PrEval HANDREICHUNG
2 | 2025

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GENERATIVE AI IN DEMOCRACY EVALUATION
OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As *Generative AI* (GenAI) tools have become increasingly accessible, their implications for democracy and democracy evaluation have multiplied. In these discussions, contradictory opinions exist side-by-side: on the one hand, AI – and GenAI in particular – has the capacity to destabilize the very foundations of democracy; on the other, such tools can supercharge evaluation and increase access to democratic processes. Navigating these binaries is not easy. However, it is clear that the mainstreaming of GenAI raises fundamental questions for democracy practitioners and evaluators.

Using a dual-focused approach, this policy brief analyses the fundamental interactions between AI and democratic systems and assesses the implications for democracy-focused programming and evaluation. While the full scope of these technological changes remains to be seen, we argue that practitioners in governance, policymaking, and democracy programming must develop a nuanced understanding of AI's capabilities and limitations. Our findings underscore the urgent need for a deeper comprehension of how AI intersects with and influences democratic institutions and evaluation methodologies in this rapidly evolving landscape. This brief offers a snapshot of the potential applications of AI tools and their implications for democracy evaluators and policymakers. It then lays out the ethical implications of AI use, and recommends ways to address these shortcomings and ethical challenges.

AI Tools Have a Wide Range of Possible and Already-Utilised Applications in Democracy Evaluations

While few discussions and case studies specifically focus on the use of AI for evaluating democracy programming, there is both speculative and experiential evidence on the positive impacts of AI for general program evaluation. **A simple way to group tools is to consider those with specific utility and broad utility for evaluation.**

Tools with specific utility for democracy evaluation:

- sentiment analysis/opinion mining
- democraping
- signal monitoring
- digital trace analysis
- text generation
- location specific variance analysis
- digital trace analysis
- transcription and translation
- data visualisations
- data querying
- evaluation synthesis and summarisation tools

Tools with broad utility for evaluation:

- data cleaning
- AI agents
- codebook and data labelling generation
- data labelling
- chatbots
- thematic analysis and insight extraction
- amalgamating/ processing/comparing data across sources

[1] See PrEval Expertise 2/2025: "Exploring Emerging AI as Subject and Object in Democracy-Focused Evaluation" for a detailed discussion of these points and a more in-depth overview of available AI tools for the evaluation profession.

Blind Spots and Downsides to AI Approaches to Evaluation of Democracy Programming

AI approaches to evaluation require a clear understanding of potential upsides and downsides. There are salient limitations to AI approaches to consider during deployment. These include practical challenges such as data quality, 'hallucinations' (erroneous outputs), and bias as well as wider ethical issues such as harms to those doing data labelling labour and environmental impacts related to water and energy consumption by data processing centres.

Core limitations and challenges with GenAI include:

- **Unreliability and validity challenges:** Use of AI tools with both qualitative and quantitative data faces various challenges regarding trustworthiness. The possibility of inaccurate outputs and false information ('hallucinations') such as fabricated citations or fictional quotes undermine the reliability of AI tools.
- **Bias across the AI lifecycle can result in suboptimal and potentially harmful outcomes:** Bias can occur across model development in data collection, data labelling, model training and deployment (*Bias in AI* n.d.). Sampling and selection bias, as well as exclusion bias, can shape initial data collection as datasets are circumscribed by what developers of the model initially choose to include as training data (Bommasani et al. 2022).
- **Algorithmically mediated news undermines journalism and information integrity:** Extractive data practices during model training infringe upon the intellectual property and copyright of citizens, outpacing the ability of regulation to ensure parity between parties and set standards for compensation and data protection. Of particular concern for democracy evaluators is the impact these practices have on journalism and information integrity.
- **Uneven regulatory practices are imbued with geopolitical power dynamics:** Despite being likely to disproportionately feel the negative effects of AI systems, *Global Majority* countries and individuals have been sidelined in discussions around AI Governance. The lack of inclusion and participation in AI Governance decisions will likely impact groups that AI development already marginalises, thereby exacerbating exclusionary dimensions of AI systems (Okorie/Marivate 2024).
- **There are wider environmental, labour and privacy concerns regarding the use of AI:** It is important to consider the wider implications of AI use when assessing an AI tool. For instance, rights-violating working environments for data labellers (Rowe 2023) and environmentally destructive resource extraction are but a few of the acute costs of AI systems.
- **Use of AI tools can reinforce *Big Tech*'s influence:** The concentration of the levers of information power within *Big Tech* firms is at odds with democratic ownership and access to information and has resulted in *Big Tech* firms having outsized influence over the policy and regulatory space that preferences corporate interests over that of citizens.

Ethics of Using AI for Democracy Evaluation

1. AI automation and mediation of democratic processes risks creating distance between elected officials and citizens. AI tends to favour "middle ground" solutions. This could mean that important but less common viewpoints get filtered out, making it harder for some voices to be heard.

2. AI tools can rapidly magnify and entrench discriminatory practices. This happens because the data used to train these systems often contains historical biases, and the way AI processes this information can make these biases even stronger.

