AI AND ELECTIONS: ARE WE READY TO SAVE DEMOCRACY?

A POLICY BRIEFING FROM THE SURREY INSTITUTE FOR PEOPLE-CENTRED ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

POLICY CONTEXT

The role of disinformation in democratic elections is not a new phenomenon. However, the ascendance of generative AI exacerbates this longstanding issue, enabling its widespread creation with unprecedented scale and believability.

In 2024, the "year of the vote," 4.2 billion people in over 60 countries, including major powers like the US, Russia, India, and the UK, take part in elections amid a global backdrop of spreading illiberalism and waning trust in democratic institutions, particularly among youth.

This year marks the mainstream adoption of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in election influence, allowing for the creation of convincing fake media and text. Early instances, like a deepfake "robocall" impersonating President Biden discouraging voting in New Hampshire, which led to the US Federal Communications Commission to ban such calls as illegal, highlight the urgent need for action.

Experts from the University of Surrey's Institute for People-Centred Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Department of Politics look at the trends that could be exploited by campaigns using AI to disrupt and influence the outcome of elections and identify practical solutions to mitigate these.
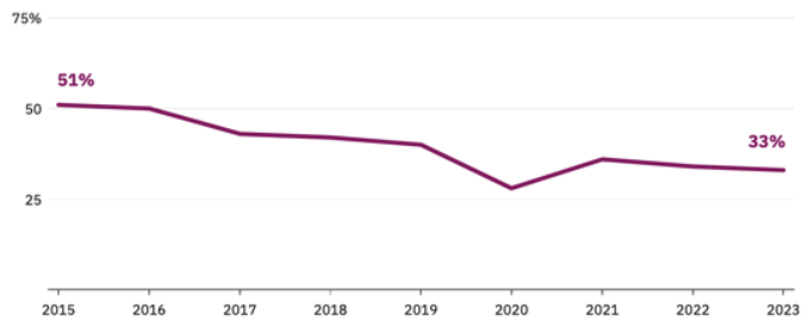
"The advent of GenAI has amplified existing problems and given powerful new tools to those who would disrupt democracies. Addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts in regulation, education, and technological development to safeguard democratic principles and foster informed civic engagement."

TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

■ **Democratic Recession and Shifting Voter Views**: There's a concerning trend of democratic decline alongside a growing preference among younger voters for strong, even autocratic leaders. This could lead to increased support for Radical Right Populist Parties (RRPP) in European elections, potentially consolidating their influence. Multiple studies indicate supporters of such parties are more susceptible to disinformation (Barash 2018).

■ **Advances in GenAI**: 2024 continues to see rapid advancements in AI technology, particularly in GenAI. With systems like Sora and Gemini becoming increasingly sophisticated, combined with the growing power of open-source AI, concerns are rising regarding their potential impacts on society and media, with significant onward impact on democratic processes.

■ **Sovereign AI**: The advent of GenAI in 2023 has driven global adoption of a powerful but immature technology troubled by hallucinations, bias and lack of controllability. Furthermore, the main providers are US-based giving UK government little sovereign influence over the technology and high dependency on non-UK infrastructure. To compound this problem, the pace of change, driven by huge commercial investments in GenAI, is unprecedented, accentuating the gap between government regulation and deployment of technology.

■ **Human Psychology and disinformation**: The rise of GenAI enables the creation of highly influential, yet misleading narratives, amplifying disinformation through social media. The age-old threat of disinformation has gained new powers with GenAI posing a problem to public discourse and democratic processes.

■ **Digital Education Divides**: Vulnerability to disinformation extends to whole populations those lacking digital literacy are particularly impacted, exacerbating societal divisions. Lack of access to accurate information widens disparities, posing challenges for informed decision-making and loss of trust in the democratic process.

■ **Lack of Regulatory Framework**: There's a notable absence of robust regulations for emerging campaign platforms and AI technologies, both domestically and internationally. Efforts to regulate AI, such as the EU AI Act and initiatives in the US and China, are in progress, but global consensus remains a distant hope.

■ **Erosion of Trust in Media and Institutions**: The proliferation of disinformation and particularly deepfakes contributes to a broader erosion of trust in media and public institutions. This phenomenon, termed the "liar's dividend," fosters scepticism towards authentic content, undermining informed decision-making and public discourse (Goldstein and Lohn 2024).

