

Over-Politicization of Public and Digital Spheres: Third-Party Involvement in 2024 Elections

Ece Eroglu

IE International Policy Review - Policy of the Month

November 29, 2024

Introduction

With the 2024 US presidential elections having taken place in the last month it was clear that the political atmosphere was more strained than ever before. In the midst of this electoral tension, the involvement of high-profile figures in politics further complicated the matters. Such was the case with the “Giant Leap”¹ of Elon Musk as he appeared on stage during Trump’s rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, on 6th of October. In his speech, the tech mogul revealed his support for Trump, calling out citizens to cast their vote for the Republican presidential nominee, in order to “preserve American democracy.” It is publicly known that Musk is a long standing supporter of Trump, previously inviting the Republican candidate to a live-streamed conversation on X. Especially in the US, X is mainly used for political purposes, as a recent Pew Research Center survey² indicated that six among ten Americans X users utilize the platform to keep up with the political circumstances. Therefore, over-politicization of social media and non-political spheres by third-party activities raises concerns about the pertinence of existing policies on political involvement.

Background and Analysis

The involvement of famous public figures in politics falls under the concept of corporate populism, which signifies the political engagement of leaders from various domains to influence power relations. These political practices operate on people’s interests and favour the creation of a dual worldview, enforcing the polarization of “the people” and “the others.” Drawing upon the consistent social media activity of Elon Musk since the 2020 US elections, his major effort to form an antagonistic narrative in the digital world reached a peak with the takeover of X. Musk’s underlying motive to purchase Twitter, before it was renamed “X” in July 2023, was evaluated as a political project, embodying his interest in influencing public opinion and having a tight grip on the shared content within the platform. After Musk’s Twitter buyout, a drastic change was observed within the views of the Republican Twitter users.³ In 2021, 60% of the Republican users who had previously asserted that Twitter was “mostly bad” for the democracy in America, shifted towards an optimistic approach, with 43% of the users re-evaluating the platform as “mostly good” in 2023.

¹ Jacob Gallagher, “Elon Musk’s Giant Leap,” The New York Times, October 8, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/07/style/elon-musk-donald-trump-campaign-rally.html>.

² Pew Research Center, “Elon Musk interviews Donald Trump on X,” The Briefing, August 15, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/newsletter/the-briefing/the-briefing-2024-08-15/>.

³ Yangyi Zhu, “Elon Musk’s Twitter Buyout: Game-Changer in Social Media,” 21, no. 1 (September 2023): 60–65, <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/21/20230234>.

⁴ On the contrary, Democrats' views had a different pattern, as more users became skeptical about the presence of free speech within X. ⁵ This finding suggests that under Musk, X may have been incentivized to foster the visibility of the Republican slant, combined with an initiative to reinstate banned accounts which were mainly Republican-leaning.

Therefore, Elon Musk's dual portrait of a tech mogul and a political influencer brought political elements within the realm of digital media. Going beyond his political content regulations for X, the entrepreneur made a leap from the digital to the real world by his active involvement in electoral politics. In the context of the 2024 elections, the recent filings of the Federal Election Commission revealed that Musk donated 75 millions dollars to his pro-Trump America PAC over a span of 3 months.⁶ His vocal support to Trump's campaign was entrenched further by appearing occasionally at Trump's rallies all over the country. The announcement that he made on 19th of October, at a Trump rally in Pennsylvania pledged 1 million dollars a day to a random person⁷ among those who signed Musk's pro-Republican petition. This petition was also communicated to a greater public by modifying the visibility algorithms of X to precisely boost Musk's very own trends.⁸ By doing so, his praise of the Republican agenda was aimed to be shared and reposted across the platform.

The current state of the issue demonstrates that the electorate is susceptible to be manipulated by the Republican rhetoric, an outcome of over-exposure to a selected content within X. ⁹ Apart from tweets and written material, circulation of the images of Musk in close interaction with Trump at political rallies

⁴ Shradha Dinesh and Meltem Odabaş, "8 Facts About Americans and Twitter as It Rebrands to X," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2023, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/26/8-facts-about-americans-and-twitter-as-it-rebrands-to-x/>.

⁵ Teri Carter, "X, Formerly Twitter, Is No Longer the Platform of Free Speech or Extended Community," Kentucky Lantern, October 9, 2024, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://kentuckylantern.com/2024/10/09/x-formerly-twitter-is-no-longer-the-platform-of-free-speech-or-extended-community/>.

