

Elections in the Age of Post Truth and Artificial Intelligence: A Case Study on the US and Indian Polls

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Article info

Received: 5 January 2025

Revised: 17 March 2025

Accepted: 25 March 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

Keywords:

USA, India, AI, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Misinformation

How to cite this article: Somyajit Sarkar, "Elections in the Age of Post Truth and Artificial Intelligence: A Case Study on the US and Indian Polls", *International Journal of Politics and Media*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 16-21, Jun. 2025. Retrieved from <https://ijpmonline.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/67>

Abstract

Artificial intelligence isn't a newborn child. It has been around for a long time. The concept of neural networks (widely seen as the bedrock of modern Artificial Intelligence) isn't of recent origin either. Scientists have been working on it for decades. However, the recent breakthroughs & applications of Artificial Intelligence have raised legitimate questions & put morality at the center of the discussion. Every aspect of human life, including elections, has been put in a spot.

On the one hand, this technology can positively transform the electoral process with the sheer strength of transformative abilities. However, it can also foment trouble if used negatively. One can easily see the negative potential of Artificial Intelligence in the form of deepfakes & disinformation/ misinformation. The paper tries to capture the strengths & weaknesses displayed by Artificial Intelligence in two of the world's most prominent democracies, India & USA, that went to the polls in the same year (2024).

1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) may be defined as a set of technologies that allow computers to do the job conventionally assigned to human beings. It is being widely seen as a breakthrough in the field of technology. AI's ability to touch upon multiple facets of human life makes it unique. However, this uniqueness has paved the way for numerous fears, including that of job losses & a dystopian scare where humans are subordinated to the might of the machines.

This technology has been hogging all the major headlines for the last couple of years and if the recent trends are anything to go by, the euphoria over AI isn't going anywhere. John J. Hopfield & Geoffrey E. Hinton were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics (2024) for their work on artificial neural networks (considered to be the basis of Modern Artificial Intelligence).

Hinton, a naysayer, has already painted a picture of doom & gloom as the world ambles its way into an AI influenced universe. The scientist, who has been a part of the path breaking journey for over four decades, believes that AI poses existential risks to humankind. However, the voices of optimism in the world of science aren't falling for that bait as of now.

1. 2024: The Year of Elections

Elections are widely seen as festivals of democracy. The year 2024 was declared as the 'year of elections' as at least 64 countries (including the US, the UK & India) representing nearly 49% of the total population of the world went to the polls. What made these elections unique was the intervention of Artificial Intelligence in the process.

2. Artificial Intelligence: Background

Artificial Intelligence is an umbrella term used to encompass a vast number of functions. However, on close attention, AI may be divided into two different branches of thought & execution?

- Traditional AI
- Generative AI

Traditional AI is good at performing repetitive tasks & solving well defined problems. Analysis & predictions are the forte of this type of Artificial Intelligence. The scope for creativity is less here since Traditional AI follows predefined rules & regulations. Generative AI is the toast of the season. It is the driving force behind all the conversions, controversies, and beyond that surrounding AI today. Generative AI is that subset of AI that can create original content in response to a user's prompt or request.

It can give birth to content like music, images & text. Generative AI is also the progenitor of deepfakes, a cause of concern for society at large.

3. India grapples with its first ever AI election

India, the largest democracy in the world, saw the implementation of AI based tools at a political & administrative level. In the run up to the General Elections of 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the nation to Bhashini, an AI based translation system that simplifies communication. Modi used this tool in his address at Kashi Tamil Sangamam in Varanasi (circa December 2023). He referred to it as a new beginning in simplifying his communication with the public.

Launched under the National Language Technology Mission (circa 2022), the system aims to provide technology translation services in the 22 scheduled languages recognized by the Indian Constitution.

However, as the elections came near, AI's disruptive abilities were abused by mischievous elements to settle political scores. Deepfakes were unleashed to discredit & denigrate political adversaries. The Election Commission of India, in charge of the polls, had minimal impact on such below the belt forces at play.

4. Deepfakes sire a new problem for the gatekeepers of Indian democracy

But what is a deepfake? Deepfake is the portmanteau of Deep Learning & Fake. Deep learning is a machine learning technique that uses artificial neural networks to process data. It impersonates the brain of a human being to process data.

Muonium AI, a Chennai based startup was one of the many entities used to deploy deepfakes promoting or discrediting candidates that spread like wildfire across social media. These videos use AI systems to create believable yet fake videos of real people saying or doing anything the creator wants. (Aggarwal & Frayer, 2024)

In the uber competitive environment of electoral politics, such deepfakes took a humorous turn once in a while. When an AI generated dance video of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee went viral on social media, the West Bengal Police sent a notice to the "X" (formerly Twitter) user who had shared it online. The news soon made it to social media trends, prompting netizens to denounce the thin-skinned Bengal administration.

