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AI-Driven campaigning and the transformation of trust in electoral politics

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Abstract
Electoral campaigns in democracies are undergoing a fundamental shift from traditional public campaigning to AI-enabled private persuasion [1]. This paper examines how artificial intelligence tools including chatbots, generative media, and microtargeted advertising are deployed in recent campaigns across the United States and Europe, analyzing implications for voter trust, democratic legitimacy, and political accountability [2]. Drawing on comparative case analysis of campaigns in the U.S. (including diaspora-targeted outreach in New York City), Germany, France, and the UK from 2023 to 2025, we demonstrate that AI-driven personalized messaging challenges communication transparency while enabling innovative voter engagement [3]. We argue that AI offers potential for enhanced voter outreach, particularly to marginalized and diaspora communities, while simultaneously eroding trust through hidden messaging, synthetic media, and public discourse fragmentation [4]. The paper concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations for campaign transparency, deepfake detection, and updated electoral regulations, and identifies future research directions at the intersection of artificial intelligence and democratic integrity [5].

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, political campaigns, electoral trust, microtargeting, democratic legitimacy, deepfakes, diaspora engagement

Introduction

Electoral politics is entering a new technological era in which artificial intelligence is transforming campaign communication. In democracies worldwide, candidates and parties have traditionally relied on public campaigning rallies, mass media appearances, town halls to deliver transparent messages. Today, however, campaigns rapidly adopt AI-driven tools enabling highly personalized and private persuasion: algorithmic microtargeting of social media ads, campaign chatbots engaging voters one-on-one, and synthetic media tailored to specific audiences. This shift from public stage to personalized channels marks significant evolution in political communication, raising urgent questions about voter trust and democratic legitimacy [6].

Recent elections illustrate both promise and peril of AI-assisted campaigning. In 2023, the U.S. Republican National Committee released an AI-generated attack advertisement against President Biden within hours of his re-election announcement [7]. The video a dystopian montage imagining future chaos was produced cheaply with generative AI software, enabling instant response logistically impossible with traditional production [2]. Meanwhile, that campaign cycle witnessed AI-generated disinformation: fabricated images of former President Trump embracing Black supporters circulated widely on social media, [8] and a political consultant admitted using an AI-voiced deepfake of Biden in robocalls aimed at discouraging voter turnout [9].

Across the Atlantic, European democracies confronted similar phenomena. France's 2024 legislative elections saw deepfake videos purporting to show a candidate's family mocking minorities, and a fake news broadcast about assassination plots against President Macron, accumulating millions of views online [10]. In the UK, as the 2024 general election approached, AI-generated videos spread on social networks one viral deepfake showed Prime Minister Rishi Sunak ordering 18-year-olds to war, while another depicted opposition leader Keir Starmer berating a staffer [11].

These examples highlight how advanced AI now allows creation and micro-dissemination of persuasive political content at unprecedented scale and speed.

This paper analyzes how AI-driven campaigning reshapes trust in electoral politics. By examining AI use in recent campaigns in the U.S. and Europe (including case evidence from Germany, France, and the UK) and exploring diaspora-focused campaign examples in the U.S., we seek to understand implications of the shift from visible, collective campaigning to customized, often hidden interactions. We focus on three democratic cornerstones affected by this shift: voter trust, democratic legitimacy, and political accountability. Voter trust refers to citizens confidence in information and appeals from political actors, and in campaign process fairness and transparency. Democratic legitimacy concerns perceived election fairness and extent to which outcomes authentically reflect public will under conditions of open debate. Political accountability involves the capacity of voters, media, and institutions to hold leaders to their promises and truthful communication.

The central argument advanced is that AI-enabled private persuasion poses a double-edged sword for democracy. On one hand, AI tools offer innovative ways to engage voters (including previously overlooked communities) and lower participation costs. AI chatbots can converse with thousands of voters simultaneously, in multiple languages, answering questions and encouraging voting [11]. AI can help campaigns translate messages into minority languages at scale, helping bridge linguistic divides and engaging diaspora or immigrant communities [12]. On the other hand, these same tools can undermine trust by enabling micro-targeted "dark" messaging and hyper-realistic fake content not easily subject to public scrutiny or verification. When every voter potentially sees different tailored messages some of which might be misleading or contradictory the collective public sphere fragments, making it harder for citizens to discern truth, compare promises, or hold politicians accountable. Growing concern exists that AI-generated fake content will create a "misinformation apocalypse" confusing voter, [13] and that mere awareness of AI capabilities will sow doubt about real information (the so-called "liar's dividend") [14].

