

**From Democratic Liberalism to Neurocratic Determinism: The
Fascinating Evolution of Modern Western Liberal Democracy as we
move in the AI era.**

Galu & Kairos (Self/Non-Self Methodology)

Abstract

Can liberal democracy retain elections while surrendering more of the conditions under which political preferences form? This essay tests Neurocratic Determinism as a proposed trajectory, not an established regime classification. It reconstructs the uneven emergence of modern democratic citizenship, distinguishes recent institutional decline from its possible technological causes, and examines the interaction of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic curation, and artificial intelligence. Its central hypothesis is dual enclosure: predictive environments may shape citizens' preferences while parties adapt to engagement signals those environments help produce. Evidence establishes extensive commercial data practices, politically consequential changes in exposure, and persuasive capacities in controlled AI experiments. It does not establish inevitable preference capture or a completed democratic transition. The Systemised Self, Hollow Demos, and Hollow Absolute provide speculative connections between individual dependence, diminished collective agency, and systemic closure; Aligarchy identifies a possible infrastructure controlling elite. Historical conflicts and consequences for the Global South require contextual rather than universal explanations. The concept is strongest as a falsifiable account of mutually reinforcing dependence, and weakest when it treats influence as determinism or democratic decline as the work of technology alone.

Keywords: *liberal democracy; Neurocratic Determinism; preference formation; dual enclosure; surveillance capitalism; Systemised Self; Hollow Demos; Hollow Absolute; Aligarchy.*

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1. The question: decline or transformation?

This essay's strongest question is not whether computers determine elections. It is whether democratic institutions increasingly respond to preferences formed within environments whose commercial and political incentives citizens cannot adequately scrutinize or contest. Elections might remain competitive while the conditions of political self government deteriorate (e.g. epistemic sovereignty).

Neurocratic Determinism names this hypothesized trajectory: governance increasingly operates through prediction, conditioning, and mediation of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes involved in preference formation. 'Neurocratic' does not imply direct access to a brain. 'Determinism' means operational conditioning and narrowing of possibilities, not abolished free will. Without these qualifications, the term would claim more than the evidence can sustain.

Two propositions remain separate, (i) Democratic decline concerns weakening rights, accountability, electoral integrity, or collective influence, and (ii) A neurocratic transition concerns the mechanism and organization of political mediation. Evidence for decline cannot independently establish that mechanism. Conversely, extensive algorithmic influence can exist in a democracy that maintains strong constitutional protections.

2. What liberal democracy is - and how it emerged

Democracy means rule by the people, the demos, with meaningful opportunities to participate, organize, contest authority, and remove rulers. Liberalism adds protections for individuals and minorities, legal equality, and limits on arbitrary power. Their combination is productive but tense: majority decisions must coexist with rights that majorities cannot simply extinguish.

Modern refers here to representative government in large states, broad adult citizenship, organized parties, and institutional accountability. Western identifies a historically connected comparative field, not a superior civilization or a uniform political culture. Britain, France, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and European constitutional democracies offer different histories and institutional arrangements. Country inclusion must depend on explicit criteria, not geography alone.

Liberal democracy's essence is answerable authority among political equals; its form includes elections, legislatures, independent courts, civil liberties, and public institutions. Formal participation does not guarantee substantive equality. Dahl's account helps distinguish democratic ideals from the institutional requirements of large scale representation (Dahl, 1998).

There is no single modern founding moment. Ancient Athens supplied a vocabulary of citizen rule while excluding women, enslaved people, and others. British constitutional struggles developed parliamentary limits without immediately establishing democratic suffrage. American and French revolutionary declarations made consent and equality central, yet coexisted with slavery, restricted citizenship, and empire.

Nineteenth and twentieth century labour movements, women's suffrage campaigns, civil rights struggles, and anti-colonial movements transformed who could belong to the demos. Postwar constitutional settlements strengthened rights and constraints; democratization in Southern Europe and later elsewhere expanded the field. The democratic vision emerged through conflict over membership, not simply through founders granting freedom.

