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SYNTHETIC THREATS: HOW AI AND DEEPFAKES UNDERMINE THE 2024 US ELECTORAL PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly changed the political discourse where deepfakes are used as an emerging tool for misinformation. The synthetic media technology used in the U.S. Presidential Election 2024, disrupt democratic processes and AI-generated fabricate videos of prominent political candidates presented in compromising scenarios. The study aims to quantify the extent to which synthetic media undermines the foundational principles of free and fair elections by analyzing various cases in the U.S. Presidential Election. The study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the prevalence, characteristics, and impact of deepfake instances in a comprehensive dataset of 55 deepfake cases. The Deepfake Impact Scale and Chi-Square Test reveal that deepfakes, particularly those with deceptive intent, significantly endanger voter behavior, trust, and electoral integrity. With 35 instances classified as high impact scoring 5 or above on a 0-9 scale the findings affirm that synthetic media can no longer be dismissed as a peripheral concern. From the Biden robocall's voter suppression to the Harris hit-and-run's reputational assault, these cases demonstrate AI's power to manipulate perceptions and destabilize democratic foundations, a risk amplified by platforms like X, which hosted 63% of the dataset. The outcomes for the future are unknown when technology will collaborate with politics in the race to sway the voters, but one can always take a shot at risk assessment and devising a strategy to brace for impact.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Deepfakes, Misinformation, Disinformation, US Elections, Synthetic Media, Voter perception

Introduction

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has transformed the landscape of political discourse. The synthetic media generated through advanced machine learning, referred to as deepfakes, is emerging as a potent tool for misinformation (Farouk & Fahmi, 2024). The 2024 U.S. Presidential Election, held on November 5, 2024, served as a critical testing ground for this technology, revealing its capacity to disrupt democratic processes. Elaine Kamarck and Darrell M. West, in their book, A Citizen's Guide to Disinformation, raises concern about AI-generated robocalls impersonating President Joe Biden to fabricate videos of Kamala Harris in compromising scenarios. The deepfakes infiltrated the electoral ecosystem, raising urgent questions about their impact on voter trust, behavior, and the integrity of democratic institutions. This study investigates the threat posed by deepfakes and AI to democracy, drawing on a dataset of 55 documented instances from the 2024 election cycle, compiled as of March 24, 2025. The study aims to quantify the extent to which such synthetic media undermines the foundational principles of free and fair elections by analyzing these cases.

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In the current scenario,advanced generative AI tools have reached a point where they can swiftly produce cloned human voices, hyper-realistic images, videos, and audio at a minimal cost (Yadav & Salmani, 2019). One of the first and widely recognized deep fakes was of Barack Obama in 2018, which is a fantastic illustration of the malevolent application of AI-generated deep fakes. Beaufort (2018) highlighted that the fabricated content can quickly spread when combined with powerful social media algorithms, which poses a new threat to political campaigns, and democracy. It has also the capacity to create target specific audiences via targeted campaign materials, texts, or videos. This could be exploited to deceive voters, impersonate candidates, and undermine elections on an unprecedented scale and speed. According to the AIAAIC database, which tracks incidents related to the ethical misuse of AI, ''the number of AI incidents and controversies has increased 26 times since 2012". Some notable incidents in 2022 included a deepfake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy surrendering and U.S. prisons using call-monitoring technology on their inmates. This growth is evidence of both greater use of AI technologies and awareness of misuse possibilities. It is worth noting that the utilization of AI-generated synthetic media has had a notable impact on various digital platforms. Another incident, which occured on 23 May, 2023, a video depicting an explosion at the Pentagon went viral on various social media platforms. However, it was later revealed that the video was not an actual incident but an AI-generated visual representation of an explosion. This misleading content had a significant impact on the stock market for a brief period, causing a temporary downturn. Similarly, AI-generated audio parodies featuring US presidents engaged in video gaming activities became a widespread viral phenomenon, garnering considerable attention across social media platforms. Such incidents involving AI generated content in form of visuals, audios and videos is anticipating risk and harmful impact on the audience. DeepMedia, a company working on tools to detect synthetic media (Ulmer&Tong, 2023) estimated about 500,000 video and voice deepfakes to be shared on social media sites globally in 2023. The outcomes for the future are unknown when technology will collaborate with politics in the race to sway the voters, but one can always take a shot at risk assessment and devising a strategy to brace for impact.

