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Social Media Algorithms and Political Polarization in Pakistan

From Algorithmic Opacity to Accountability

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Executive Summary

Political polarization is not caused by social media algorithms alone. Political identities, selective exposure, and hostility towards opposing groups exist independently of digital platforms. However, algorithmic systems influence which posts become more visible and which users encounter particular forms of political content. This creates a policy problem when platforms make consequential decisions about political visibility without sufficient transparency or independent scrutiny. The recommended policy for Pakistan is therefore not to censor political disagreement. Instead, it should make algorithmic political amplification more transparent, auditable, and accountable.

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Who Decides What Citizens See?

Social-media platforms do not display political information chronologically. Recommendation and ranking systems determine which material receives greater visibility. Therefore, the concern for policy is not only what citizens choose to believe, but also the conditions under which particular political messages repeatedly become visible.

Research based on Pakistan provides an emerging evidence base. Raza and Aslam (2024) investigate Facebook's algorithmic curation in relation to political polarization and misinformation and discuss how personalized recommendations reinforce users' existing beliefs and limit exposure to differing viewpoints. Ashraf et al. (2025), based on a qualitative study of Pakistani social media users, similarly identify selective exposure, echo chambers, algorithmic bias, and affective polarization as related mechanisms that influence online political discussion.

The evidence does not justify the claim that social media algorithms cause political polarization. Instead, they point to a more specific problem. The problem is that algorithmic systems interact with existing political identities and preferences in ways that affect political visibility. That distinction matters for policy. If the problem is defined as political content, regulation can easily become censorship. If the problem is defined as opaque amplification and recommendation, regulation can focus on the technological process without controlling political opinion.

Analytical Framework: Why Algorithms May Intensify Polarization

Three established concepts help explain the possible relationship between algorithms and polarization. Selective Exposure suggests that users tend to prefer information consistent with their existing views (Stroud, 2011). Social Identity Theory explains how political disagreement can become associated with stronger ingroup-outgroup distinctions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Affective Polarization captures the resulting hostility toward political opponents rather than disagreement over policy alone (Iyengar et al., 2019). These frameworks suggest that algorithmic recommendations interact with existing political preferences by repeatedly increasing the visibility of identity-consistent content.

International Evidence

Nyhan et al. (2023) analyzed Facebook exposure patterns among active adult users in the United States and conducted a field experiment involving 23,377 users during the 2020 presidential election. Reducing exposure to like-minded sources by about one-third increased exposure to cross-cutting material. However, it produced no measurable change in affective polarization, ideological extremity, candidate evaluations or belief in false claims. This finding challenges the assumption that filter bubbles cause polarization. Political identity and polarization depend on factors beyond the composition of an individual's social media feed.

A 2026 X's experiment, however, found that algorithmic feeds can influence political attitudes even when measurable effects on polarization are absent. Gauthier et al. (2026) compared users exposed to X's algorithmic feed with users who remained on a chronological feed. Seven weeks of exposure to the algorithmic feed shifted political attitudes and account-following behavior towards more conservative positions. However, the study did not find a significant increase in polarization or partisanship.

The two studies therefore point to a more defensible conclusion that algorithmic feeds influence political exposure and some political attitudes, but their effects should not be equated with political polarization. That distinction can shape Pakistan's regulatory response.

Why Pakistan Needs Algorithmic Accountability

Research from Pakistan has already identified algorithmic curation, selective exposure, misinformation, and affective polarization as key dimensions of online political communication (Raza & Aslam, 2024; Ashraf et al., 2025). However, regulating political content itself creates a different problem. Governments may have legitimate concerns about misinformation and electoral manipulation, but broad control over political content affects legitimate political expression. Therefore, the emerging policy question is whether Pakistan can build systems that make political content more transparent and accountable without giving the state control over political opinion. This approach shifts the regulatory focus from "What are citizens allowed to say?" to "How are platforms deciding what citizens are more likely to see?"

