

## **The Evolving Role of Artificial Intelligence in Democracy**

“Humans were always far better at inventing tools than using them wisely.” Attributed to Yuval Noah Harari

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although we may not realize it, artificial intelligence (AI) has become ubiquitous and affects almost every aspect of our lives, including impacts to our democracy. Recognizing the importance of understanding those impacts, the members at the League of Women Voters of Lane County annual meeting in May 2025 approved “The Evolving Role of Artificial Intelligence in Democracy” as a study topic. The scope of this study will define AI and its development, identify ways AI can both enhance and threaten democratic institutions, and discuss challenges in AI governance.

### **League of Women Voters Position**

The League of Women Voters does not have an official position on AI. However, the League is closely monitoring the potential impacts of AI on elections and voters. In June 2024, the LWVUS joined with 50 other groups urging Congress to pass legislation to protect federal elections from growing threats from deceptive AI-generated content.

In March 2024, the League of Women Voters of New Hampshire and the League of Women Voters US filed a federal lawsuit alleging voter intimidation, coercion, and deception ahead of the 2024 New Hampshire presidential primary. The lawsuit was brought against parties that had made illegal AI-generated robocalls using a deepfake of President Biden’s voice to discourage voters from participating in the primary election.

In October 2023, the League supported a petition to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), arguing that the FEC should regulate “Deceptive AI Campaign Communications” as it does other deceptive campaign communications. LWVUS urged the Commission to heed the requests in the petition and issue explicit guidance that deceptive AI campaign communications meet the definition of “fraudulent misrepresentation” according to the US Legal Code.

### **What Is AI?**

Artificial intelligence (AI) is the field of computer science that creates systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, understanding language, and creativity.

AI systems rely on statistical models to learn from data rather than following a fixed set of pre-programmed rules. These models identify patterns and relationships and make decisions or predictions based on the training data. Imagine teaching a child to recognize an apple: you show many pictures labeled “apple” or “not apple.” The child looks for features such as shape, color, and size and learns to decide whether a new image depicts an apple. As the training dataset grows, the child becomes more accurate at identifying apples. AI models are trained in the same way.

AI tools use a mix of techniques to enable different capabilities:

Machine learning is a core function of modern AI that learns from data to identify patterns and relationships and then applies what it has learned to make decisions or predictions. For example, if you ask AI for help choosing a movie from several options, it bases its choice on

past viewing history—considering factors such as genre, actors, and directors—and selects the option that best matches those characteristics.

Deep learning is a more advanced subset of machine learning that employs multilayered neural networks inspired by the structure of the human brain. This approach enables the processing of complex patterns and large datasets, making it highly effective for tasks such as image recognition, natural language processing, and generative AI.

Computer vision focuses on enabling computers to interpret visual data from images or videos. It underpins applications such as facial recognition, self-driving cars, and medical imaging.

Natural language processing enables computers to understand, interpret, and generate human language. It powers virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa, language translation, and speech to text applications.

Generative AI systems such as ChatGPT and Claude can create new data—such as text, images, music, or code—based on patterns learned from large amounts of existing data.

Today's AI is typically described as "weak AI" (also called narrow AI) because the models are designed and trained for a single task; for example, the natural language model cannot interpret images. "Strong AI" or "artificial general intelligence" does not exist yet, though tech companies are moving toward this goal. It would be a form of intelligence capable of understanding, learning, and applying itself to any problem a human can solve. It would reason across domains, transfer learning between tasks, and possess self-awareness and consciousness.

### **History of AI**

The theoretical groundwork for AI was laid by mathematicians and logicians. A foundational text in the field is Alan Turing's 1950 paper, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," which proposed the Turing Test as a criterion for machine intelligence. In that test, a human evaluates a text transcript of a natural language conversation between a human and machine and the machine passes if the evaluator cannot reliably tell them apart. The Dartmouth Workshop in 1956 is considered the official birth of AI as a discipline. It was there that the term *artificial intelligence* was coined by John McCarthy, a young assistant professor of mathematics. This period was marked by great optimism and early successes with programs like the Logic Theorist and the chatbot ELIZA. The initial optimism faded, however, as early AI programs failed to scale up. A lack of progress and subsequent funding cuts led to the first "AI winter." A brief resurgence occurred in the 1980s with expert systems, which were commercially successful but ultimately limited. Their collapse led to a second lull in development.

