Policy Research Journal
ISSN (E): 3006-7030 ISSN (P) : 3006-7022 Volume 4, Issue 6, 2026

DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Jamal Ud Din[*1], Haseeb Ud Din[2], Muhammad Husain[3], Hidayat Ullah[4], Iqrar Ali[5]

*[*1]Lecturer in Political Science, Department of Political Science, Government College Daggar, Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan*
[2]Lecturer in Political Science, Government Degree College (GDC) Chakesar, Shangla, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan
[3,4,5]BS Graduate, Department of Political Science, Government College Daggar, Buner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

[*1]jamal.phdps53@iiu.edu.pk, [2]haseebuddin211@gmail.com, [3]mdhussain413m@gmail.com, [4]hadayatkhan15325@gmail.com, [5]mr.iqrar.jan.1122@gmail.com

DOI:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21253966

Keywords
artificial intelligence, democracy, governance, disinformation, digital authoritarianism, public policy.

Article History
Received: 25 April 2026
Accepted: 04 June 2026
Published: 21 June 2026

Corresponding Author: *
Jamal Ud Din

Abstract
Artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the way democracies work. It can help governments serve citizens faster, help people take part in politics in new ways, and help leaders make decisions based on real evidence rather than guesswork. At the same time, AI creates new dangers for democratic life. It can spread false information through deepfakes, help governments watch and control their own citizens, and give a small number of large technology firms outsized influence over what people see, hear, and believe. This paper examines both sides of this story through a critical review of recent political science, public policy, and governance literature. It builds on conceptual work by scholars such as Jungherr (2023), Coeckelbergh (2024), and Landemore (2024), and it uses real-world evidence from the 2024 global election cycle, including detailed attention to Pakistan and South Asia, to show how AI is already shaping political life on the ground. The paper also reviews how international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the European Union are trying to govern AI, and asks what these efforts mean for developing democracies with weaker institutions. The central argument is that AI is not good or bad for democracy on its own. What matters most is how citizens, governments, and institutions choose to design, regulate, and use it. The paper closes with concrete policy recommendations for both established and developing democracies, with a particular focus on transparency, institutional accountability, and citizen participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence is no longer a topic confined to computer science laboratories. It has moved into parliaments, election commissions, courtrooms, police stations, and the daily news feeds that citizens scroll through on their phones. The year 2024 was widely described as the biggest election year in history, with more than half of the world's population called to the polls across dozens of countries (Jungherr et al., 2024). This wave of elections coincided with the rapid spread of generative AI tools that can write speeches, clone voices, translate languages instantly, and produce convincing images and

videos of events that never happened. The timing was not a coincidence of history; it was the moment when two long-building trends, the global spread of digital communication technology and the maturing of machine-learning systems, finally collided in full view of voters everywhere.

This collision has produced a genuine and unresolved debate among scholars of democracy. Some researchers argue that AI offers democracies a historic opportunity to involve more citizens in public decisions, to make governments more efficient and responsive, and to give ordinary people tools that were once available only to large institutions (Landemore, 2024; Zidouemba, 2025). Other researchers warn that the very same tools strengthen the hand of those who already hold power, deepen public confusion about what is true, and give authoritarian governments new and more efficient means of control (Coeckelbergh, 2024; Kreps & Kriner, 2023; Zuboff, 2019). Still others argue that the honest answer is, *it depends*. Andreas Jungherr's influential framework suggests that AI's effects unfold on four separate levels: how individual citizens experience political choice, how groups compete for power and equal treatment, how institutions such as elections function, and how whole political systems, democratic or authoritarian, compete with one another on the world stage (Jungherr, 2023). This paper takes that contingency seriously. Rather than asking whether AI is good or bad for democracy in the abstract, it asks under what conditions AI tends to support democratic life and under what conditions it tends to undermine it.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it offers a critical and up-to-date review of the literature on AI and democracy, paying close attention to recent empirical work from the 2024 and 2025 election cycles rather than relying only on earlier, more speculative writing. Second, it examines a case that has received comparatively little attention in the English-language political science literature: Pakistan and the wider South Asian region, where AI tools were used extensively in the February 2024 general election in ways that illustrate both the promise and the danger of the technology for a developing democracy with weak regulatory capacity. Third, it draws out policy implications, both for international governance frameworks and for national policymakers, with a particular focus on what developing democracies such as Pakistan can learn from the experiences of 2024 and from emerging global standards.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on AI and democracy and sets out a framework for analysis. Section three discusses the main opportunities AI offers for democratic governance and citizen participation. Section four turns to the central challenges, including disinformation, surveillance, algorithmic governance failures, and the concentration of power in a small number of firms and states. Section five presents a focused case study of Pakistan and South Asia. Section six sets out policy implications at both the international and national levels. Section seven offers a broader discussion of what these findings mean for democratic theory, and section eight concludes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptualizing Democracy in a Digital Age

Before asking how AI affects democracy, it helps to be clear about what democracy means in this paper. Following the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, democracy is treated here as a multidimensional concept that includes electoral fairness, protection of civil liberties, constraints on executive power, meaningful citizen participation, and the quality of public deliberation (Lindberg et al., 2014). This broad view matters because AI rarely affects all these dimensions in the same direction at the same time. A government might use AI to run cleaner, faster elections while simultaneously using similar tools to monitor and silence its critics online. Treating democracy as a single, simple category would hide exactly this kind of trade-off, which is why this paper examines AI's effects dimension by dimension rather than asking a single yes-or-no question.