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides theoretical framework, drawing on literature in political communication and trust to conceptualize how AI-mediated personalized campaigning differs from traditional models and implications for democratic norms. Section 3 outlines research approach, which relies on comparative case analysis and synthesis of emerging evidence from recent campaigns and studies. Section 4 presents findings through illustrative cases: highlighting specific uses of AI in U.S. campaigns and tools available to campaigns. Section 5 offers discussion on consequences of these developments for voter trust, legitimacy, and accountability. Section 6 examines diaspora-focused digital and AI campaigning as a case study. Section 7 addresses regulatory contexts and accountability challenges. Section 8 concludes with policy implications, suggesting measures such as transparency requirements, deepfake detection, and updated campaign regulations and identifies directions for future research.

Conceptualising trust and AI-Driven Campaigning

Elections, Communication and Political Trust

Democratic elections are fundamentally exercises in communication between representatives and citizens. Candidates seek to persuade voters through rhetoric, imagery, and interpersonal appeals, while voters make decisions partly based on how much they trust candidates and presented information. Political trust has multiple dimensions: trust in candidates (do voters believe a candidate's promises and character?), trust in messages (do voters believe campaign communication content and sources?), and trust in process (do voters feel campaigns and elections are conducted fairly and transparently?). In classical campaign settings, trust could be built or eroded through widely shared experiences for instance, a televised debate gaffe or triumphant rally speech might sway millions in unison, becoming part of collective electoral memory. Communication was largely public, mass-mediated, and synchronous, allowing verification by journalists and real-time rebuttal by opponents. This fostered baseline shared information, against which egregious falsehoods or contradictions could be more easily spotted and punished, thereby underpinning accountability.

AI-driven campaigning disrupts these dynamics by enabling private, asynchronous, and tailor-made communication. Microtargeted social media ads, personalized text messages, and one-on-one AI chatbot conversations each allow campaigns to communicate differently with each voter, often out of sight from journalists or opponents. The public arena of discourse gives way to myriad micro-audiences. In theory, such personalization could enhance relevance and engagement a voter might feel a campaign "truly understands my needs" if they receive messages finely tuned to their interests or identity. This could strengthen trust in a candidate who appears to speak their language (sometimes literally so, as with multilingual AI outreach) [16].

However, personalization also means that misleading or false messages can be sent strategically to receptive individuals with less risk of exposure. If one group of voters is privately promised X and another group Y, with AI systems optimizing those messages for persuasion, neither group may easily discover inconsistency. Traditional media watchdogs might never see these bespoke messages. As a result, scholars have warned that microtargeting can undermine accountability and informed consent in elections, because voters are not all presented with the same menu of options or pledges [17]. The "unawareness" of voters about messages others receive can be exploited by campaigns in ways that classic retail politics (speeches, manifestos) could not [19]. Thus, the informational asymmetry introduced by AI-enhanced microtargeting contradicts the deliberative ideal of transparent public sphere where claims can be openly contested.

From mass persuasion to personalized persuasion

The theoretical distinction between mass persuasion and personalized persuasion is critical. Decades of research in political communication and social psychology show that mass persuasion, e.g., a TV advertisement or national broadcast faces inherent challenges: Audiences are heterogeneous, message effects are moderated by predispositions, and blatant propaganda often triggers skepticism or backlash. AI does not magically remove these challenges; indeed, recent evidence suggests the overall persuasive impact of campaign communications remains constrained by factors like partisan bias and media

fragmentation [20].

However, AI can increase the efficiency and scope of message customization, potentially squeezing marginal gains that, in tight races, might be decisive. For example, generative AI models can craft dozens of different versions of a political message, each framed to resonate with specific personality profiles or demographic segments. In one study, researchers demonstrated that a large language model could tailor political ads to individuals personality traits and modestly increase their persuasive appeal [21]. While measured effects were small, they were statistically significant and in polarized electorates, even percentage point shifts among swing voters could alter outcomes.

Traditional campaign theory also posits that more personal contact is more persuasive. The "two-step flow" model and get-out-the-vote studies emphasize interpersonal influence door-to-door canvassing or phone banking by volunteers as highly effective in building trust and mobilizing voters [22]. AI-driven campaigning can be seen as an attempt to simulate or augment this personal touch at scale. Campaign chatbots aim to provide a facsimile of a friendly volunteer having a conversation, answering specific voter questions or countering particular hesitations. Generative AI's unique power in campaigns may lie in enabling "dynamic, digital conversations with voters" that echo individualized responsiveness of face-to-face canvassing [23]. A human campaigner might contact perhaps 30 voters in an evening; an AI chatbot could initiate 30,000 digital conversations via messaging apps simultaneously. The quality of these AI interactions, however, is unproven do voters perceive chatbot outreach as authentic or manipulative? Early field experiments are intriguing: one U.S. study found that simple text conversations with an automated bot produced a small but significant increase in voter turnout, [24] suggesting that some voters may respond positively to even rudimentary AI outreach. This raises a theoretical question: can trust be engineered through algorithms? Or will the spread of AI interlocutors breed cynicism once voters realize the "person" engaging them isn't human?

