

## Gaggle - AI and Elections

**AI Mary Jo** [00:00:00] Unless you've been living off the grid, you've probably heard of artificial intelligence. This new technology has great potential and pitfalls for everything from health care to autonomous vehicles. But what does it mean for elections?

**AI Sasha** [00:00:15] Today we're going to find out. Welcome to election dissection here on The Gaggle, your Arizona politics podcast by The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. Each week we look at the political stories that most affect you. And every month, we put a magnifying glass on Arizona's election processes. I'm county watchdog reporter Sasha Hupka.

**AI Mary Jo** [00:00:34] And I'm Mary Jo Pitzl. I cover state politics and policy.

**AI Sasha** [00:00:39] We're joined remotely by Don Palmer, vice chair of the Election Assistance Commission, or the EAC. The bipartisan commission was created by the Help America Vote Act of 2002, and it is tasked with certifying voting systems across the country. It also supports state and local election officials in their efforts to ensure accessible, accurate and secure elections.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:01:00] Mary Jo, were you talking?

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:01:03] No. Were you?

**Sasha Hupka** [00:01:05] No. No. That that wasn't me.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:01:08] Oh, that wasn't me either.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:01:11] It must be the AI trying to take over our jobs. Oh my God. As if we didn't already have enough competition. Don, thank you so much for coming on the show.

**Don Palmer** [00:01:28] Hey. No problem.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:01:30] So to start out here, outline the concerns about the use of artificial intelligence in elections and also the benefits of it.

**Don Palmer** [00:01:39] So I think the benefits when you talk to election administrators is that you're able to use AI, election or election information, improve communications to voters. And so there are a lot of possible positive uses of AI. I think when you step back and you look at the negative, for example, candidates are concerned about fake or misleading information that could be aggravated with this new technology called artificial intelligence. And I think election officials have the same concern. Election officials are concerned that if you have mistletoe, for example, like photoshopping or deepfake audio or video, that this could impact or sort of mislead voters. And so what we're trying to do with the Election Assistance Commission is we are trying to make sure the trusted sources in election offices, their communications can be improved, with voter education and positive use of artificial intelligence.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:02:42] So on that note, is AI something that voters should fear? You know, they're going to be getting bombarded with campaign messages, you know, audio, video, print. What should they be worried about?

**Don Palmer** [00:02:53] Well, that's a very good question. I mean, two months ago, I would say that I think there was an undue fear of the public. And when you talk to federal agencies, intelligence and otherwise, they're still monitoring the situation as to what could be a negative impact. I think voter just need to be skeptical of what they hear or read and need to confirm that what they read, because in some ways, artificial intelligence is just a new technology that amplifies information. And so you're still going to have to be on the lookout for social media, what you read and hear, to make sure that it's coming from a trusted source, particularly with elections. And so I would say that we just need to keep in mind that it's just a new technology and that, you know, I have some larger concerns myself that artificial intelligence doesn't replace the human intellect or the human employment. And so, I believe that it can be used positively, but it must work for citizens and voters and the greater population, and not in a negative way.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:04:01] And you say people need to be on the lookout. So help us out with that. Give me some pointers on how would someone discern an AI generated message or an image from one created by, say, a campaign consultant? What's the difference?

**Don Palmer** [00:04:18] Well, I think that when you look at some of the deepfake audio and video, recognizing that they're only going to improve, you can tell that it's an artificial likeness of the individual. But I'm an election official. I may understand what I'm looking at. And so I think there is some concern that voters may not be as attuned or can quickly identify something that may not be real. There have been discussions, with social media companies and in some states that you must identify what is an artificial intelligence generated advertisement or post. I think that is something that many of them are considering. And frankly, in some states, the legislature has already sort of required that that be labeled that being an artificial intelligence ad or some sort of post that would be indicated as generated by artificial intelligence, and that would give a clear indication to the voter that this is fake or this is not a real likeness of a candidate or some sort of other individual.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:05:26] So your office, as well as we as journalists, we serve as watchdogs, as campaigns roll out. And I'm wondering what is the proper response, as you see it, of these watchdog efforts to let people know about campaign content, for example, would the EAC put out a warning and say, 'Notice,' you know, 'this particular ad is a deep fake' ?