Overall trust score: Change over time 2015-2023 UK

Source: Digital News Report 2023

These trends collectively pose significant challenges to democratic governance, societal cohesion, and the integrity of information ecosystems. The advent of GenAI has amplified existing problems and given powerful new tools to those who would disrupt democracies. Addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts in regulation, education, and technological development to safeguard democratic principles and foster informed civic engagement.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no universal "quick fix", and elections are already underway worldwide. It is not possible or desirable to ban GenAI. Given the right direction and support, AI can be a force for good, protecting democracy, providing tools that will be transformational for the UK's economy, public services and quality of life. However, the importance of the short-term impact demands urgent action and global co-ordination. Our recommendations include:

Take back control: political leadership and citizen empowerment.

■ **UK political leadership** must be demonstrated regarding GenAI's impact on elections, moving beyond media and the dominance of "Big Tech". UK politicians should voice concerns, fostering public debate and raising awareness to prompt tech and media companies to act pre-emptively. The UK should do this on the international stage, stimulating global awareness and resolve, seeding international consensus on this powerful technology.

■ **Cross-party campaigns on media literacy and digital citizenship**, regulators, and media, are crucial to equip citizens to navigate deepfakes and disinformation as well as leverage the benefits of AI. Initiating discussions on digital citizenship's significance for the UK is vital for future prosperity and national security.

■ **Enhanced fact-checking efforts** are imperative; urging media and campaign organizations to adopt a code of practice ensuring thorough investigation and reporting of disinformation. Such standards should extend to social media platforms, ensuring user support and awareness.

Technical solutions: practical measures that can be explored now.

■ **Content provenance**. Encourage the adoption of schemes such as the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA) standards, supported by major organizations like Adobe, BBC, Microsoft, and Google, certifying the source and history of media content. C2PA enables consumers to trace media provenance and alterations, aiding publishers in meeting obligations under the Elections Act 2022 to label digital campaign materials accurately.

■ **AI labelling**. AI-generated content should be clearly labeled, as pledged by major AI companies like Meta, to enhance transparency. The UK Government should lead by supporting these practices through research and future regulations, ensuring accountability in media dissemination and upholding transparency in AI-generated content distribution.

Longer-term regulation is needed to level the playing field.

■ **Holding platforms accountable for content** is imperative, as seen in the US with efforts to amend Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. This change should garner international support, with the UK taking a leading role.

■ **Clear regulatory accountability is essential within the UK Government**, as existing consultations and taskforces lack clarity on departmental responsibilities.

■ **Journalistic standards must prioritise transparency** in content creation, distribution, and detection while safeguarding journalistic freedoms. Balancing transparency with freedom is crucial. Additionally, addressing digital news media concerns may aid in revitalizing print media, offering a potential lever for government influence on media businesses.

■ **Government Research for Media Analysis.** The UK Government is in a position to encourage academic research activities to develop standards and technical approaches to the detection, mitigation and understanding of the impact of GenAI and fake information. For example, the US' DARPA have an established programme on Semantic Forensics to detect fake information which shows high potential. The UK should establish similar world-leading research programmes.

About the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI

The Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI offers a unique environment where visionary academics are shaping the future of AI as part of a collaborative community of co-creators. We pioneer the future of trustworthy, responsible, and inclusive AI for education, healthcare, wellbeing, social interaction, entertainment, work, and sustainability, to create a brighter future for everyone.

Our Institute brings together Surrey's core AI-related expertise in vision, speech and signal processing, computer science, and mathematics, with its domain expertise across engineering and the physical sciences, human and animal health, law and regulation, business, finance and the arts and social sciences. With this distinctive approach, the academic team builds on Surrey's track record of collaboration with industry, the public sector, government, and other relevant institutions to develop innovative people-centred solutions to shared challenges.

To find out more or work with us, contact Dr. Andrew Rogoyski (a.rogoyski@surrey.ac.uk

Contributing academics:

- **Dr. Andrew Rogoyski:** Director of Innovation and Partnerships at the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI. He is a business leader, strategist and technologist with experience spanning 30 years in industry, government and academia.

- **Dr. Bahareh Heravi:** Reader in AI and Media at the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI. Her research is primarily focused on Data & Computational Journalism, data storytelling, responsible and inclusive AI, information design, and the use of AI in journalism and media.

- **Dr. Roula Nezi:** Senior Lecturer in Political Science. Her research examines developments in public opinion and political attitudes, political parties and party systems, and electoral behaviour.

- **Prof. Daniele Albertazzi**: Professor of Politics and Co-Director of the Centre for Britain and Europe. His expertise covers European Politics including right wing populism, Italian politics, political communication, party organisation and populism and democracy.

References

Barash, V., Kelly, J., Kollanyi, B., Neudert, L.M. and Howard, P.N., 2018. Polarization, Partisanship and Junk News Consumption over Social Media in the US. Data Memo, 6(02), p.2018.

Goldstein, Josh A., Lohn, A. 2024. Deepfakes, Elections, and Shrinking the Liar's Dividend.