

How does the proliferation of fabricated intelligence in presidential debates erode the epistemic foundations of democratic accountability and reshape the strategic power dynamics between political candidates?

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Executive Summary

The proliferation of fabricated intelligence in presidential debates erodes the epistemic foundations of democratic accountability by fostering a "liar's dividend" and "skepticism tax," which destabilize public trust and make it difficult for voters to distinguish fact from fiction. Simultaneously, it reshapes strategic power dynamics between political candidates by enabling low-cost narrative proliferation and high-fidelity microtargeting, allowing campaigns to curate reality for voters through algorithmically optimized content. Evidence suggests these processes are mutually reinforcing, with the rapid scaling of tailored narratives fueling the erosion of shared reality necessary for democratic accountability.

Key Findings

Erosion of Epistemic Foundations through "Liar's Dividend" and "Skepticism Tax"

Fabricated intelligence fundamentally erodes the epistemic foundations of democratic accountability by triggering a "liar's dividend" and imposing a "skepticism tax" [10, 13, 14]. The "liar's dividend" allows candidates to cast doubt on authentic evidence, enabling them to evade responsibility for their actions [10, 14]. This is exacerbated by the fact that AI-generated content is statistically indistinguishable from human-created material, with response rates to AI-written advocacy letters matching human ones [8]. The "skepticism tax" destabilizes epistemic certainty, shifting voter confidence away from institutional sources toward closed, peer-based networks [13].

Research indicates that warnings about deepfakes do not improve voters' ability to discern authentic content; instead, they induce a generalized disbelief, causing participants to believe real videos are fake [17]. This effect allows candidates to easily

discredit genuine content [17]. The proliferation of inauthentic content makes it increasingly difficult for voters to distinguish fact from fiction, leading to widespread distrust in the entire information ecosystem [2, 8, 14, 16]. This erosion of trust can foster political nihilism and weaken social trust, which is essential for civic engagement and confidence in democratic institutions [8].

The impact on voter trust is measurable. A 2025 YouGov-Brennan Center survey indicated that 62% of U.S. respondents believed they had encountered deepfakes in political content, and 41% reported increased skepticism toward all online videos of politicians [26]. A 2025 Pew study showed that 62% of U.S. adults routinely questioned video authenticity, with trust in election-related media dropping 22 points since 2020 [26]. Following mutual accusations of deploying fakes in 2024, 58% of voters reported reduced trust in all campaign media [26]. Public confidence in investigative journalism declined by 18% in post-election polling in 2025 [26].

Reshaping Strategic Power Dynamics through Microtargeting and Narrative Proliferation

AI simultaneously levels the strategic playing field through low-cost narrative proliferation while concentrating power via high-fidelity microtargeting [5, 8, 14, 16]. Generative AI tools make narrative creation inexpensive and highly accessible, allowing under-resourced candidates to optimize election logistics and campaign outreach [5]. These tools enable the rapid, scalable production of vast amounts of tailored content [5, 8, 16].

Conversely, AI concentrates power by enabling high-fidelity microtargeting that can influence voter behavior. AI systems analyze extensive data from social media, voter registration databases, and consumer behavior to identify trends and preferences with unprecedented precision [16]. AI-driven sentiment analysis allows campaigns to gauge public opinion in real-time and adjust messaging strategies accordingly [16]. This automation can widen the gap between well-funded campaigns and those with fewer resources [16]. Combined with microtargeting, AI revolutionizes disinformation campaigns by tailoring content to individual psychological profiles and exploiting cognitive biases [1, 3, 8, 11, 14]. Social media algorithms then amplify this disinformation, enabling targeted curation of reality that makes tailored narratives the most frequent and salient ones in a voter's information environment [14, 16].

AI Adoption and Campaign Tactics in Recent Elections

The 2024 U.S. presidential election served as a critical case study for emerging AI-driven strategic trends [2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10].