**Don Palmer** [00:05:49] No, I think there might be a role for the Federal Election Commission with that, as right now, for example, you have to have some sort of indicator on a digital ad, for example, on a social media platform. This was purchased perhaps, and a by a federal candidate for office. I think the EAC, what we have tried to do in talking with election officials from across the country, we just had some board meetings in Kansas City, Missouri, is that we wanted to identify ways or have they had to deal with the. Negative aspects of AI. It's not their role to identify it, but it may become their role to sort of respond to artificial intelligence communications, for example, that may prove to be true or inaccurate, either intentionally or negligently. Maybe there's some misuse of the word negligently, but sometimes the artificial intelligence is not as intelligent as you would believe. They actually get sort of the nuanced information on voting. Sometimes context is required, and the artificial intelligence is not really up to the standard of what a human expert would provide. And so we in the election community want to be prepared to simply be able to respond to that. If that was to become an issue.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:07:07] And just to follow up, looking at the role of journalists, is this the place for fact checking?

**Don Palmer** [00:07:13] I think it's a there's going to be opportunities for that fact checking or for just identifying what an AI generated advertisement might be, or some election information that's sort of created with artificial intelligence. And so I think that would be an interesting thing to bring to a reader. Either audio or visually is like, this is what it looks like. I think when you look at, for example, the video that's generated with AI, that likeness, there's still a difference between, for example, likeness that's talking about an issue or voting issue, for example, and the real person. Usually you can tell the difference, but I think it would be good for newspapers and online newspapers and television to talk about and show what an AI generated advertisement might look like.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:08:04] I want to go back to this idea of how to tell an AI generated image or video or photo, as opposed to something that is actually organically created. It's just been photoshopped to the nth degree, because we know campaigns and candidates love doing that, right? Everyone wants to look good on their campaign poster. And we know, right, that there are some states you're mentioning that are creating or going to create these regulations around how this has to be labeled as being something that included AI. But what about for the people who don't care about following the rules, the people who aren't a candidate or someone who really has much to lose? Kind of your Joe Schmo, who for whatever reason, wants to sow chaos. How do we tell the difference, particularly knowing that this technology is is going to get better as the year goes on.

**Don Palmer** [00:08:59] And the voters and citizens, you know, they usually do a fairly good job of being discerning of things. They sort of can understand when something is fake or sort of like they're as humorous, for example, and parody. I think that your example of a Photoshop is actually a good example, because if you photoshop a photo or video of some sort and it's it's generally made to lead the voter as possible that that could occur. Again, you're relying on the voter or the citizen to sort of discern the difference between real and and not real. And so you're always going to have that concern. I think I generated audio or video has the same concerns as it's very possible that you could manipulate a real video, and it basically has the potential to mislead a voter. And so I think that the labeling is probably the best option for what I would consider social media giants or, television. That there's a clear sort of label that discussed that this is an AI generated image or audio, and I think that that would help the voter. And I think that that is what most folks are looking at. But again, I think we have to be, some voters going to have to take some responsibility that an AI, that everything they see or hear may not be 100% accurate and that people on social media are not, they may not have a set of standards or principles or ethics that require them to provide context or the actual video or audio of the individual. And so I think that, the EAC, you know, there have been some members of Congress that have called for the Election Assistance Commission to develop voluntary standards. And at first I was skeptical of how we would do that. But because there's so many positives to artificial intelligence, I'm coming to the conclusion that it may be something we could do where there are certain standards where you could use AI for positive uses and communication, but also try to develop ways to avoid the negative that may come with that as well.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:11:07] We've been talking a lot about the use of AI in communications, but there's also a lot of fear about whether I could help to rig an election to somehow alter the actual mechanics and procedures of elections. So I'm wondering to. What extent those

kind of fears are founded, and is there any kind of guidance that the EAC is giving to election officials on how to use or not use this technology in their procedures?