2.2 Three Broad Positions in the Literature

The growing body of research on AI and democracy can be loosely organized into three positions. The first, which might be called the

optimistic position, sees AI mainly as a tool that can be harnessed for democratic renewal. Hélène Landemore's work on AI-assisted deliberation is a leading example. She argues that AI can help solve a long-standing puzzle in democratic theory: how to combine genuine deliberation, which works best in small groups, with mass participation, which by definition involves very large numbers of people (Landemore, 2024). AI-based tools such as automated moderators, translators, and summarizers can, in her view, allow far more citizens to take part in meaningful deliberation than was ever possible with human facilitators alone.

The second position is more pessimistic. Mark Coeckelbergh's recent book argues that AI tends to undermine democracy not necessarily through any single dramatic event, but through a slow erosion of the conditions democracy needs to function, including a shared sense of truth, equal political voice, and meaningful human judgment in public decisions (Coeckelbergh, 2024). Sarah Kreps and Douglas Kriner make a related argument focused specifically on how generative AI lowers the cost of producing convincing political content at scale, which threatens to overwhelm the information environment that healthy democratic debate depends on (Kreps & Kriner, 2023). Mengyao Nie goes further, asking directly whether AI may be the single biggest threat facing democratic systems today (Nie, 2024).

The third position, which this paper finds most persuasive, treats AI's effects as contingent on institutional context rather than fixed by the technology itself. In a major recent synthesis published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, a large team of researchers, including specialists from leading AI laboratories as well as independent academic institutions, reviewed the evidence on how advanced AI systems are likely to affect democratic life and concluded that the technology creates both serious risks and genuine opportunities, with the balance depending heavily on regulation, institutional design, and how power over AI systems is distributed in society (Summerfield et al., 2025). This contingency view is also reflected in Jungherr's conceptual framework, which insists that AI's political effects cannot be read directly off its technical capabilities; they depend on the social and institutional context into which the technology is introduced (Jungherr, 2023; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023). Earlier work by Jungherr and colleagues on how digital media more broadly have reshaped political competition provides useful historical grounding for this argument, showing that earlier waves of digital technology produced similarly mixed effects on democratic practice (Jungherr et al., 2020).

2.3 A Working Framework for This Paper

Drawing on this literature, this paper organizes its analysis around five dimensions where AI most directly touches democratic life: civic participation, the information environment, public administration, state power and surveillance, and electoral integrity, with a sixth, cross-cutting dimension concerning the global balance of power among firms and states that build and control AI systems. These dimensions are summarized in Table 1 and used to structure the discussion of opportunities and challenges that follows. This approach builds on, but does not simply repeat, Jungherr's four-level model; it adapts that model into categories that map more directly onto the practical concerns of public policy and governance.

Table 1
AI's Effects on Six Dimensions of Democratic Life

Dimension	Summary of Effect on Democracy
Civic participation	AI can widen participation through digital town halls, AI-assisted citizens' assemblies, and large-scale deliberation platforms such as Polis (Landemore, 2024), but it can also crowd out genuine human voice with algorithmically generated content.

Dimension	Summary of Effect on Democracy
Information environment	AI improves fact-checking and translation, yet generative tools also make disinformation and deepfakes cheaper and faster to produce (Walker et al., 2024; Schlicht, 2024).
Public administration	AI can speed up service delivery and reduce corruption opportunities, but opaque algorithms can weaken accountability and due process (Criado et al., 2024; Sætra et al., 2022).
State power and surveillance	AI gives governments better tools to fight crime and plan services, but the same tools enable mass surveillance and digital authoritarianism (Freedom House, 2025; Zuboff, 2019).
Electoral integrity	AI supports voter education and turnout modelling, while also enabling synthetic media, micro-targeting, and the 'liar's dividend' that erodes trust in real evidence (Ibrahim & Attia, 2026).
Global power balance	AI can support transparency movements worldwide, yet a handful of firms and states now hold outsized influence over the tools that shape political speech (Woolley & Howard, 2018; O'Neil, 2016).

