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Alternatives to Liberal Democracy and the Role of AI: The Case of Elections

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Abstract

Liberal democracy has been increasingly challenged not only by illiberal democracy but also by the Dark Enlightenment (also named neoreactionarism, abbreviated to NRx and characterised as neo-fascist), which has been supported by the top segment of global high-tech corporations based in the US. These concepts of governing have not been directly compared, either in general or in their treatment of elections in particular. This article compares these concepts with more detailed insight into a conceptualisation of free and fair elections, which form the critical difference between liberal democracy and autocracy, and are an institution vulnerable to the misuse of AI. Based on the conceptualisation of free and fair elections and a review of the sources (academic literature and reports related to AI and elections), this article offers: (a) an overview of the (mis)use of AI to affect three stages in the election processes (before, on, and after polling day); (b) a taxonomy of segments in the election process with their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use; and (c) a preliminary overview of the estimated impact of AI (mis)use on elections. The article argues that so far, AI has been only to a limited extent instrumentalised in support of liberal democracy. Rather, it has been predominantly misused in favour of illiberal democracy and Dark Enlightenment alternatives to liberal democracy.

Keywords

AI; liberal democracy; illiberal democracy; Dark Enlightenment; elections

1. Introduction

Historically, crises of liberal democracy have been cyclically addressed by political thinkers and social scientists—especially during the critical years of 1918, 1933, 1947, 1961, 1974, 1989, and 2008 (see, e.g.,

Keane, 2009; Runciman, 2013). Nevertheless, variations in particular democracies at particular times and places have also been exposed (Runciman, 2019, p. xiv). Currently, several alternative conceptualisations of governing are competing in the Western world: liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, and the Dark Enlightenment (also named neoreactionarism, abbreviated to NRx and characterised as neo-fascist). In the article, we focus on them since they not only appear in political theory but also have a practical impact on politics in the context of major social, economic, and technological changes.

Liberal democracy has a long tradition in political thought and various practices. While illiberal democracy, as a practice and political thought, has been developing since the 1990s in various parts of the world (Zakaria, 1997), the Hungarian version of illiberalism has been gaining substantial impact not only in Europe but also in the US (Shapiro & Végh, 2024). Also, it has achieved an academic level of recognition, including the publication of handbooks on illiberalism (Laruelle, 2024; Sajó et al., 2021). Although the Dark Enlightenment has some historical ideational roots, the current Dark Enlightenment alternative to democracy evolved in the 2000s based on originally disputed British political thought by Nick Land and by contributions of the US right extremist blogger Curtis Gay Yarvin (using the blogger name Mencius Moldbug). While academic philosophers have ignored the Dark Enlightenment for some time, academic literature on the Dark Enlightenment has been evolving (Burrows, 2018; Tait, 2019; Žižek, 2023). Nevertheless, the current Dark Enlightenment is not only a concept in political theory but also has practical political manifestations. It has been significantly empowered by the world's richest individuals (CEOs of AI tech corporations, particularly Elon Musk) who have adopted Dark Enlightenment ideas (E. Simon, 2025).

In academia, even the concept of liberal democracy, which is much older, has been debated to this day. More recent, illiberal democracy and the Dark Enlightenment alternatives to liberal democracy have been contested even more. Nevertheless, the latter two have been increasingly used in contemporary philosophical and social science scholarship. At the same time, they have been substantially linked to the more recent spread of practices which critically damage liberal democracy. This is obvious in their treatment of elections. This is why, in this article, we are focusing on elections.

For the purpose of the article, we argue that there are democratic (meaning free and fair) elections that are the main distinction between liberal democracy and autocracy. Elections are democratic (free and fair) and, by that, are also at the core of democracy only in truly liberal democratic systems. Elections are also held in illiberal democracies, but illiberal elites damage their free and fair characteristics in favour of maintaining their positions of power (Bíró-Nagy, 2017). The Dark Enlightenment aims to dismantle liberal democracy. In practice, its followers damage free and fair elections accordingly (Global Coalition for Tech Justice, 2024; Rankin, 2025). Elections are also critical events that can either reinforce or counteract an autocratisation or democratisation trend (Nord, Medzihorsky, & Lindberg, 2024).

Researchers have investigated the processes of democratisation, de-democratisation/autocratisation, and U-turns in transitions from democracy to autocracy. As these turns are products of human agency, it is important to learn more about the instruments used in these processes. Since information and information networks play critical roles and are especially vulnerable in the context of accelerated AI, we further narrowed our research focus to the instrumentalisation of AI in elections. Although human/information networks already existed in other historical circumstances, with the development of AI technology, they have changed in scope and quality to an unprecedented degree (Harari, 2024).

The main theses of this article are, firstly, that today, liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, and the Dark Enlightenment are competing conceptualisations of governing, which critically differ in their treatment of elections. Liberal democracy favours democratic—that is, free and fair—elections for representative institutions. Illiberal democracy damages democratic elections by damaging the freedom and fairness of elections for representative institutions. The Dark Enlightenment damages free and fair elections with an aim not only to damage free and fair elections but to eventually destroy the whole representative liberal democratic order. Secondly, AI technology has so far been predominantly (mis)used for damaging democratic (that is, free and fair) elections, both led by illiberalism and by the Dark Enlightenment.