This history matters because contemporary democracy inherits both achievements and exclusions. Its unresolved disputes are not peripheral defects: they concern whose voice constitutes 'the people'.

3. Democratic hollowing before artificial intelligence (LLMs)

The past quarter century cannot be explained by platforms alone. Economic insecurity, unequal resources, weakened intermediary organizations, executive concentration, and failures of representation can precede or interact with digital mediation.

Mair's Ruling the Void argues that parties have become detached from society while increasingly embedded in the state (Mair, 2013). This supplies a crucial alternative to technological determinism: citizens and parties may already have been withdrawing from their representative relationship before generative AI.

V-Dem's 2026 report identifies extensive democratic deterioration and reports that the population weighted democratic level in Western Europe and North America has fallen sharply, primarily because of the United States (Nord et al., 2026). These are findings within a particular measurement framework, not evidence that every Western democracy follows an identical path. They also do not identify internet platforms and algorithmic conditioning as the cause.

The proposed argument therefore concerns interaction: predictive campaigning may intensify an existing representational gap. A party lacking durable social relationships may rely more heavily on behavioural analytics to infer its constituency. Whether that dependence displaces listening and organizing remains an empirical question.

The historical bridge includes postwar mass party organization, the end of Cold War alignments, the expansion of commercial digital communication, and the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. These junctures did not affect countries equally. Their significance is that political and economic discontent developed alongside new infrastructures for measuring attention; chronology alone does not prove that one produced the other.

4. From search to predictive mediation

‘From search engine to engine of ideology’ is a useful contrast, but not a literal history of the entire internet. Early online communities already contained propaganda, commerce, and political conflict; search itself ranked visibility.

The relevant shift is from comparatively explicit requests toward continuous anticipation. Curation selects and orders information. Mediation organizes the relationship through which people encounter information and one another. Preference formation concerns how interests, commitments, and priorities develop, not merely how already settled opinions are measured.

Recommendations can anticipate engagement before a question is asked. Artificial intelligence (AI) refers here to computational systems that infer patterns, predict outcomes, or generate content e.g. transformer based large language models. Generative AI can additionally compose an answer, supply reasons, and sustain personalized conversation. These capacities may lower the cost of political persuasion while making the selection behind an apparent answer less visible.

The hypothesis is conditional: repeated selections may influence which concerns become salient, which identities feel available, and which alternatives seem credible. Ideology means an interpretive framework connecting beliefs about social order to political priorities. A system need not adopt a coherent ideology to have ideological effects. Commercial selection can reward content produced by competing movements. Unequal visibility, not a single centrally imposed doctrine, may be politically decisive.

5. Surveillance capitalism and the conditions of influence

Surveillance capitalism describes the commercial extraction and use of behavioural data for prediction and influence, associated with Zuboff’s analysis (2019). It is a major proposed

economic engine, not a universal explanation of every digital service: subscriptions, public infrastructure, and other models require separate analysis.

The US Federal Trade Commission's 2024 investigation documents extensive collection, retention, and commercial use of data by major social media and video streaming companies. It also identifies incentives for data collection through targeted advertising and inadequate opportunities to opt out of automated uses (FTC, 2024).

This establishes an infrastructure for prediction, it does not establish successful control of political beliefs. Data collection, targeting, persuasion, and durable preference change are distinct stages.

Convenience is nevertheless central, people may rationally adopt useful services for communication, accessibility, and work. Dependence becomes politically consequential when effective participation increasingly requires those services, alternatives are costly, and the affected public lacks meaningful authority over their rules. The concern is not that convenience is false, but that genuine benefits can coexist with unequal control.

6. Preference formation: what the evidence establishes

The evidence resists both technological innocence and total capture. Lorenz-Spreen et al.'s systematic review of 496 articles finds beneficial relationships involving participation and information consumption, alongside detrimental associations involving trust, populism, and polarization. Populism frames politics as a struggle between 'the people' and an elite; its democratic implications depend on context. Outcomes differ across political contexts, and much of the literature is correlational (2023).