**Don Palmer** [00:11:34] Yeah. So I think a lot of folks in the federal government are looking at ways that it could impact the communications to its citizens. But the EAC, you know, we provide guidance to election officials to protect our voting systems, to properly communicate with voters. And so, one of the things from a cybersecurity perspective is that this may make phishing and sort of intrusion efforts may cloak them or make them more difficult to identify and, and sort of prevent those sort of intrusive activities. And so we are on the lookout. We've had discussions with other federal agencies about how this may improve those who might conduct phishing attacks. And so we have provided guidance in our security series to election officials. But I will say, even with or without AI, that that has improved dramatically. But when you talk about ChatGPT, for example, and the language models that, you know, those are going to generally improve. But I think our concern from a cyber perspective, we've let the election officials know, that they should be on the lookout.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:12:40] For example, can I hack a Dominion voting machine?

**Don Palmer** [00:12:45] Well, it's probably a bold statement for me to say absolutely not. But it you know, artificial intelligence is a tool. So there would have to be some sort of, national security, first world country that would make a concerted effort to try to, you know, penetrate a vulnerability. And I think that there's so many different aspects to that. Most, if not all, election voting equipment is not ever going to be connected to the internet. They're tested in accredited labs. And so I'm fairly confident that that those systems won't be penetrated now. I would say that AI is always an unknown. I mean, just like other federal agencies are saying, well, how could this impact an election? We were part of those conversations that many folks are that focused on how I may. You know, they penetrate our voting systems. I would say it's very unlikely or minimal, but it's something that we're looking at. We do have an artificial working group within our agency and we've had communication. But this is not a significant concern because of all the protocols that we have to protect our systems.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:13:52] And here's another example. And I kind of want to just take you through a few hypothetical terrible situations right here. What if, for instance, I was being used to verify signatures on early ballots? So an AI system was written that was able to determine the same way as we currently use humans to do, whether or not a signature appeared valid and should be counted. Would that program potentially be something that would be vulnerable to attacks? And is that something that you think would be a cause for concern?

**Don Palmer** [00:14:27] Well, you know, what you describing is an election system. So it's not a tabulation system, but it's something that the aeaeac in our e step program we evaluate technology. And so for example, this process would be an election system that I feel confident that we could review and we could set standards for and test and certify. And so it could be potentially a positive use of artificial intelligence. But just like all these other technologies that we're working with here at the AEC, we want to be able to evaluate them, set standards, test and certify for election officials to use. And so when I mentioned earlier that the Congress was asking us to potentially develop standards. At first I was skeptical. But after a series of meetings, I think it's actually something that the election community may want and may need, because the example you provided with the, for example, the use of AI to help election officials do this in an efficient or accurate manner.

There may be a use for that, and it could serve a legitimate election administration process. If a state or locality wants to use that technology and it's developed by a manufacturer. That's something that should be evaluated by an independent source, perhaps the Election Assistance Commission, where the then the locality has the confidence in the state, has the confidence that the system is-- they're standards, there's testing to it. And it cannot be manipulated in a negative way.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:15:59] And in terms of creating those standards and talking about creating almost this process for evaluating technology like that, that could be used to really improve the election process and make the time that is spent verifying signatures less significant here in Arizona. How long does all that take? If you guys were to come up with standards through Congress for the use of this technology? You know, what's the timeline on that and what's the timeline then for getting maybe together some other things, right, specific to these types of certification programs?

