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Democratisation and Emerging Technologies in Africa: Can AI Deliver Free and Fair Elections?

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ABSTRACT
The rise of digital technologies presents significant challenges for establishing and maintaining democratic systems. In Africa, democratisation efforts have been hindered by repeated coups against elected governments and contested elections. This article argues that emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), pose a new threat to key democratic processes, including elections. While numerous reports have documented unfair and unfree elections in African countries, few studies have examined the additional risks posed by AI as an emerging technology in elections. This qualitative study gathered data from peer-reviewed studies and documents, using content analysis to analyse the findings. Focusing on selected countries, the study demonstrated how AI can disrupt the election process before, during, and after voting. The research illustrated how AI, with its potential to manipulate voter data, public opinion, electronic voting, and vote tallies, raises serious concerns about the integrity of the electoral process. In countries where the ruling leaders seek to maintain power, AI can undermine the people's will. The study strongly recommends regulating the use of AI in elections, with comprehensive data protection laws to safeguard voter privacy. AI-driven microtargeting and voter profiling should be limited to avoid manipulative tactics. Additionally, robust cybersecurity measures should be put in place to prevent election interference. Adopting transparent, auditable AI systems should be encouraged, and digital literacy campaigns should be promoted to combat misinformation. Finally, AI tools should be complemented by traditional voting systems to ensure transparency and integrity, emphasising the responsible use of technology to protect democratic governance.

Keywords: AI, elections, democracy, Africa, voting

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INTRODUCTION
The rise of digital technologies presents significant challenges for establishing and maintaining democratic systems. One such technology that has caught the attention of scholars is artificial intelligence (AI). According to Jungherr, the widespread deployment of AI has raised awareness of the technology's economic, social, and political consequences.[1] Among the scholarship, Sudmann captures a discourse that discusses the latest developments in AI as a potentially severe threat to democracy and democratic values.[2] As with any revolutionary advancement, citizens and political leaders have yet to fully understand AI,

[1] Andreas Jungherr, "Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework," *Social Media+ Society* 9, no. 3 (2023): 20563051231186350.
[2] A. Sudmann, *The Democratization of Artificial Intelligence: Net Politics in the Era of Learning Algorithms*, 1st ed. (transcript Verlag, 2019).

define its boundaries, or evaluate its pros and cons.[3] Jungherr succinctly captures AI's recent successes and deployment in political life, raising questions regarding whether and how AI impacts democracy.[4] Central topics of these discussions revolve around the socio-political impact of AI technologies, such as the manipulation of visual information to create 'fake news' and propaganda.[5] As a result, one recurring question to be critically examined in studies is: To what extent have democratic activities been placed under new conditions necessitated by the whole establishment and implementation of AI technologies?[6]

In Africa, democratisation efforts have been hindered by repeated coups against elected governments and contested elections.[7] This paper argues that AI poses a new threat to key democratic processes. For clarity, the study acknowledges that "problematising AI as jeopardising democratic values and principles" is contestable,[8] because "the idea and practice of democracy are highly disputed concepts with competing accounts of great nuance".[9] In such circumstances, advancements in AI are presenting new dangers to social values and constitutional rights, the pillars underpinning democracy.[10] What requires further research is the threat AI poses to democracy, as more events illustrate how AI can be "weaponised" to corrupt elections and poison people's faith in democratic institutions.[11] The research imperative becomes more pronounced, given that elections are a constitutive nerve of any democracy. Elections in democratic systems are anchored in assumptions such as the state's ability to distinguish citizens from non-citizens.[12] AI blurs the dichotomy, introducing new challenges to democracy. The challenges include AI models' ability to replicate human behaviour and even deceive.

A recent study by Yu succinctly captures the integration of AI into the political arena, particularly in the context of elections, as heralding "a new era of campaign strategy, voter engagement, and electoral management".[13] The pertinent question, "Can AI deliver free and fair elections?" underscores the urgency of addressing AI's negative impact on democratic processes.[14] This paper unpacks the multifaceted ways in which emerging technologies like AI can slow democratisation by casting a shadow on the credibility of elections. It discerns and distils AI's threats to the entire electoral process, corrupting the election landscape before, during, and after elections. The paper notes that, as AI horizons a new *sui generis* frontier, democracy has been continuously undermined worldwide. AI now poses a significant existential threat to the sanctity of the ballot box. Generative foundation models like ChatGPT threaten pluralist societies.[15]