3. Most AI systems are being developed behind closed doors by private companies, without input from the public. This locks out the wider populace from understanding model design and runs contrary to principles of democratic oversight and accountability. Government officials often struggle to keep up with how quickly the technology is changing, which means they're usually reacting to problems after they happen instead of preventing them.

4. *Big Tech* and big AI companies are actively working to prevent wider input and public oversight into how AI systems are developed and used, violating principles of consent and conducting themselves in a covert manner that is in opposition to democratic values of openness, accountability and transparency.

5. Creeping technocratization of how democracy programs are evaluated may encourage a skewed understanding of democracy and democratic values. As we use more AI tools to measure how well democracy is working, we risk focusing too much on things that can be easily counted and measured. This technical approach can lead to important cultural and social aspects of democracy being ignored and can reflect harmful historical patterns of colonial power.

When taken together these ethical challenges should prompt decision-makers to pause before encouraging or sanctioning *carte blanche* usage of AI tools. It is critical to understand the different and intricate ways that the use of AI in evaluation can itself impact evaluation outputs.

Addressing Ethical Challenges

Policy makers and evaluators should focus on supporting, uplifting and prioritizing grassroots visions of democratising AI that emphasise a local and proximate approach to AI design, development and deployment that is rooted in community oversight and considers sovereignty over the data used to build models. Grassroots efforts to address data collection for AI models work to counter both the extractive nature of current data collection and the lack of representation both within data collection and data collectors.

Recommendations

The integration of AI into democracy evaluation presents a complex landscape of potential benefits and challenges. While AI tools offer potential enhancements to democratic systems and subsequent evaluation efforts, concerns persist about their development, implementation, and impact. These tools bring a range of capabilities that could add value, yet there are worries about inherent biases and the fundamentally anti-democratic nature of their creation.

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INFO BOX

The Hiku NLP project

seeks to both empower and protect Maori speakers and the Maori language by engaging Maori community members as co-creators in building NLP tools for the Maori language, and keep Te Reo Maori linguistic data away from *Big Tech*.

Masakhane NLP community

is a volunteer-led open-source project working to create a machine translation tool which will then translate African papers into African languages. This fills in key gaps for African languages overlooked by larger ML translation services, leaving many African countries on the backfoot in terms of access to scientific research and translation tools.

Ubuntu AI

works to undo the extraction of value from African artists' by collaboratively creating a licensable portfolio of work to avoid their intellectual property being used without permission or compensation.

Policy makers can address some of these issues by following emerging good practice:

- Develop a robust, evidence-informed approach to the exploration of these tools and their use in evaluation of democracy and democracy programming.
- Focus on low risk uses, small discrete uses that do not utilise personally identifying information or do not potentially put individuals at risk of biased or incorrect automated decision making.
- Capacity and knowledge building across key nodes of the democracy programming sector, including funders, evaluators, policy makers, academics and organizations working on democracy programming.

- Research and work on addressing issues of inclusion and democracy gap of AI tools. Support of grassroots approaches aimed at creating a more sustainable suit of AI tools.
- Address growing corporate dominance in AI and AI for development by exploring alternatives including non-profit or public-sector oriented AI alternatives.
- Challenge and reflect on the pressure to utilise AI. Resource constraints and interest in new tools alone are not reasons to widely introduce a technology that is still frequently not understood. All actors within democracy evaluation must consider whether the introduction of an AI tool meets a clear need when compared to competitive alternatives.
- Consider alternative non-AI solutions that may mitigate risks or uncertainties associated with AI.
- Be clear about the risks associated with AI tools and honest about the ability to mitigate these risks. Acknowledging the limitations of AI encourages users to reflect on the mechanics of AI tools.

Policymakers and evaluators focused on assessing democracy programs should approach the use of AI tools with strategic consideration. Given the current lack of robust and standardised evaluations for *Large Language Model* (LLM) responsibility, it is crucial to be judicious about when and how AI tools are employed. To address this challenge, evaluators should first develop or identify evaluation standards that align with democratic principles and uphold the highest evaluation practices. They should then map out the evaluation process, identifying time-intensive activities and pain points where AI assistance could be beneficial, prior to any AI implementation discussions.

Conclusion

The use of AI tools in democracy evaluation requires careful consideration. Our research approach takes a holistic account of AI use in democratic processes, along with the implications of AI tools *on* democracy to better map the possibilities and limitations of using AI tools to evaluate democracy programs. Expertise and experience using AI tools is a limiting factor that must be at the front of mind when considering the extent to which evaluators can utilise AI tools in practice.

Further Information

The corresponding *PrEval Expertise*, reading recommendations and information on the authors can be found at: **https://preval.hsfk.de/handreichung0225**

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With funding from the

Federal Ministry of the Interior

by decision of the German Bundestag

PrEval – Zukunftswerkstätten

is a research and transfer project on evaluation in the prevention and countering of violent extremism, democracy promotion and civic education in Germany. This policy brief was created as part of the PrEval Zukunftswerkstatt "Evaluation Research", which is coordinated by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM).

Further information on the project and the partners involved can be found at:
https://preval.hsfk.de/en/

Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
Leibniz-Institut für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung

Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung

Design: media machine GmbH, Mainz | Print: Uwe Grube Druckservice