Deepfakes, Misinformation, and Epistemic Collapse

Trust in elections also depends on a shared basis of truth or at least an ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. AI threatens to blur this line via deepfakes and generative text that impersonate candidates or fabricate events with chilling realism. The concept of the "liar's dividend" encapsulates the perverse effect that when the public knows AI fakes are possible, dishonest politicians can more easily dismiss authentic evidence (e.g., a damaging video) as 'fake' [25].

This dynamic could dramatically reduce accountability: even clear proof of wrongdoing might not be believed by the perpetrator's supporters if labelled a deepfake. Political theorists argue that democracy's "epistemic foundations" the common agreement on basic facts needed for rational discourse are at risk if citizen confidence in information collapses [26]. In the age of AI, seeing is no longer believing, and hearing no longer trustworthy, unless new verification mechanisms are in place.

It is important to note that not all scholars see an information apocalypse as inevitable. Drawing on decades of media effects research; some argue that concerns over AI's impact may be overblown. Simon and Altay (2025) contend that the worst predictions of AI swinging elections en masse did not materialize in 2024's global election cycle [27]. They point out that traditional factors, like partisan loyalties, candidate quality, and on-the-ground campaign efforts continued to dominate election outcomes, and that mass persuasion remains difficult regardless of AI [28]. From this perspective, AI is seen as an incremental addition to the campaign toolkit, an "accelerant" to existing tactics rather than a paradigm shift in persuasion [29]. However, even these measured assessments acknowledge certain qualitatively new threats introduced by AI. While microtargeting with conventional data had debatable effectiveness, AI-driven microtargeting can be more potent by automating the personalization process and possibly exploiting sensitive traits in ways humans cannot easily detect. And even if AI's influence on vote choice is often marginal, its influence on voter trust might be more profound: the mere presence of AI manipulation can make citizens question the reality of everything they see in a campaign, feeding polarization and disengagement.

Summary: The democratic trade-off

In summary, the theoretical landscape suggests a fundamental trade-off: AI can enhance the efficiency and reach of campaign communication but at potential cost to its integrity and public accountability. The shift from mass to personalized persuasion, enabled by generative AI and advanced targeting, creates new challenges for democratic norms of transparency, accountability, and informed consent. Yet AI simultaneously offers genuine benefits for voter engagement, particularly for previously marginalized communities. Understanding this paradox is essential for developing effective responses.

Research design and methodological approach

Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs qualitative, comparative case analysis to examine how artificial intelligence is being incorporated into contemporary electoral campaigning and how these uses affect voter trust, democratic legitimacy, and political accountability. Given that most salient developments in AI-driven campaigning have occurred only since 2022, large-scale, systematically coded datasets are still limited. In this context, a qualitative design is appropriate for mapping the emerging terrain, identifying key mechanisms, and generating theoretically informed propositions rather than testing precise causal hypotheses. The analysis is exploratory and interpretive, aiming to synthesize dispersed evidence into a coherent account of how AI is transforming campaign practices and trust relations in electoral politics.

The study focuses on established democratic polities that have recently experienced both significant electoral contests and visible experimentation with AI in campaigning. The United States is included because of its early and prominent adoption of AI tools in party politics, the presence of highly professionalized campaign industries, and extensive media and think-tank coverage of digital campaign innovations. Germany, France and the United Kingdom are selected as European cases that combine competitive elections with relatively strong regulatory and data protection frameworks, allowing for comparison between more permissive and more constrained environments.

Data Sources and Evidence Collection

The empirical material for the paper is drawn from four main types of sources. First, academic literature in political

communication, digital campaigning, AI and democracy, and trust in institutions provides theoretical and conceptual backbone. This includes peer-reviewed articles on microtargeting, deepfakes, media effects, and AI-based persuasion, as well as emerging empirical studies on generative AI in political advertising and chatbot-based voter outreach.

Second, policy reports and analytical briefs produced by think-tanks, research institutes, and advocacy organisations (such as the Brookings Institution, Knight First Amendment Institute, Brennan Center for Justice, and European foundations) document concrete instances of AI use in campaigns and capture expert assessments of associated risks and regulatory debates. These sources are particularly valuable for very recent developments that have not yet filtered into peer-reviewed literature.

Third, journalism and investigative reporting from reputable national and international outlets (such as The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and leading U.S. and European newspapers) provide detailed narrative accounts of specific campaign episodes, AI-generated advertisements, deepfake incidents, and public reactions. These reports are treated critically not as neutral facts but as situated accounts that must be triangulated with other evidence.