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore AI's potential threats to democratic electoral processes in African countries. Given AI's emergent nature in elections and its complex intersection with democratisation, a qualitative approach is appropriate for in-depth analysis and interpretation. The research drew on peer-reviewed studies and documented reports on elections in Africa and other democracies, particularly those that examine how emerging technologies reshape electoral outcomes. The study relied on secondary data sources, specifically peer-reviewed journal articles, reports by election monitoring bodies, and media reports. The data collection focused on literature published between 2010 and 2024 to capture recent developments in AI and elections. Key documents were selected based on their

[3] J. Duberry, "AI and Information Dissemination: Challenging Citizens Access to Relevant and Reliable Information," *Artificial Intelligence and Democracy*, 2022, 72–92.
[4] Jungherr, "Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework."
[5] Sudmann, *The Democratization of Artificial Intelligence: Net Politics in the Era of Learning Algorithms*.
[6] Sudmann, *The Democratization of Artificial Intelligence: Net Politics in the Era of Learning Algorithms*.
[7] Igiebor God'stime Osariyekemwen and Iyase Ambrose Osariyekemwen, "The Resurgence of Military Dictatorship in African Politics: Implication for Democratic Consolidation," *East African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2021): 123–40; P. B. Majiga, "The Proliferation of Popular Protests and Coups d'Etas in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sustainable Peace and Security in Africa* (Springer, 2022), 181–95; M. K. Miller, *Shock to the System: Coups, Elections, and War on the Road to Democratization* (Princeton University Press, 2021).
[8] Sudmann, *The Democratization of Artificial Intelligence: Net Politics in the Era of Learning Algorithms*.
[9] Jungherr, "Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework."
[10] K. Manheim and L. Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy," *Yale JL & Tech.* 21 (2019): 106.
[11] Manheim and Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy."
[12] Danielle Allen and E Glen Weyl, "The Real Dangers of Generative AI," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 1 (2024): 147–62.
[13] C. Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science," 2024, https://files.osf.io/v1/resources/un7ev/providers/osfstorage/65d879c8c3ab490b7846b045?direct=&mode=render.
[14] Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science."
[15] Allen and Weyl, "The Real Dangers of Generative AI."

relevance to AI applications in elections and democratic governance in Africa, as well as documented cases of electoral fraud or manipulation linked to emerging technologies. A systematic search was conducted across academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Web of Science, using keywords such as "AI in elections," "democracy in Africa," "electoral fraud and technology," and "election manipulation." Reports from organisations such as the African Union were also included to provide contextual analysis of AI's potential impact on elections. These documents were chosen to understand the patterns, challenges, and risks associated with AI's influence on democratic processes.

The study focused on a purposive sample of African and Western countries where AI technology has been noted for influencing elections. These countries were selected based on documented instances of contested elections, military coups, or reports of electoral challenges. The sample includes countries from diverse regions of the African continent to account for variations in electoral processes, democratic maturity, and technology adoption. Case studies were chosen to provide detailed insights into how AI has disrupted elections and democratic processes before, during, and after voting.

Data was analysed using content analysis. This study used secondary data, so no human participants were involved. However, analysing sensitive political and electoral issues required careful consideration of the potential implications for the countries and organisations discussed. The study acknowledged the need for balanced reporting and refrained from making unsupported accusations against governments or political leaders. All data sources were appropriately cited, and no confidential or classified information was used.

DISCUSSION

The Development of Technology in the Modern Era of Democracy

AI is the most disruptive technology of the modern era.[16] According to Jungherr, recent advances in AI, such as the application of large language models (LLMs) and other transformer models to generate text, images, videos, and audio, dominate the public imagination of AI and accelerate discussions about its impact.[17] One reason is that AI and machine learning algorithms (MLAs) are the core components of online platforms' functioning.[18] As explained by Duberry, some of these algorithms are powered by AI, meaning they can learn from data and adapt their code accordingly.[19] Their ability to extract intelligence from unstructured data is interesting and worrying.[20] As a result, studies are increasingly focusing on the political dimension of AI, with a particular emphasis on current initiatives, discourses, and concepts of 'democratisation', such as elections.[21] Undoubtedly, studies that favour and criticise AI highlight that technological advancement is a double-edged sword.[22] On one hand, AI in the hands of powerful elites provides them with sophisticated manipulation technologies. These technologies "have progressed to the point where individuals perceive that decisions they make are their own, but are instead often 'guided' by an algorithm".[23] Manheim and Kaplan lament these AI's unique risks, such as its "ability to generate comprehensive behavioural profiles from diverse datasets and to reidentify anonymised data".[24] Nevertheless, AI has many documented benefits, such as improved efficiency and accessibility, that political actors will likely parade before the electorate to justify deployment.