With this article, we contribute to filling the gap in the political science literature related to AI and democracy. In fact, there are several specific gaps. First, there is a gap between political-philosophical contributions and contributions focusing on macro-political phenomena. Second, there is a gap between (a) highly theoretical, abstract contributions on AI and democracy, including some particular examples of (mis)use of AI; and (b) highly empirical insights into the (mis)use of AI in election processes in various reports. This article contributes to filling this gap by providing a link between the two levels of analysis. We offer: (a) a detailed comparison between currently competitive alternative conceptualisations of governing (particularly the treatment of elections within them); (b) the operationalisation of variables critical for analysing the impact of AI on two main qualities of election processes—their freeness and fairness; and (c) a taxonomy of AI (mis)uses in elections based on literature and reports on (mis)using of AI in elections (described in more detail in the methodology section).

We do this by taking into account the following major contextual factors in the current spread of the (mis)use of AI in elections. First, liberal democracy is in crisis (Önis, 2017; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018), illiberal democracy has been spreading (Vormann & Weinman, 2021), and more recently, the Dark Enlightenment alternative has been gaining space (Jones, 2019; Michael, 2016, 2022). Contrary to liberal democracy, the other two concepts of governing intentionally deconstruct liberal democratic institutions (including free and fair elections) both in normative and practical ways. A conscious impact on democratic elections is a crucial common ground for anti-liberal democracy trends.

Second, the form of capitalism has changed significantly. Political management of societies and technological advances have opened the way for a new form of capital based on the privatisation of the internet by big technological companies and the development of digital trading platforms, which do not function as markets. The payments for access to the internet (cloud) produce cloud rents to cloud owners (cloud capitalists) based on the payments for access to the internet (cloud). This is why the new form of capitalism has been nicknamed techno-feudalism (Varoufakis, 2024).

Third, international corporations—technological giants (Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, and X, previously Twitter) are currently very powerful in relation to the state (particularly in the US, where they can literally buy the political elite) and may and do control social networks (what people see and hear) beyond national borders where the state does not prevent access to them (Runciman, 2019, pp. 120–143). At the same time, such corporations may be and are instrumental in democratic states' temptations to use technology, with negative effects on democracy as well as the intervention of other countries into particular state politics (Runciman, 2019, pp. 153–157).

Fourth, recent times have seen the emergence of extreme social inequalities (Ahmed et al., 2022; Datta et al., 2023). Inequalities have radically increased not only between countries but also within countries, including those of the most developed nations (Quereshi, 2023). Potentially, the rise of AI could exacerbate both within- and between-country inequalities (Schellekens & Skilling, 2024).

Fifth, while the crisis of liberal democracy had been cyclically debated and already empirically revealed (see, e.g., Ercan & Gagnon, 2014; Hobson, 2021; Runciman, 2019), it is important to note that researchers have been revealing that, currently, a global wave of autocratisation has been in full swing (Rensmann, 2024), elections are becoming less democratic (Angiolillo et al., 2024) and the integrity of elections is now increasingly threatened both in democracies and autocracies. The quality of elections is increasingly worsening in democracies, with the level of electoral violence and the freedom and fairness of elections deteriorating the most (Hobson, 2021; Nord, Medzihorsky, & Lindberg, 2024).

Sixth, although technological innovations have affected elections in the past, the recent accelerated technological revolutions in the rapid evolution of AI and the unprecedented power concentrated in individual owners/leaders of international technological corporations based in one state (US) have been unprecedented in terms of scope, time, and influence beyond national borders. With the construction of Trump's second administration, Elon Musk's private and public (state-related) roles have converged and enabled the richest tech billionaire to act as a non-elected state representative in the domestic (US) and international arena. However, it is not only about the richest person in the world. The combination of highly concentrated but globalised technological and economic power in the hands of a few allows them to affect the information supply beyond national borders with unseen ease and speed. Privately owned platforms, such as Google, X, and Facebook, allow AI-empowered information, disinformation, and misinformation to be spread by individuals, corporations, various groups, and states, which has affected various social fields, including elections.

Seventh, recent times have also seen the rise of new reactionary philosophical and ideological/political platforms. The interference of tech billionaires in politics is not ideologically free. The ideas and practices of several of the richest American billionaires not only support illiberal practices but have also openly adopted the Dark Enlightenment alternative to liberal democracy. These ideas not only inspire extreme right-wing movements, well developed via AI-accelerated social media information impacts, but recently even entered the Trump second administration with the unprecedented direct and indirect inclusion of an extremely wealthy individual—Elon Musk—into government. Musk has been leading the rapid deconstruction of US federal institutions, which is in line with the Dark Enlightenment's ideas of disruptively destroying the democratic order with the aim of establishing a new elitist order.

Eighth, the interplay among all the above-described phenomena comes with the extraordinary power of several global AI-related technological enterprises situated in the US, led by several billionaires (owners of these companies) who increasingly support an autocratic alternative to the liberal democratic concept of governing. Tech billionaires may directly affect election processes by (a) manipulating platforms (algorithms, etc.); (b) enhancing particular (mis)information; and (c) personally interfering in particular elections (e.g., Musk's interference in the US, UK, and German elections), as well as personal support of particular, extreme right-wing politicians and parties in other countries (Robertson, 2025).

Ninth, the severe deficiencies of AI technology and its availability for misuse by various domestic and international actors in elections are factors on their own. Slattery et al. (2024, pp. 8–9) reported the findings from analysed expert articles, which show that most of the AI risks (51%) were caused by AI systems rather than humans. Most risks (65%) also emerged after the AI model had been trained and deployed. Furthermore, 35% of risks were intentional, and 37% were unintentional.

Tenth, many countries in the world are lagging behind in the regulation of AI, while some have adopted permissive rules regarding the use of AI in elections. At the same time, big tech companies made an accord on respecting some norms regarding elections in 2024 (*Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections*), but this seems to have been abandoned (Munich Security Conference, n.d.-a, n.d.-b) as big tech companies have removed fact-checking and allowed AI content to circulate without guardrails (Duffy, 2025; Verma et al., 2024). Recent increases in the regulation of AI and reductions in previously adopted AI regulation in various parts of the world have contributed to the mixed trend in states' influence on the behaviour of big tech companies.