The Rise of Machine Learning (1990s-2010s) Researchers shifted from rule-based systems to statistical and data-driven methods. Key milestones included IBM's Deep Blue defeating a world chess champion in 1997 and IBM's Watson winning Jeopardy! in 2011. The rise of the internet provided the vast amounts of data needed for these training methods to flourish.

Deep Learning and Generative AI (2010-Present) The deep learning revolution led to dramatic breakthroughs. The development of transformer architecture paved the way for modern large language models. Transformer models are trained from all available data on the internet to place words into context. The public release of ChatGPT in late 2022 made generative AI a mainstream technology.

## **Uses of AI**

AI has become an integral part of our daily lives, demonstrably improving various sectors of society. Its impact can be seen across **business**, through advancements like data analytics, forecasting, automation, supply chain orchestration, risk management, and fraud detection; in **education**, where it facilitates personalized tutoring, curriculum design, scheduling, enrollment processing, accessibility, real-time translation, and captioning; in **medicine**, supporting areas such as diagnostic support, imaging analysis, radiology aids, drug discovery, precision medicine recommendations, remote monitoring, and telehealth; and for **individual use**, powering tools like personal assistants, planning reminders, task management, search, information synthesis, and personalized coaching. This is a small list of its widespread applications.

AI's integration is not just about efficiency, it's about fundamentally transforming how we operate, make decisions, and interact with the world. As the technology continues to mature, its influence across all facets of society will expand.

## **HOW AI IMPACTS DEMOCRACY**

### **Definition of democracy and its core principles**

Democracy, at its core, means "rule by the people," but that simple definition conceals profound complexities and competing visions. Most understand it to be a system where governmental authority derives from the consent of the governed, typically through regular, free elections where citizens choose representatives. Democracy requires more than just voting. Citizens must be able to influence decisions. This ability requires access to accurate, unbiased, information; freedom to organize, speak, and dissent; real choices between alternatives; and a means to hold leaders accountable. Elections are not democratic if citizens cannot meaningfully participate, if information is controlled, if dissent is punished, or if power is so concentrated that voting becomes theater.

### **AI's Potential to Enhance Democracy**

AI could help improve civic engagement and democratic processes in meaningful ways if it is developed and deployed responsibly and equitably, with attention to fairness, transparency, and potential risks. Its benefits should be widely distributed across society rather than concentrated among a few.

For individuals, AI has the potential to strengthen democracy in several ways. Many advocates say AI technology could improve civic engagement and grassroots organizing. Tanveer Inamdar, board chair at MBANK, claims that use of AI tools helps ensure that voters are informed and equipped to make their voices heard in the democratic process. It could improve voter awareness by providing personalized information and guidance about candidates, policies, and voting procedures. AI chatbots could answer questions about voter registration, polling locations, and election dates, making it easier for citizens to participate. It could also support grassroots organizing efforts by identifying potential supporters, mobilizing volunteers, and optimizing campaign strategies by analyzing social media data to identify key influencers and engage with communities on specific issues. This could enable grassroots organizations to build more effective campaigns, reach a broader audience, and drive meaningful change at the local level.

Other possibilities include promoting individual rights, understanding privacy policies, detecting discrimination, and documenting human rights abuses. AI applications could help people understand their rights through plain language explanations of laws, generating legal documents, and identifying when rights violations may have occurred. These potential

applications could democratize legal knowledge that was previously accessible mainly to those who could afford lawyers. People could make more informed choices about data sharing if AI were put to work by clearly explaining privacy policies and identifying data breaches. It could also be used to identify discrimination by auditing other algorithms, hiring practices, or lending decisions for patterns of bias. These types of applications could create a new tool for civil rights enforcement.

On a societal level, AI could help protect elections by detecting disinformation, securing voting infrastructure, verifying information, and improving election administration. Through identifying coordinated inauthentic behavior and manipulated media (deepfakes) that aim to mislead voters, it could flag suspicious patterns faster than human moderators alone. Securing voting infrastructure through AI-powered cybersecurity systems could detect and respond to attacks on voter registration databases, election websites, or voting machines in real time. AI tools could help fact-checkers process claims more quickly during campaigns and help journalists verify the authenticity of images, videos, and documents. These systems could be used to optimize polling place locations to reduce wait times, predict where additional resources are needed, and help election officials identify irregularities that might indicate problems with ballot processing, thus improving election administration.