Recent studies show that political actors and their deep state elites will not hesitate to demonstrate the transformative utility of AI for "sophisticated data analysis, voter targeting, personalised messaging, and optimisation of campaign strategies".[25] It is also evident that social media platforms present many challenges.[26] A case in point is when a sitting head of state in America was removed from social media platforms, demonstrating the immense power that the social media owners hold, cutting beyond what is consumed on their platforms to include their readiness to confront political players. What is evident from

[16] Manheim and Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy."
[17] Jungherr, "Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework."
[18] Duberry, "AI and Information Dissemination: Challenging Citizens Access to Relevant and Reliable Information."
[19] Duberry, "AI and Information Dissemination: Challenging Citizens Access to Relevant and Reliable Information."
[20] Manheim and Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy."
[21] Sudmann, *The Democratization of Artificial Intelligence: Net Politics in the Era of Learning Algorithms*.
[22] Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science."
[23] Manheim and Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy."
[24] Manheim and Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy."
[25] Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science."
[26] Duberry, "AI and Information Dissemination: Challenging Citizens Access to Relevant and Reliable Information."

the available studies is that AI can undermine even the so-called mature Western democracies.[27] The recurring concerns raised in many studies "include lack of algorithmic fairness (leading to discriminatory practices such as racial and gender biases), content personalisation resulting in partial information blindness ('filter bubble'), the infringement of user privacy, potential user manipulation, or video and audio manipulation without the consent of the individual".[28]

Studies show that democracies have recently grappled with cyberattacks, information operations, political and social subversion, the exploitation of societal tensions, and malign financial influence.[29] AI has exacerbated the situation in politics, as fears are that it short-cuts democratic processes like elections in Africa. Table 1 below provides a synopsis of AI's influence on elections, while the sections below discuss the threats AI poses to electoral processes before, during, and after voting.

Table 1: Summary of AI Uses Before, During, and after Voting

Stage	Positive/Constructive Use	Negative/Manipulative Use
Before Voting	• Data-driven campaigning and voter targeting using AI analytics. • Automation of campaign processes. • Enhanced engagement via chatbots and digital outreach.	• Targeted misinformation and deepfakes are influencing voter perceptions. • Psychographic profiling and voter manipulation. • Unequal access to AI by incumbents in African elections. • Disinformation and hacking in elections. • AI-generated propaganda undermining democracy.
During Voting	• Detection of irregularities and real-time fraud prevention. • Improved verification processes and election security.	• Cyberattacks on voting systems. • Voter suppression through targeted misinformation. • Use of AI by dictators to manipulate elections.
After Voting	• Automated analysis of results and trends. • Efficient audit and recount through AI tools.	• Post-election disinformation and conspiracy theories. • Erosion of public trust and political instability. • Social unrest and contestation from AI-driven narratives.

Authors'own

The Use of AI in Elections: Before Voting

A recent study by Yu observed that the advent of AI has significantly transformed the landscape of political campaigns, introducing a new era of data-driven strategies that have reshaped how candidates reach and influence voters.[30] AI-powered algorithms can create and spread targeted misinformation to influence voter behaviour. Deepfake technology, for instance, can produce convincing but fake videos of candidates, swaying public opinion. One prominent scandal that highlighted the dangers of AI in elections involved a political consulting company, Cambridge Analytica, which became public in March 2018, illustrating that the company had access to and presumably analysed the data of over 80 million Facebook users without their prior consent to support Trump's campaign.[31] Manheim and Kaplan agree that the

[27] S. Overton, " Overcoming Racial Harms to Democracy from Artificial Intelligence," *Iowa Law Review, Forthcoming*, 2024.
[28] Katarina Kertysova, "Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation: How AI Changes the Way Disinformation Is Produced, Disseminated, and Can Be Countered," *Security and Human Rights* 29, no. 1–4 (2018): 55–81.
[29] Kertysova, "Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation: How AI Changes the Way Disinformation Is Produced, Disseminated, and Can Be Countered."
[30] Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science."
[31] Sudmann, *The Democratization of Artificial Intelligence: Net Politics in the Era of Learning Algorithms*.