Source: Developed by Author

3. Opportunities: AI for Democratic Renewal

3.1 Digital Governance and Public Service Delivery

One of the clearest and most immediate benefits of AI for democratic governance lies in public administration. Governments around the world are experimenting with AI tools to process welfare applications, detect tax fraud, manage public health data, and answer routine citizen queries more quickly than human staff alone could manage. When designed carefully, these tools can reduce the kind of petty corruption and arbitrary delay that erodes citizens' trust in the state, particularly in countries where bureaucracies are understaffed and underfunded. Recent scholarship on AI in public administration stresses that these effects unfold at three levels: the broad national policy level, the level of specific agencies and programs, and the level of individual interactions between citizens and frontline officials, and that success at one level does not guarantee success at the others (Criado et al., 2024). Maxime Zidouemba's review of AI's role in governance similarly notes real gains in efficiency and service delivery, while cautioning that these gains are unevenly distributed and can come at the cost of participatory rights if citizens are not properly consulted about how the systems are built (Zidouemba, 2025).

3.2 Civic Participation and Deliberative Democracy

A second major opportunity concerns citizen participation itself. Traditional methods of public consultation, such as town hall meetings or written submissions, struggle to include large numbers of people in a meaningful way. AI-assisted deliberation platforms aim to solve this problem directly. The clearest example is Taiwan's use of the open-source platform Polis, which uses machine-learning techniques to cluster thousands of citizen comments into a small number of representative positions that policymakers can actually read and respond to. Landemore's research on this kind of platform argues that AI can help reconcile two values that democratic theorists have long treated as being in tension: broad mass participation and genuine, thoughtful deliberation (Landemore, 2024). AI facilitators can manage speaking time fairly, flag toxic language, summarize long discussions, and translate across languages in real time, allowing far larger and more diverse groups of citizens to deliberate together than would be possible with only human facilitators. This is not a hypothetical promise; Stanford's

online deliberation platform has already supported deliberation among thousands of small groups simultaneously, something that would have been organizationally impossible only a decade ago.

3.3 Strengthening Transparency and Fighting Disinformation

AI is also a double-edged sword in the information environment, and this section focuses on its constructive uses. Automated fact-checking tools can scan claims made by politicians in real time and flag them for journalists and citizens. Translation tools can make official documents and court rulings accessible to citizens who do not speak the dominant national language, an important consideration in linguistically diverse countries such as Pakistan and India. Content-moderation systems, despite their well-documented flaws, can also help surface a wider range of voices than would otherwise be visible amid the sheer volume of material posted online each day, since human moderation alone cannot keep pace with that volume (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023). The challenge, as later sections show, is that the same underlying technology can just as easily be turned toward deception as toward verification, which means the net effect on transparency depends heavily on who controls these tools and for what purpose.

3.4 Evidence-Based Policymaking

Finally, AI offers governments and civil-society organizations improved tools for understanding the societies they serve. Large datasets on public opinion, service usage, and social conditions can now be analyzed in ways that were previously available only to the best-funded institutions. Cross-national monitoring projects such as V-Dem already use sophisticated statistical and, increasingly, machine-assisted methods to track democratic conditions across more than 170 countries each year, providing exactly the kind of evidence base that domestic policymakers and international donors need to identify problems early and respond before small failures of governance become full-blown crises (Lindberg et al., 2014). When made openly available, such tools can also empower independent researchers, journalists, and opposition parties, not just incumbent governments, which is an important democratic safeguard against any one actor monopolizing the benefits of better information.

4. Challenges: AI's Threats to Democracy

4.1 Disinformation, Deepfakes, and the 2024 Election Cycle

The most widely discussed danger of AI for democracy is its capacity to flood the information environment with convincing but false content. The 2024 election cycle provided the first large-scale, real-world test of this danger. Researchers who built the Political Deepfakes Incidents Database to systematically track AI-related misinformation found that such incidents rose sharply through the year, even though many widely feared worst-case scenarios, such as a single deepfake swinging a major national election, did not clearly materialize (Walker et al., 2024). A comparative study of the 2016 and 2024 United States presidential elections similarly found that AI's role in spreading disinformation grew substantially between the two contests, with social media platforms playing an increasingly central role in amplifying synthetic content (Ibrahim & Attia, 2026). Experimental work testing several widely used generative AI systems found that they varied considerably in how easily they could be prompted to produce harmful political disinformation, suggesting that the design choices made by AI companies have a direct and measurable effect on the scale of the problem rather than the risk being an unavoidable feature of the technology itself (Schlicht, 2024).

A related and perhaps subtler danger is what researchers call the liar's dividend: as the public becomes more aware that deepfakes exist, it becomes easier for genuinely guilty politicians to dismiss authentic, embarrassing evidence as fake. Even when a piece of media is real, the mere possibility of fabrication gives bad actors a new and convenient excuse. Analysis of the European Union's policy response to the 2024 election year highlights how seriously governments have taken this combined threat, with the Union's Digital Services Act and AI Act both incorporating specific provisions aimed at labelling synthetic media and forcing large platforms to assess and mitigate risks to civic

discourse before, during, and after elections (Shukla & Tripathi, 2024).

