

# AI AND ELECTIONS

## Great Equalizer or Threat to Democracy?

**T**HANKS TO GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI), the ability to disrupt and disinform election campaigns has reached a speed and savviness that is unprecedented. AI's growing capacity also positions it, ironically, as a potential weapon against that very misinformation—and perhaps even as a tool for building a racially inclusive democracy.

Research into that double-edged sword is one of two initiatives now unfolding at the Multicultural Democracy Project, which is housed at GW Law.

“AI poses some very real threats to democracy, including disinformation, increased cultural anxiety, racial polarization, and targeting local election offices with nuisance open record requests and cyberattacks. At the same time, optimists note that AI could be a great equalizer that reduces power imbalances in democracy—and, by extension, in public policy and society broadly,” said Spencer Overton, the founder and faculty director of the Multicultural Democracy Project. “The question is whether we can design legal and economic incentives so that most AI applications benefit inclusive democracy.”

The Multiracial Democracy Project was created to identify strategies and solutions to guarantee that the U.S. democracy infrastructure keeps up with the country's increasingly diverse population. The AI project is one of two research initiatives the center recently announced. The other focuses on alternative election systems, such as ranked-choice voting or Final Four primaries, with an eye on how they could affect the engagement and representation of people of color.

“I've done some work in the past on disinformation, such as Russians impersonating Black activists urging Black voters to boycott the 2016 election, for example. I felt that generative AI was going to be significant in politics,” Overton said. “Looking at these tools in this context is important but it is still an underexamined area.”

Overton has testified before Congress and organized several panels focused on AI and multiracial democracy issues. He has also presented at conferences on the topic. His examination of AI's threat to the political system is detailed in his article, “Overcoming Racial

Harms to Democracy from Artificial Intelligence,” scheduled for publication in the *Iowa Law Review* in early 2025. A complementary article focused on the potential of AI to help facilitate the country's transition to a well-functioning, inclusive, pluralistic democracy is in the works.

AI interference has become an entrenched danger to U.S. elections. FBI Director Christopher Wray has said his agency is bracing for complex threats to the U.S. elections this fall, and Microsoft has warned that state-backed cyber groups in China may be targeting campaigns. While the use of AI as a political weapon can disrupt political campaigns, its greater threat is its ability to undermine the public's trust in its institutions, including voting systems.

Yet, Overton believes AI could also be deployed to enhance democracies. Provided certain economic, political, and legal preconditions are in place, he said, AI could be leveraged to address racial disparities in political participation, racial polarization, and racial inequities across government policies and services.

Pretty much anyone with a smartphone can create sophisticated mis- and dis-information. That means they could also create sophisticated legitimate messaging, opening opportunities for resource-challenged candidates and communities—notably communities of color—to more fully participate in the democratic process. By taking on the grunt work of database management and fundraising emails, for example, AI could free volunteers for face-to-face engagement with voters. It might also be used to overcome language barriers; more than 8 million voting-age citizens do not speak English well enough to vote in English.

“AI is not a silver bullet that will make intractable problems disappear,” Overton said. He noted that technology alone will not eliminate economic factors that affect voting and campaigns. And even if the technology can be used as a tool to make politics more inclusive, tech companies and policymakers may not be interested in advancing a racially inclusive democracy.

Overton said the big question is whether the benefits of AI outweigh its harms—or whether the will exists to craft technologies and law so that the benefits outweigh the harms.

