Artificial intelligence for electoral administration and management: A pathway for Africa-EU partnership

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KEY MESSAGES

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1. Digital transformation of African Election Management Bodies (EMBs) is a priority. Most EMBs currently rely on outdated manual systems, with digital transformation efforts still in the early stages. This lagging digital infrastructure hampers their ability to leverage the full potential of AI for election management. While some EMBs may be utilising digital tools, many do so without recognising that these tools incorporate AI technologies. To unlock AI's capabilities such as improving voter registration, enhancing data accuracy and streamlining election logistics, African countries must fast-track digital transformation of EMBs. This includes investing in the necessary hardware and software, developing secure digital networks and incorporating systems that can support AI applications.

2. Institutional capacity building and skills development programmes are essential in capacitating EMBs. EMBs need to be able to navigate the complexities and challenges that arise from AI integration in electoral processes. By providing comprehensive training programmes to electoral officers on AI and digital technologies, EMBs ensure that electoral officers can effectively manage AI tools, and deal with various challenges arising from use of AI during elections.

KEY MESSAGES (CONTINUED)

3. To foster public confidence in electoral processes, EMBs must prioritise voter education regarding AI and its associated risks. The increasing use of AI technologies, particularly in disseminating information, can lead to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. EMBs should proactively educate voters about these risks, equipping them with the knowledge to identify fake news. EMBs should continue to utilise traditional communication platforms like national and community radio to reach diverse populations, particularly those in rural areas and areas with limited access to the internet. EMBs should also tailor educational content to local languages to enhance outreach efforts. By building a well-informed electorate, EMBs can strengthen trust in the electoral process and empower voters to make informed decisions.

4. The private sector must be engaged in discussions around use of AI in elections. Social media platforms are central to the spread of election information, providing a platform for voters to interact, exchange ideas and engage with their political candidates. Also, technology companies provide AI tools and technologies used by EMBs for purposes of election management. The private sector plays a key role in mitigating the potential risks and harms associated with AI such as through platform monitoring, detecting, flagging and taking down disinformation and harmful content. Technology companies also contribute towards the advancement of research on AI such as enhancing Large Language Models to include African languages which helps in making sure that AI applications used in elections are inclusive and there is broader participation in democratic processes. Engaging with the private sector in discussions on AI in elections will help to ensure the ethical, transparent and responsible development, deployment and use of AI technologies in the electoral space.

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2024 has been dubbed '*the election superbowl*' due to the higher number of elections taking place in different parts of the world, including in the United States and in the European Union. In Africa alone, over 20 countries have held or are approaching elections. South Africa and Rwanda already elected their presidents, while Ghana is preparing for its presidential election in December 2024. A distinctive feature of this year's election season is the increased concern over the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) which poses risks such as the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and violation of human rights (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2021). Various stakeholders have responded by developing guidelines (Guidelines for Political Parties Using Generative AI; see Media Monitoring Africa, 2023), making commitments (Principles and Guidelines for Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa; see IEC, n.d.), and concluding agreements ('The Tech Accord', see Munich Security Conference, 2024) to find ways to protect the integrity of electoral processes. Though regulating the use of AI in election campaigns by political parties and digital platforms is crucial, understanding how AI is deployed specifically by electoral management bodies (EMBs) for election administration and management is equally important.

The purpose of this policy brief is to explore the use of AI by African EMBs for their core functions on election management and administration. As AI adoption in Africa is still emerging, the policy brief first contextualises global AI dynamics, highlighting how geopolitics and external influences impact African elections and AI use in elections. It also outlines the state of AI adoption while highlighting the risks in uptake of AI by EMBs. Further, it provides guidance on how electoral commissions can deploy AI ethically and responsibly while upholding their constitutional mandates and protecting voters' rights. The brief also draws from the rich discussion and policy recommendations from a workshop held by ETTG members together with African and European stakeholders in Accra, Ghana. With different actors working on different aspects on the intersection of AI and elections in Africa, the brief presents a unique selling point for Europe and Africa to collaborate in building capacity to support EMBs.

