Deepfakes: A Democratic Threat

Tyson Shannon

CIS, Minnesota State University-Mankato

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In 2023, days before Slovakia's elections, an audio clip of candidate Michal Šimečka and a journalist discussing how to rig the vote was released on Facebook during a 48-hour media blackout (Meaker, 2023). The clip was later found to show signs of being AI manipulated. Due to the legally required press blackout prior to the election and Meta's policies on deepfakes which only applied to manipulated video not audio, it was widely believed this clip lost Michal's party the election. Deepfakes are described as hyper realistic videos, audio clips, or images created with artificial intelligence (Mustak et al., 2023). This content can either be completely artificially generated or simply altered to show real people saying or doing things that never happened in real life. This form of deception is especially powerful in the hands of countries who seek to create distrust and unrest in a foreign country's election process. As a result, more political leaders both domestic and abroad are turning to this technology to gain an edge and push untrue ideas disguised as legitimate media. Deepfakes present a threat to many areas of our society but are the greatest threat to the security and reliability of our democratic processes.

In recent years, the use of deepfakes for electioneering has increased significantly, being utilized by both candidates and foreign governments. In 2024 New Hampshire residents received AI generated phone calls from a voice that sounded like President Joe Biden encouraging them not to vote in the upcoming primary election (Insikt Group, 2024). The call has been deemed by many as an illegal attempt to suppress Democratic voters. It was later deemed that a Texas based company was responsible for the 5,000-25,000 calls made to New Hampshire voters (New Hampshire Department of Justice, 2024). This event marked a major turning point in democracy where domestic threats had as much power and ability to disrupt an election as a foreign government. However, foreign countries remain far more sophisticated with their attacks and

motives. According to Microsoft China has been utilizing generated images to mimic US voters and create controversy across a wide range of topics to sow discourse (Weiner & Norden, 2023). The purpose of these complex deception programs isn't to directly alter or overthrow democratic systems but build distrust in institutions and among fellow citizens. Unlike the robocall which tried to have an immediate and targeted impact on a specific election, these social media campaigns play a long game promoting greater social division for all future elections.

Generally speaking, the use of AI and deepfakes in the democratic process is a bi-partisan issue with both Republican and Democratic law makers pushing legislature across the United States to regulate these systems (Weiner & Norden, 2023). Therefore, it can be nearly universally agreed that using this technology in this way is unethical and more importantly potentially criminal. Most seem to apply a utilitarianism view to the technology and have determined it is not benefiting the greatest number of voters. The question that remains is to what extent and in what way should deepfakes be regulated. Some states like California have regulated all manipulated media that depicts candidates in an unflattering way within a 60-day period prior to an election (Weiner & Norden, 2023). Other states have simply banned synthetic content from political communications like ads. At the very least AI content needs to be properly disclosed when used, like the disclaimers on political ads that tell you who paid for them (Weiner & Norden, 2023). However, stricter prohibitions should be implemented to not only criminalize domestic use of deepfakes in elections but to also dissuade foreign activities. No matter the type of legislation passed, careful consideration and exceptions should be put in place to protect free speech and the rights of news outlets. Posting true unaltered content must remain legal even if damaging to the reputation of a candidate, and news outlets should be able to report negative news about officials. Furthermore, a news outlet reporting on the use of deepfakes is

important in the fight against them and therefore should not be considered distributing altered political content.

Dan Cavedon-Taylor rejects what he calls the ‘pessimistic view’ that affirms “deepfakes will have deleterious consequences for democratic procedures, chiefly elections” (Cavedon-Taylor, 2025). The argument he makes is that there is no evidence of election interference predicted by the pessimistic view. Cavedon-Taylor thinks we have not yet seen any impact on our elections from deep-fake technology. However, as we’ve seen from above examples that is false and in a study of 38 countries it was found that 26.8% of deepfakes were used in scams, 25.6% were used to make false claims often about candidates in elections to mislead voters, 15.8% were used in electioneering by political parties, 10.9% were used in character assassination attempts, and 10.9% were non-consensual pornography (Insikt Group, 2024). This demonstrates not only are deepfakes used in elections, but they’re used primarily for the purpose of misleading voters. Female politicians are disproportionally targeted by deepfake porn deterring political participation which is an example of democratic interference (Insikt Group, 2024). Dan Cavedon-Taylor goes on to defend the ‘nihilist view’ that states “the real threat that deepfakes pose for democracy is that they provide a reason not to reform the current political climate” (Cavedon-Taylor, 2025). He thinks that because we have so much false news and deepfake content in front of us, we have grown used to filtering out lies and falsehoods, and that a culture without this attitude, or the deepfakes to provide it, would be more susceptible to deception. Therefore, Cavedon-Taylor believes deepfakes encourage us to avoid reforms and regulations because those things would put us at greater risk of being deceived. This is an interesting and complex philosophical argument, but it’s also a very circular argument. By living in a world with no political deception, we would be more likely to be deceived, which means we

would not live in a world with no political deception. It also ignores that any lessons learned from deepfakes would be carried on even if regulation was put in place, leaving our society permanently skeptical and therefore resistant to political lies. Lastly, this nihilistic argument assumes deepfakes don't work in our society because we've become so conditioned to being lied to, which we know is not true universally.

There are many suggested solutions to the deepfakes in democracy problem, but the simplest is media literacy (Mustak et al., 2023). For decades Finland has been teaching media literacy to kids 3 and up as well as adults at risk of misinformation (Brooks, 2026). This program has recently shifted to also cover AI images and content to adapt to the ever-changing Russian propaganda war. Finland has recognized the difficulty of regulating these kinds of attacks on their democracy, especially internationally, and has chosen an educational response instead. This program provides their citizens with the tools necessary to determine what is true on their own and encourages personal research on extraordinary claims. The benefit of media literacy education also includes creating a platform to inform people of these new deception techniques and their risks. The more advanced and harder to implement solution is deepfake detection using AI and algorithms (Mustak et al., 2023). This would give organizations and potentially people the power to check if a piece of content is a deepfake and block it. Numerous algorithms have already been developed, however continuous investment into research and development is essential to evolve alongside the generative algorithms. If investment into detection systems can match investment into deepfake technologies, the two can grow alongside each other providing necessary counterbalances. No one solution, however, will be the silver bullet that saves the democratic process, and all solutions should be utilized to educate, regulate, and prevent abuse using this technology. Given the amount of resources dedicated to securing elections in the

modern world, it is not out of the picture to assume misinformation and deepfake defense should be included in that process.

In conclusion, there is no facet of our society at greater risk from deepfakes than democracy. From targeted election interference to general civil manipulation, deepfakes can be utilized by sophisticated government agencies and locals alike to disrupt political activities. Regulation can help limit the use of AI in the election process, and thankfully all sides of the aisle seem in agreement that legislature needs to be passed. However, consideration needs to be taken to protect the media and our freedom of speech within these new laws. While some have downplayed the evidence of deepfake attacks on democratic processes, their existence and impacts cannot be ignored as they represent a serious threat. Education programs, new technologies, and promotion of reliable news sources can all help in the fight against misinformation, but there lacks a single, simple solution. Instead, we need to utilize all available options to protect our democracy and inform the public. By combining resources and innovations, we can shield the most vulnerable piece of modern, Western society from both internal and external threats.

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