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1

AI, Democracy, and the New Distrust

THE OPENING DECADES of the twenty-first century have been tumultuous, to put it mildly. A global financial crisis, a deadly pandemic, increasingly frequent climate-driven environmental catastrophes—the list goes on. Despite all that has transpired, however, it seems plausible that future centuries will remember our current historical moment primarily for one thing: the rise of artificial intelligence. By all indications, we are living through the birth of a new era, the “Age of AI.”¹

Of course, the roots of current AI technology do extend further back in time. Arguably the field of AI, as an engineering project, was born in the mid-twentieth century, at a 1956 Summer Research Project workshop at Dartmouth College. And the basic techniques that underpin present-day AI, what we now call “deep learning,” emerged in the early 1980s. However, it was events following the turn of the century that signaled that these earlier developments, originally of interest only to a small handful of cognitive scientists, would provide the foundations for what will plausibly be a new global epoch.

A first crucial watershed came in 2012, when the AI research community was shocked by the victory of a deep-learning system in an important image-classification competition. The winning “AlexNet” system—created, in part, by 2024 Nobel Prize winner

Geoffrey Hinton—demonstrated that, when deep learning systems were scaled up, taking advantage of the rapid growth of computing power and the availability of large datasets for training, they could perform surprisingly impressive feats, coming close to human-level performance on tasks like visual object recognition.

New learning algorithms soon led to further breakthroughs, this time in AI gameplay. Deep-learning systems from the DeepMind lab in London shattered previous assumptions about the capabilities of AI by displaying superhuman performance first in video games and then in complex board games, including the ancient game of go, long considered an unassailable holy grail for AI research.

The development that would prove definitive, however, was the emergence of large language models. Increasingly massive deep-learning systems for language generation were first built in the 2010s, across a number of AI labs. However, it was the ChatGPT system, created by San Francisco's OpenAI and released in 2022, that captured the public imagination and launched almost overnight a global commercial market now worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

Since the launch of ChatGPT, the capacities of AI systems have continued to rapidly improve, now spanning sophisticated language and visual processing tasks, computer code generation, image synthesis, robotic control, and innumerable other domains. Indeed, it is a widespread view in the AI research community that the core problems in AI development have more or less been conquered. Practical problems, such as data availability, may affect the future pace of development. But the general view is that AI that is at least as good as humans in every testable domain—artificial general intelligence, or AGI²—is within reach, and is likely to emerge sometime over the next few decades (Figure 1).

Some commentators, particularly among high-profile Silicon Valley investors, have celebrated this technological progress and clamored for its aggressive further pursuit.³ However, many others have raised the alarm about possible hazards caused by increasingly powerful AI. The concerns expressed by this contingent range from discrimination and bias in AI-supported decision-making, to

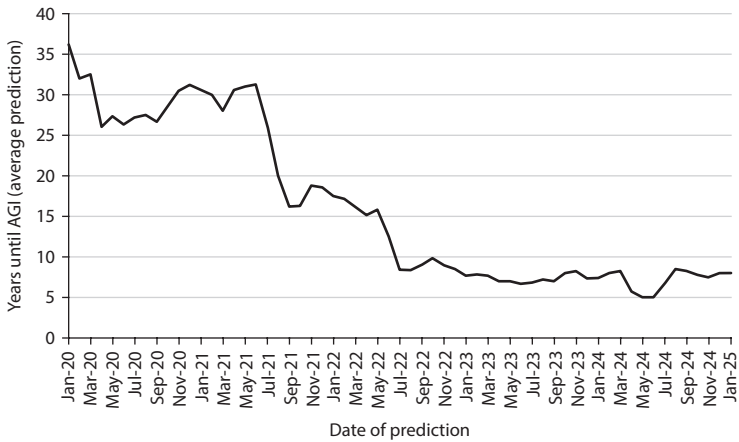


FIGURE 1. Crowd-sourced estimates of when Artificial General Intelligence will emerge. Based on data collected by Metaculus (metaculus.com) in answer to the question “When will the first general AI system be devised, tested, and publicly announced?”

possible existential risks from AI systems that escape human control.⁴ The burgeoning field of “AI safety” has spawned new academic literatures, large commercial investments, and a plethora of initiatives aimed at AI governance and potential regulation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the main threads in AI safety discussions align with a set of longer-standing cultural preoccupations. In particular, concerns about AI discrimination and bias carry forward preexisting narratives about structural racism. Similarly, work pointing to potential catastrophic risks of AI has expanded a preexisting conversation about existential risks from climate change, pandemic disease, and other global threats.

Another case where this pattern of thematic transposition can be discerned is in discussions about the impact of AI on democracy. Although it has not typically been at the top of the AI safety agenda, a number of commentators have expressed worries about how AI may impact the functioning of democratic institutions and processes.⁵ As with other topics in AI safety, this one tracks a

corresponding but wider set of concerns, concerns about the health and resilience of democracy itself.

