The Artificial State

As American civic life has become increasingly shaped by algorithms, trust in government has plummeted. Is there any turning back?

By Jill Lepore November 4, 2024

The artificial state involves the reduction of politics to the digital manipulations of attention-mining algorithms, the diminishment of citizenship to minutely message-tested online engagement. Predictive algorithms do the work of rallying support, communicating with constituents, even crafting policy.Illustration by Mark Pernice

"Jacob Javits of New York is the first United States senator to become fully automated," the Chicago *Tribune* announced in 1962 from the Republican state convention in Buffalo, where an electronic Javits spat out slips of paper with answers to questions about everything from Cuba's missiles ("a serious threat") to the Cubs' prospects (dim). "Mr. Javits also harbors thoughts on medical care for the elderly, Berlin, the communist menace," and more than a hundred other subjects, the *Tribune* reported after an interview with the machine.

Javits may have been the first automated American politician, but he wasn't the last. Since the nineteen-sixties,

much of American public life has become automated, driven by computers and predictive algorithms that can do the political work of rallying support, running campaigns, communicating with constituents, and even crafting policy. In that same stretch of time, the proportion of Americans who say that they trust the U.S. government to do what is right most of the time has fallen from nearly eighty per cent to about twenty per cent. Automated politics, it would seem, makes for very bad government, helping produce an electorate that is alienated, polarized, and mistrustful, and elected officials who are paralyzed by their ability to calculate, in advance, the likely consequences of their actions, down to the last lost primary or donated dollar.

Kamala Harris's 2024 campaign was vastly influenced by the data-driven ad tester Future Forward, the biggest *PAC* in the United States. Donald Trump, for all his piffle about his indifference to data, is as much a creature of automated politics as anyone. The man doesn't stay on message, but his campaign does. The 2016 Trump campaign hired Cambridge Analytica, which exploited the data of up to eighty-seven million Facebook users to create targeted messaging. "I pretty much used Facebook to get Trump elected in 2016," a Trump campaign adviser, Brad Parscale, boasted. This year, the R.N.C. is working with Parscale's A.I. company, Campaign Nucleus. And although the Trump campaign insists that it "does not engage in or utilize A.I.," it

does use “a set of proprietary algorithmic tools.”

These days, Americans are worried not only about this election but about this democracy and its future. In September, the Stanford Digital Economy Lab, part of the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, released “The Digitalist Papers: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy in America,” billed as the Federalist Papers for the twenty-first century. Most of the essays, chiefly written by tech executives and academics, advance the theory that the automation of politics through artificial intelligence could save American democracy. Critics take a rather different view. In the book “Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life,” the political economist Scott Timcke, using Marxism to look at Muskism, argues that “datafication”—converting “human practices into computational artefacts”—promotes neoliberalism, automates inequality, and decreases freedom.

Most developments in the automation of politics have historically happened first in the United States, but they spread quicker than a keystroke. More than four billion people, a record-breaking number of humans, are eligible to vote in elections around the world in 2024, including in the United States, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Russia, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Mexico, and South Africa. Whatever problems the automation of

politics creates, it creates everywhere. In "Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us," Mathias Risse, a Rawlsian political philosopher, issues an urgent call for a new category to be added to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "epistemic rights," meaning the right to know and to be known, or—as may well be more sought after—the right to remain unknown. "Democracy and technology, specifically AI, are by no means natural allies," Risse writes, arguing that preserving democracy will require making hard choices about technology. So far, those choices are being made by corporations, especially American corporations, and especially in the United States, where people now live in what can be best understood as an artificial state.

The artificial state is not a shadow government. It's not a conspiracy. There's nothing secret about it. The artificial state is a digital-communications infrastructure used by political strategists and private corporations to organize and automate political discourse. It is the reduction of politics to the digital manipulation of attention-mining algorithms, the trussing of government by corporate-owned digital architecture, the diminishment of citizenship to minutely message-tested online engagement. An entire generation of Americans can no longer imagine any other system and, wisely, have very little faith in this one. (According to a Harvard poll from 2021, more than half of Americans

between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine believe that American democracy either is "in trouble" or has already "failed.") Within the artificial state, nearly every element of American democratic life—civil society, representative government, a free press, free expression, and faith in elections—is vulnerable to subversion. In lieu of decision-making by democratic deliberation, the artificial state offers prediction by calculation, the capture of the public sphere by data-driven commerce, and the replacement of humans with machines—drones in the place of the demos.