Fourth, official documents and regulatory texts, including existing and proposed legislation, electoral commission guidance, and public statements by election management bodies, are examined to understand how regulators are responding to AI-enabled campaigning and what normative standards are being articulated.

Analytical Strategy and Coding

The analysis proceeds in three steps. In the first step, all collected material was organized thematically around key dimensions of AI-enabled campaigning: automated text generation, microtargeted advertising, synthetic media and deepfakes, chatbot-based voter contact, and multilingual or diaspora-focused outreach. Within each theme, illustrative empirical examples were identified and summarized.

In the second step, these thematic clusters were read through the lens of the paper's core concepts voter trust, democratic legitimacy, and political accountability. For each empirical example, the analysis asked: (a) how does this use of AI alter the communicative relationship between campaign and voter; (b) what kinds of informational asymmetries or transparency deficits are created or mitigated; and (c) what are the likely implications for citizens ability to evaluate candidates, verify information, and hold political actors to account? This conceptual coding allowed disparate cases to be compared on common dimensions. In the third step, a comparative synthesis was undertaken across the U.S. and European cases. The focus was on identifying patterns and contrasts for example, differences in how permissive data environments versus stricter privacy regimes shape the intensity and form of AI use; or how diaspora-focused campaigns illustrate both inclusive and exclusionary potentials of AI-driven personalization. The aim is not to produce a comprehensive typology, but rather to trace recurring logics and tensions in the emerging practice of AI campaigning.

Limitations and Scope

Several limitations of this methodological approach should be acknowledged. First, reliance on secondary reporting and early-stage academic work means that some accounts may later be revised as more systematic evidence accumulates. Second, because many AI tools are deployed by campaigns in non-transparent ways, there is a risk of both underestimation (uses that remain hidden) and overemphasis (sensationalized cases that receive disproportionate media coverage). Third, the absence of large-scale survey or experimental data on voter attitudes to AI limits the ability to draw firm conclusions about the magnitude of AI's effects on trust, legitimacy, or vote choice.

These limitations do not invalidate the analysis but instead point to the need for caution and modesty in claims. The strength of the present design lies in its ability to map the field, identify mechanisms and normative concerns, and formulate questions and hypotheses for future research using more fine-grained quantitative and mixed-method designs.

Findings: The emerging AI campaign toolkit

The Paradigm Shift: From Public to Private Persuasion

Across recent democratic elections, a clear trend emerges campaigns are complementing or replacing traditional public-facing tactics with AI-enabled private persuasion strategies [30]. The new toolkit includes a range of AI applications: generative text AI (like GPT-based models) for drafting communications; AI chatbots for voter interaction; generative image and video AI for producing advertisements; voice cloning for creating synthetic voice messages in multiple languages; and advanced data analytics for identifying and targeting persuadable voters [31]. Campaigns in 2023–2025 have piloted each of these to varying extents.

Table 1 synthesizes key differences between the traditional paradigm of campaigning and the new AI-driven paradigm, as evident from case observations.

Table 1: Traditional vs. AI-driven campaigning

Aspect	Traditional Public Campaigning	AI-Enabled Private Persuasion
Communication Mode	Mass rallies, broadcasts, debates (one-to-many, public)	Microtargeted ads, personalized messages, chatbots (one-to-one/one-to-few, hidden)
Message Consistency	Generally uniform messaging for all voters	Highly customized messaging for different segments; content may vary or conflict
Transparency	High statements on record, media coverage, rebuttal possible	Low tailored messages not publicly archived; difficult to monitor variants
Speed	Responses limited by human capacity; hours/days lag time	Near-instant AI-generated responses; campaigns react in minutes
Scale and Reach	Mass media reach millions but not personalized; limited volunteers	Microtargeting pinpoints thousands with specific appeals; AI chatbots scale personal outreach.
Intermediaries	Party operatives, journalists, volunteers mediate messages	Algorithms and AI agents mediate with minimal human oversight per message
Impact on Trust	Relatively higher baseline trust from shared narrative	Trust may increase for personally addressed voters but overall erodes due to opacity

Note: Comparison of traditional public campaigning and AI-enabled private persuasion across communication modes, transparency, scale, intermediaries, and implications for voter trust. The table highlights how the shift toward AI-driven personalization transforms political communication from shared, publicly observable messaging to fragmented and often opaque interactions, enhancing efficiency and reach while raising concerns about accountability and systemic trust.

