

# [***How a magician who has never voted found himself at the center of an AI political scandal***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BD6-SJX1-JBSS-S3VG-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; A New Orleans street magician who has no fixed address, has never voted and claims to hold a world record in fork bending might seem like an unlikely candidate to be involved in a high-tech political scandal.

But on Friday, Paul Carpenter - whose magical feats include escaping a straitjacket in less than 11 seconds - entered the national political spotlight when he revealed himself as the creator of an AI-generated robocall imitating President Joe Biden's voice that was sent to New Hampshire voters.

Carpenter told CNN in an interview that he was hired to create the fake audio by a political consultant working for the campaign of Minnesota Rep. Dean Phillips, a long-shot Democratic challenger to Biden. He provided text messages, Venmo logs and other records to support his account.

The robocall, which urged Democrats to skip voting in the New Hampshire primary, has spurred law enforcement investigations and worries about the future of AI's impact on American ***politics***. Carpenter said that he didn't know how the audio would be used and was "heartbroken" that his work could have convinced people not to cast their ballots.

"I'm a magician and a hypnotist," he said. "I'm not in the political realm - I just got thrown into this thing."

The Phillips consultant, Steve Kramer, declined to comment Friday, and Phillips' campaign distanced itself from Kramer, saying it had no knowledge of his alleged involvement with the robocall.

Carpenter's claims were [*first reported*](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/biden-robocall-new-hampshire-strategist-rcna139760) Friday by NBC News.

The origin of the robocall - the first major effort to use AI to imitate a US president in an attempt to suppress votes - has been a much-debated mystery among political circles since it was sent to more than 20,000 people in late January. A voice that sounds like Biden's urged listeners not to vote in the primary and instead to "save your vote" for the November election.

New Hampshire's attorney general [*announced earlier this month*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/tech/nh-ag-robocall-update/index.html) that he had opened a criminal investigation into the call and linked it [*to a pair of Texas-based telecommunications companies*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/politics/biden-robocall-texas-strip-mall-invs/index.html). US law enforcement officials have also been closely monitoring the incident to determine if a federal crime was committed, a senior US official familiar with the matter told CNN.

Kramer was hired by the Phillips campaign to assist in ballot efforts in New York and Pennsylvania, and the campaign paid his company a total of more than $250,000 in December and January, Federal Election Commission records show.

A longtime political consultant, Kramer [*worked for*](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/07/kanyes-short-lived-attempt-to-get-on-the-2020-ballot.html) Kanye West's 2020 presidential bid and has a history of producing robocalls. Phillips' campaign said it had no knowledge of his reported involvement with the AI Biden call.

"If it is true that Mr. Kramer had any involvement in the creation of deepfake robocalls, he did so of his own volition which had nothing to do with our campaign," Phillips spokeswoman Katie Dolan [*told CNN*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/23/politics/dean-phillips-biden-robocall/index.html) in a statement on Friday.

"The fundamental notion of our campaign is the importance of competition, choice, and democracy," Dolan said. "We are disgusted to learn that Mr. Kramer is allegedly behind this call, and if the allegations are true, we absolutely denounce his actions." Dolan said Kramer is no longer working for the campaign.

Kramer referred a request for comment to Hank Sheinkopf, a New York political consultant. Sheinkopf, who said he was acting as a spokesman for Kramer, told CNN that Kramer will "have a statement to make after the South Carolina primary" on Saturday but declined to comment further before then.

Last month, Phillips, who represents a Minneapolis-area district in the US House, pushed back on the notion that the robocall might have come from a supporter of his. If that were the case, he told CNN's Jake Tapper, "I'd be the first to denounce it."

"Whoever did that, it's wrong, and it's exactly why we need a leader who's not 80-some years old, who can understand what is coming," said, framing himself as more apt to deal with AI regulation than Biden or former President Donald Trump, the front-runner for the Republican nomination.

Carpenter, who performed card tricks and bent a fork during an interview with CNN on Friday, said he was introduced to Kramer on the street in New Orleans by an acquaintance. A self-described "digital nomad" who spends his time traveling around the US, performing magic and doing web design and other freelance jobs, Carpenter, 47, said he's long been interested in learning the latest tech advances.

"If you study the history of magic, you'll know that magicians have always used the newest forms of technology," he said.

Carpenter said he did several AI voice-imitation projects for Kramer, including audio that sounded like Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, before Kramer sent him a script for the call mimicking Biden. He said he generated audio of the president through the AI voice service ElevenLabs, which has said it deactivated the account associated with the fake Biden call.

The process only takes "five minutes, ten tops," Carpenter said. "I can make anybody say whatever I want."

Carpenter, who said he's never cast a ballot in his life, saw the job as just "another gig" and claimed he didn't realize the political implications of what he was creating. He said he had never heard of Phillips, and assumed Kramer was working for Biden himself.

Carpenter said that Kramer arranged for his father, Bruce Kramer, to pay Carpenter $150 on Venmo for generating the AI call, and provided screenshots of Venmo transactions from an account with the name Bruce Kramer. Bruce Kramer told CNN that "I cannot confirm or deny anything at this point."

After news broke about the fake robocall, Kramer sent Carpenter a link to an article about it and the word "Shhhhhhhh," according to a text message screenshot Carpenter showed CNN. He said that Kramer told him to delete all of the emails between the two of them, and that he did.

Carpenter's attorney, Brandon Kizy - who Carpenter said he found on Reddit and is representing him for free - stressed that Carpenter didn't know about any plans to use the robocall when he made it.

"Paul had no prior knowledge of what the AI-generated content would be used for and Paul did not have any knowledge that it would be used to potentially affect or be used in connection with any election or voter activity," Kizy said in a statement.

As figures at the center of American political scandals go, Carpenter is certainly "eccentric" - a word he uses to describe himself. In the interview, he talked about the stunts he has posted videos of online, including one in which he role-plays various characters - wearing blackface, walking into a women's restroom, and drawing a swastika on his forehead - in what he explained as an effort to bring people together.

"What is the difference between the facts and the truth?" he asks in the video, standing in a river wearing only a leaf.

Few magic tricks appear on Carpenter's social profiles, but he has posted at least one other deepfake video of Biden on his Facebook account. In the three-second video clip, Biden appears to say, "this is the end of media as we know it. Next question?" Carpenter wrote in a post that he made the video in "five minutes."

Political observers said the robocall scandal - and Carpenter's role in it - is a sign of how simple it is for just about anyone to influence ***politics*** with AI tools that are increasingly easy to access.

"We have now fully democratized the ability to do what used to be in the hands of a few - the state-sponsored actors and sophisticated organizations - and now anybody can do this," said Hany Farid, a University of California Berkeley professor who has studied artificial intelligence. "By the time we sort it all out, the election is over, we've all voted. And that I think is really worrisome."

Liz Purdy, a senioradviser to Biden's campaign, said in a statement that the campaign was "hyper vigilant about the urgent threat disinformation aimed at suppressing voting and deliberately undermining free and fair elections poses to our democracy."

"We support efforts, including by New Hampshire law enforcement, to hold those who want to disrupt our democratic elections accountable," she said.

Carpenter said he has not been contacted by authorities about the robocall. Asked about his brush with the political spotlight, he said he feels duped and used by Kramer.

"I never thought I'd be here," he said. "I've chased fame my entire life, not infamy - and now I feel like I'm infamous."

CNN's Alison Main, Allison Gordon, Isabelle Chapman and Yahya Abou-Ghazala contributed this this report.

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