4.2 Surveillance and Digital Authoritarianism

If disinformation is the most visible AI-related threat to democracy, the use of AI for state surveillance may be the most consequential in the long run, particularly for citizens living under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule. Shoshana Zuboff's influential account of what she calls surveillance capitalism describes how private technology firms collect vast amounts of personal data and convert it into a resource for predicting and influencing human behaviour, a business model that authoritarian states have since adapted for their own political purposes (Zuboff, 2019). Freedom House's annual assessments of internet freedom document this trend in detail. Its 2023 report found that legal frameworks in more than twenty countries already required digital platforms to deploy machine-learning tools to remove disfavoured political, social, or religious speech, while a record number of governments blocked websites containing content that should be protected under international human-rights law (Freedom House, 2023). Its 2025 report found that global internet freedom had declined for a fifteenth consecutive year, with authoritarian governments deepening both surveillance and censorship, and with some governments shaping AI chatbots themselves to stay within politically acceptable boundaries on sensitive topics (Freedom House, 2025). These findings matter for democratic theory because they show that AI's threat to political freedom does not only come from disinformation aimed at voters; it also comes from far less visible, day-to-day technical infrastructure that determines what information citizens can access at all.

4.3 Algorithmic Governance and Accountability Gaps

A third challenge concerns the use of AI inside the machinery of government itself, where the risks are less dramatic than deepfakes or mass surveillance but arguably more pervasive. When automated systems decide who receives a welfare payment, who is flagged for a tax audit, or who is approved for a loan from a state bank, citizens often have little ability to understand or challenge the decision. Henrik Skaug Sætra and colleagues warn explicitly against allowing algorithms to dilute democratic accountability, arguing that automated decision-making can quietly shift real political power away from elected officials and toward the engineers and private contractors who design the underlying systems, often without any deliberate decision by voters or legislators to permit this shift (Sætra et al., 2022). Criado and colleagues make a related point in their framework for studying AI in public administration, noting that accountability failures can occur at any of the micro, meso, or macro levels of government and that solutions designed for one level, such as a technical audit of a single algorithm, often fail to address problems rooted at another level, such as a poorly designed national digital strategy (Criado et al., 2024). The common thread in this literature is that algorithmic governance does not automatically respect the basic administrative-law principles, such as the right to reasons and the right to appeal, that citizens in functioning democracies have come to expect from human decision-makers.

4.4 Concentration of Power, Computational Propaganda, and Epistemic Inequality

A fourth and structural challenge concerns who actually controls AI systems and the consequences this has for political equality. Samuel Woolley and Philip Howard's research on computational propaganda documents how political actors around the world have used automated accounts, bots, and algorithmic amplification to manufacture the appearance of grassroots support or opposition, distorting the kind of information ordinary citizens rely on to judge how widely shared a political view actually is (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Cathy O'Neil's work on algorithmic decision-making more broadly shows how mathematical models trained on biased historical data can reproduce and even intensify existing social inequalities under a misleading appearance of objectivity, a danger that is especially acute when such models are used in policing, sentencing, or credit decisions that affect a person's standing as an equal citizen (O'Neil, 2016). Nathaniel Persily's earlier but still influential analysis of the internet's effects on democracy warned that a

small number of platforms had already accumulated dangerous power over public discourse before generative AI even arrived on the scene, a concern that recent legal scholarship has extended directly to AI, arguing that algorithmic systems trained on historically biased data can produce racially disparate outcomes that quietly undermine the equal political voice democracy is supposed to guarantee (Overton, 2024; Persily, 2017). Taken together, this literature suggests that the danger is not simply that AI might be used badly by a rogue actor, but that the ordinary, profit-driven logic of how today's leading AI systems are built and deployed tends to concentrate communicative power in ways that sit uneasily with democratic equality.

4.5 Democratic Backsliding and the Global Picture

Finally, these specific mechanisms must be understood against the backdrop of a broader global trend: democracy itself has been in decline for some time, independent of AI. The V-Dem Institute's 2025 Democracy Report found that the world had then completed twenty-five years of what researchers call a third wave of autocratization, with forty-five countries undergoing democratic backsliding in 2024 alone and freedom of expression declining in nearly a quarter of all countries, the worst recorded figure in the twenty-five years covered by the dataset (V-Dem Institute, 2025). AI did not cause this long-running trend, which predates the recent wave of generative AI tools by at least a decade. However, the evidence reviewed in this section suggests that AI is becoming an increasingly important accelerant of the same backsliding dynamics that V-Dem and other researchers have already identified, particularly through its growing role in disinformation, censorship, and surveillance. This is precisely the kind of context-dependent effect that the contingency framework set out in section two would predict: AI does not create democratic backsliding from nothing, but it can make backsliding faster and harder to resist in countries where institutions were already under strain.

5. Case Study: AI and Democracy in Pakistan and South Asia

Pakistan's February 2024 general election offers an unusually rich and, for political science, an underexamined case of how AI interacts with a developing democracy that has weak regulatory capacity, a young and digitally connected population, and a history of contested elections. The case is valuable precisely because it shows opportunities and dangers occurring side by side, often involving the very same technology used by the very same political actors.