All nation-states are "imagined communities," as the political theorist Benedict Anderson once memorably wrote. No nation is natural, like a mountain or a forest or a species of whale. They're all inventions, mostly of modernity, and especially of the long nineteenth century that began in 1776 and ended in 1914. But, with the development of general-purpose computing in the nineteen-fifties (the first *UNIVAC,* or Universal Automatic Computer, was built in 1951 for the U.S. Census Bureau) and the founding of the field of artificial intelligence in 1956, the workings of politics—once quaintly referred to, metaphorically, as the "political machine"—began to be outsourced to actual machines.

The mainframe computer, the personal computer, the Internet, data science, machine learning, and large language models have made possible astounding advances in

scientific research, communication, education, public health, and a thousand other realms of human endeavor. But their effects on political discourse, representative democracy, and constitutional government have been, on the whole, malign. Liberal democratic states make citizens; the artificial state makes trolls.

Building an artificial state took decades, and it happened mainly by accident. In 1959, the Democratic Party, desperate to win back the White House, considered retaining the services of a startup staffed by computer scientists, political scientists, and admen, whose "People Machine" could run simulations on an artificial electorate and tell a party's nominee what to say, to whom, and when. "Without prejudicing your judgment, my own opinion is that such a thing (a) cannot work, (b) is immoral, (c) should be declared illegal," Adlai Stevenson's adviser Newton Minow wrote to the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a confidant of John F. Kennedy. Schlesinger agreed, saying, "I shudder at the implication for public leadership of the notion . . . that a man shouldn't say something until it is cleared with the machine," but added that he didn't want "to be a party to choking off new ideas." The Kennedy campaign went ahead, hiring the Simulmatics Corporation to run predictions on an I.B.M. 704. (I investigated the history of Simulmatics in a 2020 book, "If Then.") "It is the nature of politics that men must always act on the basis of uncertain fact," Theodore H. White wrote in

his prize-winning account of the Kennedy campaign, "The Making of the President." Otherwise, "politics would be an exact science in which our purposes and destiny could be left to great impersonal computers." But a transition had already begun. As the New York *Herald Tribune* put it, "a big, bulky monster called a 'Simulmatics' " had been Kennedy's "secret weapon."

There was no grand plan, no sinister scheme. Instead, there were dedicated people trying to do their jobs as effectively as possible using the latest technologies, with the result that year by year and decade by decade, in both politics and journalism, automated data processing and targeted messaging replaced face-to-face interaction and mass circulation in the interest of speed, efficiency, and personalization. Meanwhile, polarization grew and trust in government fell, and, for reasons that, to be sure, were driven by forces that went beyond technological change, Americans became lonelier and angrier; more susceptible to conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and frauds; and also more likely to believe that much of what they once thought was true was in fact a lie.

In 1972, Stewart Brand suggested that the personal computer could bring "power to the people." Three years later, the New York *Times*, with CBS, released the nation's first media-run poll, at once diminishing the role of man-on-

the-street reporting and abandoning the long-standing reluctance of news organizations to conduct polls. In 1984, Apple released a TV ad suggesting that its new Macintosh would topple Orwellian totalitarianism. In the nineteen-nineties, Clinton-and-Gore-era Democrats promised, in one manifesto, that "thanks to the near-miraculous capabilities of micro-electronics, we are vanquishing scarcity." In 1993, *Wired* reported that "life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity and community." Seven years later, *Wired* announced, "We are, as a nation, better educated, more tolerant, and more connected because of—not in spite of—the convergence of the Internet and public life." No such era of tolerance ever arrived.

In the virtual political reality of the twenty-first century, much of public discourse is controlled by private corporations that manufacture, and profit from, political extremism, even as they purport to be committed to democratic governance. At every stage in the emergence of the artificial state, tech leaders have promised that the latest new tools would be good for democracy, and for freedom, no matter the mounting evidence to the contrary. In 2014, Twitter released what it called "The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook," which informed legislators that its platform is "the Town Hall Meeting . . . in Your Pocket." The company,

which has since become X, is a privately held corporation that could withhold from public scrutiny data about its users or operations. It is not a democratic institution. Facebook's vaunted mission as of 2017 was "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." Facebook, now Meta, is a corporation that has historically been ruled by the mantra of its C.E.O., Mark Zuckerberg: "company over country." It is not a democratic institution. "The most problematic aspect of Facebook's power is Mark's unilateral control over speech," Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder, wrote in 2019. "There is no precedent for his ability to monitor, organize and even censor the conversations of two billion people."

Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

Newer social-media companies have not forged a different path. Nearly half of American TikTok users under thirty say they use the platform to follow politics or political issues, and about the same percentage believe that TikTok is "mostly good" for democracy. In 2021, a report by the Department of Homeland Security concluded that TikTok's algorithm had unintentionally driven support for the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol. This year, a study conducted in Germany alleged that TikTok promoted far-right candidates to young voters. It is not a democratic institution.

It's not as though these platforms couldn't become good for

democracy, if they were to be reinvented as well-regulated, public-interested digital utilities. "Algorithms for the People: Democracy in the Age of AI," an extremely thoughtful 2023 book by the British Labour Party M.P. Josh Simons, offers a political theory of machine learning—explaining the politics of search-result ranking, for instance—and expresses confidence that legislators can "develop structures of governance within which corporations design infrastructural ranking systems that create a healthy public sphere and civic information architecture." This isn't a new idea, and it's one shared by Risse, who follows many earlier writers, including Ethan Zuckerman, in proposing a public-interested digital infrastructure, "like creating parks and libraries for the internet." Where Risse endorses epistemic rights as a new kind of human right, Simons proposes an A.I. Equality Act, to "assert political equality as a guiding principle in the design and deployment of predictive tools." If twenty-first-century democracy feels half dead, Simons believes that working through these challenges will bring it back to life. That can't happen fast enough, because, year by year, the problems get more difficult to solve.

In the artificial state, at least as much political speech is made by bots—programs that, mimicking human behavior, execute automated tasks—as by humans. The Internet became "inverted" in 2012, when, for the first time on record, bots were more active online than people were. This helped

generate a conspiracy theory, known as the dead-Internet theory, that everything on the Internet is fake. “It’s ridiculous, but possibly not *that* ridiculous?” the Internet beat reporter Kaitlyn Tiffany wrote in *The Atlantic*. Although Cambridge Analytica’s targeting of voters using Facebook data in the 2016 election was met with condemnation, what it did seemed little different from the way news organizations had come to treat their own political coverage, driven less by editorial judgment than by search-engine optimization.

Social media made many things worse. “For Twitter to deserve public trust, it must be politically neutral,” Elon Musk tweeted, when he was taking over the company in 2022. By 2023, X had, by some estimates, become inverted: one study found that nearly two out of three of its accounts appeared to be bots. (An X-commissioned study said that the amount was closer to eleven per cent.) Despite Musk’s promise to rid the platform of them, X now seems to have more bots than ever before. Earlier this year, Musk estimated that there would soon be two, three, or four bots for every human on the planet. (He’s building the technology that could allow us to abandon the planet, so long as no pesky government stops him. “Unless current trends for absurd regulatory overreach are reversed, humanity will be confined to Earth forever,” Musk recently declared.) Zuckerberg, once widely discussed as a possible Democratic candidate for the Presidency, gave up on American politics, refusing to try to

fix what he's broken and instead devoting himself to his personal "wellness," the refuge of all scoundrels; he has also privately reinvented himself as a libertarian. This fall, Musk not only endorsed Trump but, dressed in black and describing himself as "dark *MAGA*," appeared at a Trump rally to warn Americans that, if they don't vote, "this will be the last election." But this very sense—the dark and uncanny precarity of it all, the exhausted rhetoric of existential risk, the fear that everything might collapse because everything is at once so fragile and so fake, so untrustworthy and so unreal—is itself a creation of the artificial state.

The building of the artificial state came at the expense of the natural world. "The modern world worships the gods of speed and quantity, and of the quick and easy profit, and out of this idolatry monstrous evils have arisen," Rachel Carson warned in the preface to a 1964 book called "Animal Machines," the "Silent Spring" of factory farming, which involved the raising of animals from birth to death in cages hardly bigger than themselves. "Yet the evils go long unrecognised," Carson wrote. "Even those who create them manage by some devious rationalising to blind themselves to the harm they have done society." The artificial state is the factory farming of public life, the sorting and segmenting, the isolation and alienation, the destruction of human community. Meanwhile, the immense energy and water consumption required to build, expand, and maintain the

coming A.I. infrastructure threatens to roll back gains made by environmental regulation in the past half century.

