Which AI tools shaped 2024-2026 presidential debates, and what were their costs, accuracy, and fabrications?

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Executive Summary

AI tools significantly shaped the 2024-2026 presidential debates by enabling low-cost, rapid fabrications that directly eroded public trust and complicated voters' ability to discern truth, while also providing advanced analytical capabilities for campaigns. General-purpose large language models (LLMs) and specialized voice cloning platforms were widely used for content generation and deepfakes, with costs ranging from free to a few dollars per month for basic services. While fine-tuned AI models achieved high accuracy (up to 92.86%) in detecting debate content nuances, the widespread proliferation of AI-generated misinformation and the public's struggle to identify it created a "liar's dividend" that undermined the overall information environment.

Key Findings

AI Tools Primarily Shaped Debates Through Low-Cost Messaging and Viral Deepfakes

The prominence of AI tools in shaping the 2024-2026 presidential debates was driven by their low cost and accessibility, which democratized their use in candidate preparation, and the viral nature of deepfakes that captured public attention [5, 9, 10, 12, 14]. "Shaping" encompassed altering candidate preparation and messaging, influencing real-time analysis, and driving post-debate public perception.

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, DALL-E, Resemble AI, and Civox were extensively used to draft press releases, generate fundraising solicitations, and fine-tune political messages for diverse voter groups thousands of times daily [9, 10]. This significantly reduced the cost and increased the scale of political content production [2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12]. AI models, including fine-tuned BERT, DeepSeek, and various LLMs, were also deployed for real-time analysis of debate transcripts to detect personal attacks and media bias [15, 18]. However, AI chatbots also actively influenced real-time perception by spreading false claims about broadcast delays during a CNN presidential debate [16].

AI tools drove post-debate public perception through deepfake audio and video, such as the January 2024 Biden robocalls and altered images of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris [2, 5, 8, 10, 12, 17]. This proliferation created a "liar's dividend," allowing politicians to dismiss authentic evidence as fake, which eroded public trust and fueled polarization [5, 7, 10, 12, 17]. While visual deepfakes received significant attention, deepfake audio and simple text were considered more problematic and harder to detect [12]. Ultimately, achieving significant impact required financial resources and expertise, meaning well-funded campaigns and Super PACs were the primary drivers in implementing and popularizing advanced AI tools [10].

Costs of AI Tools Ranged from Free to Specialized Enterprise Plans

General-purpose large language models (LLMs) and image generators like ChatGPT (GPT-4 and GPT-4o), DALL-E, Midjourney, Microsoft Copilot, Meta AI, Google Gemini, Grok, and DeepSeek-V3 were primary drivers of debate fabrications and content generation [2, 5, 9, 15, 16]. Specialized platforms such as Resemble AI for voice cloning and Civox for robocalls also played significant roles [2].

New AI software products are generally inexpensive and accessible to all actors, including the general public and smaller campaigns [9, 10, 12, 14]. For specialized services, Resemble AI offers pay-per-use pricing: rapid voice clones cost $2 per month per voice, pro voice clones cost $5 per month per voice, text-to-speech generation costs $0.0005 per second, and deepfake detection costs $0.04 to $0.07 per second [19]. These platforms also offered volume discounts of up to 80% for higher usage and enterprise plans for custom model training, which disproportionately benefited high-volume, well-resourced operations [19].

While low marginal costs democratized basic access, hidden expenses related to fine-tuning, verification, and specialized voice cloning created a distinct advantage for well-funded campaigns and Super PACs [10]. Achieving significant political impact required financial resources and expertise to build models that surpassed free offerings [10]. Well-funded Super PACs were more likely to implement these advanced generative AI tools [10]. No campaigns or Super PACs disclosed a granular breakdown of AI software spending into specific categories like fine-tuning, generation, verification, or base subscription costs [1, 3, 4, 10, 11]. Instead, campaign finance reports listed general disbursements to vendors for "ads," "mailers," or "campaign services," often funneling funds through shell companies that obscured the actual recipients and specific AI services purchased [20].

Accuracy Varied Widely, with Fine-Tuned Models Excelling in Analysis but General Tools Prone to Errors

The reported high accuracy of AI debate analysis tools is achievable but varies significantly across models, revealing underlying biases and benchmark limitations that undermine their reliability as purely objective scoring mechanisms [15].

Analytical Accuracy:

- **DeepSeek-V3:** Achieved the highest accuracy at 92.86% and a 91.43% recall rate in detecting personal attacks in 2016, 2020, and 2024 debate transcripts [15].
- **Claude Sonnet 4:** Recorded 91.96% accuracy with a 75.68% F1-score [15].
- **Fine-tuned BERT models:** Demonstrated high accuracy ranging from 86.34% to 88.84% and F1-scores between 87.49% and 89.24% [15].
- **Factiverse AI's LiveFC System:** Applied to a 2024 political debate, it successfully identified all 30 claims detected by human fact-checkers, achieving macro-averaged Precision, Recall, and F1 scores of 82.59, 85.78, and 83.92 respectively, with a weighted F1 of 87.26 [21].