5.1 AI as a Campaign Tool Under Constraint

Ahead of the election, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party faced severe restrictions on its ability to campaign conventionally: its leader, former Prime Minister Imran Khan, was imprisoned, and the party's traditional cricket-bat election symbol was removed by the Election Commission of Pakistan. In response, PTI used AI tools to generate audio and video speeches in Khan's voice from notes he reportedly passed to his legal team, including an AI-generated victory speech released after polling closed, and used an AI chatbot linked to his social media accounts to engage supporters directly (Dawn, 2024). The party also moved its campaign website to GitHub and built tools to help confused voters identify which independent candidates were aligned with PTI after it lost its unified ballot symbol. Other major parties used AI as well: PML-N's digital team described using AI-generated content for rally promotion, while noting that the technology still struggled to produce convincing Urdu-language speech, a reminder that AI's political effects can be shaped as much by linguistic and technical limitations as by any deliberate policy choice (Dawn, 2024). Seen narrowly, this is a story about AI lowering the cost of political communication and allowing a constrained political actor to reach voters despite serious obstacles, an outcome that resonates with the participatory promise discussed in section three.

5.2 The Darker Side: Deepfakes, Boycotts, and an Election-Day Shutdown

The same election also illustrated the risks discussed in section four with unusual clarity. In the days before the vote, deepfake videos

circulated on social media showing PTI and PML-N figures apparently calling for a boycott of the election, content that digital-rights researchers in Pakistan have documented as part of a broader pattern of disinformation targeting voter turnout and trust in the process (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024). On polling day itself, mobile telecommunications networks were suspended nationwide, ostensibly for security reasons, which prevented many voters from receiving the text-message confirmations needed to locate their assigned polling stations and made it far harder for journalists, election monitors, and ordinary citizens to verify what was happening at polling sites in real time. While the network shutdown was not itself an AI tool, its effect, namely making it harder for citizens to distinguish reliable information from rumour at the most sensitive moment of the election, compounded the confusion that AI-generated content had already begun to sow in the preceding weeks.

5.3 Institutional Gaps

A central reason Pakistan's experience is instructive is the country's almost complete lack of dedicated legal tools for governing AI-related political harms. Pakistan's main cybercrime statute, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act of 2016, was designed for an earlier generation of online harms and has no specific provisions addressing AI-generated deepfakes, algorithmic discrimination, or voice cloning (Nawaz, 2025). Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency reportedly received more than eleven thousand AI-related complaints in a single year, ranging from political misinformation to identity theft and gender-based harassment, a volume that existing institutions are not well equipped to handle (Nawaz, 2025). The Election Commission of Pakistan extended its code of conduct to cover social media for the first time in 2024, but it offered no specific guidance on political parties' use of AI tools and no mechanism for holding parties accountable for AI-generated content, leaving a substantial governance vacuum precisely where it was most needed.

5.4 Regional Comparison

Placing Pakistan alongside its neighbours sharpens the picture. In India's 2024 general election, AI-translated and AI-dubbed campaign content reached voters in numerous regional languages, but deepfake videos of national leaders were also shared widely across closed messaging networks such as WhatsApp, exploiting precisely the kind of linguistic and religious diversity that AI translation tools were, in principle, supposed to bridge constructively. Taiwan, by contrast, offers a more encouraging counterpoint: its long-running experience with the Polis deliberation platform, discussed in section three, suggests that a digitally literate population with strong civil-society institutions and prior experience using such tools for public consultation is considerably better placed to harness AI's participatory benefits while resisting its manipulative uses, even though Taiwan too saw AI-generated content used to flood political discussion during its own 2024 election. Table 2 summarizes this comparison across four cases, including the United States, where the central concern proved to be less about a single decisive deepfake and more about a generalized erosion of public trust in any political content, real or synthetic.

Table 2 *AI in the 2024 Election Cycle: A Brief Comparative Snapshot*

Country/Case	How AI Was Used in 2024	Main Concern Raised
Pakistan	AI-generated speeches and a victory address by an imprisoned former prime minister; an AI chatbot for voter outreach; a GitHub-hosted party site after a symbol ban (Dawn, 2024).	Deepfakes urging an election boycott; an election-day mobile network shutdown that blocked voter information; weak legal coverage under PECA 2016 (Digital Rights Foundation, 2024; Nawaz, 2025).

Country/Case	How AI Was Used in 2024	Main Concern Raised
India	AI-translated and AI-dubbed campaign videos reaching voters in multiple regional languages; AI avatars of leaders for rallies.	Deepfake videos shared in thousands of WhatsApp groups, exploiting linguistic and religious divisions.
Taiwan	An open-source platform (Polis) used to gather and cluster citizen opinions on contested issues, partly inspired by deliberative-democracy research (Landemore, 2024).	AI-generated content ('AIPasta') used to flood social media with synthetic commentary around the presidential election.
United States	Campaigns and outside groups used generative tools for fundraising messages, robocalls, and rapid content production.	AI-generated robocalls impersonating a candidate; broad public anxiety about deepfakes despite limited confirmed large-scale manipulation (Walker et al., 2024).