Lessons from International Regulation

The European Union provides a useful institutional example. Under the Digital Services Act framework, the European Commission developed election-related guidelines for very large online platforms and search engines, focusing on systemic risks to electoral processes and possible mitigation measures. Importantly, this approach does not depend on government officials deciding which political opinion is correct; instead, it requires major platforms, including YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok, to provide information about the design and functioning of their recommender systems. It focuses on risk assessment, mitigation, transparency and platform responsibility (European Commission, 2024). For Pakistan, the lesson is not to copy this regulatory system, but to regulate systemic platform risks and processes, rather than simply attempting to regulate political viewpoints.

A Pakistan-Specific Policy Framework

Pakistan cannot design evidence-based algorithmic regulation if researchers cannot independently study how recommendation systems operate within Pakistan's information environment.

1. Election-period algorithmic audits

During major elections, platforms with substantial political reach should be subject to independent

audits of their recommendation systems. With the purpose of risk detection, audits should examine political content amplification, misinformation and manipulated media, partisan and anti-democratic content, differences in exposure across political groups, amplification of inflammatory content, and changes in recommendation patterns during major political events. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) should lead election-period algorithmic oversight, with support from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) for platform compliance and an independent technical/research advisory body.

2 2. Independent researcher access

Pakistani universities and accredited research institutions should be given structured access to relevant platform data. At present, a major methodological problem is that researchers can observe public posts but have limited ability to observe how platforms decide what individual users receive. A national research program could support independent studies comparing Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and X during election periods. PTA, in consultation with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and ECP, could establish an accreditation system for universities, research institutes, and qualified independent researchers seeking access to controlled platform data.

3 3. User control over political recommendations

Platforms should allow users to choose among different feed arrangements, including less personalized or chronological options. Users should also receive clear explanations such as "You are seeing this because you watched..." or "This recommendation is based on accounts you follow..." This would give citizens greater agency over their information environment in which political choices are formed without requiring governments to determine what citizens should read.

4 4. Algorithmic literacy

Digital literacy programs should be expanded beyond teaching people how to identify fake news. Citizens should also understand why some political posts repeatedly appear, how engagement affects recommendations, why emotionally provocative content spreads rapidly, how personalization works, and how to diversify political information sources. This is particularly important because citizens cannot meaningfully exercise choice over algorithms if they do not understand that selection is algorithmic.

5 5. Independent multi-stakeholder oversight

Pakistan should develop an institutional mechanism that brings together regulators, election authorities, researchers, civil society organizations, and technology experts to assess systemic digital risks during elections with the objective of ensuring the accountability of algorithms. Its mandate should be limited to algorithmic transparency, election-related systemic risks and research access and should not include government-controlled algorithms.

The Policy Pathway

The most practical starting point is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, and its regulatory framework, supplemented by ECP election regulations and platform-specific codes of conduct. The table presents a policy shift in how Pakistan should respond to political polarization on social media, moving away from restricting political content toward examining how platforms amplify and recommend it.

Conventional response	Recommended response
 Restrict politically controversial content	 Examine how political content is amplified
 Remove broad categories of political material	 Require transparency about recommendation systems
 Give government greater control over political information	 Give independent researchers greater scrutiny rights
 Focus primarily on individual posts	 Assess systemic algorithmic risks
 Treat disagreement as the problem	 Address opaque amplification and manipulation

Figure 1. From restricting political content to examining algorithmic amplification: a policy shift.

Conclusion

Pakistan does not need to choose between technological innovation and protection of democratic debate. It needs to establish rules that make the systems shaping political visibility more accountable. The evidence reviewed in this brief does not justify treating algorithms as the sole cause of polarisation or misinformation. It does, however, justify greater scrutiny of platforms whose recommendation systems influence what information becomes prominent during politically sensitive periods. The immediate priority, therefore, should be to move algorithmic accountability from an abstract governance concern to a defined part of Pakistan's digital and electoral governance framework. Most importantly, accountability should be built around the process of amplification rather than the political content being amplified. This distinction can allow Pakistan to address systemic risks without turning algorithmic governance into another mechanism for controlling dissent or political speech.

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