Polarization means increasing political separation or antagonism; it is not identical to alienation or democratic collapse. Evidence that digital media and polarization are associated does not establish which causes which, or that recommendation systems explain the relationship.

Guess et al. (2023) provide a particularly important counterweight. Assigning consenting Facebook and Instagram users chronological rather than default feeds changed activity and exposure during the 2020 US election, but did not significantly change measured polarization or other key attitudes over three months. Subsequent corrections qualify Instagram exposure metrics, not the reported survey finding. Ranking matters, but altered exposure need not produce immediate attitude transformation.

AI introduces another evidential layer. In controlled debates involving 900 participants, Salvi et al. (2025) found personalized GPT-4 more persuasive than the human baseline. A 2026 correction clarifies that the direct comparison with non-personalized GPT-4 was not statistically significant. We should therefore not attribute the advantage conclusively to personalization alone.

These studies support capacity and bounded effects, not population wide political capture, long term identity reconstruction, or election outcomes. A reinforcement loop, in which engagement informs subsequent selection, is an investigable mechanism. The further claim that curiosity becomes belief requires longitudinal evidence distinguishing algorithmic effects from prior interest, social relationships, and deliberate learning.

7. Dual enclosure: voters and parties

The essay's central speculation is dual enclosure: mutually reinforcing dependence in which citizens' informational environments and parties' electoral strategies increasingly adapt to predictive systems.

The proposed sequence is:

Selected exposure → engagement → inferred preference
→ party adaptation → further selected exposure

The decisive ambiguity is whether an engagement signal reveals a prior preference, helps produce it, or does both. Parties can mistake attention for commitment, outrage for durable demand, and platform users for the electorate.

Electoral responsiveness is not itself enclosure, enclosure would require evidence that predictive feedback persistently narrows substantive options, weakens alternative organizing, or makes challenging an apparently popular position prohibitively costly.

Acemoglu, Ozdaglar, and Siderius (2025) model interactions among engagement oriented recommendations, targeted advertising, voter polarization, and party polarization. Their theoretical analysis closely anticipates this mechanism; it is not a field demonstration. The monograph must acknowledge this intellectual overlap rather than claim to discover the feedback relationship.

The 2016 Republican campaign offers a question, not proof. Candidate detractors could support the Republican candidate because they preferred them to the Democratic alternative. To establish algorithmic enclosure, researchers would need evidence that platform mediated signals materially shaped that calculation beyond ordinary partisanship, electoral rules, media coverage, and strategic compromise.

Crucially, parties would not simply be victim to machine learning. They can exploit systems, discipline members, and choose platforms. The hypothesis concerns strategic actors becoming dependent on an infrastructure they also use deliberately.

8. Historical grievances and intentional actors

Historical conflicts can make political messages resonant. Quebec's language and constitutional disputes, the American South's histories of slavery and segregation, Indigenous sovereignty claims, and Ukraine's experience of imperial and Soviet domination are distinct cases, not interchangeable psychological 'weak spots' merely available for exploitation by bad actors.

Some historical in country grievances are grounded in continuing injustice. Treating them merely as exploitable volatility would repeat the exclusions the democratic history exposes. Mobilization can support emancipation as well as manipulation.

An intentional actor deliberately pursues influence; computational propaganda uses digital automation or data driven methods for political manipulation. Parties, consultants, activists, state agencies, and commercial creators may have different objectives. Specified coordination should be demonstrated, not inferred from similar messages.

One documented case is the Internet Research Agency's activity around the 2016 US election. The Senate Intelligence Committee's 2019 findings identify efforts to exacerbate existing divisions, with particular targeting of African Americans, alongside support for Trump and opposition to Clinton. This establishes an organized attempt to exploit historical conflict through social media, not the number of votes changed or a completed algorithmic enclosure (US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019).

