MPhil Politics, Comparative Government

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Reseseach Question

What are the causal effects of AI-generated news articles on voter attitudes towards immigration and the economy?

Theoretical and Empirical Motivations

Advancements in machine learning techniques, particularly transformer models trained to efficiently handle sequential data inputs and outputs, have popularised the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Vaswani *et al.*, 2017). Amongst AI's applications, generating hyper-realistic textual and visual content has become easily accessible, helping AI become an enabling informational tool. Yet, as unregulated AI technologies remain prone to hallucinations and misuse from bad actors, they are raising concern in social and political contexts (Duberry, 2022; Rawte *et al.*, 2023). AI can be used to generate manipulative political information and deceitful deepfakes which can be used to incite hate or spread misinformation. Questions are therefore being raised on whether AI-generated content influences voting behaviour and election outcomes such that it poses a threat to the trust and integrity of democratic political institutions (Stockwell, 2024).

My research question builds upon the rise of fake news, and fills a distinct gap in the new AI literature. Structural effects of globalisation and economic liberalism, coupled with individual political failings and electoral shocks have created an increasingly unequal and divided world. Consequent disillusionment and disconnected identities have encouraged voter volatility and rising populist narratives, notably in the United Kingdom (UK) (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2019: 28-32). This environment — coupled with social media — has encouraged the dangerous spread of fake news which has been shown to favour populists, affect voting behaviour, and strengthen identities and affective polarisation within echo chambers (Cantarella, Fraccaroli and Volpe, 2023; Pfister *et al.*, 2023; Hobolt, Lawall and Tilley, 2023). Despite minimal literature on AI in political science, early research suggests AI-generated messages can also be

persuasive, and propaganda produced by AI can be compelling (Bai *et al.*, 2023; Goldstein *et al.*, 2024). But, when aware of political content being AI-generated, readers become sceptical of its validity even if the content is true (Altay and Gilardi, 2024). Given possible scepticism towards veracity, Cashell (2024) argues deepfakes are used to perpetuate existing stereotypes rather than attempting to persuade new views. As AI-generated content can be compelling and used to polarise in similar ways to fake news, the volatile political landscape also provides fertile ground for widespread dissemination of deceitful AI-generated information.

The research focuses on the UK to expand the literature beyond the United States. The dependent variables are conceptually grounded in voting behaviour and valence theory, with consideration given to their operationalisation and measurement validity so results can be reliably used for further research (Adcock and Collier, 2001; Goertz, 2006; Green and Jennings, 2012; Fisher, 2017). However, further literature review is required to best identify what voter attitudes may be susceptible to persuasion from a simple experimental exposure. Running a pilot study may be an effective way to provide credence to my initial hypotheses before refining the research design.

If AI is shown to influence attitudes, it could validate populists using the technology to shape political discourse and threaten institutions, risking democratic backsliding (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). The implications of this research topic would inform how we regulate, highlight, or restrict AI-generated news — whether inaccurate or not.[1]

Hypothesis to be Tested

H_1: Exposure to AI-generated news articles will increase voter support for immigration policies.

H_2: Awareness of article content being AI-generated will not moderate the effect of exposure of such articles on attitudes towards immigration and the economy.

[1] However, aggregate-level effects of AI on the 2024 UK election were minimal (Simon, McBride and Altay, 2024).

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