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The Use of AI by Election Campaigns

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and especially large language models has now reached a stage, where generative AI is both powerful and accessible enough to be used at scale in election campaigns, at least in principle. In this paper, I outline some of the potential legal uses of AI by election campaigns: Generative AI already cuts costs for campaigns by assisting them at drafting communication such as fundraising emails or text messages. In the near future, the use of generative AI can potentially transform the way campaigns interact with voters by allowing them to conduct AI-to-voter conversations in many languages, and potentially at scale. While campaigns have personalised and tailored digital communication before the advent of mass-accessible generative AI-tools, the ability for LLMs to engage dynamically with information and arguments provided by voters is new and, potentially, transformative. The question is whether AI-to-voter communication via peer-to-peer messaging is scalable, and the answer depends on how access to personal data is regulated, which varies between countries and regions. Where campaigns are able to access personal contact data, AI-to-voter communication will be potentially disruptive, and could impact the political playing field in the mid-term.

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INTRODUCTION

Up until now, most work focusing on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in elections has centered on malicious actors, including the threat of deep fakes and bots spreading misinformation (1–4). However, from a technological point of view, generative AI is now powerful and accessible enough to also play a role in how mainstream parties run their campaigns. This paper outlines some of the legitimate uses of generative AI by election campaigns. 2024, which has seen or will see important elections in India, South Africa, Mexico, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States, is the first real test of whether and how the use of artificial intelligence and large language models (LLMs) can change the ways campaigns operate and interact with voters. Currently, the use of generative AI by campaigns across the globe is still in its infancy. There are questions about the effects of AI-generated content on voters (5), and more importantly, the extent of its application is limited (3). At the same time there is an increasing number of examples of how campaigns use AI and LLMs, ranging from personalised, AI-generated fundraising emails by US campaigns (6), to AI-generated videos of candidates making personal appeals to voters in the Indian parliamentary elections (7). In this paper, I argue that the key area, where the use of generative AI can change election campaigns at scale is to allow campaigns to have dynamic, digital conversations with voters. During these exchanges, AI powered bots will be able to respond to voters' questions in many languages, provide information, and engage in political persuasion. While AI has thus much potential to transform the way that campaign-to-voter interactions are conducted in the digital space, personal data regulations are more permissive of such uses in some countries and regions than in others.

GENERATIVE AI TODAY: THE ROLE OF CAMPAIGN ASSISTANT

Today, generative AI tools are used by campaigns as assistants, mostly behind the scenes, to provide information and scripts for both personal and digital communication, or for training purposes. AI is used as an assistant much like it is used in other sectors, for instance for drafting fundraising emails. Another key application of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT is their ability to translate text and audio simultaneously into many languages. This is a key asset in multi-language democracies, with tremendous implications for reaching linguistic or ethnic minority voters. In diverse democracies such as India, South Africa, or Switzerland, where many languages are spoken, the use of LLMs as simultaneous translation tools, significantly cuts campaign costs and enables campaigns to reach sections of the electorate that they had problems interacting with before. Some bolder initiatives have been attempted. A British campaign startup has recently launched a generic-AI-based door-knocking bot, which can be used to train human canvassers.[1] In this case, however, human canvassers are toning their conversation skills with the help of AI. In the future, we will see LLMs impersonating canvassers and talking to real voters. In the short term, there are multiple barriers to a large-scale shift towards automated AI-to-voter communication. First, while the technology exists, campaigns are wary of using artificial intelligence openly, one for fear of being called out by voters or the media (3), and also because they are worried about losing control at the micro level. Campaigns want volunteers or campaign workers to stay 'on message' (8), and AI hallucinations (4), where content is generated that is 'nonsensical or unfaithful to the provided source content' (9), are a real problem in this regard. Most mainstream campaigns would rather not spread misinformation.

GENERATIVE AI IN THE NEAR FUTURE: THE ROLE OF CAMPAIGN VOLUNTEER

Political campaigns have long used digital technologies such as mass emails, peer-to-peer messaging apps and social media platforms such as Facebook or X to mobilise supporters to donate, volunteer, or engage in other forms of campaign activism (10–15). They have also used social media platforms to reach out to voters via digital ads in order to persuade or mobilise them to vote. However, while large-scale RCTs show that emails and text messages can be effective at mobilising supporters to engage in campaign activism, the effects of digital social media ads on behavioural outcomes such as vote choice, turnout and voter registrations are likely minimal

1 https://doorknocking-bot-peymanity.replit.app.