⁶ Hugo Lowell, "Elon Musk gave \$75m to his pro-Trump group in three months," The Guardian, October 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/oct/16/elon-musk-donald-trump-donation-america-pac>

⁷ Arnaud Leparmentier, "Musk has gone from donor to major player in Trump's campaign, but how influential is he?" Le Monde, October 22, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/22/he-has-gone-from-donor-to-major-player-in-trump-s-campaign-but-how-influential-is-elon-musk_6730077_4.html

⁸ Prithvi Iyer, "New Research Points to Possible Algorithmic Bias on X," Tech Policy Press, November 15, 2024, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.techpolicy.press/new-research-points-to-possible-algorithmic-bias-on-x/>.

⁹ Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, John Cook, Sander van der Linden, Jon Roozenbeek, and Naomi Oreskes, "Misinformation and the Epistemic Integrity of Democracy," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 54 (December 2023): 101711, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101711>.

constitutes a huge impact for the campaign strategy. From a policy-oriented perspective, although there are current regulations on campaign finance and media ownership, their accuracy to address the over-involvement of non-political high-profile figures in politics deems ambiguous.

The existing campaign finance laws such as the Federal Election Campaign Act¹⁰, reinforce disclosure requirements and limitations on donation to a political campaign for individuals. However, Super PACs¹¹ don't take part in this scope, as they are allowed to spend unlimited amounts of money through independently conducted political activities. That being said, the political engagement of Elon Musk benefits from this exception, enabling him to indirectly affect the electoral campaign by his big financial contribution. On the other hand, control mechanisms that operate through social media create monopolies on information, taking a grip on the circulation of knowledge flows within echo chambers. Thus, public discourse is oriented according to the profit of the media owners, benefiting them financially and in some cases, consolidating their political relations with public authorities.

Policy Solutions

The aftermath of the 2024 presidential elections demonstrated the influential extent of third-party engagement in politics, as Elon Musk was appointed to lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) with entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. According to the equity analyst Daniel Ives of Wedbush Securities, Musk's new post will drastically leverage his power, enlarging his realm of control towards numerous agencies of the federal government¹².

Considering the aforementioned considerations, it could be argued that the increasing intervention of figures for non-political spheres necessitates effective policy implementation to mediate between the power of high-profile figures and democratic institutions. Potential policy solutions should prioritize controlling the expansion of political intervention on administrative, financial and digital levels. First of all, tighter disclosure should be enforced for private investments in political rallies or campaigns. Transparent sharing of donation balances with the electorate would illuminate the power dynamics at play behind the scenes. This openness fosters accountability, enhancing trust and credibility in both individuals and

¹⁰ "Federal campaign finance laws," USAGov, last modified October 1, 2024, <https://www.usa.gov/campaign-finance-laws>.

¹¹ Samir Sheth, *Virginia Law Review* 105, no. 3 (2019): 655-702, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26842251>

¹² Daniel Trotta and Eric Beech, "Trump Says Elon Musk, Vivek Ramaswamy Will Lead Department of Government Efficiency," Reuters, November 13, 2024, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-elon-musk-vivek-ramaswamy-will-lead-department-govern-ment-efficiency-2024-11-13/>.

institutions. Thus, personal political affinities and profit-seeking activities would be distinguished from one another, by justifying the motives behind the deeds. Regarding governance, occupying a position in government may run a potential risk of overreach by third parties. These roles could alter the structure of the cabinet and further lobby in favor of corporate friendly policies over democratic principles. When it comes to the specific case of Elon Musk, his actions and decisions offer a striking example of how individual influence can shape public discourse and institutional dynamics.

Hence, preservation of democratic integrity calls for strengthening transparency on media ownership, taking into account the lack of regulation on intentional social media algorithms and disproportionate content moderation. Electoral behavior is in particular vulnerable to these unethical manipulations, leading to lack of trust among users. One of the most prominent outcomes of this phenomenon was the changes within the special media landscape, as more than 115,000 users deactivated their accounts during the day after the presidential election.¹³ This shift was mostly observed through Democrat accounts, who switched to Bluesky, known to be the longstanding social media rival for X. This recent development brings about the question of a democratic accountability that citizens perform through their social media choices. Furthermore, from a policy-oriented view, it enhances the idea that a common ground should be found between free speech, democratic principles and corporate vision; favoring a static framework that adapts itself according to the changes in the political landscape.