Core AI Applications in Contemporary Campaigns

Automated Content Generation

U.S. campaigns have used generative AI to write fundraising emails and policy drafts. During the 2025 NYC mayoral race, Andrew Cuomo's campaign acknowledged using ChatGPT to generate at least one detailed policy proposal (a housing plan) [32]. This suggests AI is lowering the cost of producing polished campaign materials. Similarly, multiple U.S. congressional campaigns in 2024 reported using AI tools to draft speeches or social media posts, treating AI as an "assistant" writer. While this behind-the-scenes use does not directly impact voters trust (since the output is presented as the campaign's own words), it indicates routinization of AI in campaign operations. Generative AI already cuts costs for campaigns by assisting with drafting communications like emails or texts, freeing up staff time. However, reliance on AI for content carries risks of hallucinations (AI generating false information) a phenomenon campaigns must guard against to avoid embarrassing gaffes [33].

Algorithmic Microtargeting and Voter Segmentation

Political microtargeting itself predates AI campaigns have long segmented voter lists and tailored direct mail or Facebook ads. What AI adds is speed and personalization depth. The 2024 U.S. presidential campaigns could feed vast voter data into AI systems to generate bespoke messages. Campaigns will use AI to analyze microdata in real-time and craft messages that "nudge" specific voting blocs on particular issues [34]. This means that an undecided suburban mother might see AI-curated ads emphasizing education policy, while a young urban voter sees an entirely different set focusing on climate all orchestrated by algorithms optimizing for engagement.

Evidence shows that in 2020, even without modern generative AI, campaigns already used granular Facebook targeting primarily for negative ads aimed at select groups. With generative AI, creating multiple ad variants for different demographics is far easier and cheaper, potentially amplifying this targeted negativism [35]. Recent research warns that LLMs make it trivially easy to produce "effectively microtargeted political ads at scale", including possibly untruthful or manipulative content specifically calibrated to resonate with each group [36].

Chatbot-Based Voter Outreach and Engagement

Perhaps the most novel tool is the AI chatbot canvasser. While still experimental, the idea is that instead of (or in addition to) human volunteers calling or texting voters, an AI chatbot can handle those conversations [37]. By 2024, some campaigns were testing this. OpenAI's ChatGPT was slated for integration with WhatsApp, hinting at how campaigns might deploy bots in peer-to-peer messaging apps [37].

Generative AI engaging dynamically with voters' arguments is potentially transformative an AI could talk with a voter in their preferred language, counter their specific doubts about a candidate, and never stray off message or grow tired. One British startup has introduced an AI-based "door-knocking bot" simulator to train human canvassers [38]. The next step will be using such bots to impersonate canvassers for real voter outreach. The major barrier cited is that campaigns fear voter backlash if it's discovered they are using bots authenticity still matters to many voters [39]. Nonetheless, in settings where it has been tried, results are cautiously optimistic.

Synthetic Media, Deepfakes, and Fabricated Content

AI's ability to generate persuasive audio-visual content has already been deployed by campaigns. The RNC's Biden attack ad in April 2023 was a prominent example: it used AI-generated imagery to depict hypothetical future scenes (e.g., China invading Taiwan, boarded-up storefronts) meant to instill fear of Biden's policies [40].

The RNC openly disclosed it was AI-generated, arguably to pre-empt criticism and demonstrate tech savvy. By contrast, other uses have been more duplicitous. During the 2024 cycle, Donald Trump's campaign (or allied PACs) released ads with AI-generated fake photos, including one showing Trump hugging and smiling with Black individuals (to court Black voters). These images were spread on social media by supporters without disclosure [41].

In New York City, the 2025 mayoral race became a showcase of AI ads: Eric Adams, who eventually dropped out, created AI-driven robocalls featuring his voice speaking languages he doesn't actually speak (Mandarin Chinese, Urdu, Yiddish) to appeal to those communities [42]. Adams also put out an AI-generated video portraying New York City as a crime-ridden "war zone" as a scare tactic against his opponent [43]. Meanwhile, Andrew Cuomo's campaign (he ran as an independent after losing the primary) produced a barrage of AI-made videos targeting the Democratic nominee, Zohran Mamdani including one bizarre deepfake video showing a caricature of Mamdani eating rice with his fingers and a cast of criminal stereotypes, a clip widely condemned as racist and later deleted [44].

The normalization of AI in visuals whether for satire, policy promotion, or smears indicates that future campaigns will be awash in synthetic content. The critical question is whether voters will be able to tell real from fake, or more importantly, whether they will even care to make the distinction amidst content overload.

Comparative Analysis: Regulatory divergence across democracies

The United States has seen more aggressive and creative uses of AI in campaigning (for both outreach and deception), whereas Europe has been somewhat restrained, with more attention to regulation and ethical norms [45]. Yet the underlying trend is convergent political actors in both contexts are actively exploring AI's capabilities, and democratic societies are realizing the profound challenges this poses [46]. In Germany, an AI-generated parody video of opposition leader Friedrich Merz circulated online in 2024, causing debate on the ethics of such tactics. Although apparently intended humorously by the Social Democrat who shared it, it underscored that German politicians are experimenting with AI content. Germany's federal election agencies concluded that while AI did not directly decide any recent election, it 'amplifies existing risks' [47].