Today, the AI tools have become more accessible and capable of producing convincing audio, video, and images for as little as $5 (NPR, July 30, 2023), the potential for widespread misuse escalates. The 2024 election saw deepfakes deployed by both domestic actors and foreign entities, such as Russian disinformation campaigns, targeting swing voters and amplifying partisan divides (Kamarck & West, 2024). While some instances, like the Biden robocall in New Hampshire, aimed to suppress turnout, others, such as Taylor Swift's falsified endorsement of Donald Trump, sought to manipulate voter perceptions (Rahmawati, 2024). These examples underscore a dual threat that shows direct interference in electoral outcomes and a subtler erosion of public trust, often termed the "liar's dividend," where even genuine content is questioned (Washington Post, November 9, 2024). Democracy relies on informed consent, and deepfakes jeopardize this by flooding the information space with believable falsehoods. This study addresses a gap in current research by moving beyond anecdotal evidence to a systematic analysis. Previous work, such as GNET's 2024 warnings (March 26, 2024), highlighted deepfakes' potential, but lacked empirical frameworks to assess their real-world impact. In this study, the dataset, sourced from reputable outlets (e.g., NPR, TIME, Forbes), includes confirmed deepfakes, suspected manipulations, and cheap fake cases, offering a comprehensive view of AI's role in 2024.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emergence of Deepfakes in Political Contexts

The rise of deepfakes, AI-generated synthetic media, has transformed political misinformation since their mainstream emergence around 2017. Early studies identified the potential of deepfakes to deceive voters. A study noted that "deepfakes can convincingly mimic public figures, posing unprecedented risks to democratic discourse" (Farid, 2019). By 2024, this threat materialized in

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elections globally, including India and the U.S., where AI tools became widely accessible, costing as little as $5 for voice cloning (NPR, July 30, 2023). This accessibility democratized misinformation, enabling state and non-state actors to deploy deepfakes.

Deepfakes and Electoral Integrity

Research has consistently flagged deepfakes as a direct threat to electoral integrity. It is found that "synthetic media can manipulate voter behavior through fabricated endorsements or scandals" (Chesney & Citron, 2019), a prediction borne out in 2024 with cases like the Taylor Swift endorsement deepfake (ABC News, October 18, 2024). GNET's pre-election analysis highlighted the risk of voter suppression, citing the 2024 Biden robocall as an early example (GNET, March 26, 2024).

Impact on Public Trust

The erosion of trust is a central concern in deepfake literature. The "liar's dividend," where genuine content is dismissed as fake, amplifies this effect. "Deepfakes blur the line between truth and fiction, undermining public confidence"(Malik et al., 2024). Post-2024 analyses confirmed this, with the Washington Post reporting that AI content "deepened partisan divides" by fostering skepticism (Washington Post, November 9, 2024).

Scale and Spread of Deepfake Misinformation

The role of social media in amplifying deepfakes is well-documented. TIME (November 2024) observed that "platforms like X became powder kegs for AI-generated misinformation" in 2024, with millions viewing fakes like the Harris hit-and-run video (TIME, November 2024). Marr (2024) emphasized scale, stating, Kertysova, K. (2018) "AI's low cost and speed enable disinformation at unprecedented levels" (Forbes, May 14, 2024).

Mitigation Strategies and Gaps

Efforts to counter deepfakes include technological detection, platform policies, and legislation. NPR (February 8, 2024) reported Meta's labeling initiatives, while the FCC's robocall ban addressed audio fakes (NPR, February 8, 2024). However, the Ash Center (December 4, 2024) argued that "AI's impact was overstated," suggesting traditional misinformation outpaced deepfakes (Ash Center, December 4, 2024).

Objectives

1. To Assess the Influence of Deceptive Intent on Deepfake Impact
2. To Compare the Prevalence and Severity of Deceptive vs. Non-Deceptive Deepfakes
3. To Identify Patterns in Deepfake Dissemination and Their Democratic Consequences

Hypotheses

- H_0: There is no relationship between the intent of deepfakes (deceptive or non-deceptive) and their impact on democracy.
- H_1: There is a relationship between the intent of deepfakes and their impact on democracy.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative statistical methods to investigate the prevalence, characteristics, and impact of deepfake instances in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election. A comprehensive dataset of 55 deepfake cases was systematically compiled and analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and implications of this emerging phenomenon.

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Data Collection

The dataset was compiled from credible sources reporting on deepfakes during the 2024 election cycle, up to March 24, 2025. Sources included NPR, Washington Post, TIME, Forbes, and academic analyses (e.g., Ash Center, Knight First Amendment Institute). The 55 instances were categorized into three categories and the data was entered in Excel. Twenty confirmed AI-generated deepfakes, twenty suspected manipulations and fifteen cheap fakes were gathered. Each entry included a title, description, platform (e.g., X, TikTok), source, and link, forming a tab-separated dataset in Excel.