Like the popular discussion around AI, the current wave of apprehension about democracy came to cultural center stage in the mid-2010s. Indeed, if one compares the state of the conversation around democracy during the closing years of the previous century, the themes were dramatically different. Rather than anxiety or unease, writing on the state of democracy reflected instead a moment of relative complacency, or even in some cases an air of triumphalism. Most emblematic of this mood, perhaps, was Francis Fukuyama's influential 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which predicted international convergence on the American institutional model, in "an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism."⁶

In that late twentieth-century, post-Cold War moment of self-confidence, when concerns were raised about democratic institutions, they tended to call for a loosening of restraints on the will of the popular majority. For example, writing in 1999, political theorist Jeremy Waldron argued against the need for constitutional guardrails on lawmaking, reasoning that such limits were really superfluous. According to Waldron, there would be "a compelling argument for constitutional constraints if minorities had reason to fear that any legislative rethinking of the rules about free speech and loyal opposition would be a way of crushing or silencing dissent."⁷ In Waldron's view, such a fear was simply unjustified, at least in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. "In both countries there are robust and established traditions of political liberty . . . and in both countries there are vigorous debates about political structure that seem able to proceed without threatening minority freedoms . . . political procedure and political culture remain the subject of ongoing, healthy and benign disagreement."⁸

This same trustfulness toward government institutions continued to manifest after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, when influential figures like law professor and judge Richard

Posner argued that legal constraints on presidential action should be relaxed in order to allow for a robust defense of national security.⁹ Underlying such recommendations lay an evident confidence in the reliability of liberal democratic institutions, which admitted no fear that expanding presidential power might raise any risk of fundamentally destabilizing the overall political order. As Sanford Levinson and Jack Balkin wrote in 2010:

Even the bitterest enemies of the Bush administration . . . never genuinely worried that the President and Vice President would try to extend their terms in office by decree or that they would attempt to suspend the constitutionally required election and the inauguration of a successor. No matter how boldly presidents appear to act, the tradition of regular elections is firmly rooted in the American political system. . . . Indeed it is this very certainty that elections will be held and that losers will acquiesce in a peaceful transition of power that establishes the United States as a constitutional republic.¹⁰

This same confidence was evinced still more vividly in an essay written around the same time by legal scholars Eric Posner and Adrian Vermeule, in which they inveighed against what they viewed as a widespread but baseless fear that democratic governance might collapse into authoritarianism, a fear they labeled “tyrannophobia.” Posner and Vermeule called for an end to such paranoia: “The United States has never had a true dictator, or even come close to having one. . . . By now, 233 years after independence, these risks should be close to zero.”¹¹ Tyrannophobia, they argued, is “an element of the broader paranoid style of American politics,” which “can be explained by cognitive biases and other psychological phenomena,” making it “akin to a fear of genetically modified foods.”¹² Once again, the real danger, in their view, was that unjustified fears of government power would lead to excessive and counterproductive constraint on democratic processes: “We might think of tyrannophobia as similar to other prejudices that perhaps had some social function under radically different

circumstances in the distant past, but that have no place in modern times, and only retard institutional change that is needed to address modern challenges.”¹³

However discordant this argument may sound in the present historical moment, it is only fair to acknowledge that writers like Posner and Vermeule, Waldron, and Fukuyama did have some apparent empirical basis for their views. It was of course true that, up until the time of their writing, every outgoing president had peacefully handed over the reins of power. But there were also broader patterns that encouraged confidence in democracy. For one thing, democracy appeared to be spreading worldwide, with fairly steady increases year after year in the number of democratically structured governments during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s (Figure 2). And earlier research had provided a basis for expecting that once democracy was established, it could be relied upon to persist, at least in reasonably prosperous countries. In particular, highly influential work by Seymour Lipset had observed that democratic countries with a GDP above a particular threshold were extremely unlikely to lose their democratic character.¹⁴ It was Lipset’s work and its progeny that led Posner and Vermeule to argue, in their paper on tyrannophobia, that the “United States of 2009 is too wealthy, with a population that is too highly educated, to slide into authoritarianism. Very likely, it really can’t happen here.”¹⁵

That complacent attitude, which characterized at least thirty years of commentary on democracy, has since been shattered by a constellation of events spanning the first couple of decades of this century. First, a reversal became apparent in what had been worldwide growth in democracy. Sometime after the turn of the century, that trend had leveled out and the proportion of countries with authentically democratic governments started to decline (see Figure 2). This apparent democratic recession represented an acceleration in a trend that had started earlier; between 1974 and 2008, at least fifty-two democracies had shifted either to illiberal or authoritarian regimes,¹⁶ in what would become a spreading pattern of democratic backsliding.

