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Election Safety in the Age of GenAI

The end of democracy or new opportunities for political participation?

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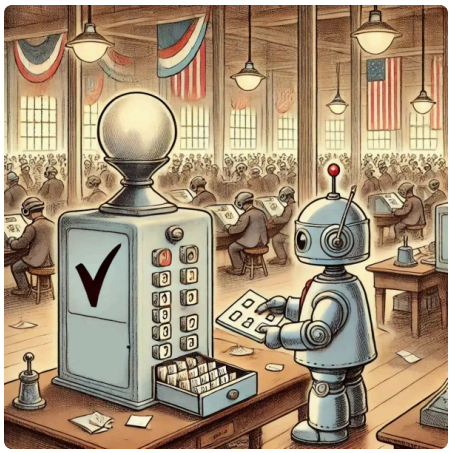

Abstract

More than four billion people exercised their right to vote in 2024, marking an unprecedented moment in the history of democracy. This year, the electoral process unfolded across the globe, including in the United States, the European Union, India, Taiwan, Pakistan, and Turkey.

The massive turnouts in these elections point to a larger narrative unfolding—one that interrogates the robustness of democratic institutions at a time when the future of democracy globally seems uncertain. The decline in the number of democracies worldwide and increasing threats to the peaceful transfer of power, as seen in the US in 2021, cast a shadow over these elections.

This democratic test coincides with another crucial junction - the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). GenAI's applications in political campaigns and electoral processes have been both innovative and controversial. From creating hyper-realistic deepfakes to automating the production of targeted propaganda, GenAI tools have the potential to significantly influence both public opinion and election outcome.

The dichotomy of GenAI’s impact is palpable. On one hand, it offers unprecedented opportunities for enhancing political engagement, making information dissemination more efficient, and even enabling suppressed voices to

circumvent censorship. On the other hand, it presents a formidable challenge to electoral integrity, with the proliferation of dis- and mis-information and the creation of deceptive media content threatening to undermine public trust in democratic processes.

The rise of enemies of democracy paired with the seemingly unstoppable acceleration of AI leaves us with a tough and discomforting question: Are democracies able to defend themselves against these challenges, or will the age of democracy remain a short-lived intermezzo in the long history of human societies?

To provide a more robust empirical foundation to answer this question, I led a research project at the Harvard Kennedy School analyzing the impact of AI on three recent elections in Argentina, Pakistan and Taiwan. This commentary summarizes the findings and recommendations from this research that were also published as an ebook entitled *Election Safety in the Age of Generative AI* in July 2024.[1]

Argentina: The First "AI Election"

Argentina's 2023 election became a milestone as one of the world's first campaigns heavily influenced by AI. The competing candidates—Javier Milei and Sergio Massa—both used GenAI to shape public perception, with varying results. Massa's team leaned on AI-generated visual content to revive Peronism for younger audiences, creating campaign images that placed Massa in heroic roles such as Indiana Jones and a Soviet-style leader. AI's power to quickly generate engaging political narratives helped candidates mobilize their bases more efficiently than ever.

However, the election also saw AI cross ethical lines. Deepfakes circulated by both camps aimed to discredit their opponent, such as a video falsely portraying Milei discussing the sale of human organs. While the campaign warned that the footage was AI-generated, it was still convincing enough to stir controversy and erode public trust. This election exemplifies the ambiguity of AI: while it enhanced political messaging, it also amplified misinformation, leaving voters unsure of what to believe.

Pakistan: AI as a Tool for Political Resistance

In Pakistan's 2024 election, GenAI took on a different role. With Imran Khan imprisoned and barred from conventional campaigning, his supporters turned to AI to circumvent government censorship. Using AI-generated video clips, they recreated Khan's speeches, enabling him to reach millions of supporters despite being physically absent. These videos, labeled as synthetic, connected with a young, tech-savvy electorate and underscored the value of AI as a democratizing force.

However, not all AI-driven content was transparent. Rival actors created fake AI messages urging voters to boycott the election, highlighting how AI can also be weaponized to confuse voters. Despite these challenges, many observers viewed Khan's PTI Party's use of AI as a legitimate way to counter repressive government tactics. This case underscores how GenAI can bolster democracy in authoritarian settings by offering political actors tools to bypass censorship.