With a large and increasing share of the world's population active on social media (an estimated 56.8% of the world's population, with an estimated four billion eligible voters, according to Krimmer et al. [2022]), the impact of AI on electoral processes gained importance in 2024, which has been considered a test of the health of democracy (United Nations, 2024). The year 2024 witnessed a historically unprecedented number of elections around the world, involving nearly half of the world's population. It was also a period when the rapid developments and use of AI technologies—particularly the increased use of generative AI (GenAI; Taylor, 2024), such as ChatGPT (Open AI) and Copilot (Microsoft)—were believed to have the potential to significantly impact on elections and democracy (Brand, 2024).

In the article, we are interested in the decay of liberal democratic systems, where liberal democracy has been losing its qualities, in the evolution of illiberal systems, and in the implementation of a new, plutocratic-based system inspired by the Dark Enlightenment, with a specific focus on elections. We are not, however, dealing with the (mis)use of AI in authoritarian regimes and the export of authoritarian playbooks by countries like China or Russia (Jang & Yoo, 2024). More precisely, we are seeking answers to these research questions:

> RQ1: Which AI technologies are used to affect election processes?
>
> RQ2: How and why are these impacts related to alternative concepts of governing (liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, and the Dark Enlightenment)?

In the following sections, we first present the key differences among the competing conceptualisations of governing and the critical differences among them in their treatment of elections. In the methodological section, two dimensions (free and fair elections) and the elements of three election stages are conceptualised (before, on the, and after polling day). Based on literature and election reports, we present an overview and a taxonomy of segments in the election process, including their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use in the different election stages as well as in relation to alternative conceptualisations of governing. We conclude with estimations of AI's impact on elections, a summary of findings, and suggestions for further research.

2. Alternative Conceptualisations of Governing: A Comparative Analysis

Three conceptualisations of governing embedded in the political thought of the Western world (liberal, illiberal, and the Dark Enlightenment) have been both increasingly gaining status in academic research and competing on a global scale (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Material). They all share a core of political ideas, attitudes towards democracy, and international dimensions, including at least some aspects of colonisation and postcolonial reordering (Luger, 2020).

In practice, the concept of liberal democracy has been losing the trust of citizens in the ability of elites within these systems to genuinely represent citizens' interests. Illiberalism may be (and in some countries has been) gradually growing within a liberal democratic order and has a tendency to be replaced by an authoritarian regime. Recently, the Dark Enlightenment has been practically promoted within the already illiberally damaged democratic order (a case in point being the US, which has been evaluated as a flawed democracy since 2016; Lotz, 2025; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). How do these three conceptualisations of governing actually differ among themselves?

Liberal democracy is a political, social, and moral philosophy with a variety of real-life liberalisms, in principle based on the consent of the governed, constitutionalism, division of powers, private property, free enterprise, secularism, individual rights, civil liberties, equality before the law, free and fair elections, and freedom of the public sphere. Because a vast, well-known literature has long been available (to mention just Dahl, 1971; Held, 2006), for the purpose of this article, we mostly keep the comparisons with the other two competing conceptualisations in Table 1 (in the Supplementary Material).

Illiberal democracy (e.g., Laruelle, 2024; Zakaria, 1997) rests on a fundamental rejection of liberalism, notably the liberal concepts of equal political freedom and civil liberties for their alleged hypertrophic individualism. Nevertheless, it does not entirely reject democracy. Rather, it accepts formal democracy based on elections. Contrary to liberal democracy, it does not respect tolerance, multiculturalism, or the protection of minorities and their "decadent" way of life. Rather, it favours traditional social hierarchies, cultural homogeneity, and nation-centrism. It undermines the prerequisites for liberal democracy, such as constitutional order in general and liberal democratic institutions in particular (including free and fair elections and division of powers), and erodes participation, representation, and the public sphere.

Since the Dark Enlightenment is the least known conceptualisation of governing among the three conceptualisations considered in the article, we present it in more detail. Establishers of the Dark Enlightenment (particularly Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin) have developed and spread a philosophical basis for Trumpism (Johnson & Stokols, 2017) to a great extent via the internet through blogs, web-based media, and interlinked neoreactionary online communities (Tait, 2019). Despite some peculiarities, a significant portion of the tech elites in Silicon Valley share strong links to the Dark Enlightenment (Goldhill, 2017). Republican strategist Steve Bannon also supports the Dark Enlightenment (Johnson & Stokols, 2017). Recent empirical developments in the US have also shown how the richest man in the world took over *de facto* US leadership without electoral legitimacy, dismantling national state institutions and affecting national and international US policies (McGreal, 2025). Elon Musk, a non-elected, extremely rich individual, and at the same time the leading person in several tech companies, was named by President Trump as the head of the Department of

Government Efficiency and took over government operations with his private company, as well as taking advantage of unprecedented access to government data (Stanger, 2025).

The current Dark Enlightenment thinking (especially Nick Land, Curtis Yarvin, Peter Thiel, and Patri Friedman) favours "architectures of exit," including a micro-fracturing of nation-states into private governments—"gov-corps" (H. Smith & Burrows, 2021). The ideal is a realm: A sovereign corporation that draws its executives from the same talent pool large companies now draw from. A patchwork of such realms (Moldbug, n.d.) is seen as a modified version of a monarchy. To establish such an order, the old order needs to be destroyed. The disintegration of liberal democratic institutions within a nation-state has been taking place in real-time by an extremely rich minority supporting extreme right candidates and parties who can be instrumentalised in the process of political transformation. For that purpose, a Gramscian approach has also been used. In the US, this can be seen in the insertion of the richest tech CEOs into the state apparatus (as seen in the case of Trump's second administration).