### **AI's Threats to Democratic Systems**

The use of AI can threaten democracy in a number of ways. When AI spreads misinformation and disinformation, it creates uncertainty, causing us to question not only false information but also accurate information. It distorts the democratic discourse on important public issues and erodes trust in public and private institutions including elected and appointed officials, judges, and agencies. The use of biased AI systems can lead to government decisions that impact some groups of people unfairly. Using AI to identify and track individuals could become a tool to discourage or suppress the exercise of fundamental rights, such as free speech and assembly.

Deepfakes create uncertainty. Misinformation, disinformation and deepfakes can undermine an informed citizenry. *Deepfake*, a form of disinformation, is defined as an image or recording that has been convincingly created or altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said. Sora, the most recent smartphone app made by OpenAI, lets people create hyper-realistic videos entirely from artificial intelligence, raising questions about the possibility of losing touch with what is real.

Deepfakes are being increasingly used in the political domain. Many deepfakes are obviously untrue, such as cartoon-like photos of President Donald Trump posing as a superhero. Others, however, can be intended, or have the potential, to deceive. For example, an AI-generated meme posted by President Trump purported to show that Taylor Swift supported him, which she did not. As deepfakes become more prevalent, they amplify uncertainty. Even when deepfakes do not deceive viewers, they increase uncertainty about the specific information being viewed – and the accuracy of information from other sources. Northeastern University Professor Don Fallis writes that, as deepfake technology improves, it may become “irresponsible to simply believe that what is depicted in any particular video actually occurred.” As a result, people may question the content of any video they view, effectively preventing them from believing not only information from deepfakes but also accurate information from sources they generally consider reliable.

Misinformation and deepfakes can interfere with democratic discourse. Democratic discourse functions best when all involved are working from a foundation of shared facts supported by empirical evidence. Disinformation spread by deepfakes allows individuals to choose what they

want to believe based on manufactured “facts” while ignoring the truth. This distorts the democratic discourse on important policy questions because there is no foundation of shared facts.

Deepfakes can be used to manipulate elections. Opponents of a political candidate may try to sabotage that candidate by distributing damaging, but false, video or audio content. This has the potential to influence the outcome of an election, especially if the distribution is timed to prevent debunking before the election.

AI is used as a tool in gerrymandering. AI is being increasingly leveraged by partisan mapmakers to create highly sophisticated and effective gerrymanders, manipulating electoral district boundaries to favor specific political parties. AI systems use extensive datasets, including voter preferences, demographics, and past election results, allowing mapmakers to pinpoint areas with a propensity to support particular parties. The analysis of geographic data is also crucial, providing information on population density and distribution that informs decisions on how to redraw boundaries effectively to maximize partisan advantage. Advanced algorithms rapidly assess numerous potential district configurations, simulating how changes in district boundaries might influence election outcomes. This optimization process maximizes votes for specific parties, making the manipulation highly effective.

The use of AI for gerrymandering raises significant ethical and legal questions for democratic governance. Manipulating district boundaries can disenfranchise voter groups, which fundamentally undermines the core tenets of democracy. The lack of transparency surrounding the algorithms used raises serious concerns about accountability and fairness in the electoral process.

### **Bias**

AI systems are trained on datasets produced by people. When those datasets are biased, AI algorithms learn from, and may amplify and exacerbate, those biases. Companies do not disclose the algorithms and weights used in their AI models, claiming they are proprietary, leaving the public and lawmakers ignorant of the algorithms used by different AI systems.

Different kinds of biases occur in AI. Algorithmic bias occurs if developers prioritize certain attributes over others, such as age or gender. Sampling bias occurs when data entered is not representative of the population. Representation bias occurs when data doesn't represent the population it means to model.

Biases in AI systems can lead to inconsistent, even damaging, results. For example, COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions) was used to predict the likelihood of criminal defendants reoffending and to influence sentencing. An investigation by ProPublica found that this AI system demonstrated a distinct racial bias: It was more likely to over-predict that Black defendants would reoffend and to under-predict that White defendants would reoffend.

### **Surveillance**

Wherever we go, whatever we do, increasingly we are watched. Cameras trained on intersections and highways feed license plate data into AI-powered law enforcement systems. Stores record shoppers' movements to train security systems to recognize suspicious behaviors, and employers monitor their workers online and in person. Each keystroke entered on computers could surrender personal information. Every website visit is tracked. This massive data collection has the potential to put citizens' rights at risk. Writing about the introduction of an

“Investigations Manager” in the Flock surveillance system, Jay Stanley of the American Civil Liberties Union cautions, “In a democracy, the government shouldn’t be watching its citizens all the time *just in case* we do something wrong.”

