Foundations First #19: AI in Politics

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is already part of daily life. It recommends movies, filters spam, and helps you navigate traffic. It is also quietly reshaping politics. Campaigns use AI to sort data and test messages. Social media platforms use it to decide what you see in your feed. New tools can even create realistic audio and video of events that never happened.

In this lesson, we are going to walk through what that actually means. We will talk about what AI is in simple terms, how it is used in campaigns, ads, and speechwriting, how it affects political content on social media, what deepfakes and synthetic media are, and how emerging technologies might shape politics in the years ahead. Then we will finish with practical ideas for how ordinary citizens can respond. The goal is not to scare you or sell you on any particular viewpoint. The goal is to give you enough understanding to recognize what AI can do, where it can help, where it can go wrong, and how you can stay an informed voter in a changing information environment.

What Is AI

At its core, artificial intelligence is about building computer systems that can perform tasks that usually require human intelligence. Things like recognizing a face in a photo, turning speech into text, suggesting a reply to an email, or summarizing a long document. Traditional software works like a recipe. A programmer writes step by step instructions. If the input is A, the output is B. The rules are fixed and the program does exactly what it was told to do.

AI systems, especially modern machine learning systems, work differently. Instead of writing out every rule, developers feed the system large amounts of data and let it find patterns. For example, to build a system that recognizes cats in pictures, you do not write “two pointy ears plus whiskers equals cat.” You feed it thousands of labeled images of cats and non cats, and the system “learns” the patterns that distinguish one from the other.

In politics, the data might be polling results, voter files, social media posts, or news articles. AI systems can sift through huge volumes of this information faster than any human team. They can spot correlations, group people by shared characteristics, and generate text, images, or video based on prompts. That does not mean AI is thinking, or wise, or always correct. These systems reflect the data and instructions they are given. If the data contains bias or gaps, the output can reflect that. If the model is used carelessly, it can amplify mistakes at scale. Understanding that helps when we look at how AI is used in campaigns and political communication.

AI in Campaigns, Ads, and Speechwriting

Campaigns have always used data. They have relied on polls, voter files, and past election results to understand which messages resonate and where support may be strong or weak. AI does not change that basic idea, but it can make parts of it faster and more complex.

One use of AI is in data analysis. Instead of manually sorting spreadsheets, a campaign can feed information into a model that looks for patterns. It might group voters into broad segments such as “frequent voters who prioritize the economy” or “younger voters who care a lot about education and housing.” In a general sense, that can help a campaign decide what issues to emphasize in different types of outreach. It is important to note that just because AI can draw lines between groups in data, that does not mean those lines are always meaningful or ethical. The quality of the data and the judgment of the humans using it still matter.

AI tools can also help draft text. A campaign might use a language model to generate first drafts of speeches, talking points, fundraising emails, or policy summaries. This can make the work more efficient. Staff can spend more time editing and refining and less time staring at a blank page. The risk is that messages start to sound generic. If overused, AI generated language can flatten a candidate’s voice and make everything feel scripted.

In advertising, AI can generate many versions of scripts, slogans, and visual concepts. It can suggest different ways to explain the same issue, and campaigns can test these variants to see which version performs better in small trials before investing money to air them more widely. AI image and video tools can also produce illustrations or animations to accompany ads.

There are upsides to this. It can lower costs, speed up experimentation, and help smaller campaigns develop professional looking materials. There are also risks. A campaign might become overly focused on tiny changes that move a number by one or two points in a test but do not reflect deeper values. AI systems can also reproduce biases in the data they are trained on, leading to messages that unintentionally stereotype or exclude.

Another concern is authenticity. When a voter listens to a speech or reads a letter from a candidate, there is an expectation that a real person chose those words. If AI tools are used carelessly, voters may feel that they are being spoken to by a machine rather than a human being. That can undermine trust. The technology itself is neutral. It can help people summarize complex policies in plain language, which is useful. It can also be misused to craft messages that feel tailored and confident but are not grounded in careful thinking or genuine conviction. The difference lies in how campaigns choose to use it.

AI in Political Social Media

Most people today encounter political content through social media feeds. Those feeds are already shaped by algorithms. They decide which posts rise to the top and which fade into the background. AI is deeply embedded in that process.

On the content creation side, AI tools make it easy to generate huge volumes of material. Short text posts, comments, replies, images, and even short videos can be produced quickly. This can be used in positive ways. For example, a civic group might use AI to help translate informational posts into multiple languages or to generate educational explainers. However, the same tools can be used to flood platforms with repetitive or misleading messages. Automated accounts, sometimes called bots, can post, like, and share at a speed that no individual can match. When coordinated, they can make a slogan or hashtag appear more popular than it really is. That can create a false sense of consensus, which can sway how real users perceive an issue or a candidate.

AI is also used on the platform side to try to detect harmful behavior. Companies train models to spot spam, coordinated inauthentic activity, and certain types of abusive or prohibited content. These systems can flag suspicious patterns, such as thousands of accounts posting the same message at the same time. They can also help identify fake engagement that is designed to game the system.

From a citizen's point of view, the important thing to remember is that your feed is not a neutral window on reality. It is a curated stream shaped by algorithms that are trying to maximize engagement. AI can learn what keeps you scrolling and show you more of it, including political content that fits your past behavior. That can create echo chambers where you mostly see views that match your own and rarely see thoughtful disagreement.