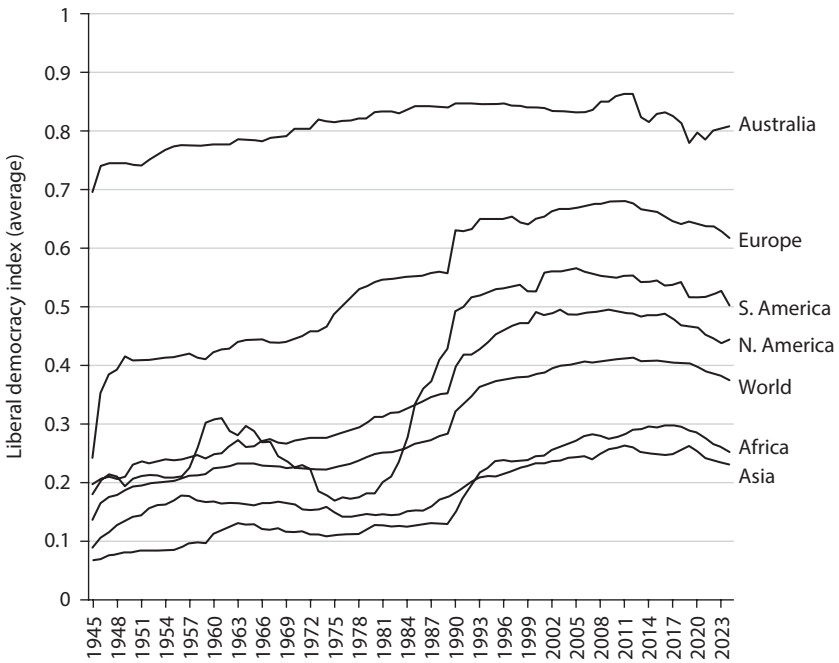


FIGURE 2. Trends in democratic governance, based on data from V-Dem processed by Our World in Data.

Within this broader pattern, the authoritarian tilt of Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s administration in Turkey had salience to Western commentators, as did Xi Jinping’s reversal of previously liberalizing trends in China. Still closer to home was the dramatic pattern of democratic backsliding in Hungary under Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party, and then, in the US itself, the rise of Donald Trump and the shocking January 6th attack on the Capitol building.

These developments, and the broader pattern in which they appeared to participate, profoundly changed the tenor of the public conversation around democracy. As political scientist Yascha Mounk tells it, “When I started graduate school in the late 2000s, the conventional wisdom in comparative politics still held that a large number of affluent democracies had become ‘consolidated.’

Because of their wealth and the length of their democratic history, I learned, countries such as France, Japan, and the United States were extremely unlikely to experience serious democratic backsliding, much less any actual breakdown of their institutions. . . . Over the past decade, events have forced political scientists to consign many of these supposed certainties to the scrap heap.”¹⁷

In this new atmosphere—as a shorthand, let’s call it the New Distrust—the previous calls to remove hindersome restraints from government have been replaced by calls for new measures to protect against democratic backsliding. For example, concerning the situation in the United States, legal scholar Laura Dickinson wrote that “Trump’s presidency revealed many weaknesses in the U.S. constitutional structure, its statutory framework, and its jurisprudence, weaknesses that had been relatively obscured for most of our history because Presidents of all political parties have mostly voluntarily obeyed norms of behavior that keep the presidency within the bounds of constitutional democratic governance.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Eric Posner, erstwhile author of “Tyrannophobia,” turned his scholarly attention to threats to democracy, as in a 2020 book entitled *The Demagogue’s Playbook*. And whereas the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1992 had featured Fukuyama’s *End of History*, in 2018 it featured a book by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt entitled *How Democracies Die*.¹⁹

Levitsky and Ziblatt, along with other writers like Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq (authors of *How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy*),²⁰ returned to an attitude much older than the one evinced by the likes of Vermeule or Waldron, an attitude according to which democratic institutions must be carefully structured and vigilantly monitored, in order to protect against their own intrinsic tendency to collapse into authoritarianism. It makes sense to call the contemporary view the *New Distrust* because apprehensions about the inherent fragility of democracy have been expressed intermittently since the time of ancient Athens. The Framers of the US Constitution, in particular, were veritably obsessed with the problem, speaking frequently in terms of the risk of “tyranny” reemerging from

within the polity they were trying to design,²¹ a polity that Benjamin Franklin described ominously as “a republic, if you can keep it.”²² The events of the last two decades have brought this anxiety-ridden attitude toward democracy roaring back.²³