The Dark Enlightenment view on liberal democracy is that it is a form of government that is dangerous and degenerative, leading to tyranny and chaos (Tait, 2019). The alternative is based on libertarians opting for a minimal state and a new form of authoritarianism, which is based on a privatised state (corporate–monarchy regime). Its formation is not seen as a gradual reformist change but as "a hard reset."

In Table 1 (see Supplementary Material), we compare liberalism, illiberalism, and the Dark Enlightenment based on the sources cited below the table.

Current AI developments have also enhanced the ability of external actors to interfere in national elections. Private ownership of some leading digital infrastructures (particularly platforms used by governmental and nongovernmental users) additionally challenges democracy. For example, Elon Musk has been using his resources as the richest man and tech CEO in the world to: (a) use social media ownership to promote far-right parties in elections in other countries (Collinson, 2025); (b) selectively deny and allow access to his platform X to governmental and nongovernmental users, algorithmically manipulate their use of the platform X, algorithmically manipulate his own tweets and tweets related to Musk and Trump; and (c) affect the power of one particular side in the war in Ukraine. One example is the Starlink satellites owned by Musk's SpaceX company, which are being used by Ukraine's military forces for communications because Russia disabled Ukraine's internet services as part of its invasion in early 2022. The second example is Elon Musk's refusal to let Ukraine use his satellite network to guide its drones to attack Russia's Black Sea fleet in 2023 (Kim et al., 2023). With US-based companies emboldened by their gilded status in Trump's second administration, their impacts on the international order have also gained a new dimension (Wilkinson, 2025).

As with the concept of liberal democracy in the past, illiberalism has also been internationalised (Cottiero et al., 2024). The territorial interests of particular illiberal states have also come to the fore. Such examples are even present within the EU, such as Orbán's interests in the Western Balkans (Domenech, 2024). The Dark Enlightenment ideas and politics look for territorial expansion on Earth and even include the thesis that the territoriality of governing needs to be amended by hybrids of territoriality, cyberspace, and extraterritoriality (Luger, 2020; Thiel, 2009).

3. Methodological Framework

We focus on the (mis)use of AI in three election process phases (before, on, and after polling day) while also taking into account the conceptualisation of free and fair elections. Also, we discuss the findings in relation to the three alternative conceptualisations of governing.

3.1. AI

Since AI developments are very dynamic, the definition of AI is also important. To be sufficiently precise, in our research, we expose specific sets of AI, which we have identified in a "bottom-up" way based on the sources cited in the article. Because determining these AI sets was part of the research and was not pre-determined, we only present a basic overview: advanced machine-learning, large language models (LLMs), automated or semi-automated social media accounts controlled by algorithms (social bots), LLM-based chatbots, AI models, and GenAI tools (i.e., AI tools for generating text, image, video and audio content, including bots and deepfakes—products of machine-learning algorithms, which generate images and sounds that appear to be authentic).

Other than these AI tools, it is worth mentioning that impactful algorithms are still used in social media (e.g., Facebook, Facebook Messenger service, TikTok, X, and YouTube). These algorithms are sets of instructions to be followed in calculations or other operations, such as classifications and recommendation systems. Their impact has been greatly enhanced by their combination with AI tools.

3.2. Free and Fair Elections

We draw on the detailed conceptualisation of free and fair elections developed by Elklit and Svensson (1997), which is rooted in the idea that coercion is uncommon in a democratic system (Dahl, 1989, p. 221). They link freedom with voters' opportunity to participate in the elections without coercion or restrictions of any kind except for possible economic limitations (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 35). We also take into account Dahl's thesis that external interventions in elections are not feasible with free and fair elections.

Fairness is related to impartiality and the equal treatment of equals—the unbiased application of rules and reasonableness in terms of the distribution of relevant resources among competitors (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 35). It is also important to distinguish between events before, during, and after the actual polling (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 36). The checklist for election assessment (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 37) distinguishes between three periods: before polling day, on polling day, and after polling day.

At the core of Elklit and Svensson's understanding of freedom is that it primarily deals with the "rules of the game" (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 35). In their view (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 37), elections are free if: (a) in the period before the polling day, multiple preconditions are fulfilled (freedom of movement; freedom of speech for candidates, the media, voters and others; freedom of assembly and of association; freedom from fear in connection with the election and electoral campaign; absence of impediments to standing for elections for political parties and independent candidates; equal and universal suffrage); (b) on the polling day, there is an opportunity to participate in the elections; and (c) after the polling day, there are legal opportunities for complaint.

According to Elklit and Svensson (1997, p. 37), elections are fair if, (a) in the period before the polling day, there is: a transparent electoral process, an election act, and an electoral system that grants no special privileges to any political party or social group; an absence of impediments to inclusion in the electoral register; the establishment of an independent and impartial election commission; an impartial treatment of candidates by the police, the army, and the courts of law; equal opportunities for political parties and independent candidates to stand for election; impartial voter-education programmes; an orderly election campaign observance of a code of conduct; equal access to publicly controlled media; impartial allotment of public funds to political parties—if relevant; and there is no misuse of government facilities for campaign purposes. Elections are fair if (b) on the polling day, there is: access to all polling stations for representatives of the political parties, accredited local and international election observers, and the media; secrecy of the ballot; absence of voter intimidation; effective design of ballot papers; proper ballot boxes; impartial assistance to voters—if necessary; proper counting procedures; proper treatment of void ballot papers; proper precautionary measures when transporting election materials; and impartial protection of polling stations. And lastly, elections are fair if (c), after the polling day, there are: official and expeditious announcements of election results, impartial treatment of any election complaints, impartial reports on the election results by the media, and acceptance of the election results. As identified in Table 2 (in the Supplementary Material), many of the prerequisites for free and fair elections are vulnerable to AI manipulation.