Facial recognition software, used around the world with the aim of identifying suspected criminals and terrorists, exemplifies the potential for flawed AI deployment. A 2018 study found that these programs disproportionately failed when identifying women and people of color, largely because the images used to train the systems predominantly included light skin tones. But even if these flaws are corrected with technological advances, Stanley writes, “to the extent [AI] becomes more intelligent, that will also allow for more and richer information to be collected about people, and for people to be scrutinized, monitored, and subjectively judged in more and more contexts.”

After a shooting on campus in 2023, Michigan State University installed an AI-powered surveillance system with thousands of cameras, motion detectors, and electronic door locks feeding data into a single security center. However, security experts warned that the system might not speed up response to a violent threat, and student activists have raised concerns that the monitoring might be trained on participants of lawful demonstrations.

Darrell West of the Brookings Institute summarizes the threats to freedom of expression and other civil rights posed by AI-enabled online surveillance:

Overall, it is a risky time for AI-based surveillance because we have a combination of advanced digital technologies, high-level computing power, abundant and non-secured data, data brokers who buy and sell information, and a risky political environment. It is the confluence of each of these factors that endanger people’s freedoms and ability to express themselves in an open manner. As AI surveillance grows, individual freedom diminishes, and the risks of government and corporate overreach rise.

## **GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES**

To better ensure that AI is used effectively to support and strengthen democracy, there must be coherent oversight, including monitoring of outcomes, regulation, use of multi-stakeholder assessments, accountability mechanisms, and public education. Effective monitoring may be achieved through independent auditing by third-party researchers, civil society organizations, and government agencies. These monitors would need access to AI systems to test them for bias, security vulnerabilities, and unintended harms. “Algorithmic transparency” would be required in applications where high-stakes AI, used in criminal justice, hiring, credit, and elections, for example, must be explainable and auditable with requirements to pause or modify systems causing harm.

Some governments are developing AI-specific regulations like the EU’s AI Act, effective August 1, 2024, that classify systems by risk level and impose requirements accordingly. High-risk systems should be subject to stricter testing, documentation, and human oversight requirements before deployment.

A bipartisan group of four senators hosted a 9-part AI Insight Forum in 2023 that focused on the advent of AI and its future. Topics considered included AI innovation, copyright and intellectual property, use cases and risk management, national security, guarding against doomsday scenarios, AI’s role in our social world, transparency, explainability, alignment, and privacy and

liability. Attendees included leaders of large tech companies, civil rights organizations, and labor organizations.

One outcome of the forum was a 30-page road map that called for increasing funding for AI innovation to maintain global competitiveness, ensuring enforcement of existing AI laws, addressing unintended bias, and considering the potential impacts of AI on the U.S. workforce. It also sought to address issues related to deepfakes, particularly regarding election content and “non-consensual intimate video images.” Additionally, at the conclusion of the forums, Senate co-hosts indicated that key committees would begin ramping up efforts to craft bipartisan AI legislation.

On October 30, 2023, President Biden signed Executive Order (E.O.) 14110 on *Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence*. It established a government-wide effort to guide AI development and deployment through federal agency leadership, regulation of industry, and engagement with international partners.

On January 23, 2025, President Donald Trump repealed President Biden’s order and since that date the Trump administration has pursued a deregulatory approach to the use and development of AI.

On July 1, 2025, a proposal to deter states from regulating AI for a decade was soundly defeated in the U.S. Senate.

Successful oversight includes diverse voices, with technologists, ethicists, affected communities, domain experts, and policymakers working together. Advisory boards, public comment periods, and impact assessments are needed to ensure AI serves the broad public interest. Clear liability rules for AI harms, whistleblower protections for those who report problems, and enforcement agencies with technical expertise to investigate violations will be essential. However, national security and competitiveness create pressure for secrecy. Protecting rights requires limiting certain AI uses, but innovation advocates resist “overregulation.” Securing elections requires some centralized monitoring capacity, but that same infrastructure could enable authoritarian control. The challenges are that oversight often lags behind deployment, enforcement agencies lack resources, and companies resist transparency, citing trade secrets.

Citizens need AI literacy to understand how these systems affect them and to advocate effectively for their interests. Funding to build public awareness of these tools and instruct students of all ages how to use and consume AI is essential. Free tutorials and educational content could help consumers understand how AI works and how it could be used for good or ill. The companies building these products will realize multiple benefits, like building trust and credibility with the public and gaining users, by creating these campaigns and educational content. One way to achieve this aim is through exposure to positive use cases of AI as quickly as possible. It will be critical to show the public how AI could be used beneficially so that people are not fearful of its power but rather learn how they can best use it. A strong safeguard will result from educating citizens to be able to spot when AI is used for good purposes versus negative.