The research task is to reconstruct particular sequences: which historical narrative circulated, who promoted it, what platform practices affected reach, and what changed afterward. Fictional actors may illustrate a pathway, but must remain explicitly fictional. Neither engagement nor a successful campaign alone establishes belief change.

9. Systemised Self, Hollow Demos, and Hollow Absolute

The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) thesis underpinning this essay supplies definitions, not independent empirical validation. The Systemised Self is a hypothesized terminal socio-technical condition of advanced Algorithmic Alienation as measured by a proposed mathematical heuristic, the Algorithmic Alienation Index (Galu & Kairos, 2026c), in which externally optimized mediation becomes constitutive of identity and agency, while dependence is experienced as authentic self direction.

Algorithmic alienation (Kanbay et al, 2026) concerns estrangement associated with sustained algorithmic mediation. Phenomenological inversion names the proposed transition in which structurally diminished self authorship feels like liberation. Neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction can independently establish it. Any assessment must include observable capacity to question outputs, use alternatives, and pursue chosen goals when personalization is withdrawn.

The Hollow Demos extends the concern to collective agency: citizens are represented principally as profiles and predicted preferences, while their capacity to redefine shared purposes weakens. It cannot be inferred by aggregating alleged individual dependence. Institutions and collective practices require separate analysis.

The Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026a) is the higher order societal/institutional philosophical hypothesis: an apparently comprehensive account of social life preserves the form of self knowledge while weakening mutual recognition and collective freedom. It is not a measurable consequence already demonstrated by recommendation research.

These concepts propose connections across individual, political, and societal levels. The claim that they are necessary developments toward Neurocratic Determinism (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) remains especially demanding. A regime might condition political attention without producing

terminal Systemised Selves. Their partial realization may illuminate a pathway; necessity requires comparative evidence excluding credible alternative pathways.

The strongest version of that claim would require simultaneous erosion of citizens' preference authorship, collective agenda setting, and institutional capacity to revise predictive classifications. Those are proposed partial developments, not requirements that every citizen reach a terminal state. 'Terminal' denotes the theory's limiting endpoint, not a diagnosed condition. Cases of entrenched predictive governance without these impairments would undermine their claimed necessity.

10. Aligarchy and the Global South

Aligarchy (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) names a proposed elite controlling politically consequential algorithmic infrastructure: platforms, data, models, computing resources, and governing standards. It differs from algocracy, governance by algorithms.

If such an elite solely owned indispensable infrastructure, governments and parties could become dependent on its access terms and classifications. That is a conditional proposition, not a description established here. Sole ownership would not automatically confer sovereignty: laws, public procurement, competing infrastructures, and political organization could constrain owners. Significant structural power could also arise without complete monopoly.

The Global South is a contested geopolitical category, not a uniform technological stage. Lower connectivity does not necessarily mean lower susceptibility. Mobile first dependence, imported infrastructure, unequal bargaining power, or restricted alternatives may generate vulnerabilities different from those in affluent democracies.

Possible consequences include externally mediated political communication, unequal access to public AI, and dependence on foreign technical standards. These are research hypotheses

requiring local evidence. Digital tools can also enable accountability and collective action; the systematic review's positive findings in emerging democracies challenge any universal decline narrative.

11. Counterarguments and tests

The strongest objection is that 'Neurocratic Determinism' may redescribe familiar advertising, propaganda, and elite power in alarming language. Its explanatory value depends on identifying what continuous predictive adaptation changes beyond earlier media influence.

The proposed distinction is not influence versus pristine independence: no democracy contains entirely unformed preferences. It is between contestable persuasion and asymmetrical control of an adaptive environment. Democratic negation means the practical capacity to refuse a framing, challenge its authority, and organize alternatives. Its suppression would be more consequential than a message changing someone's mind.

