**Call for proposal: How data and technology form our identities in democratic mechanisms and systems**

**Background**

Our identity and democracy are intimately linked. From politicians seeking to tap into and influence our identity to whether not we are considered eligible to vote. As political campaigns and voting technologies have evolved so too have their relationship with our identity.

Democracy and the ability of citizens to engage in civic society is under threat in a variety of ways:  from well-equipped actors exploiting data throughout the electoral cycle to governments’ attempts to use surveillance technology to constrain civil society and political participation. Private, political, and state actors are creating an environment that is rife for manipulation of democratic outcomes, and loss of confidence in democratic institutions and processes.

Restraining data exploitation in elections is a core element of Privacy International's new [strategic portfolio](https://privacyinternational.org/strategic-areas/defending-democracy-and-dissent) aimed at addressing digital threats to democratic mechanisms and systems - the focus needs to be on addressing what is destabilising them and safeguarding and strengthening them to ensure that they serve the people. We need laws or regulations enforced, changes in technologies and industry behaviour, and expert allies to understand the risks of exploitation and to be prepared to mitigate them.

**Focus of the call**

Data and how this links to identity is becoming ever more integral to the ways in which we engage in democratic processes. The ways in which we're called on to identify ourselves, online and off, is changing. New identity providers, and ways of identifying ourselves, come along with [new risks of exploitation](https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/2850/data-exploitation-and-democratic-societies), particularly in the political context. We're tracked, profiled and targeted digitally, increasingly without our knowledge, across services and platforms creating a new form of identity - which political campaigns are desperate to tap into and exploit. At the same time, there is ever more collection and use of our biometrics, our immutable identity, for among other things voter registration and authentication. Our identity or perceived identity impacts on our democratic rights.

Personal data and how this links to our identity plays a fundamental role in these emerging ways of influencing democratic processes. The actors seeking to exploit our identity information are traditional political parties, organisations or individuals pushing particular political agendas, foreign actors. Through the amassing and processing of vast amounts of data, individuals are profiled based on their stated or inferred political views, preferences, and characteristics. These profiles are then used to target individuals with adverts, news, disinformation, political messages, and many other forms of content aimed at influencing and potentially manipulating their views.

The actors seeking to exploit our data and identity include: traditional political parties (from the whole political spectrum), organisations or individuals pushing particular political agendas, foreign actors aiming at interfering with national democratic processes, and the industries that provide products and services that facilitate the actions of the others (from public facing ones, such as social media platforms and internet search engines, to the less publicly known, such as data brokers, ad tech companies and what has been termed the 'influence industry').

Data and how this links to identity is also becoming ever more integral to the ways in which we vote - from the creation of vast voter registration databases, sometimes including biometric data, to reliance on electronic voting. Such voting processes are often implemented without sufficient consideration for their considerable privacy and security implications.

Left unchecked, such exploitation of our data and identity is highly privacy invasive, raises important security questions, and has the potential to undermine faith in the democratic process, including in relation to transparency, fairness and accountability.  We therefore welcome proposals that reveal, scrutinise and demand change in relation to the way people's data and identity are exploited in the political and electoral context and the consequences of that exploitation.

**Priority areas expected to be explored**

*Projects should be focused on identity and the exploitation of our data and identity in the political and electoral context.*

The proposals should aim to address at least one of the following:

* Expose how our digital identity is exploited for political purposes - by companies, governments and political actors
* Document the extent to which the law protects our digital data identity in the political context (with a focus on data protection and electoral law)
* Reveal or test the way political adverts and messaging are shaped by our digital identity
* Raise awareness about the use of our digital data identities in the electoral cycle from voter registration, to campaigning to electronic voting.