Conclusion

From various aspects, politics constitute an overly sensitive area to manipulation and voluntary control. The involvement of third-parties blurred the boundaries between the political and public sphere, which was further aggravated by the advent of increasing social media activities. Musk's appointment in DOGE raises questions related to the prominence of the tech mogul's influence in this field. Under his recent governmental appointment, Musk could now weaponize X to a larger extent for political endorsements to sway people toward Republican views and ignite in return a positive rippled effect on his businesses Tesla and SpaceX.

The over-politicization of public and digital spheres is thus an issue which necessitates dynamic policy-oriented regulations to safeguard democracy. Given these settings, determining the extent of intervention within the political domain is of great importance. Campaign finance should frame in firm terms the limitations to Super PACS, evaluating exploitations and possible leeways for financially eminent

¹³ Bobby Allyn, "Bluesky Traffic Surge After Election," NPR, November 19, 2024, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/19/g-s1-34898/bluesky-traffic-surge-after-election>.

figures. From a digital perspective, regulations must enhance impartial narratives through social media algorithms, enhancing an objective content moderation to avoid monopolistic manipulations. Zooming out, the ethical side of the issue should be resolved by putting in place accurate public frameworks within the government. In this context, autonomous bodies could oversee the interventions of third bodies and arrange guidelines to protect the democratic principles within the public discourse. Thus, a uniform treatment would be put in place towards intrusive acts of non-political actors.

By keeping profit-seeking financial motives and personal political affinities separate from public governance, transparency would be entrenched as a principle between the high-profile figures and the public. This would instill accountability among public authorities towards the electorate and enhance ethical standards, consolidating the overall credibility for future deeds.

Bibliography

- Allyn, Bobby. "Bluesky Traffic Surge After Election." NPR. November 19, 2024. Accessed November 27, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/19/g-s1-34898/bluesky-traffic-surge-after-election>.
- Carter, Teri. "X, Formerly Twitter, Is No Longer the Platform of Free Speech or Extended Community." Kentucky Lantern. October 9, 2024. Accessed November 27, 2024. <https://kentuckylantern.com/2024/10/09/x-formerly-twitter-is-no-longer-the-platform-of-free-speech-or-extended-community/>.
- Dinesh, Shradha, and Meltem Odabaş. "8 Facts About Americans and Twitter as It Rebrands to X." Pew Research Center. July 26, 2023. Accessed November 27, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/26/8-facts-about-americans-and-twitter-as-it-rebrands-to-x/>.
- Gallagher, Jacob. "Elon Musk's Giant Leap," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/07/style/elon-musk-donald-trump-campaign-rally.html>.
- Iyer, Prithvi. "New Research Points to Possible Algorithmic Bias on X." Tech Policy Press. November 15, 2024. Accessed November 27, 2024. <https://www.techpolicy.press/new-research-points-to-possible-algorithmic-bias-on-x/>.
- Lewandowsky, Stephan, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, John Cook, Sander van der Linden, Jon Roozenbeek, and Naomi Oreskes. "Misinformation and the Epistemic Integrity of Democracy." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 54 (December 2023): 101711. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101711>.
- Leparmentier, Arnaud. "Musk has gone from donor to major player in Trump's campaign, but how influential is he?" *Le Monde*, October 22, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/10/22/he-has-gone-from-donor-to-major-player-in-trump-s-campaign-but-how-influential-is-elon-musk_6730077_4.html.
- Lowell, Hugo. "Elon Musk gave \$75m to his pro-Trump group in three months," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/oct/16/elon-musk-donald-trump-donation-america-pac>.
- Pew Research Center. "Elon Musk interviews Donald Trump on X," *The Briefing* (newsletter), August 15, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/newsletter/the-briefing/the-briefing-2024-08-15/>.
- Sheth, Samir. "SUPER PACS, PERSONAL DATA, AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE LOOPHOLES." *Virginia Law Review* 105, no. 3 (2019): 655–702. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26842251>.
- Trotta, Daniel, and Eric Beech. "Trump Says Elon Musk, Vivek Ramaswamy Will Lead Department of Government Efficiency." Reuters. November 13, 2024. Accessed November 27, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-elon-musk-vivek-ramaswamy-will-lead-department-government-efficiency-2024-11-13/>.

USAGov. "Federal campaign finance laws." Last modified October 1, 2024
<https://www.usa.gov/campaign-finance-laws>.

Zhu, Yangyi. "Elon Musk's Twitter Buyout: Game-Changer in Social Media." 21, no. 1 (September 2023):
60–65. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/21/20230234>.