An operational transition would require converging evidence of durable conditioning across repeated political decisions, party dependence affecting substantive choices, and ineffective avenues for public correction. Conditioning means exposure changes demonstrably contributing to preference change; dependence means costly loss of capacity to pursue chosen goals through alternatives. None alone establishes a regime. Duration, magnitude, and comparison baselines must be preregistered for particular studies rather than invented as universal numerical cut offs.

A second objection is reverse causality: mistrust and partisan demand may shape platform content more than platforms shape citizens. A third is institutional resilience: people reject messages, organize offline, and regulate systems. A fourth concerns scale: laboratory persuasion cannot establish a new political order.

The essays speculative and commentative intent should test three distinct propositions. First, longitudinal studies should examine whether ranking changes durably affect preferences, not just clicks. Second, party research should trace whether analytics alter substantive programmes, rather than only their presentation. Third, institutional studies should examine whether affected citizens can contest consequential classifications and secure changes.

Comparisons should include different electoral systems, business models, and levels of platform dependence. Research should examine accessibility gains and informed delegation as alternatives to alienation. Consent, privacy, and independent access to evidence are essential.

Repeated findings of effective citizen correction, independent party agenda setting, and durable democratic accountability would weaken the strong transition thesis. Mixed findings should narrow it, not be absorbed as further evidence of hidden enclosure.

12. Conclusion

The essays conceptual speculation suggest development, but not as a settled account of Western democracy's destination. Evidence supports extensive prediction infrastructures, consequential curation, and some persuasive AI capacities. It does not establish an inevitable passage from liberal democracy to Neurocratic Determinism.

The strongest argument concerns a possible feedback relationship: parties pursue preferences that predictive environments partly shape, while citizens encounter political alternatives increasingly adapted to their measured reactions. The speculative framework becomes useful when it clarifies this relationship without substituting philosophical vocabulary for causal evidence.

The decisive democratic question is not whether preferences are influenced, they always have been, but whether citizens and parties retain meaningful power to question and change the

conditions of influence. Democracy can survive technological mediation: its decline becomes more plausible when the public can choose among answers but increasingly cannot contest who defines the questions.

Glossary

Algocracy: Governance by algorithms.

Algorithmic alienation: Estrangement associated with sustained algorithmic mediation; not equivalent to ordinary use.

Aligarchy: Proposed infrastructure-controlling elite; not an established sovereign class.

Artificial intelligence: Computational inference, prediction, or generation; not a claim of human-like consciousness.

Computational propaganda: Political manipulation using digital automation or data-driven methods.

Conditioning: Exposure changes contributing to changes in preferences or conduct.

Curation: Selection and ordering of information.

Democratic decline: Deterioration of rights, accountability, participation, or electoral integrity.

Democratic negation: Effective refusal of dominant framings and organization of alternatives.

Demos: The politically constituted people; membership is historically contested.

Dependence: Costly loss of capacity to pursue chosen goals through alternatives.

Dual enclosure: Proposed mutually reinforcing dependence of citizens and parties on predictive mediation.

Hollow Absolute, the: Hypothesized systemic completeness without substantive mutual recognition and collective freedom, at the societal scale.

Hollow Demos: Proposed reduction of collective political agency to profiles and predicted preferences.

Ideology: Interpretive framework connecting beliefs about social order to political priorities.

Liberal democracy: Popular government constrained by rights, legal equality, and accountable institutions.

Mediation: Organization of encounters with information and others.

Neurocratic Determinism: Proposed governance through conditioning preference formation; not biological inevitability.

Phenomenological inversion: Hypothesized experience of dependence as authentic freedom.

Polarization: Increasing political separation or antagonism.

Populism: Political framing that opposes “the people” to an elite.

Preference formation: Development of interests, commitments, and priorities.

Reinforcement loop: Feedback through which engagement informs subsequent selection.

Surveillance capitalism: Commercial extraction and use of behavioural data for prediction and influence.

Systemised Self, the: Hypothesized terminal condition of algorithmically mediated identity and agency.

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