3.3. Sources of Findings

The generalised findings are based on experiences with AI affecting elections as revealed in academic research, reports by intergovernmental organisations, national governmental reports, and nongovernmental reports. The review of empirical examples of particular types of AI used in elections so far was based on sources published by the end of February 2025. The sources are cited in the text and under tables in the Supplementary File.

4. The Impact of AI on Requirements for Free and Fair Elections

In line with the methodological framework, we focus on the (mis)use of AI in three election process phases (before polling day, on polling day, and after polling day) while also taking into account the conceptualisation of free and fair elections. The findings are summarised in relation to alternative conceptualisations of governing.

4.1. Free Elections

Before polling day, politicians, election administration, citizens, and other actors are involved in this stage. They may be creators, disseminators, and recipients (or targets) of AI (mis)use.

Citizens need to be informed about ways to exercise their right to vote (e.g., in person on a polling day or before the polling day, via mail). Practical information and organisational preparations for the implementation of the voting rights of various minorities and citizens living abroad also need to be ensured. All these elements for the preparations before polling day can be (and in some countries have been) taken care of by AI and/or mitigated by the (mis)use of AI tools (see, e.g., "How Donald Trump's Election," 2024; International IDEA, 2024; Richardson, 2024).

Citizens' right to participate in elections is based not only on legal norms but also on the maintenance of actual voter records, including purging voter records, voter registration, and identification. Among the most problematic examples of using AI models and AI tools in the pre-polling stage are problems with voter registration and identification due to biased AI-based biometric tools, identity fraud during voter registration, intimidation and disenfranchising of marginalised voters, overload of the voter registration system, deletion of or tampering with voter data, AI-empowered re-drawing of election district lines (gerrymandering), and damaging of the potential for the clear expression of the voters' will. Optimising resource allocation to particular voting stations throughout a country and to support voters abroad, as well as individually targeted campaigns to discourage voters from voting even before polling day, can also involve problematic use of AI (Bender, 2022; "How Donald Trump's Election," 2024; International IDEA, 2024; Panditharatne, 2024). Discouraging voters from voting may be a form of persuasion, as in the case of deepfakes persuading voters from a particular party in Pakistan to boycott elections (de Abreu, 2024) or deepfakes of Biden discouraging voters from going to vote in the US (Han, 2024). However, threats have also been used to discourage particular groups of voters from coming to vote—examples include threats to Black voters in particular US territories using AI-supported mass communication (robocalls "on steroids" from candidates or other influential figures; Johns Hopkins University, 2024). It is also difficult to make a positive estimate of all the encouragements to particular voters to vote in favour of a particular party as favourable to democracy or not, such as the positive promotion of voting by a widely shared AI-generated video of Donald Trump and Elon Musk dancing to the Bee Gees song "Stayin' Alive" (Daily Mail, 2024; Elliott, 2024), attracting youth with avatars (Lamb et al., 2024), and the AI-empowered targeting of previously ignored voters (Rao, 2023).

AI-supported information campaigns for/against a particular politician may focus on issues of candidates' fitness or even eligibility for a political office (e.g., political procedural arguments against Kamala Harris's presidential candidacy and arguments against Trump's presidential candidacy due to his being convicted of a felony). Campaigns may also focus on candidates' personal characteristics such as age, gender, mental capacity, and "perceived strength" (e.g., Musk about the need for the US leader to appear terrifying to others in the world), which can mislead the public about candidates' policy positions and their expected political moves in case of electoral victory (Noti, 2024). Sponsors of particular candidates may also become targets of negative campaigning. Recent examples include the widely shared AI-generated sexually explicit deepfakes of Taylor Swift, who endorsed Kamala Harris (Maslej et al., 2024, p. 18), and false information about public persons endorsing a political candidate can also be disseminated (e.g., Trump's announcement that Taylor Swift endorsed him).

Technology can also be misused by authorities (they may be democratic or autocratic) and by private actors to suppress voters' political participation. Currently, owners of AI companies mostly privately regulate the social media milieu, which provides the platform for AI information campaigning. Their owners may even actively campaign in person for/against a particular political leader (e.g., Elon Musk's decisions about Trump's X account and joining Trump's campaign in 2024 in person). Public regulation of this aspect has been evolving slowly, unevenly, and with backlashes.

In regard to the polling day, this day is about the actual implementation of the right to vote. Individually targeted voters may be politically encouraged or discouraged to vote (Clarke, 2023). The use of a voter identification signature-matching AI tool could lead to the disenfranchisement of eligible voters due to the limitations of such tools (International IDEA, 2024). For example, AI-based tools for facial recognition

technology disproportionately misidentify non-white faces (Perkowitz, 2021). This may raise concerns about electoral integrity and potential electoral fraud.

Spreading disinformation could also persuade voters to stay home on election day. There have been examples of disinformation scaring voters and turning them away from voting on polling day. This can include disinformation on the locations and openings of polling places, the eligibility of particular voters, false reports about non-functioning voting machines, long waiting lines, and false alarms about emergency situations, such as a fire or an attack (Cotter et al., 2021; International IDEA, 2024).