**Don Palmer** [00:16:34] Well, our voting system standards are voluntary, we call them the VVSG. Sometimes those standards can take years. And, you know, we consult with experts. The National Institute of Standards and Technology and election officials from across the country. Now, I mentioned our E-step program, which is our election supporting technology evaluation program, and that involves electronic poll books, for example, and all voter registration systems. They have them at work. And we just got a briefing at our Standards board, which is all the states, local and state officials, plus the territories, and they are making significant progress in a whole area of technologies. And so I'm much more confident today than I was even six months ago, that we could do this in an orderly manner, perhaps a year or two with some initial standards. But there are a lot of technologies out there. And so some of this is based on what resources and personnel the Congress decides to give us. Our team is just doing absolutely great work. So this would be potentially one more thing we look at.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:17:38] And if you're saying it might take years, do we run the risk of being too far behind the technology by the time that we actually get these types of standards on paper, so to speak? I think what my concern is, understandably, this is a new technology. It takes a lot to understand. There are a lot of potential uses of it, both good and bad. But then do we miss the ship for this election? If it takes us until 2026 to actually get standards on paper?

**Don Palmer** [00:18:07] Well, that's always a risk, and it's always something that I wish Congress and states were more responsive to the election community. And look, our first our primary job is to administer elections. I would say that, for example, our electronic poll book testing program, you know, this was a concern back in 2017 that the Congress was less concerned about our voting systems and the accuracy of them than they were of our electronic poll books and the interaction with the internet. And so I think this is a good example of where once we've identified a problem, perhaps we can move it expeditiously.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:18:43] So going back to the hypotheticals for a minute, there are also ways that I could be used from outside election offices to sow chaos and, you know, erode our trust in elections. And you touched on this a little bit previously, but I want to throw another example at you. So say that there was an AI generated script and voice cloning software that could be used to overwhelm voting hotline with fake calls, or a clone of an employee's voice that could be used to gain access to sensitive information. How are you recommending that election officers prepare for these types of attacks, knowing that where the technology is at right now, these are things that are potentially possible?

**Don Palmer** [00:19:26] Well, election officers, they have a, you know, a range of plans that they put in place for any type of issue like that. You brought up the issue and you can see the negative aspect of it. For example, if somebody tried to over overrun the the voter education hotline or the voter hotline, you know, I think that happened. There was a problem in the primary in Iowa. I think it was on the Democratic side years ago. And basically that's shut down. You could see where they weren't able to provide results, or they weren't able to communicate with each of the the polling places in Iowa. So there could potentially be some sort of denial of service. This is why election officials will do tabletop exercises, and they will generate plans to identify how they would respond if a certain aspect of their service to voters was unable to operate correctly. So they will deal with denial of service from a cyber perspective or from their the voter hotline, that sort of thing. And so election officials are already responding on how they would try to mitigate that problem.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:20:30] Well done. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk this through with us. I trust that this is not an AI generated Don, but the real thing?

**Don Palmer** [00:20:41] Yeah, it's a little jolting and stuff. You would be able to identify it.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:20:46] Well, if, if our viewers wanted to follow you on social media, where can they find you?

**Don Palmer** [00:20:51] So they can find me at the voting guy, or they can find me on LinkedIn and they can follow me on those social media platforms.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:20:58] Well, thanks again very much for your time. We really appreciate it.

**Don Palmer** [00:21:01] Thank you.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:21:08] That is it for this week, Gaggle listeners. Thanks so much for listening to Election Distraction an election series by The Gaggle. Sasha and I will be back next month to answer a new question about how all this works. Is there something about the election process that you're curious about? Or did you learn something new today? Let us know. Send us a voice memo to [thegaggle@ArizonaRepublic.com](mailto:thegaggle@ArizonaRepublic.com). That's all. One word, all spelled out. Or give us a call at (602) 444-0804.

**Sasha Hupka** [00:21:42] This episode was edited and produced by Kaely Monahan. Our AI voices were generated by Speechify. Our news direction is by Kathy Tulumello Till. Episode oversight is by Kara Acheson. Music comes from Universal Production Music. Never miss an episode of The Gaggle by subscribing to us wherever you listen. Also, be sure to share this episode with a friend. You can also leave us a review and rate of five stars. You can follow the gaggle on social media @azcpodcasts. I'm @SashaHupka. That's h u p k a.

**Mary Jo Pitzl** [00:22:19] And I'm @MaryJPitzl. That's p i t z l. The Gaggle is an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com production. Ron and I will be back next week diving into a new political issue. Thanks again for listening. We'll talk to you then.