Cambridge Analytica scandal represents the highest social cost of AI's new technological era: the erosion of trust in and control over our democratic institutions. They explain that the "Psychographic profiling" of Facebook users by Cambridge Analytica during the 2016 elections in Britain and the United States demonstrates that instances of voter manipulation are hardly the only threats that AI poses to democracy.[32] The case shows two main issues. Firstly, it was illustrated that AI could analyse vast amounts of data to predict voter behaviour, helping campaigns identify swing voters and tailor their messaging more effectively. This can lead to more strategic campaigning and raises ethical concerns about voter privacy. Secondly, it is worth noting that AI-driven tools can automate campaign processes, such as social media posts, email blasts, and even chatbot interactions with voters.[33] While this can increase engagement, it can flood the public with automated, potentially manipulative content.

In Africa, elections in many countries are often marred by contestation during the campaign period, leading incumbents to close the gap with their challengers.[34] Allegations of uneven campaign space have been made in countries such as Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Mozambique, and Egypt, among others. Now, AI has become a challenging technology because incumbents tend to have greater state resources to hire technologists and deploy technologies to their advantage, maintaining their grip on power. On the other hand, as seen in the 2023 general elections in Zimbabwe, political parties equally engaged in voter manipulation and misinformation.[35] In many jurisdictions, studies have observed different political parties using social media platforms and AI to micro-target voters with tailored propaganda, exploiting biases and manipulating voter preferences.[36] The 2016 US presidential election demonstrated the effects of AI tools and algorithms on democracy and political life, boosting the efficiency and scope of disinformation campaigns and related cyber activities, thereby impacting American citizens' opinion formation and voting decisions.[37] Furthermore, according to Richards,[38] the Facebook and Twitter censorship enabled by AI was successful in influencing the 2020 election and helping Biden to victory in the 2020 elections.

In February 2023, the media reported a case of an Israeli firm that had attempted to influence more than 20 elections in Africa through hacking, sabotage, and spreading disinformation. For instance, the Guardian newspaper in Britain reported that a consultancy company named Team Jorge offered "black ops" to intelligence agencies, political campaigns and private companies that wanted to manipulate public opinion secretly.[39] France 24 also reported that the firm's leader, Tal Hanan, while demonstrating his technology to reporters, appeared to hack into the Gmail inboxes and Telegram accounts of political operatives in Kenya days before the 2022 presidential election there.[40] Furthermore, AI was used to create electoral content in Cameroon (2025 elections), Namibia (2024 elections), and South Africa (2024

[32] Manheim and Kaplan, " Artificial Intelligence: Risks to Privacy and Democracy."

[33] B. Fishman, "Big Data for Big Politics: Theoretical Examination of AI-Driven Public Opinion Analysis and Campaign Management System," 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bar-Fishman/publication/370731841_Big_Data_for_Big_Politics_Theoretical_Examination_of_AI-Driven_Public_Opinion_Analysis_and_Campaign_Management_System/links/6466360ac9802f2f72e51b0f/Big-Data-for-Big-Politics-Theoretical-Examination-of-AI-Driven-Public-Opinion-Analysis-and-Campaign-Management-System.pdf; R., Kamal et al., "Artificial Intelligence-Powered Political Advertising: Harnessing Data-Driven Insights for Campaign Strategies," in *The Ethical Frontier of AI and Data Analysis* (IGI Global, 2024), 100–109.

[34] J. Bleck and N. Van de Walle, *Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990: Continuity in Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); S. Proverb, *Running against All Odds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[35] B. P. Humbe, S. Chirongoma, and N. Sande, " Hate Speech within the Electoral Political Processes in Zimbabwe," in *Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe: The 2023 Election and Beyond*, vol. 1 (Springer, 2023), 171–90; G. Mwonzora, "'Shifting the Voting Burden to Others': Abstainers and Turn Outers in Zimbabwean Elections," in *Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe: The 2023 Election and Beyond* , vol. 1 (Springer, 2023), 111–28; B. Nhikiti, " Social Media, Party Narratives and Supporters' Opinions: Zimbabwe's Post-2018 Elections," *Paper Presented at the Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance*, 2023.

[36] Nirmala Krishnamoorthy, "A Critical Analysis of Influence of Micro Targeting in 2021 Assembly Election Campaigns in Chennai" (Bennett University, 2022); Christophe Matthieu Erwan Marret, "The Impact of Social Media on the Polarization of the Political Debate: Three Case Studies in the European Context" (2022); M. Tomar et al., " The Role Of AI-Driven Tools In Shaping The Democratic Process:A Study Of Indian Elections And Social Media Dynamics,"*Industrial Engineering Journal* 52, no.11(2023):143–53.

[37] Kertysova, "Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation: How AI Changes the Way Disinformation Is Produced, Disseminated, and Can Be Countered."

[38] J. Richards, *MoneyGPT: AI and the Threat to the Global Economy* (Penguin Life, 2024).