At the same time, video monitoring of elections could raise concerns related to surveillance (e.g., damaged security, privacy, and human rights) and discourage people from participating in elections. Misuse of AI could be focused on damaging the administration of elections by threats and harassment of the nonpartisan election workers who try to ensure a smooth and fair democratic process (Edlin & Norden, 2023). Finally, the AI-supported spread of unjustified doubt about election results and mobilisation for rebelling against potentially unfavourable election results may also take place on polling day.

The stage after polling day presents new opportunities for bad actors to undermine the administration of elections and spread unjustified doubt about the results. AI may be used to fabricate audio of a candidate claiming they rigged the results or to generate other misinformation that could persuade the supporters of a failed campaign to disrupt vote counting and certification procedures, which are already increasingly politicised and provided the basis for the effort to sabotage the 2020 US presidential election (Devine et al., 2024). Mobilisation to rebel against election results, including coordination of particular actions, has already taken place with the help of AI technologies. These actions may be particularly efficient when an election-denial movement has already been nurtured during the previous election stages and additionally fuelled by an AI-supported participatory disinformation campaign (e.g., the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol).

4.2. Fair Elections

The "fair" dimension of elections is also important in all three stages: before polling day, on polling day, and after polling day.

Before polling day, election fairness relates to many characteristics, including transparency, no privileges, an absence of impediments for inclusion, equal opportunities for political parties and independent candidates to stand for elections, impartial voter-education programmes, and orderly election campaigning. So far, many misuses of AI have been observed.

First is the damage to human rights, particularly privacy, caused by the use of data on the internet for AI-based targeting of particular individuals. This damage has even risen with the (mis)use of GenAI. For example, AI has been found to allow the targeting of particular social groups in particular languages using increasingly high-quality deepfake images, audio, and video (Johns Hopkins University, 2024).

Second, AI technologies themselves are insufficiently reliable. For example, chatbots have spread misinformation about EU elections and the EU vote in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain (F. Simon et al.,

2024). US government officials have also warned citizens that AI chatbots are not reliable sources of voting information (Field & Kolodny, 2024).

Third, another example is the misuse of AI technology to affect election administration and suppress voters' participation in elections (e.g., manipulation of voters' records, gerrymandering, and attacking applications and websites dedicated to voters' registration or requests for particular modes of voting; Bender, 2022; Eisen et al., 2023).

Fourth, AI has been misused to damage equal opportunities for candidates and parties through, for example, cyberattacks that steal classified or sensitive data to undermine a candidate or party. Deepfakes can also be misused, such as the audio clips of a politician from India's Hindu party attacking his own party and praising his opponent (Maslej et al., 2024, p. 211).

Fifth, some politicians take advantage of declaring something they said or did to be fake when, in fact, it is true (the "layers' dividend"; Joffe-Block, 2024). Public claims that reality is a deepfake may also have a different logic: For example, Donald Trump alleged that images showing large crowds of people turning out to rallies for Vice President Kamala Harris were AI-generated.

Sixth, misuse of AI can privilege particular individuals and private economic entities in the election process. For example, technological companies can offer or deny the use of social platforms based on the owners' decisions, as well as the direct involvement of leaders of such companies in elections (Elon Musk's platform X in the 2024 US elections).

Seventh, AI technology can be used to damage the fairness of elections by targeting particular individuals and groups to encourage or discourage their participation in elections. This includes targeting particular actors involved in elections through, for example, public and private bullying or harassment, as well as the surveillance of activists, candidates, journalists, or other public figures via social media.

Eighth, AI has been misused to mobilise individuals and groups in anticipation that elections will not be fair. For example, participatory disinformation spread doubt about the fairness of US elections (Starbird et al., 2023) as part of the election denial movement in the US.

Ninth, external actors can promote disinformation and fake news, thus seeding doubts about the legitimacy of elections. For example, the dissemination of deepfakes by Russian actors showing an immigrant saying he plans to vote multiple times for Kamala Harris (The Associated Press, 2024).

Regarding the polling day, as already presented in the previous section, various misuses of AI have already been revealed, which may affect voter turnout and observation of the elections, thus tempering election administration and directly subverting the perception of election legitimacy.

After the polling day, the critical preconditions for fairness include the official and expeditious announcement of election results, impartial treatment of any election complaints, impartial reports on the election results by the media, and acceptance of the election results. Perception of election legitimacy may be challenged in various ways when using and misusing AI. Krimmer et al. (2022) have listed examples

related to: (dis)information about rigging elections; issues with voting technology (e.g., software bugs that alter election results, overloading the systems used for counting or aggregating results, tampering with the supply chain involved in the movement or transfer of data); breaching voter privacy; election results; and reports on election results and election complaints. AI can be used and misused in the presentation of election results, election complaints, and reports on election results, as well as by spreading (non)acceptance of the results and organising violent actions as reactions to the non-acceptance of the results (Krimmer et al., 2022; Starbird et al., 2023).

4.3. External Interference in the Three Election Stages

The use of AI via digital networks has simplified cross-border political interference. Information warfare has gained new dimensions of hostile social manipulation (Mazarr et al., 2019). Before the 2024 election, it had been estimated that the (mis)use of AI technology had high potential both as an ongoing threat and to target a particular election process (Prochaska et al., 2023). We highlight some particular cases in Section 5 (see also Table 3 in the Supplementary Material).

5. Summary and Overview of Findings

In the context of free elections, when looking at the prerequisites for this, the role of AI is not one-dimensional. Freedom of speech in relation to AI is actually freedom of speech on the internet. On the one hand, AI appears to democratise (particularly taking into account the accessibility of AI tools, including GenAI), while on the other hand, it can be and has been misused to damage freedom based on fear in connection with elections and electoral campaigns. It can be used and misused in election campaigns to reveal impediments to standing for elections for particular parties and candidates. AI tools can be misused for purposes that undermine equal and universal suffrage, damage electoral administrative infrastructure, demobilise voters on polling day, or prevent them from coming to vote.