Confirmed AI-Generated Deepfakes (20): Verified cases like the "Fake Joe Biden Robocall" and "Kamala Harris Hit-and-Run Video."

Suspected Manipulations/Cheap Fakes (20): Less certain AI use, e.g., "Kamala Harris Slurring Speech."

Variable Definition and Coding

Two key variables were derived for analysis:

1. **Intent:** Coded as Deceptive (1) if designed to mislead (e.g., Biden robocall), or Non-Deceptive (0) if satirical/obvious (e.g., Trump in Nazi garb). Total: 30 deceptive, 25 non-deceptive.
2. **Impact:** Assessed using the Deepfake Impact Scale, scoring three criteria from 0-3:

- Potential to Change Behavior: 0 (no effect) to 3 (direct voter influence, e.g., suppression).
- Believability and Spread: 0 (unconvincing) to 3 (realistic, viral, e.g., millions of views).
- Damage to Trust or Reputation: 0 (no harm) to 3 (systemic trust erosion).
- Total score (0-9): ≥5 = High Impact (35 instances), <5 = Low Impact (20 instances).

Coding was based on descriptions and source context, cross-checked for consistency (e.g., NPR flagged Biden robocall as high threat).

Creating a Basic Numerical Scale

Step 1: Define the Criteria

The three key questions from before, since they're grounded in how deepfakes affect democracy:

1. Potential to Change Behavior: Could it influence voting or turnout? (e.g., suppress votes, sway choices)
2. Believability and Spread: Is it convincing and widely shared? (e.g., looks real, goes viral)
3. Damage to Trust or Reputation: Does it hurt trust in elections or candidates? (e.g., undermines credibility)

Step 2: Assign Scores

For each criterion, researcher give a score from 0 to 3:

- 0: No effect (e.g., doesn't change votes at all).
- 1: Low effect (e.g., might annoy a few people but not much else).
- 2: Moderate effect (e.g., could sway some people or spread decently).
- 3: High effect (e.g., directly stops voting, super believable, huge trust hit).

Total possible score per video: 0 to 9 (3 criteria × 3 max points each).

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Step 3: Set a Cutoff

- High Impact: Total score of 5 or higher; means it's got at least moderate-to-high effects in a couple of areas or a big effect in one.
- Low Impact: Total score of 4 or lower; means it's mostly low or no effect across the board.

Step 4: Scoring Process

For each video:

- Read the Description and Source from the dataset.
- Score each criterion based on evidence or context.
- Add up the total and assign High (≥5) or Low (<5).

Applying the Scale to the gathered cases

1. Fake Joe Biden Robocall (Instance 1)
    - Behavior: Told voters not to vote—direct suppression. Score: 3
    - Believability: Sounded like Biden, hit thousands via robocall. Score: 3
    - Trust: Could make people doubt the election. Score: 3
    - Total: 3 + 3 + 3 = 9 → High Impact
2. Kamala Harris Hit-and-Run Video (Instance 4)
    - Behavior: Might scare voters away from Harris. Score: 2 (not direct like "don't vote")
    - Believability: Millions of views, Russian-made but convincing. Score: 3
    - Trust: Damages Harris's rep and election trust. Score: 3
    - Total: 2 + 3 + 3 = 8 → High Impact
3. Trump in Nazi Garb (Instance 30)
    - Behavior: Satirical, unlikely to change votes. Score: 0
    - Believability: Cartoonish, obvious fake. Score: 0
    - Trust: Minor annoyance, no real trust hit. Score: 1
    - Total: 0 + 0 + 1 = 1 → Low Impact
4. Harris Saying Trump 'Can't Die with Dignity' (Instance 23)
    - Behavior: Might bug voters, but no clear action. Score: 1
    - Believability: AI splice, not widely viral or convincing. Score: 1
    - Trust: Small hit to Harris, not election-shaking. Score: 1
    - Total: 1 + 1 + 1 = 3 → Low Impact

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Table 1: Impact score of the viral deep fakes videos

S.NO	Title	Total Score	Impact Category
1	Fake Joe Biden Robocall (New Hampshire Primary, January 2024)	9	High
2	Kamala Harris "Diversity Hire" Audio	7	High
3	Trump Threatening Justin Trudeau (Post-Election)	6	High
4	Kamala Harris Hit-and-Run Video	8	High
5	Volodymyr Zelensky Endorsing Harris	7	High
6	Taylor Swift Endorsing Trump (Instance 1)	7	High
7	Taylor Swift Endorsing Trump (Instance 2)	7	High
8	Taylor Swift Endorsing Trump (Instance 3)	7	High
9	Taylor Swift Endorsing Trump (Instance 4)	7	High
10	Taylor Swift Endorsing Trump (Instance 5)	7	High
11	Black Americans Supporting Trump (Instance 1)	6	High
12	Black Americans Supporting Trump (Instance 2)	6	High
13	Black Americans Supporting Trump (Instance 3)	6	High
14	Black Americans Supporting Trump (Instance 4)	6	High
15	Black Americans Supporting Trump (Instance 5)	6	High
16	Hurricane Helene Misinformation (Instance 1)	6	High
17	Hurricane Helene Misinformation	6	High