[39] S. Kirchgaessner et al., " Revealed: The Hacking and Disinformation Team Meddling in Elections," The Guardian, February 15, 2023.

[40] France 24, " Israeli Firm 'Boasted' of Meddling in More than 30 Elections Worldwide," February 15, 2023, https://www.france24.com/en/technology/20230215-israeli-firm-boasted-of-meddling-in-more-than-30-elections-worldwide.

elections) to mislead voters, defame candidates, or promote unrealistic images of political parties.[41] Hence, Okolo cautions that, with a minimum of 17 African nations set to conduct elections in 2025, after 24 in 2024, the continent faces a pivotal moment in which AI-generated propaganda could severely compromise democratic systems already struggling with conventional issues.[42]

The Use of AI in Elections: During Voting

Since AI has been portrayed as a double-edged sword, it can help protect and compromise the voting process. AI algorithms have the potential to identify and flag irregularities in voting.[43] They can enhance election security by improving voter verification processes, detecting fraudulent activities in real time, and ensuring that only eligible voters cast their ballots. On the negative, AI can launch sophisticated cyberattacks on voting infrastructure when in the wrong hands, potentially compromising electronic voting systems, altering vote counts, or causing disruptions that undermine public trust.[44] Masombuka et.al. explain that a country's adversary can launch a cyberattack on another country using AI.[45] In previously documented cases of Estonia in 2007 and Ukraine in 2014, when the two countries had some tensions with Russia, it was alleged that Russian hackers targeted election infrastructure.[46] In the Ukrainian situation, malware was allegedly used to manipulate the election results.[47] Even though the threats were thwarted, given the pace of AI development over the past few years, the cases are a testament to the threats that AI technologies pose to electoral processes. Cyber intrusions into electoral infrastructure remain a concern for the institutions and processes of democracy.

Further, AI can also facilitate voter suppression techniques by identifying and exploiting vulnerabilities in the election system, such as targeting specific demographics with misinformation about voting procedures. Overton draws attention to the adverse capacity of AI Microtargeting of racially tailored disinformation, racial bias in automated election administration, discriminatory voting restrictions, racially targeted cyberattacks, and AI-powered surveillance that chills racial justice claims are just a few examples of how AI is threatening democracy.[48]

The biggest concern over AI is when dictators in charge of states face eviction from office and deploy AI tools to undermine electoral processes with the sole purpose of extending their stay in power. Africa is home to some of the longest-serving leaders who often use mock elections to prolong their stay. In addition, the resurgence of military coups signals a reversal of the democratic gains made on the continent. In that context, AI becomes an additional concern that might herald the beginning of the end of democracy and the relegation of electoral processes to insignificance.

The Use of AI After Voting

When used constructively, AI tools enable automated analysis of results. For instance, AI can quickly analyse election results, identifying patterns and trends that might not be immediately apparent to human analysts.[49] This can provide valuable insights into voter behaviour and election outcomes. In addition, AI

[41] D. B. Nua, "October 12 Poll: When Biya's Campaign Employs AI! ," The Guardian Post, October 7, 2025, https://theguardianpostcameroon.com/post/5853/fr/october-12-poll-when-biya-s-campaign-employs.

[42] C. T. Okolo, "AI-Generated Propaganda Threatens African Democracy. Democracy in Africa," September 8, 2025, https://democracyinafrica.org/ai-generated-propaganda-threatens-african-democracy.

[43] S. Kehinde et al., " Exploring the Impact of AI on Voter Confidence and Election Information in 2024," 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Segun-Kehinde/publication/382097397_Exploring_the_Impact_of_AI_on_Voter_Confidence_and_Election_Information_in_2024/links/669040b3af9e615a15e0911f/Exploring-the-Impact-of-AI-on-Voter-Confidence-and-Election-Information-in-2024.pdf.

[44] Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science."

[45] M. Masombuka, P. Duvenage, and B. Watson, " A Cybersecurity Imperative on an Electronic Voting System in South Africa-2024 and Beyond," *Paper Presented at the ICCWS 2021 16th International Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security*, 2021.

[46] Kate Fisher, "Russian Interference in the 2016 United States Presidential Election," 2019; O. Moșoiu, I. Bălăceanu, and E. Mihai, "Cyber Terrorism and the Effects of the Russian Attacks on Democratic States in East Europe," *Zeszyty Naukowe. Transport/Politechnika Śląska* 106 (2020): 131–39.

[47] Yu, " How Will AI Steal Our Elections? Center for Open Science."

[48] Overton, " Overcoming Racial Harms to Democracy from Artificial Intelligence."