BACKGROUND COMPLEXITIES OF AI GEOPOLITICS, AI RACES AND ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

Africa's approach to use of AI in elections and AI regulation is heavily influenced by global dynamics. Both state and non-state actors have historically meddled in African elections, raising concerns about the potential impact of AI on future elections. The African Union (AU) articulated in its Continental AI Strategy that external influence from AI technologies developed outside Africa may undermine democratic sovereignty, pan-Africanism values and civil liberties (African Union, 2024). Geopolitically, the United States and China as two major digital empires are competing for digital supremacy and extending their spheres of influence in Africa through investing in Africa's digital and AI infrastructure. This rivalry shapes Africa's technological landscape, as reliance on foreign investment and technology could compromise African countries' control over AI deployment, subjecting them to strategic interests of global powers and potentially limiting their autonomy in shaping AI governance and policy (Timcke, 2024; Falajiki, 2023). The European Union (EU) is also expanding its influence in Africa's digital space through infrastructure investments and regulatory influence. As a global leader

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in shaping AI frameworks, the EU has taken a significant step by passing the first law regulating AI, the EU AI Act (European Union, 2024). African countries, mindful of the 'Brussels effect' and the influence of global actors on AI governance, worry that global AI standards may not reflect African values and contexts (Musoni, 2024). Given the geopolitical rivalry over AI, there are concerns over whether these global AI standards will be imposed on Africa, or if Africa will be able to carve out and define its own approach to AI governance.

A significant number of disinformation campaigns in African elections are orchestrated by foreign actors seeking to influence political outcomes. For instance, Russia has been linked to disinformation campaigns in Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan, exploiting political instability and shaping public opinion (African Digital Democracy Observation, 2023). In South Africa, concerns arose during the election season that the country's historic ties to Russia, along with its foreign policy position over Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Gaza conflicts, could be manipulated in the spread of disinformation campaigns to sway voter sentiment (Allen, 2024). Similarly, in Kenya, non-state actors like Cambridge Analytica have played a pivotal role in spreading fake news (Effoduh, 2024). These incidents highlight the vulnerability of African electoral systems to foreign interference, which can complicate the efforts of EMBs in ensuring fair and transparent elections.

Most African countries are consumers and users of technologies developed elsewhere. Electoral processes are managed using foreign digital tools and imported digital devices. This reliance increases the vulnerability of electoral processes (Research ICT Africa, 2023). At the same time, tech dependency leaves African countries at risk of losing digital sovereignty as they find themselves subject to policies of external tech companies (Musoni et al., 2023). Another risk associated with this dependency is that the use of AI systems trained on non-African data can result in algorithmic bias. Such biases may disenfranchise certain demographics and exclude local cultural context, leading to unfair electoral outcomes (Timcke & Hlomani, 2024). In some cases, AI tools used during elections lack support for local African languages, restricting access to vital electoral information and potentially disenfranchising populations who are not fluent in the dominant languages.

These complex challenges complicate the adoption and use of AI by African EMBs. In the next section, we explore the ways in which EMBs leverage AI to enhance their electoral processes.

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HOW ARE ELECTORAL BODIES USING AI FOR ELECTION MANAGEMENT?

AI presents significant potential for improving various stages of the electoral process from pre-election to during election and post-election. Some of the uses of AI pre-election include voter registration, eligibility checks, planning, predictive analytics, civic education and voter mobilisation. AI-driven solutions are automating operations such as data entry, verification and authentication of voters which reduces errors and discrepancies and reduces the workload of electoral authorities (Stevenson, 2024). EMBs can also use AI during elections for campaign monitoring, fraud detection, voting operations and polling centre monitoring, and post-election for electoral results analysis

and reporting (Juneja, 2024). In other countries like Estonia, South Korea and Switzerland, AI is used for online voting and vote counting, utilising machine learning to detect anomalies and prevent manipulation (Chennupati, 2024). AI can also potentially be used by EMBs to maintain voter lists and flag duplicate voter entries, but this AI usage is still very low (Deepak et al., 2023). EMBs can also monitor elections in real time and detect anomalies or irregularities which can compromise the legitimacy of elections (Stevenson, 2024). In some instances, AI voting assistants and AI-powered translation services are quite useful in making political information accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities (Ndiho, 2024) and young people (Thaver, 2024).

EMBs across Africa are gradually integrating AI into election management, although the extent of its use remains unclear due to the early stages of digital transformation. There is evidence of AI deployment by EMBs from South Africa, Eswatini, Madagascar and Nigeria. The uses of AI in these countries range from voter register management to automated chatbots for voter engagement, voter authentication and cyber threat detection (Itodo, 2024). Some EMBs are more advanced than others due to the advanced stages of digital transformation in the country. For instance, the South African Electoral Commission (IEC) developed an AI-driven mobile app (found on Google and Apple App Stores; see Google PlayStore, 2024) which played a critical role in providing voters with election-related information. Other EMBs like Ghana's Electoral Commission introduced biometric voter registration to facilitate both online and offline registration. However, it is unclear how widely these platforms are used, what data they collect, and how it is processed. Research is needed to understand AI's impact on voter engagement and participation.