Source: Compiled by Scholar

The lesson this case study offers political science is not that AI is uniquely dangerous in developing democracies, since established democracies such as the United States and France faced their own AI-related controversies in 2024. The lesson is rather that the same technology produces sharply different outcomes depending on the strength of surrounding institutions, such as election commissions, courts, telecommunications regulators, and independent fact-checking organizations. Where these institutions are well resourced and empowered to act quickly, as in parts of the European Union's coordinated response, AI's risks can be substantially contained without sacrificing its benefits. Where these institutions are under-resourced or are themselves subject to political pressure, as in Pakistan, the same risks can compound rapidly, and the country's encouraging civil-society response, including independent fact-checking initiatives and persistent advocacy by digital-rights organizations, has so far had to substitute for the kind of statutory framework that more established democracies are beginning to build.

6. Policy Implications

6.1 International Governance Frameworks

Over the past several years, international organizations have moved from general statements of principle toward more detailed and binding rules for AI governance, and these efforts offer useful lessons for national policymakers everywhere, including in Pakistan. The OECD's Recommendation on Artificial Intelligence, first adopted in 2019 and updated in 2024 to reflect the rise of generative AI, set out shared values-based principles for trustworthy AI that have since been adopted by the G20 and have shaped subsequent national strategies in dozens of countries (OECD, 2024). UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, adopted unanimously by all 193 member states in 2021, was the first global normative instrument on AI ethics and placed particular emphasis on human rights, human dignity, and the specific needs of developing countries, making it especially relevant for a country such as Pakistan that is still building its domestic AI policy capacity (UNESCO, 2021). The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act, which entered into force in 2024, goes further still by creating legally binding, risk-based obligations for AI systems and explicitly naming the protection of democracy and the rule of law among its core purposes, making it the first comprehensive AI law of its kind anywhere in the world (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024).

None of these frameworks were written with Pakistan specifically in mind, and a purely

binding, highly detailed regulation modelled directly on the European Union's approach may not be realistic or appropriate given Pakistan's very different administrative capacity and digital economy. What these frameworks do offer is a shared international vocabulary and a set of practical building blocks, such as risk-based classification of AI systems, mandatory transparency for synthetic media, and a requirement for human oversight of high-stakes automated decisions, that Pakistani policymakers can adapt rather than invent from scratch.

6.2 National-Level Recommendations for Pakistan and Similar Contexts

Building on the case study in section five, several specific recommendations follow for Pakistan and countries facing similar institutional conditions. First, Pakistan's cybercrime legislation needs targeted updates to explicitly address AI-generated deepfakes, voice cloning, and algorithmic discrimination, since the existing 2016 framework was simply not written with these harms in mind. Second, the Election Commission of Pakistan should be given clear statutory authority, along with adequate technical staff, to require political parties to label AI-generated campaign content and to penalize the deliberate use of deceptive synthetic media during campaign periods, building on the social-media code of conduct it introduced for the first time in 2024. Third, given how disruptive the 2024 election-day network shutdown proved to be for voter information access, any future restriction on telecommunications during elections should be subject to prior judicial authorization and narrowly limited in scope, with clear public justification, rather than being imposed as a blanket measure. Fourth, the government should establish a dedicated, multi-stakeholder AI governance body, bringing together legal experts, technologists, election officials, and civil-society representatives, broadly along the lines proposed by recent Pakistani policy commentary (Nawaz, 2025), with a specific mandate to monitor AI's electoral and political uses rather than treating AI policy purely as an economic-development matter. Fifth, sustained public investment in media and digital literacy is needed, since independent surveys already show that most young Pakistani internet users encounter disinformation daily and recognize it as a threat to democracy, suggesting that public appetite for solutions already exists and simply needs institutional support to be effective.

6.3 Institutional Design Principles for Any Democracy

Beyond Pakistan, the broader literature reviewed in this paper points toward several institutional design principles that appear relevant across very different political systems. Algorithmic systems used in public administration should be subject to independent auditing and a meaningful right of appeal for citizens affected by automated decisions, addressing the accountability gap identified by Criado and colleagues and by Sætra and colleagues (Criado et al., 2024; Sætra et al., 2022). Human oversight should remain mandatory for any high-stakes decision, whether made by a government agency or a private platform, that significantly affects a citizen's rights or access to public services, a principle already embedded in the European Union's risk-based approach (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024). Election authorities everywhere should be equipped with the technical capacity to detect and respond to AI-generated disinformation in close to real time, since the evidence from the 2024 cycle shows that delayed responses allow false content to spread far beyond the point where later corrections can have much effect (Walker et al., 2024). Finally, governments should support, rather than crowd out, independent fact-checking and digital-rights organizations, since the case of Pakistan suggests that such organizations often fill governance gaps long before formal state institutions are able to act.

