

AI Deepfakes

Chris Coons

Nigeria. Chicago. Slovakia. What do these places have in common? Voters in each have faced a new political weapon: Audio “deepfakes” of political candidates created using artificial intelligence (AI). The bipartisan [Protect Elections From Deceptive AI Act](#)—which Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Josh Hawley (R-Mo.), Susan Collins (R-Maine), and I introduced last year—is a step that could help secure our elections against audio deepfakes.¹

In Nigeria, [an AI-generated deepfake](#) of presidential candidate Peter Obi calling the election a “religious war” stirred controversy in a country closely divided between Christians and Muslims.² Widely popular among young Nigerians and considered one of the leading candidates in the February 2023 election, [Obi ultimately finished third](#) as opponents launched AI-generated attempts to discredit his candidacy.³

Closer to home, Democratic mayoral candidate Paul Vallas of Chicago was the target of an audio deepfake in which he seemingly excused the police killing of civilians. Vallas [finished first in initial voting](#) versus multiple candidates, but second in the March 2023 runoff.⁴

Across the Atlantic, the October 2023 deepfake of Slovak prime ministerial candidate Michael Šimečka had a significant impact on his campaign. In an audio clip, voices similar to Šimečka’s and that of a prominent Slovak journalist discussed [how to buy votes from the Roma minority](#), which makes up 9% of the country and often faces discrimination.⁵ The deepfake appeared during the 48-hour “cooling off” period before Election Day, meaning neither Šimečka nor media outlets could refute it publicly before polling opened. [Šimečka’s pro-Western party fell second](#) to the Kremlin-friendly Smer party by 5 percentage points, although [pre-election polling](#) had them much closer.⁶

It’s not evident whether a deepfake has swung an election yet, but it’s clear that people are trying. Future audio deepfakes might definitively decide an election—perhaps even this November.

Why audio in particular? For starters, AI text-to-speech platforms are cheap, easy to use, and high in quality. Professionals [struggle to authenticate or debunk](#) them because of audio clips’ lack of “contextual clues.” It’s only getting harder to determine whether a clip is real as advances in technology perfect natural-sounding inflection and intonation. By the time a clip is identified as fake, it could have spent hours, days, or even weeks circulating on social media.

That brings up another problem: Audio deepfakes are dangerous because we lack the digital literacy required to correctly understand them. Many people now understand that editing software is used frequently to manipulate images; the model in a fashion magazine probably looks different in real life. However, it took years for our culture to come to terms with that. Since AI tools are still quite new, it will take a while before we have the same understanding of deepfakes.

So, short of stopping the march of technology—and losing the benefits that AI will provide society in the future—we must act. In February, I attended the Munich Security Conference, where major social media and tech companies—including Google, Meta, OpenAI, TikTok, and X—[announced a “Tech Accord”](#) in which they pledged to work together to stop deceptive AI from influencing the many elections occurring globally in 2024.⁷ I applaud that effort by the private sector, but governments and regulatory bodies must also step up.

In America, states have taken the lead. Nineteen have enacted laws to regulate AI use in elections, and similar bills have been introduced in most other statehouses (my home state’s [elections deepfake bill](#) passed the

Delaware General Assembly in June and awaits the governor's signature).⁸ Federal agencies have also jumped into the fray, although haltingly. The Federal Election Commission, for example, [has weighed whether to ban candidates from using AI to depict their opponents but has not yet acted](#).⁹ The Federal Communications Commission [has proposed a rule to require on-air and written disclosures](#) when AI is used in radio or TV political ads but has not proceeded further.¹⁰

Something is missing, and that's Congress.

While the United States does need a comprehensive, broad-based AI policy, the congressional road to such a destination is long and bumpy. Something more targeted, like the Protect Elections From Deceptive AI Act, might be more immediately feasible. The bill would ban "materially deceptive AI-generated audio or visual media" from being used to influence voters or solicit donations. A targeted candidate then would be able to sue for damages and prohibit further dissemination of the deepfake.

In accordance with our First Amendment rights, the Protect Elections From Deceptive AI Act makes exceptions for media outlets and parody or satire. The only people at risk of being sued are those who use AI to maliciously influence an election, not those who document it for journalistic reasons or use AI to poke fun at our politics.