Taiwan: GenAI Supercharges Foreign Interference

Taiwan's 2024 presidential election showed the dark side of AI when wielded by foreign actors. Chinese-backed campaigns flooded social media with GenAI-generated videos, memes, and deepfakes aimed at swaying public opinion. Some videos impersonated American officials endorsing candidates, while others criticized U.S. influence in Taiwan, sowing distrust among voters.

China's computational propaganda campaigns blended real and fake narratives so seamlessly that even tech-savvy Taiwanese voters struggled to distinguish them. These efforts, aimed at destabilizing Taiwan's democratic institutions, highlight GenAI's potential as a weapon for cognitive warfare. Taiwan's robust fact-checking organizations and media literacy efforts served as a crucial line of defense, demonstrating how public awareness can mitigate some of GenAI's harmful effects.

Policy Recommendations: A risk-based approach across the full AI value chain

The case studies from Argentina, Pakistan, and Taiwan reveal the urgent need for comprehensive but appropriate regulatory safeguards to manage AI's impact on democracy. The thoughts below are meant to be a starting point, not an exhaustive list:

Risk-Based Regulation Inspired by the EU AI Act

The regulation of GenAI in elections should follow a risk-based approach, similar to the EU AI Act. AI tools should be classified based on their potential impact on democratic processes. Low-risk applications, such as using AI to summarize policy positions, could remain lightly regulated. High-risk applications, like deepfakes designed to undermine public trust, should face strict oversight or even outright bans. This tiered framework ensures that regulation is proportionate, balancing innovation with electoral integrity.

Comprehensive Measures Across the Entire AI Value Chain

An effective regulatory framework must address every stakeholder of the AI value chain to mitigate election risks:

- **AI technology companies:** Providers of large foundation models, such as OpenAI and Stability AI, should be required to establish Know Your Customer (KYC) processes and integrate safeguards (e.g., watermarking tools) into their platforms to increase traceability.
- **Campaign staff:** Candidates and their teams creating GenAI content should be required to reveal how they are using (Gen)AI for their campaigns. Another potential step would be for government authorities to develop a GenAI code of conduct that candidates need to abide by to partake in elections.
- **Social Media Platforms:** At the distribution stage, platforms should be required to develop and use mechanisms to detect and verify watermarks. If distributors cannot verify proper labelling, the content should be

removed from their platforms. Collaboration with fact-checking organizations will further enhance content integrity.

- **Voters and Civil Society:** Media literacy campaigns should equip voters to recognize manipulated content, while watchdog organizations monitor AI's use in elections and alert the public to potential abuses. A public registry should be made available, which would also allow whistleblowers to report anonymously.

This comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach ensures that the regulation of GenAI addresses risks at every point in the electoral process—from content creation to distribution and voter engagement.

Immediate Next Step: Establishing an International AI Election Safety Panel

Given the global nature of AI risks, international cooperation is essential. The eBook referenced above advocates for the formation of an Intergovernmental Panel on Election Safety (IPES), modeled after the IPCC for climate change and the Global Electoral Risk Management (GERM) framework. This panel would facilitate knowledge-sharing and coordination among countries to address cross-border AI-driven election risks, such as foreign interference and computational propaganda. The IPES could also set global standards for the ethical use of AI in elections, helping nations align their regulatory efforts and respond to emerging threats swiftly.

About the Author

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Patrick Tammer serves in AI Strategy & Operations at Google, where he works at the intersection of organizational execution and the practical deployment of advanced AI capabilities. Drawing on a cross-sector perspective, he focuses on translating AI strategy into scalable operating models while attending to governance, risk, and accountability considerations. He is an alumnus of Harvard Kennedy School, completing the Master in Public Administration (2022–2024), where his academic work concentrated on AI and technology policy. His research interests include the design of evidence-informed AI governance frameworks, the regulatory and institutional implications of frontier technologies, and the societal impacts of automation and data-driven decision-making. Through his combined policy training and industry practice, Tammer contributes to ongoing discussions on responsible AI adoption, public–private coordination, and the operational challenges of aligning innovation with public values.

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