As for fair elections, the (mis)use of AI helps to damage the transparency of the electoral process from the stage of administrative preparations (electoral administration). Even when the election does not grant special privileges to any political party or social group, AI can be misused to affect this prerequisite for free elections (e.g., AI misused in gerrymandering, impediments to inclusion in the electoral register). AI distorts equal opportunities for political parties and candidates to stand for elections and distorts the impartiality of voter-education programmes. It is difficult to talk about the observance of a code of conduct in election campaigns because not many countries have such codes adapted to the reality of increasing (mis)use of AI in elections. Tech companies have stopped following the rules agreed upon among themselves. Issues of election (public/private) funding via AI-composed and AI-targeted communication are appearing. On polling day, issues of AI (mis)use appear to be related to ballot secrecy, voter intimidation, and impartial assistance to voters, as well as impartial protection of polling stations. The (mis)use of AI after polling day has also gained new dimensions, particularly in swift campaigns spreading (mis)information on the impartiality of reports on the election results and mobilising against/in favour of the acceptance of the election results.

In regards to external interference, the spread of misinformation and other external information activities with the intention to affect elections in other countries is not new (Whyte et al., 2021). However, the (mis)use of AI tools has made it much less costly. The spread of (mis)information has become much quicker in combination

with (mis)using social media and their algorithms (Pomerantsev, 2020). Nevertheless, virtual societal warfare can involve a combination of a broad range of techniques—old and new (Mazarr et al., 2019).

Based on examples found in the reviewed literature and sources, we created the following taxonomy of segments in the election process with their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use (see Table 3, in the Supplementary Materials). This taxonomy exposes the vulnerability of many segments of the election process, starting with electoral administration and then including civic education, multiplication of specific campaigns and related segments, including external involvement and cyber-crimes. It also shows the vast variability in the (mis)uses of machine-learning, AI models, bots, and GenAI products, which have clearly entered the election processes.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that various actors had used diverse ways to affect election processes even before the development and spread of AI tools. Party organisations had been adapting to ever more complex politics through bureaucratisation and professionalisation (Panebianco, 1988), increasingly collaborating with the newly emerged profession of political campaigning (Butler & Ranney, 1992), and had adopted strategies based on emerging new technologies (printed political press, radio, TV including CCTV, internet; Runciman, 2019, pp. 159–161). Not only had political parties tended to evolve into elitist organisations (Michels, 1911; Ostrogorski, 1902) and corrupt entities—even in the form of political machines (Gosnell, 1933)—but they also had not shied away from manipulating elections through corruption and electoral fraud (Anderson, 2000; Bryce, 1906; Campbell, 2005; Lehoucq, 2003). Technologies before AI had also been found to be addictive (e.g., TV), including for the use of political news and campaigning (Ivanova, 2024). Elections are still vulnerable in democracies today (Hill et al., 2017), and other factors of democracy may either prevail in preserving liberal democracy or fail in preventing the effective degradation towards illiberal democracy and the even more radical shift towards governing based on the Dark Enlightenment ideas.

Concerning alternative conceptualisations of governing, AI per se used in election processes does not automatically function in support of implementing a particular conceptualisation of governing. However, the presented findings expose AI misuse within the framework of liberal democratic systems (e.g., UK, Germany) and within the framework of already damaged democratic systems—e.g., in the US, which has been recently characterised as a flawed democracy (J. Smith, 2025). Such an environment, together with the concentration of the richest and most powerful CEOs of AI tech corporations in the US, has also opened opportunities for national and global implementation of Dark Enlightenment ideas.

6. Estimations of AI's Impact on Elections and Alternative Conceptualisations of Governing

Estimations of the extent to which AI has affected elections vary. There have been reports stating that the (mis)use of AI affected the US 2016 presidential elections (leading to Trump's first electoral victory) and the support for the Brexit referendum (leading to the first EU member state ever leaving the EU). Preliminary estimations of AI's impact on elections by high-tech companies did not confirm such a thesis. It should not be forgotten, however, that their view is not unbiased—Microsoft and Google provided training to several campaigns on how to use their GenAI products during elections (Kelly, 2024). Despite a fast-growing misuse of GenAI, such as deepfakes (McIsaac, 2024), various governmental and nongovernmental reports have stressed that AI's impact has had little or no effect on elections (Elliott, 2024) and that the impact of social media

misinformation on elections still prevails over that of AI (Tuquero, 2024). However, AI fakes appear on social media platforms without a label or fact-checking (Verma et al., 2024).

While these estimations relate to election outcomes, they may be very different when estimating other impacts on politics. In the US, it has been found that the (mis)use of AI has deepened the partisan divide (Verma et al., 2024). It may negatively affect trust in democratic institutions, including trust in electoral integrity in particular and democracy in general (Regis et al., 2025). This impact is actually quite significant, especially taking into account the competition among the three conceptualisations of governing presented in the theoretical framework. Some authors have also argued that the aggregate effects of AI might fundamentally alter political dynamics in ways we cannot yet predict (Hubbard, 2024).

There have already been examples of the unanticipated role of AI related to elections. For example, in Denmark in 2022, a new political party, the Synthetic Party, was formed by the artist collective Computer Lars and represented by an AI representative, the AI chatbot, Leader Larss. The chatbot was programmed on the policies of Danish fringe parties since 1970 and was meant to represent the values of the 20% of Danes who did not vote in these elections (Werner, 2022; Xiang, 2022). Despite not competing in elections, this artistic social intervention expressed political and social criticism, as well as pointing towards the poor representative function of the existing political system.