France has been proactive legally it passed an "anti-fake news" law in 2018 that can apply to deepfakes during election periods [48]. By 2024, however, actual deepfake misinformation emerged targeting politicians. French media and regulators acted quickly to debunk these, but the cat-and-mouse game is on. The UK entered this arena as it prepared for a general election. British researchers published a report warning that AI's impact on the

upcoming election, while so far "limited", may damage the democratic system. European institutions are formulating systemic responses [49].

The EU's proposed Artificial Intelligence Act will likely impose some requirements on AI-generated content disclosure. Additionally, an EU regulation on political advertising is in the works that would limit microtargeting. These moves reflect a distinct approach: prevention and transparency [50]. In the U.S., by contrast, regulation is ad hoc a few states like California and Oregon have passed laws. But federally, no clear rules existed as of 2024, leaving it largely to platforms and campaigns' own ethics.

Implications for trust, legitimacy, and accountability

Voter Trust: Enhancement or Erosion

Trust is being reshaped at multiple levels. On one hand, trust in the authenticity of campaign information is arguably eroding. The proliferation of deepfakes and AI-generated propaganda contributes to an atmosphere of doubt. Surveys confirm that public concern is high: 84–85% of people in various countries voice concern about AI-created fake content corrupting political discourse [51]. High-profile incidents like fake videos in France or the deepfake robocall in the U.S. reinforce these fears. When voters cannot trust what they see or hear in campaign materials, the very foundation of informed voting is shaken. Moreover, unscrupulous actors can exploit this doubt: as predicted by liar's dividend theory, politicians caught in scandal increasingly have the escape hatch of claiming "fake news" or deepfake, muddying the waters to escape accountability.

On the other hand, trust at the interpersonal level might be enhanced for some voters through personalized engagement. When a voter receives a prompt, accurate answer from a campaign's chatbot about a policy issue they care about, they may develop greater trust in that campaign's competence or responsiveness. If a Spanish-speaking voter can chat in Spanish and get detailed explanations (where previously language barriers kept them in the dark), their trust in the system to hear them could rise.

Democratic legitimacy and the fragmentation of public discourse

One core aspect of democratic legitimacy is the notion of a fair contest where voters have equal access to information needed to make a choice. AI-driven micro targeting complicates this by creating information inequalities. If different voters are told starkly different things (and perhaps contradictory promises are made), can we say all voters participated in choosing from the same set of options?

Furthermore, the shift to private persuasion means that much election discourse bypasses traditional media gatekeepers. While this democratizes campaigning (even a fringe candidate can directly reach niche audiences), it also means false or extremist messages can thrive without rebuttal. The public sphere, in classical terms, fragments into "silos" or echo chambers, where deliberation across differences diminishes [52].

That said, legitimacy could benefit if AI helps more voters participate. Higher turnout generally boosts legitimacy of a mandate. If AI chatbots and personalized nudges manage to mobilize infrequent voters, that could increase turnout. Evidence suggests AI outreach has a small positive effect on participation. Also, engaging diaspora and minority-language communities can make an election more representative.

Political Accountability: Opacity, Distance, and the Liar's Dividend

Perhaps the clearest impact of AI-driven campaigning is a decline in accountability of candidates to the public. Several factors contribute. First, the opacity of messages makes it harder for watchdog groups to document what candidates said to whom. With so many communications happenings outside public view, accountability is compromised.

Second, AI allows candidates to create distance e.g., using a deepfake surrogate or unofficial proxies to do dirty campaigning. The campaign can always claim an AI activist did it without direction. This blurred accountability means campaigns can have it both ways: benefit from AI propaganda, but shirk responsibility for it.

Third, the liar's dividend's impact on accountability is profound. If a genuine scandal arises, the candidate can claim it's a deepfake. This forces media and authorities to take time for forensic verification, by which point the news cycle may move on or public opinion is split on what to believe [53]. Without strong evidence to prove authenticity (and sometimes even with it), a portion of the public will accept the lie, especially if it aligns with their partisan loyalty.

Fourth, journalists and fact-checkers struggle to keep up with the volume and velocity of AI-fueled misinformation. When campaigns do large-scale disinformation blasts, by the time the truth is sorted out, many voters have internalized the falsehood. Traditional media corrections may not reach those secluded in microtargeting bubbles. This "whack-a-mole" problem reduces the ability to hold campaigns accountable for dishonesty in real time.