- **Strategic AI Adoption:** In January 2024, AI-generated robocalls mimicking President Joe Biden's voice urged over 20,000 New Hampshire voters to skip the primary [5, 7, 10, 11]. During the 2024 Republican primary, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's campaign deployed AI-generated images depicting Donald Trump embracing Dr. Anthony Fauci [12]. In August 2024, Donald Trump posted an AI-generated image on Truth Social falsely depicting Taylor Swift endorsing him as Uncle Sam [7].

- **Narrative Variants and Engagement:** Coordinated networks of 34 accounts used generative AI to create biased images and amplify conservative narratives for Donald Trump across Twitter/X, YouTube, and mock websites, with promoted content shared thousands of times daily [6]. A false AI audio clip of UK opposition leader Keir Starmer garnered 1.5 million views on X within days [12].

- **AI Models and Costs:** Campaigns deployed Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, GPT-4, Gemini, and Llama 2 for text generation, and DALL-E, Midjourney, and Stability AI for images [5, 6, 10, 13, 14, 15]. Generating AI content required minimal time and cost [6, 16]. However, building advanced models required significant financial investment, giving well-funded Super PACs an advantage [19, 22].

- **Accuracy:** Standard LLMs performed poorly on fact-checking (0.1 to 0.3 F1 scores) [23]. When augmented with Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) pipelines accessing curated evidence, accuracy improved by 233%, reaching a 0.90 macro F1 score [23]. In 2024 debate tests, ChatGPT and Perplexity provided instant responses that closely matched human fact-checkers, operating faster but lacking the scalability of human oversight [9, 13, 20]. Factiva's real-time fact-checking system transcribed and categorized 1,123 statements during the 2024 presidential and vice-presidential debates [21].

Durability of Reputational Damage and Early AI Advantages

AI-induced reputational damage remains durable even when voters suspect fabrication [18]. Deepfake videos degrade political reputations and decrease voter support for targeted candidates, with the damage being most severe among a candidate's initial supporters [18]. Standard fact-checking efforts reportedly fail to undo this total reputational harm [18].

Early AI adoption in campaigns yields only temporary electoral advantages that rapidly dissipate as opponents mirror tactics and neutralize the initial edge [23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29]. While AI tools allow campaigns to analyze vast datasets, gauge real-time sentiment, and deploy chatbots for personalized voter outreach [16], the accessibility of AI technology and the nature of AI-driven voter engagement prevent the establishment of durable electoral gains [23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29].

During the 2024 presidential debate, no specific instances of candidates using fabricated intelligence to directly counter opponents in real-time were recorded [7, 10]. However, candidates made numerous false or misleading claims, with Donald Trump making four times more false or suspect claims than Kamala Harris [4]. Post-debate analysis quantified the "liar's dividend" effect: experimental studies found that false claims of misinformation increased politician support more effectively than apologies or simple denials [25].

Implications

The proliferation of fabricated intelligence presents a profound challenge to democratic processes, requiring a re-evaluation of how information is consumed, verified, and regulated. The erosion of epistemic foundations means that traditional mechanisms of accountability, such as fact-checking, are increasingly performative and resource-intensive, often failing to reverse reputational damage or restore trust [17, 18]. This necessitates a shift in focus toward building resilience against disinformation and fostering critical media literacy among the electorate.

The reshaping of strategic power dynamics implies that political campaigns will continue to evolve rapidly, with AI becoming an indispensable tool for both narrative creation and voter engagement. While AI offers opportunities for under-resourced campaigns to compete, its capacity for high-fidelity microtargeting and algorithmic curation of reality risks concentrating power in the hands of those with superior data access and technical expertise. This could lead to a more fragmented and personalized information environment, further undermining the shared factual basis required for collective democratic decision-making.

Limitations and Caveats

The provided research, while extensive, lacks precise statistical data on voter trust

decline rates, exact fact-checking budget allocations for major campaigns, and mathematical correlations between detected fabrications and final vote share changes [8, 13, 16, 18]. While qualitative and some quantitative evidence points to significant impacts on trust and reputation, specific metrics for these effects are not consistently available. Additionally, the conclusion regarding the temporary nature of early AI adoption advantages is based on moderate confidence, as direct comparative data on durable electoral gains for early versus late AI adopters remains limited, and expert consensus is split [23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29].

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