Another X user who goes by the handle @Atheist_Krishna took a dig at Mamata Banerjee by sharing a similar meme video of Prime Minister Narendra Modi dancing in front of a large crowd. The stinging caption read, "Posting this video cuz I know that 'THE DICTATOR' is not going to get me arrested for this."

Quite uncharacteristically, the Prime Minister reshared the post on social media with the caption, "Like all of you, I also enjoyed seeing myself dance. Such creativity in peak poll season is truly a delight! #PollHumour." The canny politician in the Prime Minister had subtly scored a brownie point out of nowhere.

5. The strengths of AI in the electoral process

But is AI always a bad thing? The answer is no. Artificial Intelligence can be used as a positive force that complements the ingrained interests of a free & fair election. It can help in securing an efficient process, where the systematic follies are kept in check with the assistance of AI based tools.

In a country as diverse as India, administrative bottlenecks may be resolved by efficient technology. Artificial Intelligence can also enhance transparency, often under the cloud due to the vicious cycle of allegations and counter allegations. The evolving technology provides us with opportunities to modernize the poll process & address the challenges posed by the byzantine electoral framework. (Quraishi, 2024)

6. Deepfakes as a tool of promotion & disinformation in India

Political maverick & former member of Parliament Subramanian Swamy once said that elections are not won on economic performance but on emotions. Indians, by their very nature, are sensitive people. They often develop a deep personal bond with political leaders & their families. In the run up to the 2024 General Elections, canny political parties, aware of such sensibilities, whipped up emotional fervour by resurrecting dead leaders with the help of AI tools.

On January 23, 2024, Lt. M Karunanidhi, the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister & an icon of Indian cinema, addressed a large gathering to congratulate fellow politician TR Baalu on the launch of his memoirs.

He also showered fulsome praise on his son & the current Chief Minister of the State, MK Stalin. It goes without saying that AI was used to being the dead 'Kalaingar' (a scholar of arts), as Karunanidhi was fondly called, back to life.

Though the occasion was that of a book launch, electoral calculations caught up with the makers of the technology as the gathered crowd witnessed their favourite leader recounting the various achievements of the incumbent DMK government: from cash handouts to female friendly policies of the state. Muonium, an AI media tech firm was roped in by the DMK to create this AI version of Karunanidhi.

West Bengal, a state once considered a 'red citadel' for electing the Communists to power for 3 decades in a row, has seen massive political shifts in recent times. A border state that was once polarised between the Indian National Congress & the Left has no representative left from either of the two ideological formations in the state's assembly. Desperate to make a comeback, the CPI(M), the largest Left Party in India, tugged at the heartstrings of the masses via an AI run video of former Chief Minister & Marxist leader Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee appealing to the voters to vote for the Left coalition. In a 2 minute video address, Bhattacharjee was seen denouncing the ruling TMC over the Sandeshkahli incident (allegations of rape & land grab). The BJP wasn't spared either. It was held responsible by the former CM's AI avatar for spreading communal poison. The video went viral on social media with hundreds of likes, comments & shares. The frenzy on social media didn't translate into votes as the Left Parties failed to open an account in the state for

the second consecutive time. Bhattacharjee passed away in August 2024 after a prolonged illness.

The General Elections of 2024 were marked by a rampant use of deepfakes to spread misinformation. Political parties, irrespective of their ideological inclinations, were found guilty of using these tools to mislead the citizenry. Public figures were the biggest scapegoats in the process. Aamir Khan & Ranveer Singh, two major stars of the Hindi film industry, were seen campaigning for the Congress Party in a manipulated video. The actors lodged a complaint with the police soon after. The Prime Minister expressed concerns over deepfakes being used to tarnish the image of senior leaders of his party, including him. Narendra Modi's statement had immediate repercussions as one worker each from the Congress & the Aam Aadmi Party was arrested in connection with a doctored video of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

The Aam Aadmi Party didn't take the police offensive lying down. Amit Malviya, the national convenor of the IT Cell of the BJP, was in their crosshairs. Saurabh Bharadwaj, a senior leader of AAP, accused the saffron party of earning a PhD in fake videos. Arvind Kejriwal's party wasn't alone. In the past, Supriya Shrinate of the Indian National Congress (INC) had also pockmarked Malviya for 'heading the biggest fake news factory on the planet'.

Unfortunately, almost every major political party has turned the IT cell into a dirty tricks department that uses the all pervading power of technology to malign political rivals. AI is the latest addition to the arsenal of technology seamlessly abused for electoral benefits. But who are these people who employ AI technology to create misleading videos? What's their intent? An investigation of India Today revealed how digital manipulators were weaving an insidious plot to prevaricate public opinion during the election season.