Tempering Pessimism: Countervailing Mechanisms and Adaptation

Yet, it's worth tempering this bleak view with some nuance. Not all is lost for accountability. Democratic systems adapt: regulators are exploring ways to require disclosure of AI use. If enforced, such rules can improve transparency though enforcement is tricky. Civil society and tech companies are developing better deepfake detection tools and provenance tracking for media. If widely adopted, these could restore some level of authenticity verification, making it easier to call out fakes and thus hold fakers accountable.

Additionally, the electorate itself may adjust its expectations. Some scholars argue that there's a cycle of panic with new media but eventually society reaches a new equilibrium. Voters might become sceptical of all sensational media and demand more credible proof, which could reduce gullibility. Even measured assessments acknowledge that while AI's influence on vote choice often proves marginal, the risk of eroding epistemic trust is significant and warrants serious attention [54].

Diaspora-focused digital and AI Campaigning: Case study and implications

Diaspora Communities as Political Constituencies

Engaging diaspora or immigrant communities in elections has always been challenging due to cultural and language barriers. AI and digital tools are now changing that calculus, offering campaigns new ways to target these groups. Diaspora communities defined as geographically dispersed populations maintaining connections to homeland nations

and identities represent an increasingly important political constituency in Western democracies. For diaspora communities, the impact of AI-driven campaigning is particularly complex, encompassing both unprecedented opportunities for political inclusion and novel vulnerabilities to manipulation [55].

The Zohran Mamdani Campaign: Multilingual Digital Outreach

Zohran Kwame Mamdani, a young Ugandan-born Indian-American politician, ran a grassroots campaign in the 2025 New York City mayoral race that exemplified positive use of digital tools to engage diverse communities. Mamdani recognized that many immigrant and diaspora voters in NYC are often ignored by mainstream campaigns. To change that, his team produced creative multilingual social media videos one famous clip featured Mamdani playfully invoking Bollywood film tropes to explain ranked-choice voting in Hindi/Urdu, complete with a mango lassi metaphor [56].

These culturally resonant videos went viral among South Asian diaspora circles, circulating from Instagram to WhatsApp family groups [57]. Voters who rarely saw a politician speak their mother tongue saw Mamdani doing so (he is fluent due to his heritage). According to observers, this strategy helped catalyse conversations in diaspora communities about the election and made those voters feel seen and valued.

The Mamdani campaign demonstrates how AI and advanced digital media can be deployed ethically and inclusively. His team used sophisticated digital tools though not exclusively AI-generated to reach diverse immigrant and diaspora voters. The strategy worked: Mamdani won the Democratic primary with 43% of the vote (in a crowded field), significantly outperforming former Governor Andrew Cuomo despite Cuomo's endorsement from President Trump. Mamdani went on to win the general election in November 2025, becoming New York City's first Muslim mayor and youngest mayor since 1892, with 50.78% of the final vote [58].

Deepfake Attacks and Diaspora Vulnerability

However, the general election campaign took an uglier turn with Mamdani's opponents resorting to AI-generated attack ads. Cuomo's team circulated deepfake videos including one featuring a grotesque caricature of Mamdani and others aiming to stoke fear about crime and disorder under a "radical" mayor. One Cuomo ad portrayed New York City in flames imagery clearly fabricated to suggest Mamdani's tenure would bring chaos. These videos often lacked clear labels that they were AI-generated. New York State actually has a law requiring disclosure on AI political ads, but enforcement is weak [59]. As a result, misleading content circulated before it could be taken down, likely reaching many voters.

Deepfakes targeting diaspora candidates are particularly insidious because diaspora communities often have heightened concerns about political legitimacy and authenticity, given homeland experiences with propaganda and misinformation. AI-generated false videos or audio can exploit diaspora voters skepticism and reinforce stereotypes or concerns about candidate trustworthiness. The attack ads on Mamdani, which depicted stereotypical representations of crime and disorder, were particularly designed to exploit both generalized concerns about urban safety and cultural anxieties that may resonate differently with diaspora voters who have experienced different political and social contexts.

Implications: Inclusion, trust and cross-border accountability

Diaspora-targeted campaigning thus illustrates another facet of the public-to-private shift: historically marginalized voter groups can now be reached in personalized ways, potentially boosting inclusion and trust. Yet, it also introduces new angles for manipulation and selective messaging. The transformation of trust here is double-sided: trust can be earned through authentic recognition of diverse identities via technology, or trust can be abused if AI is used to exploit niche vulnerabilities (like spreading false rumours in a language that mainstream fact-checkers don't monitor).

Furthermore, diaspora engagement through AI raises questions about political accountability across borders. When campaigns reach diaspora voters with tailored messages about homeland policy or diaspora-specific pledges, how are these commitments tracked and enforced? AI-enabled microtargeting could enable candidates to make different or contradictory promises to diaspora communities and domestic voters, then obscure these inconsistencies through the privacy of personalized messaging. The diaspora application thus exemplifies both the promise and peril of AI-driven campaigning.