7. Discussion: Toward a Democratic Theory of AI Governance

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports a central claim: AI functions less like an independent force acting on democracy from outside and more like a mirror that reflects and amplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the political institutions into which it is introduced. Where institutions are strong, transparent, and

accountable, AI tends to be absorbed into existing democratic practice in ways that expand participation and improve governance, as the more encouraging elements of Taiwan's experience with deliberative platforms suggest. Where institutions are weak, under-resourced, or already under political strain, the same technology tends to widen existing cracks rather than create entirely new problems, as Pakistan's 2024 election illustrates. This is consistent with the contingency position identified in the literature review and with the conclusions of the largest recent synthesis of evidence on advanced AI systems and democracy, which found that outcomes depend heavily on how AI development and deployment are governed, rather than on any fixed property of the technology itself (Summerfield et al., 2025).

This framing has an important implication for how the problem should be studied and addressed. Much of the public conversation about AI and democracy, understandably, focuses on the technology itself: how convincing a deepfake looks, how powerful a new model is, how quickly a chatbot can be deployed. The argument developed in this paper, drawing on Jungherr's insistence that AI's political effects are always mediated by social and institutional context (Jungherr, 2023), and on critical theoretical work that situates AI within long-running debates about technology, ideology, and democratic life (Park, 2024), suggests that political science has just as important a role to play as computer science or engineering in shaping how this story unfolds. Decisions about who is allowed to build and deploy powerful AI systems, how much transparency the public is owed about their use, and which institutions are empowered to hold both governments and private firms accountable are, at their core, political decisions, not technical ones. They belong squarely in the domain of constitutional design, administrative law, and electoral regulation, fields where political scientists, not just engineers, have the relevant expertise.

This is not to say that all positions in the debate are equally well supported by the evidence available so far. The optimistic literature on AI-assisted deliberation has real, demonstrated successes, but these successes have so far occurred mainly in specific, favourable settings such as Taiwan, and it remains an open empirical question whether they can be replicated in countries with weaker civic infrastructure. The pessimistic literature, meanwhile, correctly identifies serious and growing risks, particularly around surveillance and disinformation, but sometimes understates the extent to which these risks stem from existing institutional weaknesses, such as Pakistan's outdated cybercrime law, that long predate AI and that AI has simply made more visible and more urgent to fix. A balanced reading of the evidence, of the kind this paper has tried to offer, suggests that the immediate policy priority should not be a search for some general technical fix to AI's political risks, but a more patient, and admittedly less exciting, programme of institutional repair and reinforcement, of the kind described in section six.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between artificial intelligence and democracy through a critical review of recent literature, supported by close attention to the 2024 global election cycle and a focused case study of Pakistan and South Asia. The central finding is that AI is neither a simple gift to democracy nor a simple threat to it. It offers genuine opportunities, including more inclusive citizen deliberation, faster and fairer public services, and better tools for monitoring democratic conditions, while also creating genuine dangers, including cheaper and more convincing disinformation, more efficient tools for state surveillance, accountability gaps inside public bureaucracies, and a worrying concentration of communicative power in a small number of firms and states. Which of these tendencies dominates in any given country depends heavily on the strength and design of that country's political institutions, a conclusion that holds across both the broader international literature and the specific evidence from Pakistan's 2024 general election examined in this paper.

For Pakistan specifically, the events of 2024 should be read as an early warning rather than a final verdict. The same AI tools that allowed a constrained political party to reach voters despite severe restrictions also carried deepfakes

designed to suppress turnout, and the same election that showcased creative digital campaigning was also marked by a disruptive, unexplained network shutdown that left voters struggling to find basic information. Closing the legal and institutional gaps identified in this paper, updating cybercrime law, strengthening the Election Commission's technical capacity, protecting telecommunications access during elections, and investing in digital literacy, would allow Pakistan to capture more of AI's benefits while reducing its most serious risks, and would align the country more closely with the emerging international consensus reflected in the OECD, UNESCO, and European Union frameworks discussed in this paper.

This paper has certain limits that point toward useful future research. The evidence on AI's electoral effects from the 2024 cycle is still recent, and longer-term studies will be needed to assess whether the patterns identified here persist as both AI tools and institutional responses continue to evolve. Comparative survey research within Pakistan, examining how different groups of citizens, by age, region, and language, perceive and respond to AI-generated political content, would also strengthen the policy recommendations offered here. Finally, as AI systems continue to advance, political scientists will need to keep revisiting Jungherr's basic question with fresh evidence: not whether AI will strengthen or weaken democracy in some final, settled sense, but which institutional choices, made deliberately by citizens, legislators, and election officials, will determine the answer in each specific political setting (Jungherr, 2023). The future of democracy in the age of artificial intelligence remains, in the most important sense, a matter still to be decided by democratic societies themselves.