Rohit Pal, the founder of The Digital Publicity, was heard outlining his plan for the candidates he was enrolled to campaign for. Pal confessed to having created deepfake videos to discredit political opponents. His primary aim was not only to brighten the image of the candidate he was working for but also to make the opponents look foolish. When asked what if people could see through the fakery of deepfakes, Pal was unfazed. He believes that it will be difficult to detect the manipulation at work. Pal added that creating such deepfakes doesn't take time since AI controls everything & the subscription cost of the applications used to make such videos is also reasonable.

Regulation of Artificial Intelligence has been a major point of concern. The Information Technology Act (2000), Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 may come in handy in due course. However, there is a need to upskill & modernize the provisions considering the massive impact of AI. There's a catch, though. Laws are often framed with a noble intent but implemented in a manner that frequently infringes upon an individual's right to life & liberty. The Draft Broadcast Services Bill (2024) raised the alarm as it had provisions that could fetter the freedom of independent content creators.

7. The United States deals with AI in its most anticipated Presidential Election, Russian 'interference' drops its shadow once again

The world's largest democracy wasn't the only country going to the polls in 2024. The United States of America (USA), the oldest democracy, witnessed a high stakes battle for the Presidency where the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, bested his nearest rival, Kamala Harris to win a comfortable victory. These elections were highly significant since the most powerful nation once again chose not to elect a woman to the highest office of the land. Coincidentally, the same Trump had dashed the chances of Hillary Clinton, another female contender, back in 2016.

The US elections have been subject to manipulation charges for a long time. Russian bots were accused of influencing the outcome of the 2016 US elections. Trump, the surprise victor of those elections, was even called a traitor for 'acting in connivance' with the Russian forces, thereby threatening the sovereignty of the United States.

The ghosts of Russian interference continued to haunt the US elections of 2024. The Biden administration issued sanctions against Russian broadcasters in the run up to the Presidential Elections. The former communist stronghold has allegedly used Generative AI to make texts, images & videos to foment fear around immigration (a topical issue in the US these days). However, certain experts believe that the Russian 'mischief makers' were not successful in their endeavour since certain inherent limitations within AI allow one 'thus far and no further'. (Chow, 2024)

Another key tool of manipulation in the US elections of 2024 has been Generative Artificial Intelligence. Many of the political actors could sense the overwhelming impact of AI in the election season. Thus, as many as 16 states made legislation around the use of AI in elections & campaigns. The Election Assistance Commission (that helps the electioneering apparatus) published an AI toolkit to help election officials guide the populace in the age of rampant misinformation.

8. Anti migrant sentiment & Deepfakes

Anti migrant sentiments have been running high in the US for some time. The Trump administration has begun the process of repatriation of illegal immigrants. Thus, very few were taken aback when Trump & his running mate, JD Vance, went hammer & tongs against migrants. In his rallies, Trump accused the Springfield (a small town in Ohio) based Haitians of eating pet dogs & cats. For the unversed, Haiti is a Caribbean country on the island of Hispaniola.

The Haitians were not pleased with the remark woven out of the thin air of rumor mongering. Even the Republican mayor of Ohio dispelled the claims. However, that didn't stop the Republican nominee from uttering the same claim time & again. The community in question felt intimidated, even avoiding scribes looking for information & clarification. Artificial Intelligence made matters worse. AI images and memes depicting animal abuse flooded the internet. A debunked rumor attained the status of a fact.

US' tryst with AI based disinformation doesn't end here. Donald Trump set the cat among the pigeons by posting an AI generated picture of actress Taylor Swift dressed in American colors with the text: 'Taylor Wants You To Vote For Donald Trump.' The post was uploaded on the Trump owned social media platform. The post went viral in no time. The gross abuse of AI & legal concerns took center stage. Swift didn't address the issue directly but didn't fail to mention it while endorsing Kamala Harris for the 2024 Presidential election. (Chakravarti, 2024)

When confronted by the press, Trump went into a mode of denial. He refused to own up to the act & blamed someone else for making it. He then played the victim card by claiming to have been misrepresented by AI several times in the past. But he had no answers for the gross negligence on the part of his team to publish AI driven false information, and that too by dragging a well known public figure into the mud.

9. US Legislation & Artificial Intelligence

Tennessee implemented the ELVIS (Ensuring Likeness Voice and Image Security) Act to offset the abuses of Generative AI. The Act pledges to protect against AI-generated deepfakes & voice clones. The unauthorized use of the voices of artists has become an actionable crime thanks to this new law. AI has the potential to usurp a person's individuality. ELVIS intends to stop such activities.

