the citizen may remain electorally visible while becoming politically secondary to the systems that know what the citizen is likely to want. The decline of liberal democracy would then be less a dramatic replacement than a phenomenological inversion: the subject experiences choice as personal at the very moment that its conditions are increasingly systemically produced, alienation experienced as liberation.

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