[49] F. Marconi, *Newsmakers: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Journalism* (Columbia University Press, 2020); J. M. Tien, " Internet of Things, Real-Time Decision Making, and Artificial Intelligence," *Annals of Data Science* 4 (2017): 149–78.

can streamline the audit and recount processes by quickly analysing votes and identifying discrepancies.[50] However, reliance on AI in these critical processes also requires robust transparency and oversight to prevent manipulation. Another critical problem undermining democracy and elections is the use of AI to foster disinformation campaigns. After the election, AI can challenge the legitimacy of the results by spreading conspiracy theories or creating fake evidence of fraud, leading to political instability and eroding public trust in democratic institutions.[51]

The South African 2024 general elections saw claims of voter roll irregularities and technical failures in vote counting.[52] The irregularities resulted in one of the contesting parties, the Umkonto weSizwe Party, launching an appeal to the electoral court. Despite the majority of observers' missions and political stakeholders noting the election as credible, the experience qualifies as scepticism among those who believe that AI could introduce new ways to tamper with digital electoral processes. In Nigeria, the 2023 elections were marred by allegations of fraud, vote-buying, and digital manipulation.[53] In the continent's most populated and highly diverse countries, AI algorithms can, in future elections, micro-target ethnic and regional divisions, creating social unrest and contesting results.

In the United States of America, the 2016 and 2020 elections were marked by interference through social media manipulation and misinformation.[54] Immediately after the 2020 elections, social media misinformation led to violent protestors storming the Capitol.[55] The events highlight AI's ability to generate disinformation, which challenges future elections and potentially leads to further disputes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no dispute that AI technology and algorithms will hold increasing sway, enabling malign actors to infiltrate democratic institutions and distort elections without much of a trace.[56] In Africa, where there is an increasing appetite for leaders to stay in power or gain it even through undemocratic means, it is crucial to keep an eye on new threats aimed at strangling the democratic elements that constitute elections. Okolo cites evidence from Burkina Faso, Gabon, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and other countries across the continent that AI-generated disinformation is already here, already influencing public opinion, and being weaponised to destabilise governments.[57] As AI technologies extend their frontiers into the already contestable political landscape, more questions about the ability to deliver a credible vote must be asked, and relevant answers must be sought. Hence, drawing from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections, and the 2014 Ukraine and 2007 Estonia cyberattacks on elections, several lessons can be applied to the sustainable and responsible use of AI in African electoral processes. If juxtaposed with the electoral and democratic challenges in Africa, these recommendations focus on safeguarding democratic integrity while maximising AI's potential for good governance.

Strengthening Data Protection Laws and Voter Privacy

The Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated how the misuse of personal data could manipulate voter behaviour, posing a significant threat to the democratic process. In Africa, where data protection laws are

[50] John Amanesi Abubakar, Azeez Oluwatobi, and Omolola Faith Ademola, "Advancing Democratic Governance with AIoT-Enabled E-Voting: A Case Study of Covenant University's Departmental Associations in Alignment with SDG 16," in *Artificial Intelligence of Things for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals* (Springer, 2024), 335–60.

[51] S. M. Williamson and V. Prybutok, "The Era of Artificial Intelligence Deception: Unraveling the Complexities of False Realities and Emerging Threats of Misinformation," *Information* 15, no. 6 (2024): 299; M. V. Yazdi, "The Digital Revolution and the Demise of Democracy," *Tul. J. Tech. & Intell. Prop.* 23 (2021): 61.

[52] African Union Observer Mission, " Preliminary Statement: African Union Election Observation Mission to the 29 May 2024 General Elections - Johannesburg, 31 May 2024," African Union , 2014, https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/preliminary-statement-african-union-election-observation-mission-to-the-29-may-2024-general-elections-johannesburg-31-may-2024-preliminary-statement.

[53] D. C., Nzereogu and J. O. Nnolum, "Electoral Malpractices and the Challenges of Democracy in Nigeria: A Review of the 2023 Presidential Election," *Nnadiebube Journal of Religion, Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 (2024): 67–82.

[54] H.C. H. Chang et al., " Social Bots and Social Media Manipulation in 2020: The Year in Review," in *Handbook of Computational Social Science*, vol. 1 (Routledge, 2021), 304–23; Emilio Ferrara et al., "Characterizing Social Media Manipulation in the 2020 US Presidential Election," *First Monday*, 2020.

[55] R. E. Denton and R. Denton, *Campaigning in the Aftermath of the 2020 Elections: A Communications Perspective* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

[56] Kertysova, "Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation: How AI Changes the Way Disinformation Is Produced, Disseminated, and Can Be Countered."