For future research and policy, it is crucial to develop diaspora-specific protections. Election authorities should develop frameworks addressing diaspora campaigns, ensuring consistency across borders and preventing exploitation of diaspora-specific vulnerabilities. This might include requirements to disclose multilingual campaign messaging and establish accountability mechanisms for diaspora-targeted content.

Conclusion and Policy Imperatives

The Central Paradox: Inclusion vs. Integrity

AI-driven campaigning represents a fundamental transformation of electoral communication in established democracies. The shift from visible, public-sphere campaigning to personalized, algorithmically mediated persuasion challenges three foundational democratic principles: voter trust, political legitimacy, and electoral accountability.

The evidence presented suggests a fundamental paradox: AI simultaneously enables democratic inclusion and threatens democratic integrity. Multilingual AI chatbots and personalized diaspora engagement can bring previously marginalized communities into political processes; AI-generated synthetic media and hidden microtargeting can fragment democratic discourse and enable accountability evasion. How democracies navigate this paradox will significantly shape the future of electoral politics.

Synthesis of Key Findings

- **First, private persuasion dominates contemporary campaign strategies:** Campaigns across the U.S. and Europe are shifting from mass public communication to personalized private messaging, enabled by AI automation at scale.
- **Second, trust is multidimensional and contradictory:** Personalization can increase trust among voters feeling "addressed", while opacity and deepfakes decrease

overall trust in the information environment creating net negative effects on democratic epistemic foundations for many voters.

- **Third, diaspora engagement represents a novel frontier:** AI's capacity for rapid multilingual adaptation creates unprecedented opportunities for diaspora political inclusion, yet simultaneously enables deepfake attacks exploiting diaspora vulnerabilities.
- **Fourth, regulatory divergence matters significantly:** European data protection frameworks constrain AI deployment more effectively than the U.S. permissive environment, suggesting that regulatory design shapes technological adoption patterns and electoral outcomes.
- **Fifth, evidence remains preliminary:** While individual AI applications show measurable effects, comprehensive understanding of AI's net impact on trust and democratic outcomes remains limited, requiring sustained research.

Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations

- **First, deepfake disclosure and detection:** Governments should mandate disclosure of AI-generated content and invest in detection technologies and media literacy education to help voters identify synthetic media. This includes funding research into reliable deepfake identification tools and training programs for journalists and election officials.
- **Second, transparency in microtargeting:** Campaigns should be required to disclose targeting criteria, message variants, and audiences for AI-generated advertisements, with independent auditing to verify compliance. This would help media watchdogs and researchers document what messages voters are receiving.
- **Third, diaspora-specific protections:** Election authorities should develop frameworks addressing diaspora campaigns, ensuring consistency across borders and preventing exploitation of diaspora-specific vulnerabilities. This might include monitoring multilingual campaign content and establishing accountability mechanisms for diaspora-targeted messaging.
- **Fourth, data protection alignment:** Democratic nations should harmonize data protection standards internationally, preventing campaigns from exploiting jurisdictional variations in privacy regulations. The EU's GDPR provides a model; extending similar protections globally would constrain micro targeting.
- **Fifth, research infrastructure:** Governments should fund sustained research on AI's electoral effects, with transparent data sharing for independent investigation. Academic partnerships with election authorities could generate valuable evidence on campaign impacts while protecting voter privacy.
- **Sixth, platform accountability:** Tech platforms should implement content provenance verification, deepfake detection, and content moderation specifically for election periods, coordinating with election authorities.
- **Critical questions remain unanswered:** Can algorithmic trust-building (chatbots, personalization) overcome concerns about authenticity? Do diaspora voters respond differently to AI-driven campaigns than domestic voters? Can detection technologies reliably identify deepfakes before they proliferate? How do voters balance increased relevance from personalization against decreased trust in information authenticity?

Longitudinal studies tracking voter trust across elections, experimental designs isolating AI effects on specific voter populations, comparative qualitative research across democracies, and ethnographic studies of diaspora voter responses to multilingual AI outreach are essential. Additionally, research examining how misinformation spreads in microtargeted environments and how fact-checking efforts can be improved in fragmented information spaces would be valuable.

The democratic stakes are substantial. Electoral campaigns mediate the relationship between citizens and representatives. If campaigns increasingly operate through opaque, algorithmically-mediated channels unavailable to public scrutiny, the transparency and accountability fundamental to democracy erode regardless of whether AI directly swings votes. Conversely, if democracies can harness AI's capacity for genuine inclusion (particularly of diaspora and marginalized communities) while establishing robust safeguards against manipulation, they may strengthen both electoral participation and democratic representation. The path forward requires sustained attention to evidence, principled regulatory design, and commitment to democratic values even amid technological transformation.

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