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The University of Texas at Austin
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CAN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IMPROVE DEMOCRACY?

Ai Chatbots In Political Communication

In preparation for her 2024 campaign, politician Shamaine Daniels has enlisted the help of "Ashley" a generative AI technology that allows Daniels to reach thousands of voters in the tenth district of Pennsylvania. When making calls, Ashley discloses themselves as an "artificial intelligence volunteer" and then proceeds to engage constituents in a two-way conversation, discussing and answering questions surrounding Daniels' positions. In addition to generating these interactive conversations, Ashley tracks and analyzes voters' responses to provide candidates with a better understanding of their constituents' opinions. Ashley was designed by the Political AI tech company, Civox, which claims that this technology will pioneer the new age of AI politics. Daniels and Civox argue that artificial intelligence provides an opportunity to foster connections between constituents and their representatives while increasing democratic participation (Kern et al., 2023). However, others fear the rapidly developing technology of AI poses serious ethical concerns regarding transparency and bias in political communication.

Despite the extensive concerns surrounding the intersection of AI and politics, emerging research has pointed to AI as a powerful tool to increase constituents' confidence in their politicians. When high-performing AI technology was used in legislative correspondence, constituents felt increased trust and connection to their lawmakers, especially compared to "auto-responses" that are usually issued in response to constituent feedback. This can be attributed to AI's ability to generate more rapid and personalized messages to particular voters than the slow, clichéd responses typically associated with government correspondence. The researchers also found that when AI was being used transparently--meaning the utilization of artificial intelligence was disclosed--constituents did not lose trust in their elected officials. In some cases, disclosure even heightened a constituent's confidence in their lawmaker and increased the likelihood he or she would vote for them (Kreps & Jakesch, 2023). The research in this study signifies AI's productive role in political communication should politicians utilize it transparently. However, given AI's unregulated nature and technology's rapid integration into politics, many worry AI could pose significant threats to a representative democracy.

A prevalent concern in this new era of AI in political communications is that government officials may utilize AI to collect and pool comments and opinions from constituents without ever considering an individual's arguments or concerns. Underlying this is the duty many voters place on officials to evaluate and incorporate specific, discrete feedback they receive. Using technology to summarize the opinions of and respond to constituents may remove the direct and personalized human contact many expect from their elected leaders (Nachmany, 2023). Additionally, some researchers are concerned about the potential biases influencing the operation of AI systems. There have been numerous cases in which AI has unfairly targeted or discriminated

against minority groups. Depending on how an AI system is programmed or structured, biases may appear. For example, research has found that when AI is taught using news articles, the technology might replicate or echo biases such as gendered stereotypes within that training data (Manyika et al., 2023). There are additional worries that some conversational AI technologies may have difficulty detecting and processing certain languages or accents which could influence how they communicate with those who speak using certain non-dominant dialects (Panditharatne et al., 2023). Concerns over how politicians and government officials may utilize AI and the repercussions of potential bias tendencies have sparked increased discourse on its feasible implementation in the public sector.

As AI develops rapidly, the ethical dilemmas of utilizing AI must be weighed as this technology enters the political sphere. AI has powerful abilities to foster connection and trust between lawmakers and their constituents making it an enticing and compelling tool for political communication (Kreps & Jakesch, 2023). On the other hand, the potential for bias and detachment from previously assumed human contact between officials and their community may have adverse effects. For Shamaine Daniels and many other candidates in the 2024 election, contending with the ethical concerns that arise when utilizing AI has become a center point in campaign strategy, policy, and communication.

Discussion Questions:

1. What potential risks does Shamaine Daniels assume when using an AI caller in her campaign?
2. What are the ethical concerns in using AI in communicating with voters or constituents?
3. Does using AI-mediated technology to correspond with elected officials detach or alleviate representatives from their duty to engage with their constituents?
4. What ethical principles should guide politician's use of AI in talking with their constituencies or voters?

Further Information:

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