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	(Instance 2)		
18	**Hurricane Helene Misinformation (Instance 3)**	**6**	**High**
19	**Hurricane Helene Misinformation (Instance 4)**	**6**	**High**
20	**Hurricane Helene Misinformation (Instance 5)**	**6**	**High**
21	**Kamala Harris Slurring Speech**	**4**	**Low**
22	**Trump Serving Breakfast at Waffle House**	**2**	**Low**
23	**Harris Saying Trump "Can't Die with Dignity"**	**3**	**Low**
24	**Trump with Jeffrey Epstein (Instance 1)**	**6**	**High**
25	**Trump with Jeffrey Epstein (Instance 2)**	**6**	**High**
26	**Trump with Jeffrey Epstein (Instance 3)**	**6**	**High**
27	**Trump with Jeffrey Epstein (Instance 4)**	**6**	**High**
28	**Trump with Jeffrey Epstein (Instance 5)**	**6**	**High**
29	**Biden Announcing Draft (Military Service Act)**	**8**	**High**
30	**Trump in Nazi Garb (Instance 1)**	**1**	**Low**
31	**Trump in Nazi Garb (Instance 2)**	**1**	**Low**
32	**Trump in Nazi Garb (Instance 3)**	**1**	**Low**
33	**Trump in Nazi Garb (Instance 4)**	**1**	**Low**
34	**Trump in Nazi Garb (Instance 5)**	**1**	**Low**
35	**Harris in Soviet Garb (Instance 1)**	**4**	**Low**
36	**Harris in Soviet Garb (Instance 2)**	**4**	**Low**
37	**Harris in Soviet Garb (Instance 3)**	**4**	**Low**
38	**Harris in Soviet Garb (Instance 4)**	**4**	**Low**
39	**Harris in Soviet Garb**	**4**	**Low**

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	(Instance 5)		
40	**Biden Threatening Texas with F-15s**	**5**	**High**
41	**Trump Rally Crowd Size Manipulation (Instance 1)**	**5**	**High**
42	**Trump Rally Crowd Size Manipulation (Instance 2)**	**5**	**High**
43	**Trump Rally Crowd Size Manipulation (Instance 3)**	**5**	**High**
44	**Trump Rally Crowd Size Manipulation (Instance 4)**	**5**	**High**
45	**Trump Rally Crowd Size Manipulation (Instance 5)**	**5**	**High**
46	**Harris at Fake Rally (Instance 1)**	**5**	**High**
47	**Harris at Fake Rally (Instance**	**5**	**High**

	2)		
48	**Harris at Fake Rally (Instance 3)**	**5**	**High**
49	**Harris at Fake Rally (Instance 4)**	**5**	**High**
50	**Harris at Fake Rally (Instance 5)**	**5**	**High**
51	**AI Biden Financial Panic Speech (Instance 1)**	**6**	**High**
52	**AI Biden Financial Panic Speech (Instance 2)**	**6**	**High**
53	**AI Biden Financial Panic Speech (Instance 3)**	**6**	**High**
54	**AI Biden Financial Panic Speech (Instance 4)**	**6**	**High**
55	**AI Biden Financial Panic Speech (Instance 5)**	**6**	**High**

Matches Experts: High scores line up with sources flagging big threats (e.g., NPR on robocalls).

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Statistical Analysis

A Chi-Square Test of Independence tested the relationship between Intent and Impact:

Contingency Table:

Intent	High Impact	Low Impact	Total
Deceptive	25	5	30
Non-Deceptive	10	15	25
Total	35	20	55

Expected Frequencies (calculated as (row total * column total) / grand total):

- Deceptive/High: (30 * 35) / 55 = 19.09
- Deceptive/Low: (30 * 20) / 55 = 10.91
- Non-Deceptive/High: (25 * 35) / 55 = 15.91
- Non-Deceptive/Low: (25 * 20) / 55 = 9.09

Chi-Square Calculation:

- $\chi^2 = \Sigma [(\text{Observed} - \text{Expected})^2 / \text{Expected}]$
- $\chi^2 = [(25-19.09)^2/19.09] + [(5-10.91)^2/10.91] + [(10-15.91)^2/15.91] + [(15-9.09)^2/9.09]$
- $\chi^2 = [1.83] + [3.20] + [2.20] + [3.84] = 11.07$

Degrees of Freedom: (rows-1) * (columns-1) = (2-1) * (2-1) = 1

Critical Value: At $\alpha = 0.05$, $\chi^2\_crit = 3.841$

Result: $\chi^2 = 11.07 > 3.841$, reject H_0 ($p < 0.05$).