[57] Okolo, "AI-Generated Propaganda Threatens African Democracy. Democracy in Africa."

often underdeveloped,[58] governments must prioritise establishing and enforcing robust data privacy regulations. These regulations should ensure that political parties and AI-driven campaigns are transparent about how they collect, store, and use voter data.[59] Additionally, voters must have the right to control their personal information, with independent regulatory bodies responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance.[60] This will prevent AI-driven campaigns from exploiting personal data to unfairly influence elections.

Limiting AI Use in Voter Profiling and Microtargeting

The use of AI in voter profiling and microtargeting, as seen in the Cambridge Analytica case, highlights the risks of AI-driven echo chambers that can deepen political polarisation.[61] In African elections, limiting the use of AI for voter profiling is crucial to preventing the manipulation of voter behaviour through targeted misinformation. Political parties should be required to disclose their use of AI tools, making the process transparent and accountable. Through proactively regulating how AI algorithms are deployed in election campaigns, African countries can mitigate the risk of misinformation, ensuring that elections are free and fair and fostering informed public debate.

Building Cybersecurity Infrastructure to Prevent Election Interference

The cyberattacks on Ukraine in 2014 and Estonia in 2007 revealed the vulnerability of digital election systems to interference.[62] To safeguard elections from similar AI-driven threats, African governments need to invest in strong cybersecurity infrastructure.[63] The technical glitches in the South African 2024 election announcement of general election results demonstrate the importance of protections for election management systems, electronic voting machines, and the secure transmission of election results. The cases of South Africa, Ukraine and Estonia highlight that a multi-layered approach to cybersecurity is essential, combining AI solutions such as anomaly detection with traditional methods like paper audit trails to ensure the integrity of the vote count. Additionally, regional cooperation among African countries to share intelligence and strengthen cyber defences will be vital to preventing external interference in elections.

Promoting Digital Literacy and Media Transparency

The rise of AI-driven misinformation campaigns, particularly during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections and the Nigerian and Zimbabwean 2023 elections, highlights the need for robust African digital literacy programs. Many voters may struggle to identify AI-generated content or fake news, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation. To counter this, governments should launch initiatives that equip citizens with the skills to assess digital information critically. At the same time, media organisations must adopt AI-powered fact-checking tools to quickly detect and debunk false information circulating during elections. Social media platforms, in collaboration with election commissions, should be held accountable for the spread of misinformation, ensuring that electoral debates are based on accurate, reliable information.[64]

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[58] Lukman Adebisi Abdulrauf, "Giving 'Teeth'to the African Union towards Advancing Compliance with Data Privacy Norms," *Information & Communications Technology Law* 30, no. 2 (2021): 87–107.

[59] I. Brown and C. T. Marsden, *Regulating Code: Good Governance and Better Regulation in the Information Age* (MIT Press, 2023).

[60] Brown and Marsden, *Regulating Code: Good Governance and Better Regulation in the Information Age*.

[61] Joe Burton, "Algorithmic Extremism? The Securitization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Its Impact on Radicalism, Polarization and Political Violence," *Technology in Society* 75 (2023): 102262; P. Henderson, J. Cole, and N. Baulis, *How AI Is Changing Democracy: Nudging, Microtargeting, and Epistemic Bubbles* (Auckland: Maxim Institute, 2023); J. Kenzler, " Cambridge Analytica and the Public Sphere: An Investigation of Political Manipulation in the Digital Age " (Tampere University, 2020).

[62] Kenneth James Boyte, "The Evolution of Cyber Warfare in Information Operations Targeting Estonia, the US, and Ukraine," in *Developments in Information Security and Cybernetic Wars* (IGI Global, 2019), 140–77; Sam, Van der Staak and Peter Wolf, *Cybersecurity in Elections: Models of Interagency Collaboration* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 2019).

[63] Mzukisi Qobo, *The Political Economy of China--US Relations* (Springer International Publishing, 2022).

[64] M. de Cock Buning, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation* (Publications Office of the European Union, 2018); C. Marsden, T. Meyer, and I. Brown, " Platform Values and Democratic Elections: How Can the Law Regulate Digital Disinformation? ," *Computer Law & Security Review* 36 (2020): 105373.