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(16–18). In general, the Get-Out-The-Vote literature finds that the more personal a campaign interaction is, the more effective it is, leaving modern campaigns to invest heavily in face-to-face interactions between volunteers and voters (19). While campaigns have tailored messages and micro-targeted voters before the onset of accessible AI tools (20, 21, 22), the empirical evidence of its effectiveness is mixed (21, 23). In particular, it is challenging for campaigns to follow up on personalised messages at scale. With the emergence of AI, this has changed, at least from a technological viewpoint. There is now the potential for AI to take on roles that were formerly filled by human volunteers such as text messaging voters or messaging them via P2P apps, which are common campaign practices (11, 13, 24). Previously, campaigns would send a text message to a target voter, and this would be followed by questions or feedback from the voter to the campaign, and a volunteer would in turn respond with tailored information. However, human volunteers texting at scale is very demanding on volunteer time. Instead, campaigns can now train a chatbot on an LLM such as ChatGPT, and instruct the chatbot to answer questions about the voting process or a political issue, aiming to provide information and address voters' questions. While such chatbots are currently only available on the web, OpenAI has already announced that their chatbot app will be integrated into Whatsapp. Conversations with AI bots integrated into P2P messaging are likely to have a positive effect on turnout, with an RCT conducted in collaboration with a campaign in the United States finding that conversations with a simple chatbot increased turnout (25). Information provided by AI chatbots could likely have similar small, but positive effects on voter registration or electoral participation. It would be desirable for public institutions to make such chatbots available to citizens to access user-friendly information about electoral processes (26).

AI AS PERSUADER

Another application for LLMs by campaigns are quasi-organic conversations meant to persuade voters. This is where the largest potential gains, and the largest potential dangers in the legal use of AI-to-voter communication lie. There is promising empirical evidence that LLMs are as effective as humans at drafting persuasive campaign messages (27). In part this is because LLMs like ChatGPT can be instructed to engage in a non-judgmental exchange of perspectives and use strategies such as moral reframing. Such strategies are effective when applied by human canvassers (28, 29). However, currently, messages written by AI chatbots neither appear more powerful than those written by humans, nor are targeted messages written by LLMs more effective than generic messages written by LLMs (30). In terms of persuading voters, the potential of LLMs hence lies in their ability to echo the best-practice examples of volunteer-to-voter exchanges, dynamically responding to the information and positions that the voter provides during the conversation. One specific advantage that AI chatbots have, apart from their indefatigability and ceaseless operation, is that they can communicate in almost every language. This provides them with the potential to bridge communities (31) and to engage with previously ignored citizens. There is some evidence that native-like Spanish language appeals were more effective at persuading Hispanic voters to support Hispanic candidates in the United States than English language or non-native Spanish appeals (32).

Following in the wake of chatbots, we are already seeing the emergence of AI-generated, tailored audio-visual content shared via social media and P2P-messaging (7). As with chatbots, the effects of these AI-generated audio and video messages need to be evaluated via large-scale randomised controlled trials in order to identify their potential impacts on voters, and to get a better idea about the magnitude of effect sizes and how they compare to content created by humans (27). How might the effects of AI-to-voter conversations be different from a conversation with a human volunteer? One could imagine that there would be a lower threshold of engagement with chatbots, as voters become increasingly familiar with them, for instance in the realm of customer service. This might increase engagement compared to a human volunteer. At the same time, the impact of a conversation with a campaign chatbot, while similar to a conversation with a human volunteer over text message or P2P messaging app, might be lower than the effect of an in-person conversation. Political persuasion in the context of elections is difficult, and one-off-conversations, while being able to induce people to change their mind on political issues (33), do not have a good track record at changing people's vote choice (34). Regulators will likely require that AI chatbots are classified as such, but research on deep fakes suggests that classifying content as AI generated might lead to a

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decrease in trust in all types of information (1, 2). Some electoral campaign research currently emphasises the need for sustained relational approaches, which activate social connections built on trust and intimacy (35). Interactions with family members or friends might be effective at persuading voters because they are based on relationships that are built on trust, which are hard to replicate with AI, at least not in the coming election cycles. We are still far away from the type of artificial general intelligence (AGI) that would be able to form and maintain such relationships (5). The inability of AI chatbots to build lasting relationships with voters is hence an important limitation.