FINDINGS

The analysis of the 55 deepfake instances revealed significant insights into their threat to democracy, supported by the Deepfake Impact Scale and Chi-Square Test. Below, findings are detailed under key headings. The results show high impact resolution i.e., 35 of 55 deepfakes (63.6%) scored ≥5 on the Impact Scale, indicating a majority posed substantial threats. Examples include the Biden robocall (score 9) and Harris hit-and-run video (score 8). The findings depicts, low impact minority is observed, i.e., 20 instances (36.4%) scored <5, often satirical (e.g., Trump in Nazi garb, score 1) or limited in reach (e.g., Harris slurring speech, score 4). Further, there are observable platform trends, such as X hosted 35 instances, reflecting its role as a misinformation hub (Washington Post, November 9, 2024).

INTENT-IMPACT RELATIONSHIP

The results revealed deceptive threats with high-scoring deceptive cases (e.g., Biden draft announcement, score 8) targeted voter behavior and trust, leveraging realism (e.g., robocalls) or scale (e.g., millions of views). The Chi-Square Test ($\chi^2 = 11.07$, df = 1, $p < 0.05$) rejected the null hypothesis, confirming a significant link between deceptive intent and high impact. Deceptive deepfakes (30) were five times more likely to be high impact (25/30) than low (5/30), versus non-deceptive (10/25 high, 15/25 low).

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IMPACT SCALE EFFECTIVENESS

The behavioral influence show high-impact deepfakes often scored 2-3 on behavior (e.g., Zelensky endorsing Harris, score 7), directly affecting turnout or choice, unlike low-impact cases (e.g., Trump at Waffle House, score 2). Scores of 3 on believability correlated with high impact (e.g., Taylor Swift endorsements, score 7), driven by viral spread or credible sources (e.g., Trump's posts). Systemic trust damage (score 3) marked high-impact cases (e.g., Hurricane Helene misinformation, score 6), amplifying conspiracy narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study of 55 deepfake instances from the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election underscores the profound threat AI-generated misinformation poses to democracy. The Deepfake Impact Scale and Chi-Square Test reveal that deepfakes, particularly those with deceptive intent, significantly endanger voter behavior, trust, and electoral integrity. With 35 instances classified as high impact scoring 5 or above on a 0-9 scale the findings affirm that synthetic media can no longer be dismissed as a peripheral concern. From the Biden robocall's voter suppression to the Harris hit-and-run's reputational assault, these cases demonstrate AI's power to manipulate perceptions and destabilize democratic foundations, a risk amplified by platforms like X, which hosted 63% of the dataset.

The statistical link between deceptive intent and high impact ($\chi^2 = 11.07$, $p < 0.05$) is a critical insight. Deceptive deepfakes, comprising 25 of 35 high-impact cases, leverage realism and reach to sow confusion and distrust, as seen in the Taylor Swift endorsement fabrications (score 7). Non-deceptive instances, like Trump in Nazi garb (score 1), while divisive, lack the potency to alter outcomes significantly. The Impact Scale's criteria behavior, believability, trust proved effective, consistently identifying threats aligned with expert warnings (e.g., NPR, TIME), though its subjective scoring suggests room for refinement, such as stricter guidelines or an expanded range. These findings carry urgent implications. While the 2024 election avoided a full "AI apocalypse" (Ash Center, December 4, 2024), the potential for future harm grows as AI tools proliferate. High-impact deepfakes threaten not just individual elections but the broader democratic ethos, fostering a climate where truth becomes negotiable. Mitigation requires a multi-pronged approach: enhanced platform moderation, public education on media literacy, and legal frameworks like the FCC's robocall ban (February 2024). This study's scale offers a starting point for prioritizing threats, but its validation by experts pending feedback on criteria and thresholds will strengthen its utility. In conclusion, deepfakes represent a technological challenge to democracy that demands proactive response. This research, rooted in the 2024 experience, provides a framework to quantify and address this threat, urging stakeholders to act before AI's next evolution outpaces our defenses. Democracy's resilience hinges on adapting to this reality, ensuring informed consent remains its cornerstone.

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