Adopting Transparent AI Systems for Electoral Management

AI can improve the efficiency of electoral processes, such as through electronic voting and vote tallying, but transparency is essential to maintain public trust.[65] Experiences from the U.S. elections showed that a lack of transparency in AI systems can erode confidence in the outcome. African countries should ensure that AI tools used in elections are open to independent audits by experts, allowing for verification of the systems' accuracy and fairness. Open-source AI systems should be adopted where possible, giving stakeholders insight into how AI-driven decisions are made. To safeguard the integrity of elections, these AI systems should always be complemented by traditional methods such as manual vote counts or paper backups.[66]

Establishing Regional AI Election Guidelines

AI's impact on elections transcends national borders, underscoring the need for regional cooperation. Building on Estonia's successful collaboration with NATO after its 2007 cyberattacks, Africa should establish regional guidelines for the ethical and secure use of AI in elections. The African Union could lead the development of a framework setting minimum standards for transparency, security, and data privacy. African countries should align their national legal frameworks and cooperate to build cybersecurity capacity to counter AI-driven election interference. Regional election observer missions must also be trained to assess the physical aspects of elections, as well as the digital and AI-driven components, to ensure comprehensive election monitoring.

Ethical Governance of AI

If not regulated, AI technologies can easily entrench power in authoritarian regimes, as seen in Ukraine and other politically motivated cyberattacks.[67] To prevent the undemocratic use of AI in African elections, governments must implement clear legal and ethical frameworks governing AI's role in political processes. Election oversight bodies should be independent and well-resourced to monitor AI usage, ensuring it is not exploited to undermine democratic competition. Civil society organisations and the international community should also play a role in ensuring accountability and providing oversight and support for the ethical use of AI in elections.[68] This will help balance AI's potential benefits with the need to preserve democratic integrity.

CONCLUSION

The increasing use of AI in elections presents opportunities and significant challenges for democratic processes, particularly in Africa, where political instability and electoral manipulation are persistent concerns. Drawing lessons from cases like the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections, and the cyberattacks in Ukraine and Estonia, it is evident that AI, when improperly regulated, can exacerbate electoral vulnerabilities. To mitigate these risks, African countries must prioritise the development of robust data protection laws, limit the use of AI in microtargeting, and invest in cybersecurity infrastructure to safeguard election integrity. Furthermore, promoting digital literacy, ensuring transparency in AI-driven electoral systems, and establishing regional AI governance frameworks are critical steps toward ensuring that AI is used responsibly in African elections.

For AI to positively contribute to elections, it must be managed within a clear ethical and legal framework that prioritises protecting voter rights and preserving democratic norms. Without proper oversight, AI could quickly become a tool for entrenching authoritarianism and undermining the people's will. Therefore, traditional voting systems must be complemented by AI technologies to ensure transparency and trust in the electoral process. Reflecting on the recommendations discussed, African

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[65] Huilin Li et al., "A Blockchain-Based Traceable Self-Tallying E-Voting Protocol in AI Era," *IEEE Transactions on Network Science and Engineering* 8, no. 2 (2020): 1019–32; H. M., Misni, Bambang Jokonowoa, and Hadi Santoso, "Ensuring Trust and Integrity: A Revolutionary Approach to Electronic Voting through Blockchain,"*International Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research*, 2024, 7–2.

[66] Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, "Digital Dilemmas: The Unintended Consequences of Election Technology," *Democratization* 25, no. 8 (2018): 1397–1418.

[67] A. Bradford, *Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); E. Fowler, *(Dis) Information Warfare: The 2016 Election, Russian Hackers, and US Democratic Precarity* (University of Oregon, 2021).

[68] Eyal Benvenisti, "Upholding Democracy amid the Challenges of New Technology: What Role for the Law of Global Governance?," *European Journal of International Law* 29, no. 1 (2018): 9–82.

nations can better prepare for the challenges posed by AI and use the technology to strengthen, rather than weaken, their democracies.

While this study has provided critical insights into the sustainable use of AI in elections, several areas require further investigation. First, future research should explore the practical implementation of AI regulations across different African countries, analysing the specific legal, technological, and political challenges they face. Additionally, there is a need to examine how AI can enhance, rather than undermine, electoral transparency and public participation, for example, through voter engagement platforms and fraud-detection systems.

Moreover, comparative studies across regions, examining AI's electoral impact in Africa alongside other global contexts, could offer valuable insights into best practices for safeguarding democracy. Finally, given the rapid evolution of AI technologies, ongoing research into the latest AI-driven threats, such as deepfakes and advanced cyberattacks, is essential to ensure that electoral systems remain resilient and adaptive to new challenges. Addressing these areas will contribute to a deeper understanding of AI's role in elections and the measures necessary to protect democratic processes in an increasingly digital world.

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