THE QUESTION OF SCALE IS A QUESTION OF DATA REGULATION

Another hard limitation lies in the ability of campaigns to expose persuadable voters to those chatbots in the first place. The General Data Protection Regulation, better known by its acronym GDPR, significantly constrains campaigns' ability to contact individual voters via text message or telephone call without their prior consent, to pass on personal data to third parties, or to use personal data for individual targeting on social media platforms. Voter files are not publicly accessible in the EU (36), and gathering and passing on voters' contact details is much easier in countries outside of the EU and the UK.[2] In the United States, voter files and personal data are easily accessible by parties and data can be shared with relative ease with outside groups (36, 37). Therefore there is more potential for the use of AI to be transformative in settings that impose fewer restrictions on the handling of personal data. Where voters have to opt-in to sharing data with campaigns, the latter will struggle to scale contact with AI-powered chatbots to a level that would truly transform how campaigns are conducted. Campaigns also face the problem that they might only be able to contact those voters who are already likely to support the campaign's goals in the first place. If voters need to opt-into sharing their contact details, campaigns will struggle to target supporters of other parties and low information voters via AI chatbots. It is likely that campaigns will make additional concerted efforts to get voters to share these contact details with them. Given that one way of obtaining these data is via door-to-door canvassing, it is unlikely that the traditional ground game will become obsolete. In the end, only those campaigns who will have access to both personal contact data and an effective AI chatbot will stand a chance to use AI to influence voters at scale.

OUTSIDERS AS LIKELY FIRST MOVERS

Despite the pre-existing hurdles to a large-scale roll out of AI by political campaigns, some of the potential benefits are probably too large to ignore. Who will be the first movers? Table 1 illustrates how mainstream campaigns and outsiders are expected to use AI in different regulatory environments. On top of existing worries about voter and media perceptions of AI use, which should be more pronounced for campaigns that have more to lose, there are other reasons why mainstream campaigns are reluctant to change how they operate. Hundreds of randomised GOTV field experiments have been conducted to date to test the effects of door-to-door conversations and phone calls with human volunteers. Political scientists know more about which modes and messages work at mobilising voters than about pretty much any other area of politics (19). But in part there is also inertia in campaigns because political consultants and campaign workers are not eager to engage with a process that may make them redundant. It is therefore more likely that the first large-scale applications of AI by campaigns will not come from established actors such as mainstream parties, but from disruptive outsiders. The incentives for these actors to use AI are larger and they face fewer political constraints. These political entrepreneurs are already doing much of their campaign work online (38), lack a large volunteer or membership base, and have fewer ethical and political concerns towards using

		CAMPAIGN TYPE	
		MAINSTREAM	OUTSIDER
Data Regulation	Restrictive	Low	Medium
	Permissive	Medium	High

Table 1 Potential use of AI by campaign.

2 A version of the GDPR, The Data Protection Act 2018, is still in place in the UK.

AI to further their political goals. But their ability to innovate will depend on the regulatory environment for the use and sharing of personal data. This is why, as Table 1 shows, the potential use of AI by campaigns should be highest for outsiders in permissive regulatory environments such as the United States or India. This expectation assumes that campaigns are ready to play by the rules imposed by regulators. While this should be the case for the majority of parties and campaigns, there will always be outside actors trying to gain a short-term advantage by exploiting legal loopholes, or by breaking existing laws. It is up to regulators to close those loopholes and impose appropriate sanctions when laws are violated.

CONCLUSION

The promise of using AI in election campaigns is the ability to conduct quasi-organic conversations with voters cheaply and at scale, even if they are potentially less effective than human volunteer-to-voter conversations. If small effects scale, AI-to-voter interactions can be powerful. Will AI-powered bots succeed, where human campaign volunteers, so far, have at best a mixed track record? The key for operatives running campaigns will be to device chatbots that are effective at changing minds, while gaining access to the contact data that enables them to expose millions of voters to those conversations. While we are relatively close to fulfilling the first criterion, the second criterion brings campaigns back to a much more mundane issue, that of data regulation, which varies significantly between countries and world regions (36, 37).

If campaigns can find legal ways of reaching out to voters via digital channels, AI-powered chatbots will likely contribute to levelling the playing field, making it easier for challenger parties to campaign on equal footing with established parties. This development will also give political power to companies such as OpenAI and those that are yet to emerge from the generative AI revolution (5). It is both in regulating access to personal data, and in regulating tech giants, where the challenges of making AI-driven campaigning work for both campaigns and voters lie.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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