References

Coeckelbergh, M. (2024). *Why AI undermines democracy and what to do about it*. Polity.

Criado, J. I., Sandoval-Almazán, R., & Gil-Garcia, J. R. (2024). Artificial intelligence and public administration: Understanding actors, governance, and policy from micro, meso, and macro perspectives. *Public Policy and Administration*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/09520767241272921

Dawn. (2024, January 16). Online rallies, AI script: New threats loom ahead of 2024 polls. *DAWN.COM*. https://www.dawn.com/news/1806163

Diamond, L. (2010). Liberation technology. *Journal of Democracy*, *21*(3), 69–83.

Digital Rights Foundation. (2024). *Election illusions: Deepfakes and disinformation in Pakistan*. Digital Rights Foundation. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/election-illusions-deepfakes-disinformation-in-pakistan/

European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024). *Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act)*. Official Journal of the European Union, L 1689.

Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom on the net 2023: The repressive power of artificial intelligence*. Freedom House.

Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom on the net 2025: An uncertain future for the global internet*. Freedom House.

Ibrahim, N. T., & Attia, N. A. (2026). The impact of disinformation generated by AI on democracy: Case studies of the US presidential elections in 2016 and 2024. *Review of Economics and Political Science*, *11*(3), 186–201. https://doi.org/10.1108/REPS-12-2024-0104

Jungherr, A. (2023). Artificial intelligence and democracy: A conceptual framework. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186353

Jungherr, A., & Schroeder, R. (2023). Artificial intelligence and the public arena. *Communication Theory*, *33*(2–3), 164–173. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad006

Jungherr, A., Rivero, G., & Gayo-Avello, D. (2020). *Retooling politics: How digital media are shaping democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Kreps, S., & Kriner, D. (2023). How AI threatens democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *34*(4), 122–131.

Landemore, H. (2024). Can artificial intelligence bring deliberation to the masses? In R. Chang & A. Srinivasan (Eds.), *Conversations in philosophy, law, and politics* (pp. 39–69). Oxford University Press.

Lindberg, S. I., Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., & Teorell, J. (2014). V-Dem: A new way to measure democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, *25*(3), 159–169.

Nawaz, A. (2025, August 27). *AI governance in Pakistan* [Blog post]. https://www.worldhistorythreads.com/p/ai-governance-in-pakistan

Nie, M. (2024). Artificial intelligence: The biggest threat to democracy today? *Proceedings of the AAAI Symposium Series*, *3*, 376–379.

OECD. (2024). *Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence* (OECD/LEGAL/0449). OECD.

O'Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. Crown.

Overton, S. (2024). Overcoming racial harms to democracy from artificial intelligence. *Iowa Law Review*, *110*, 805.

Park, S. (2024). Theodor W. Adorno, artificial intelligence, and democracy in the postdigital era. *Postdigital Science and Education*, *6*(4), 1287–1303.

Persily, N. (2017). Can democracy survive the internet? *Journal of Democracy*, *28*(2), 63–76.

Sætra, H. S., Borgebund, H., & Coeckelbergh, M. (2022). Avoid diluting democracy by algorithms. *Nature Machine Intelligence*, *4*(10), 804–806.

Schlicht, E. J. (2024). *Evaluating the propensity of generative AI for producing harmful disinformation during the 2024 US election cycle* (arXiv:2411.06120). arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2411.06120

Shukla, A. K., & Tripathi, S. (2024). AI-generated misinformation in the election year 2024: Measures of European Union. *Frontiers in Political Science*, *6*, Article 1451601. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1451601

Summerfield, C., Argyle, L. P., Bakker, M., Collins, T., Durmus, E., Eloundou, T., Gabriel, I., Ganguli, D., Hackenburg, K., Hadfield, G. K., Hewitt, L., Huang, S., Landemore, H., Marchal, N., Ovadya, A., Procaccia, A., Risse, M., Schneier, B., Seger, E., Siddarth, D., Sætra, H. S., Tessler, M. H., & Botvinick, M. (2025). The impact of advanced AI systems on democracy. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *9*(12), 2420–2430. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-025-02309-z

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

UNESCO. (2021). *Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. UNESCO.

V-Dem Institute. (2025). *Democracy report 2025: 25 years of autocratization – Democracy trumped?* University of Gothenburg.

Walker, C. P., Schiff, D. S., & Schiff, K. J. (2024). Merging AI incidents research with political misinformation research: Introducing the Political Deepfakes Incidents Database. *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, *38*(21), 23053–23058. https://doi.org/10.1609/aaai.v38i21.30349

Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (Eds.). (2018). *Computational propaganda: Political parties, politicians, and political manipulation on social media*. Oxford University Press.

Zidouemba, M. T. (2025). Governance and artificial intelligence: The use of artificial intelligence in democracy and its impacts on the rights to participation. *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, *5*, Article 12. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-025-00229-5

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.