Given that this widespread concern about democratic backsliding reemerged around the same time that public attention turned also to AI safety, it is natural that the intersection between these two topics should become the focus for some analysis. And consistent with this expectation, a certain amount has been written on the topic of “AI and democracy.” However, when one looks closely at the details of this nascent literature, there is something surprising about its substance. The conversation that has emerged so far concentrates overwhelmingly on three topics.²⁴ The first is the use of AI to pollute the epistemic environment that citizens need to exercise their democratic role, with worries including deepfakes and AI-generated misinformation, for example by foreign actors attempting to disrupt elections. The second focus is on the risk that burgeoning AI-driven revenues will unreasonably expand the power of technology companies, with distorting effects on public decision-making and the rule of law, including violations of privacy through corporate “surveillance” or misappropriation of private user data.²⁵ Third, there is a focus on how AI lends itself to abuse in nondemocratic regimes.²⁶

Certainly, all of these topics identify genuine risks, and they deserve to be vigorously investigated and addressed. However, there is a surprising disconnect between most writing on “AI and democracy” and the current discussion around democracy per se. The themes that characterize the latter are organized around what we have called the New Distrust, highlighting the ways in which state institutions may fall into democratic backsliding, as a result of their own inherent structural vulnerabilities. The New Distrust, that is, distrusts *government*, and sees it as an intrinsically risky affair, one always threatening to lapse into illiberalism or authoritarianism, due to a malfunction of its own internal processes. In contrast to this perspective, most commentary on AI and

democracy has tended to focus on factors surrounding but external to democratic government institutions, in particular news and social media, tech corporations, and rival nondemocratic nations. When democratic government itself comes into the conversation, it is typically assigned a role not as a perpetrator of problems, but rather as an innocent victim or, still more often, as a problem-solver. Government regulation of AI is almost always part of the proposed recipe for avoiding the challenges AI might cause for democratic functions.

All in all, the assumptions about government institutions that underlie most commentary on AI and democracy seem more in line with the complacent attitude that prevailed during the 1990s than with the more skeptical perspective underlying the New Distrust. Perhaps this reflects the genealogical connection between current debates about the social impact of AI and a longer-standing conversation about other forms of digital technology, in particular the internet and social media, a conversation that began well before the onset of the New Distrust. Although that older discussion has certainly flagged potential negative impacts of digital technology on democracy, the story has typically been one about an undermining of the broader social and cultural conditions that impinge on democratic functions, rather than about dangers structurally inherent to democratic government institutions themselves, and recommendations for reform typically involve technical mitigations or regulation by presumably reliable organs of government. Perhaps for the same genealogical reasons, most work on AI safety shows this same confident attitude toward the role of government.

What does the topic of AI and democracy look like when viewed from the standpoint of the New Distrust, and the anxieties—inherent to republican theory—which the New Distrust revives? That is, what forms does the potential impact of AI on democracy take when one starts with an already suspicious eye toward the reliability of democratic institutions? The aim of the present work is to examine that question. Starting from the

assumptions animating the New Distrust, and therefore viewing democratic government institutions as intrinsically liable to backsliding into illiberalism or authoritarianism, our objective is to examine the possible impact of AI on democracy, considered in that already circumspect light.

In approaching the topic, we will begin, in the next chapter, with a consideration of democratic stability. The goal is to identify some of democracy's most important points of vulnerability, in preparation for an analysis of whether AI might put pressure on some of those weak points. Unlike most recent discussions of democracy in the AI context, the focus of this discussion will be on democratic government, though of course by definition this embraces the relationship between government bureaucracies and officials, on the one hand, and the voting public, on the other.

The distrust-based approach also leads us to depart in another way from most work on AI and democracy, in particular by considering a much longer timeframe. Thinking through the potential impacts of AI will prompt us to lift our gaze from short-term concerns and instead to consider two successive epochs that together span the full remaining expanse of the present century. As we shall argue, AI presents serious challenges to the sustainability of democratic institutions in both of these epochs, though the issues in the two cases are quite different and call for different approaches to mitigation.

In approaching the first phase, in chapter 3, we will delve into AI's impacts on labor markets, national security, and government intelligence work, explaining how these disparate effects fit together into a triple threat to democratic stability, providing convenient leverage for aspiring autocrats. Considering this nearer-term phase, spanning the coming twenty years or so, chapter 4 will argue—perhaps surprisingly—that the best way of defending democracy may lie not in AI governance but in legislative democratic reforms.

Turning to the longer-term impacts of AI, our attention will return to the issue of labor. Here, as argued in chapter 5, the spread of technological unemployment will threaten to undermine the

social contract that makes democracy feasible. Chapter 6 will argue that, in this longer-term setting, a defense of democracy will require a more fundamental rethinking of how government works, one that prioritizes deep citizen engagement, possibly supported by innovative uses of AI itself.

As a group, the challenges we will describe will materialize over a period of many years, extending perhaps even beyond our lifetimes. However, as we shall argue, the moves we must take to reinforce democracy can and should be undertaken before the threats emerge in full force. We must, in short, find a way to begin our preparations now.

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