The use of AI is growing rapidly, and the technology is getting better each passing day. It was inevitable that AI would find its way into politics, here and abroad. Let's pass the bipartisan Protect Elections From Deceptive AI Act and make headway toward keeping our elections free and fair.

Chris Coons was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2010 following terms as New Castle County Council President and County Executive. He sits on the Appropriations, Judiciary, Foreign Relations, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Ethics Committees. Senator Coons has used his position on the Foreign Relations Committee to advocate for national security priorities. Senator Coons has marshaled into law bills to modernize international development finance and impose sanctions on Russia, North Korea, and Iran for actions that undermine American interests. As co-chair of the bipartisan Human Rights Caucus, Senator Coons stands up for those fighting for universal values around the world. During his first four years in the Senate, he served as chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, emerging as an important voice on the continent's security challenges and economic opportunities. This Congress, Senator Coons has shifted his focus to China and East Asia. He traveled to China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in April with a concentration on developing a smart, comprehensive strategy for promoting American values, interests, and alliances in a region critical to the future security and prosperity of the United States. Prior to serving as county executive, Senator Coons worked as an attorney for Delaware-based W.L. Gore & Associates. He lives in Wilmington with his wife, Annie, and their three children, Michael, Jack, and Maggie. Senator Coons graduated from Amherst College with a B.A. in chemistry and political science and earned his law degree from Yale Law School and a master's in ethics from Yale Divinity School. He is a member of the Aspen Strategy Group.

¹ "Senator Coons, Colleagues Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Ban Use of Materially Deceptive AI-Generated Content in Elections," Chris Coons, September 15, 2023, <https://www.coons.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senator-coons-colleagues-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-to-ban-use-of-materially-deceptive-ai-generated-content-in-elections>.

² Abdulkareem Mojeed, "Peter Obi, Labour Party Say 'Religious War' Audio Is 'Fake Doctored', Threaten Legal Action," Premium Times, April 6, 2023, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/591973-peter-obi-labour-party-say-religious-war-audio-is-fake-doctored-threaten-legal-action.html?tztc=1>.

³ Ruth Maclean and Elian Peltier, "Nigerian Election 2023 and Bola Tinubu's Victory: What to Know," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/nigeria-election.html>.

⁴ "Chicago Mayor Election Results," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/02/28/us/elections/results-chicago-mayor.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=election-results&context=election_recirc®ion=FreeformText.

⁵ "Slovakia's Election Deepfakes Show AI Is a Danger to Democracy," *Wired*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/slovakias-election-deepfakes-show-ai-is-a-danger-to-democracy/>.

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- ⁶ The Associated Press, "Pro-Russia Ex-Premier Leads Leftist Party to Win in Slovakia Election," NBC News, October 1, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/slovakia-election-pro-russia-ex-premier-robert-fico-election-win-rcna118257>; "Exclusive Survey of the AKO Agency for TV Joj 24: The Progressives Narrowly Surpassed Smer. Are We Facing an Electoral Stalemate?," Joj 24, September 9, 2023, https://joj24.noviny.sk/volby/parlamentne-volby-2023/joj24-volebna-encyklopedia-slovenska/838980-exkluzivny-prieskum-agentury-ako-pre-tv-joj-24-progresivci-tesne-predbehli-smer-sme-pred-volebnym-patom?_gl=1*afwxdi*_ga*MTEyODk0MTMzNy4xNjk1ODExNDYw*_ga_RHR53MHYFE*MTY5NTgxMTQ2MC4xLjEuMTY5NTgxMTU1OC4wLjAuMA.
- ⁷ "A Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections," Munich Security Conference, <https://securityconference.org/en/aielectionsaccord/>.
- ⁸ "An Act to Amend Title 15 of the Delaware Code Relating to Deep Fakes in Elections," Delaware General Assembly, passed on June 30, 2024, <https://legis.delaware.gov/BillDetail/141109>.
- ⁹ "FEC Moves Toward Potentially Regulating AI Deepfakes in Campaign Ads," PBS, August 10, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/fec-moves-toward-potentially-regulating-ai-deepfakes-in-campaign-ads>.
- ¹⁰ "FCC Proposes Disclosure Rules for the Use of AI in Political Ads, Federal Communications Commission, released on July 25, 2024, <https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-proposes-disclosure-rules-use-ai-political-ads>.