In 2024, Victor Miller, a candidate in a mayoral campaign in Wyoming, created a ChatGPT-based bot VIC (Virtual Integrated Citizen) and promised to govern entirely by AI (Elliott, 2024). While this has not produced any particular impact, the results were somewhat different in the case of Belarus. In 2024, Belarusian dissidents in exile used an AI candidate (Gaspadar) to symbolically counter President Alexander Lukashenko, whose regime actually harassed dissidents, their relatives, and journalists (Elliott, 2024; Stein, 2024). The recent Romanian example also shows a struggle of liberal democratic institutions in dealing with externally rigged elections. Romania's Foreign Intelligence Service reported in December 2024 that Russia had targeted the country in an attempt to influence its presidential elections. Russia used far-right, pro-Russian propaganda and AI-generated content that was disseminated through a large network of social media channels and AI-generated accounts. With the help of AI (which can help develop malware that evades cybersecurity defences), Russia is also believed to have organised some 85,000 attacks against the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority to gain access to its databases (Regis et al., 2025).

Estimations on the future (mis)uses of AI in elections are not unified. GenAI allows for campaigning based on real-time digital conversations with voters, which may change the scale of election campaigns (Foos, 2024). Nevertheless, there is also recognition of the (potential) uses of AI to strengthen democratic elections (Brkan, 2019). It needs to be acknowledged that past estimations of the impact of technological innovations on elections have not been simply direct and one-dimensional—be it the proliferation of the political press, television, the professionalisation of campaigning (including e-campaigning), the internet (see e.g., Althaus & Trautman, 2008; Davis, 2024), or AI-supported change in the scope, scale and precision of election manipulation (Henle & Bradshaw, 2022). Today, this is especially difficult because political campaigns have combined various strategies and media to reach out to voters (i.e., hybrid campaigning; Haßler, 2022).

Also, it is not possible to predict how (mis)uses of AI in elections will relate to future trends in the actual implementation of liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, or the Dark Enlightenment neo-reactionary forms of

governing. At the current stage the findings support the following theses: (a) characteristics of AI (including its unreliability and hallucinations) limit AI's full use in support of liberal democracy; (b) public regulation is lagging behind the spread of AI use; (c) misuses of AI in elections may be feasible for both those seeking to enforce illiberal democracy and the Dark Enlightenment; and (d) individual owners of a few private tech companies, who control the worldwide digital platforms have enormous power to enforce concepts of governing according to their preferences.

7. Conclusions

While taking into account the broader social and technological context presented in the introduction, in this article, we sought to answer these research questions: What forms of AI are used to affect election processes? How and why are these effects related to alternative conceptualisations of governing (i.e., liberal democratic, illiberal, and the Dark Enlightenment)?

Based on the criteria of free and fair elections, the three main stages of elections, and a review of the literature and governmental and nongovernmental reports, we presented an overview of various types of (mis)use of AI in elections. This review has shown that the use of AI is unequally distributed among the three election stages (before the polling day, on the polling day, and after the polling day). The period before the polling day tends to be exposed to longer and more diversified (mis)uses of AI, notably AI-boosted algorithms and GenAI products. In contrast, AI-supported external interference appears to take place in all stages. Misuses of AI commonly involve the support of misinformation and disinformation campaigning, and also the strengthening of political polarisation—all of which damage the democratic prerequisites for free and fair elections. The potential benefits or damage of newly emerging uses of AI (e.g., for developing AI-supported performance of party organisations) are not yet fully known. Based on the findings from the empirical cases of various kinds of AI (mis)use in elections, we have offered a taxonomy of segments in the election process and their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use.

We have shown that the three competing conceptualisations of governing currently differ critically in how they treat elections. Elections are institutions and processes in which various actors can promote liberal democracy, internally damage it to gradually achieve illiberal governing, or misuse illiberally damaged governing to pursue Dark Enlightenment governing. AI can be and has been used both to strengthen the liberal democratic characteristics of governing in the election process and, more often, to damage them. As a rule, damage is done through disinformation, misinformation, and deepfakes without labels clarifying their fake nature. These inflict damage through their impact on the prerequisites for free and fair elections, as well as their effects in favour of a particular alternative to liberal democracy. So far, the (mis)use of AI has been biased in favour of illiberal and Dark Enlightenment alternatives to liberal democracy. This finding resonates with warnings that democracies may die at the hands of elected leaders (presidents or prime ministers) who subvert the process by which they came to power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 3).

While processes damaging to liberal democracy have already taken place in previous historical waves, the (mis)use of AI has allowed these trends to develop as if "on steroids." At the same time, research findings point to some of the problematic characteristics of AI technologies as well as the overlapping of political and economic interests and activities, which seek to damage democratic elections, coming either from the illiberal or Dark Enlightenment agendas. On the one hand, it is important to reveal how, exactly, the contextual changes

(particularly the radically increasing social inequalities related to the AI technological revolution, as well as the disproportionate growth in the power of big technological companies) and alternative conceptualisations of governing translate into real-life changes in governing. On the other hand, it is of critical importance to reveal potentials and scenarios for alternatives to ongoing autocratic scenarios as well.

These findings not only call for more research into human agency in contextual and technological changes but also for contextually updated research into the core political science issues (especially power, conceptualisations of governing, relations between the private sector and the state, political–ideological streams, actors, and processes) in the context of the interlinkages between (a) accelerated technological development and (b) the autocratic tendency, supported by tech corporations, on the global scale.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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