These domain-specific tools significantly outperformed standard approaches; for instance, HateBERT-a generic model fine-tuned for general abusive language-achieved only 21.13% accuracy on debate content, highlighting the necessity of specialized fine-tuning [15].

Common Errors and Limitations:

- **Hallucinations and Fabricated Facts:** AI chatbots frequently invented information, such as ChatGPT and Copilot erroneously confirming a broadcast delay during a CNN presidential debate [16]. Other tools, like Meta's AI assistant, falsely insisted that an attempted assassination of Donald Trump did not occur [7].
- **Over-detection and Under-detection:** Grok 3 tended to over-detect attacks, resulting in high recall (91.43%) but lower precision (64.00%) [15]. Conversely, ChatGPT-4o under-detected genuine attacks, performing poorly with a 40.00% recall rate and 51.85% precision [15].
- **Generic Content and Bias:** AI-generated analysis and political content often lacked uniqueness, producing generic slogans, made-up promises, and biased assumptions even when given neutral prompts [9].
- **Public Detection Failures:** Average consumers struggled to distinguish AI-created content from human-created content, achieving an average accuracy of only 5

out of 10 [2, 9, 13, 17]. Voters frequently relied on flawed open-source intelligence strategies, inaccurately assessing content authenticity over half (52%) of the time [7].

AI Fabrications Triggered a "Liar's Dividend" and Eroded Public Trust

AI fabrications directly altered debate narratives and voter perceptions through viral amplification and algorithmic prioritization, triggering a "liar's dividend" that eroded public trust [5, 7, 10, 12]. During the 2024-2026 cycle, AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Copilot erroneously confirmed a broadcast delay during a CNN presidential debate, spreading false claims that disrupted real-time discourse [16]. Deepfakes and altered media rapidly gained traction through viral amplification; for instance, an AI-generated image of Kamala Harris in a communist-style suit tweeted by Elon Musk [17] and a deepfake of a Harris rally with an inflated crowd size garnered 3.6 million views on X [7]. This spread was compounded by algorithmic prioritization, where AI-driven content recommendations fueled confirmation bias and political polarization [11].

The causal chain was reinforced by delayed and flawed fact-checking. The proliferation of AI content created a "liar's dividend," enabling politicians to dismiss authentic but damaging information as AI-generated, which eroded trust in factual information [5, 7, 10, 12]. Public concern was widespread, with 83.4% of Americans expressing concern about AI's role in spreading misinformation in the 2024 election [2]. A significant portion of the public (51%) stated they would lose trust in American democracy if deepfakes impacted voting [11].

However, evidence also suggests these fabrications were largely absorbed without altering the broader electoral calculus. Analyses indicated that AI's actual impacts in 2024 were less than originally feared, with deepfake images and videos not proliferating as extensively as anticipated [6, 12]. Empirical evidence from elections showed that AI-generated visuals had limited superior persuasive power, with emotional and attitudinal effects driven by the content itself rather than its AI origin [13]. While AI turbocharged existing disinformation efforts, making them cheaper and more scalable [2, 5, 8, 12], the final voting decisions remained resilient to the synthetic content itself. Despite this resilience, 21% of voters expected their votes to be swayed by election deepfakes and misinformation [11].

Implications

The widespread adoption of AI tools in the 2024-2026 presidential debates indicates a

permanent shift in political campaigning and information dissemination. Campaigns, Super PACs, and even individual actors can now generate vast amounts of political content and synthetic media at low cost, accelerating content creation and microtargeting efforts. This necessitates increased vigilance from media organizations, fact-checkers, and the public to verify information. The "liar's dividend" effect suggests a long-term challenge to public trust in authentic information, requiring robust media literacy initiatives and technological solutions for content provenance. While advanced AI offers precise analytical capabilities for debate content, its effectiveness is undermined by the pervasive nature of AI-generated fabrications and the public's difficulty in distinguishing real from fake. Future debate cycles will likely see continued evolution in both the sophistication of AI-generated content and the tools developed to detect it, further complicating the information environment.

Limitations and Caveats

The granular financial data on AI software spending by specific campaigns and Super PACs remains largely undisclosed, often obscured by general disbursements to vendors and shell companies [20]. This limits a precise understanding of the exact dollar amounts allocated to fine-tuning, generation, and verification versus base subscription costs. While high accuracy rates are reported for specific AI models in detecting personal attacks, these are often based on domain-specific fine-tuning, and generic models perform poorly [15]. The reliability of AI for objective debate scoring is contingent on the specific model used and remains vulnerable to over-detection, under-detection, and factual errors [9, 15, 16]. Furthermore, while the impact of AI fabrications on voter perception is evident, the precise causal link to broader electoral calculus shifts is less clear, with some evidence suggesting voter resilience to synthetic content [6, 13].

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