In India, social media sites like Instagram have also been flooded with AI generated voice clones of eminent artists (both living & deceased). However, there hasn't been any attempt to regulate such things yet. The voice of an artist shouldn't be degraded at the altar of new-age technology. There cannot be any knock offs of god gifted baritones.

10. Big Tech, Threats, & Limitations

How can a researcher ascertain the impact of Generative AI on the populace? The path to research is becoming increasingly narrow due to the policies of social media giants like Meta & X. X (formerly Twitter) has ended free access to its Application Programming Interface (API), whereas Meta has done away with Crowdtangle (a misinformation tracking tool) despite repeated requests from scribes & researchers. (Chow, 2024)

But why did Meta decide to shut the tool down just before the US elections of 2024? Many rumors have been doing the rounds, but one 'official reason' has been voiced by one of the company's co-founders. Brandon Silverman opined that the shutdown is 'likely' a part of Meta's larger objective of withdrawing from the news business. The Cambridge Analytica controversy (circa 2018) had convinced the company to move out of the news business. Facebook was accused of enabling the violation of privacy of millions of users by stealing their data for political purposes. The uproar that followed established the 'right to privacy' as a major point of protest across the globe. The Supreme Court of India went on to interpret it as a part of a citizen's fundamental rights.

Elon Musk, the owner of 'X', has his reasons for ending the free access to the microblogging site's API. He says that scammers & bot accounts were exploiting the free feature for

their own benefit & a paid subscription would clean things up. Musk's takeover of the site has resulted in seismic shifts, including a paid subscription model for verified accounts. Anyone can verify his or her X account by paying a certain fee. The subscription models follow a hierarchy of slabs: the greater the contribution, the greater the benefits. (Barnes, 2023)

However, verification in exchange for money has created its own set of problems. Earlier, the power to bestow verification on accounts lay with the management, ensuring that only those with a certain social standing were accorded this privilege. Since the entire process depends on the purse, many are running 'verified' accounts in the name of eminent persons, leading to greater confusion & conundrum in the election season. Some of these accounts may peddle AI borne misinformation too. Recently, 'X' has made an effort to combat the problem by officially launching a mandatory labeling system for parody & fan accounts. This will help in distinguishing between the official accounts & their parody counterparts. This new feature, however has come a bit late since the US elections are over.

2. Research methodology:

Articles from newspapers, online portals & magazines have come in handy. A qualitative form of research has been adopted to examine the research objectives & unexplored matter. No survey has been conducted. The ongoing tussle between the two countries has been explained from the perspective of information as well as disinformation.

3. Data Collection:

The case study has been helped by a variety of sources. Most of the data has been collected via newspaper, magazines, online portals & the internet. Opinion pieces have also come in handy through the insights they have provided.

4. Data Analysis:

Data has been analyzed descriptively. It has been complimented by appropriate critical analysis. The analysis has been done according to the objectives of the study. Hence, data that is not germane to the research objectives have been removed.

Findings:

The Election Commission of India (ECI), responsible for holding elections at different levels has woken up to the threats of misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI). During the recently concluded Delhi Assembly elections, the ECI asked political parties to use AI technology responsibly & transparently.

Incidentally, an FIR was launched against the Aam Aadmi Party for posting AI generated videos of Prime Minister Narendra Modi & Union Home Minister Amit Shah on social media. Before the 2024 General Elections, the institution had issued guidelines to curb the use of deepfakes & distorted AI generated content by political parties in their campaigning.

But is this enough? Have such directives led to a decline in deep fakes creation during elections? The answer is no. The institution is no match for the limitless power of technology (including social media). Hence, the ECI hasn't been able to achieve much in this domain. In the dead heat of elections, political parties abide by the dictum of Sama, Dana, Bheda, and Danda. They try to outmaneuver the adversaries by hook or by crook.

The United States is no exception. Despite being the most powerful nation on earth, it is grappling with the problems posed by Artificial Intelligence. Unfortunately, even leading politicians like Donald Trump have been found guilty of misusing AI for instant political benefit. However, several states in the US have adopted measures (including laws) to counteract the vicious use of Generative AI.

In such an environment, can society expect a free & fair election where transparency is accorded a special place? The answer is no. Thus, we must brace for a turbulent future full of deepfakes & AI propaganda. The viewer or reader must cultivate a critical mindset to combat the spectre of post truth that is far more powerful than it was in the past.

5. Conclusion:

Artificial Intelligence is a potent tool that should be used responsibly to ensure that it is used for the benefit of society. Unfortunately, the wobbly world of politics has misused AI to serve narrow interests. Legal framework, along with public awareness, are vital at this hour.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding:

The authors have not received any grant or financial support for this research

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