An impediment to effective oversight and regulation of AI is that Big Tech companies—such as Meta, Amazon, Apple, Google, Microsoft, IBM, and OpenAI—wield immense and unprecedented power that extends far beyond traditional corporate economic influence. They significantly influence government and proposed regulations with the primary aim of protecting their market dominance and business models. These companies control the essential infrastructure and platforms on which nearly all other digital businesses and individuals rely. This dominance

includes core services like cloud computing, mobile operating systems (e.g., iOS and Android), and app stores. They maintain near-monopoly control over fundamental digital services: Google dominates global search, Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) dominates social media and messaging, and Amazon dominates online retail, logistics, and web-based cloud services. Their search, social media, and video algorithms dictate what billions of people see, read, and believe. This power allows them to actively shape public discourse, influence election outcomes, and determine the success or failure of movements and businesses globally.

The extreme wealth of these companies, often measured in hundreds of billions of dollars, allows them to spend enormous sums on lobbying to influence policymakers and actively resist regulation on critical issues such as data oversight, antitrust, and taxation. They maintain in-house public affairs teams, fund think tanks, and participate formally in the rulemaking process. Their scale and technical expertise give them significant leverage in audits, enforcement decisions, and new rulemaking. The overarching goal is to shape legislation and regulatory interpretations in ways that reduce problems for their products, protect their current business models, and establish favorable competitive conditions for themselves. They are actively influencing the debate on AI regulation, generally pushing for an environment that minimizes restriction and grants them even more control over future systems and societal functions. In a 2018 interview with Vox regarding Facebook's role in addressing issues like election interference and content regulation, Mark Zuckerberg stated:

I actually think that regulation of some sort is important, but I do think that when you have any company that's in an area that's highly technological, that the company is going to have the best understanding of the issues and the kinds of nuances of what needs to be in place. I just don't think that having regulators try to sit on a board or something is going to be helpful... I think what would be more helpful is having the company itself be responsible for this.

## **CONCLUSION**

The application of artificial intelligence in democratic systems and processes has the potential for both good and harm. This technology could be deployed to help voters become better informed about candidates and issues; to understand and act on their rights; and to monitor and contribute their views on government actions at the local, state, and federal levels.

On the other hand, sophisticated AI video and audio programs have unleashed political deepfakes so convincing that they make fiction indistinguishable from reality. In addition, the rapid development of AI systems may outpace the ability of citizens and government watchdogs to recognize and seek to correct flaws in these technological tools and to head off threats to individual and collective rights—freedom of assembly and expression, due process, and equal treatment under the law, to name a few. These threats are exacerbated by the power concentrated in a few Big Tech companies that largely control AI development and refuse to divulge, under the guise of trade secrets, the data and algorithms that power their products.

A 2025 analysis by Rafea Chehudi encompassing economic, political, and demographic factors in 72 countries found “a significant negative association between AI development and democracy scores.” The author called for further investigation to identify the mechanisms through which AI impacts democratic systems but cited several threats to citizens discussed in previous research: potential human rights violations driven by opaque and uneven applications of this technology; bias and discrimination; replication of existing inequalities; and privacy violations.

This study focuses directly on how AI affects democracy and human rights, but its growing use has far-reaching impacts on government actions and oversight of environmental and economic concerns as well. These topics may be proposed for future studies.

Citizens need to stay informed about the impact of AI in their daily lives. The League of Women Voters and other civic organizations need to continue monitoring how AI might be used in elections and in facilitating or hampering public participation in government. The importance of transparency and truth in information disseminated in political campaigns is not a partisan issue. It should be the minimum expectation of a healthy democracy to provide voters with complete and truthful information about political candidates, parties, and issues.

## QUESTIONS

Whether you are excited or worried about AI advances, what are some ways to stay informed about the impact of this technology on democratic systems and processes?

How can we know when we can trust AI-generated data when it has been shown that the training data often contains biases, which are then incorporated into its models?

Debates arose recently in both Eugene and Springfield over the deployment of Flock surveillance cameras. Do the benefits to law enforcement using this AI-powered system outweigh concerns about individual privacy rights and Flock's use in immigration enforcement?

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