Critical thinking becomes essential. When you see a political post that triggers a strong emotional reaction, it is worth asking a few questions. Who is behind this? Is it being reported by multiple outlets? Does it rely on insults rather than arguments? Does it seem unusually dramatic or perfectly crafted to push your buttons? Slowing down and asking those questions is one way to keep AI-shaped social media from doing all the thinking for you.

Deepfakes and Synthetic Media

One of the most striking uses of AI in politics is the creation of synthetic media. Synthetic media refers to audio, images, or video that have been generated or heavily altered by AI. A deepfake is a particular kind of synthetic media that convincingly makes it appear that a person said or did something they never actually said or did. For example, AI can take audio recordings of a person's voice and generate new speech in that voice. It can take video of a person and realistically map their face onto another body, or manipulate the movement of their mouth to match new words. It can alter the background of a scene or change what appears on a screen in the shot. When done well, the result can be very hard to distinguish from real footage at a glance.

In politics, you can imagine the impact. A fake video could show a candidate making offensive comments, announcing a policy that they never proposed, or appearing in a place they never visited are possible outcomes with AI in politics. The goal in many cases would be to shock, to discredit, or to confuse voters right before an election when there is little time to fact check. The danger is not only in people believing fake content, for there is also a "liar's dividend." As deepfakes become more common, real recordings can be dismissed as fake. A public figure caught on video saying something damaging might claim that it is AI generated and some people might believe them. That erodes trust in authentic evidence.

There are efforts underway to respond. Researchers are developing tools to detect signs of manipulation, such as tiny artifacts in the pixels, irregular lighting, or inconsistencies in motion. Some groups are working on standards to label AI generated content so that images, audio, or video created by certain tools would carry a kind of digital watermark. Journalists and fact checking organizations are building workflows to verify media before they publish. Still, no system is perfect. For the average citizen, deepfakes are a reminder to be cautious about dramatic audio or video that appears from an unknown source, especially if it surfaces at a politically strategic moment. Trusted outlets, context, and corroboration matter more than ever.

Emerging Technology and the Future of AI in Politics

AI today is powerful, but it is still evolving. Looking ahead, there are several ways it might shape politics even more deeply. One possibility is more sophisticated simulations of public opinion. AI could be used to model how different groups might react to hypothetical events or proposals. That could help policymakers stress test ideas before rolling them out, but it could also be used to fine tune messaging in ways that feel more like psychological targeting than open debate.

Another possibility is more personalized information tools. Imagine a civic assistant that can explain any bill, budget, or ballot measure at the level of detail you choose. You could ask "how would this policy affect small businesses" or "what are the main arguments for and against this proposal" and get a plain language answer. If designed well and built on reliable sources, tools like that could help voters cut through complexity.

There is also a darker side. The same ability to simulate, personalize, and generate realistic content could be used to create more advanced misinformation. Fake news sites could be spun up instantly. Fake comments and letters to the editor could flood public forums. AI generated phone calls or messages could imitate trusted voices. The tension is real. AI can help inform, organize, and engage people in constructive ways. It can also mislead, overwhelm, and manipulate if used irresponsibly. Laws, platform policies, and professional norms will need to evolve to keep up, but those will always lag behind the fastest innovators. That is why an informed public is so important. Technology will keep changing. The basic skills of careful thinking, curiosity, and healthy skepticism will still matter.

How Ordinary Citizens Can Respond

As an individual, you cannot redesign algorithms or rewrite election laws overnight. But you do have more power than it might seem in how you respond to AI-shaped politics. One simple habit is to check multiple sources before believing or sharing sensational content. If you see a shocking claim in a meme or a short video, look for coverage from reputable news organizations. See whether independent fact checkers have weighed in. Pay attention to whether different outlets with different viewpoints are at least agreeing on basic facts. Be especially cautious with audio and video. If something seems too perfectly damaging to one side, or appears at the exact moment it would do the most political harm or good, treat that as a signal to slow down. Ask where it came from. Check whether it is being reported with context or whether it is just bouncing around social media without verification.

Another helpful habit is to notice how content makes you feel. AI and algorithms often reward posts that trigger strong reactions such as anger, fear, or outrage. When you feel that spike, you can step back and ask “is this giving me information or is it mainly trying to push my buttons?” That short reflection can prevent you from being pulled into manufactured outrage. You can also support transparency. When platforms give you options to see why you are being shown an ad, use them. When tools label content as AI-generated or as having been fact-checked, pay attention. Where possible, give feedback when you see obviously fake or harmful political content.

Finally, talk with other people about these issues. Friends, family, and coworkers may not realize how AI is shaping their feeds or how realistic deepfakes have become. Calm, nonpartisan conversations about how you each decide what to believe can build resilience in your immediate circle.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence in politics is not science fiction. It is already woven into campaigns, advertising, speechwriting, social media, and even the media we see and hear. It brings real opportunities to make information more accessible and to help people understand complex issues. It also brings real risks, from generic messaging and loss of authenticity to coordinated disinformation and convincing deepfakes. The technology will keep moving. Some tools will help voters. Others will be designed mainly to gain advantage in the next campaign. You do not have to become a technical expert to navigate this world. You do not have to know how every model works. What you can do is stay curious, cautious, and informed. Ask basic questions about where information comes from. Look for context and corroboration. Be slow to share and quick to verify. Remember that behind every AI system there are human choices about what to optimize and how to use it. If citizens bring that mindset to the political information they encounter, AI will still change politics, but it will be harder for it to quietly change the way we think without us noticing.