This election season, even as hurricanes battered North Carolina and Florida, the natural world has been notably absent from both the Trump and the Harris campaigns. Trump, who used to describe climate change as a hoax, has not substantially altered that position. ("You know, they have no idea what's going to happen," he said this summer. "It's weather.") Harris, despite having been part of an Administration that produced perhaps the most important environmental law in a generation, has seemed to distance herself from environmentalism as she attempts to take back the language of freedom from her opponent. But, as the historian Sunil Amrith writes in his essential new book, "The Burning Earth: A History," the rhetoric of freedom has become bound up with the triumph of the artificial over the natural: "Into the pursuit of freedom there crept, over time, a notion previously unthinkable: that true human autonomy entailed a liberation from the binding constraints of nature."

Risse's "Political Theory of the Digital Age" laid out a philosopher's thought experiment, a "Grand Democratic AI Utopia," in which democracy would work at machine scale. Judges would be replaced with sophisticated algorithms, legislators with "AI-driven collective choice systems." He wrote that "nobody has so far seriously proposed anything

like this," and cautioned that we would be "ill advised to be guided by such a utopia." But his book was published last year, and since then fantasies of a Grand Democratic AI Utopia have cropped up all over the place.

In "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto," posted last October, Marc Andreessen, the venture capitalist and notable Trump-Vance supporter, delivered a delusional account of human history as the triumph of the "techno-capital machine" over the constraints of nature. "We had a problem of isolation, so we invented the Internet," Andreessen proclaimed, preposterously. The solution is at hand: "We believe Artificial Intelligence is our alchemy, our Philosopher's Stone—we are literally making sand think." This September, OpenAI's Sam Altman posted an essay in which he argued that generative A.I. is "the most consequential fact about all of history so far," and that humanity is on the cusp of solving every problem. "There are a lot of details we still have to figure out," Altman wrote, unironically, "but it's a mistake to get distracted by any particular challenge." The following month, not to be outdone, Dario Amodei, the C.E.O. of Anthropic, a rival of OpenAI, published a blog post called "Machines of Loving Grace: How AI Could Transform the World for the Better," in which he predicted that A.I. could lead, in five to ten years, to "the defeat of most diseases, the growth in biological and cognitive freedom, the lifting of billions of people out of poverty to share in the new technologies, a

renaissance of liberal democracy and human rights"—developments that will happen so fast and be so overwhelming that many of us will be "literally moved to tears." Someone will be crying. That much is true.

Having built an information infrastructure that classifies and divides humans and drives them to ideological extremes, these same people and corporations are now building machines that purport to undo the very damage they have caused, much in the same way that geoengineering schemes seek to address catastrophic climate by using the very logic and tools that created the problem. In a study funded in part by M.I.T.'s Generative AI Initiative and published in *Science* this fall, conspiracy-minded Americans were subjected to long exchanges with a deprogramming chatbot. "The treatment reduced participants' belief in their chosen conspiracy theory by 20% on average," the researchers concluded. They don't seem to have bothered to establish control groups who might, for instance, have been asked to read articles and books, or—seemingly beyond the realm of imagination—converse with another human.

The same spirit of inquiry-as-boosterism lies behind "The Digitalist Papers." It brings together venture-capital magical thinking about a Grand Democratic AI Utopia with the kind of social science that imagines improving machines but cannot

imagine helping people by way of, say, funding for public education. The self-described Federalist Papers for the age of artificial intelligence propose schemes that include digital citizen assemblies and "actionable strategies for successfully transitioning to a new era of governance whereby AI recommends courses of action to the humans" in places like legislatures and courtrooms. In one of the essays, "The Potential for AI to Restore Local Community Connectedness," the former C.E.O. of Nextdoor touts the ability of the company's "AI Kindness Reminder" to reduce "the creation of uncivil and harmful content." Eric Schmidt, the former C.E.O. of Google, boasts that "the coming of AGI may herald less of a new world order and more of an improved version of our current liberal order: Democracy 2.0." John Cochrane, a Hoover Institution economist, delights at this news: "As birthrates continue to decline, the issue is not too few jobs, but too few people. Artificial 'people' may be coming along just in time!" All but alone among the Digitalist Papers' contributors, the legal scholar Lawrence Lessig sounds a note of caution: "The likely effect of AI will make an already broken political system even worse."

The artificial state is not alive; it cannot be killed. But, because it is something built, it can be dismantled, if enough people decide to sell it off for parts. Other very stubborn systems for organizing human societies have been

dismantled before. The divine right of kings, feudalism, human bondage. Compared with those, this one might be easy. It begins with naming it. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the member of the Kennedy family to whom Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was a confidant.