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Workshop participants noted that several EMBs are now using generative AI on devices like laptops and phones and some host websites with AI features such as virtual assistants and chatbots. However, many officials are unaware of what AI entails, leading some to mistakenly believe they do not use it internally. Additionally, due to the lack of internal policies on AI use, some EMBs are hesitant to acknowledge its use. What is clear is that EMBs across Africa are already using AI, but its usage varies.

CONCERNS AND RISKS OF AI ADOPTION BY EMBS

Voter data sensitivity and data privacy

Electoral bodies manage sensitive voter data, making it crucial to protect data privacy and integrity. The use of AI and data analytics to analyse voter behaviour raises significant privacy concerns, particularly the risk of political parties accessing the data for targeted advertising or disinformation campaigns (Razzano, 2021; Stevenson, 2024). As AI is new, rules governing its use by EMBs are unclear, heightening the risk of manipulation of voters through tailored misinformation. Given the questionable integrity and independence of some electoral bodies, political pressure could result in unauthorised data sharing (Masau, 2024). To ensure the ethical use of AI, clear guidelines safeguarding privacy, transparency and accountability must be established. The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (UNESCO, 2024) provides a valuable framework for establishing these ethical standards.

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Cybersecurity risks

Cybersecurity in Africa remains weak, with many electoral bodies lacking proper cyber-hygiene practices and facing constant threats. In August 2024, the theft of a biometric verification device used during Ghana's voter registration raised concerns about the integrity and security of Ghana's Electoral Commission (Ghana Electoral Commission, 2024). Similarly, a data breach of South Africa's IEC exposed sensitive data of election candidates (Tech Central, 2024). The Information Regulator criticised the IEC for failing to adequately explain how the data breach occurred (Information Regulator, 2024a). As AI integration increases, so do the risks of security compromises. EMBs need to adopt stringent cybersecurity protocols to protect electoral data, ensuring that AI-driven systems are secure from hacking or manipulation.

Lack of digital and AI infrastructure

Africa faces significant digital infrastructure gaps, which directly impact the ability of EMBs to adopt and effectively use AI. These gaps range from inadequate hard and soft infrastructure, limited access to high-speed broadband and fibre-optic networks, insufficient data centres and overall poor internet connectivity. The high cost of internet access and digital devices remains a barrier for many EMBs which can limit their capacity to use AI. The use of AI requires infrastructure like high-performance servers, secure cloud computing capabilities, and steady and efficient power supply. However, most EMBs do not have access to such infrastructure. South Africa's IEC for instance, made strides by modernising its electoral management process and built a digital infrastructure hub where election results were counted in real time using AI (Malinga, 2024). Without a strong digital foundation, EMBs are not better positioned to use AI while some voters may be automatically excluded due to the digital divide.

Risks of foreign influence on Africa

As discussed earlier, foreign investments can undermine African countries' control over AI as they may be forced to align with the strategic interests of global powers. This limits Africa's autonomy in shaping AI governance and policies which may leave African countries more vulnerable to external agendas. At the same time, foreign actors are sponsoring disinformation campaigns in Africa which are exposing the electoral system to manipulation and undermining democratic processes. Moreover, the heavy reliance on foreign technologies risks eroding Africa's digital sovereignty and foreign AI tools may perpetuate bias and exclusion.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING PUBLIC TRUST IN EMBS

1

Public trust is a cornerstone of electoral integrity, but trust in EMBs is already on the decline. As AI begins to play a larger role in elections, this trust must be reinforced. While AI holds a myriad of benefits to improve election management, such as enhancing transparency and efficiency, the public often encounters its negative aspects such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Hitchen & Pumpuni Asante, 2024; Arteaga, 2024).

To rebuild trust, EMBs should focus on how AI can be used to safeguard elections rather than undermine them. They should reinforce transparency, accuracy and fairness in AI when used during elections. Trust is also built by communicating to the public on how AI can be used as a tool to protect the integrity of electoral processes, such as detecting fraud, verifying voter identities and improving the accuracy of voter rolls.

PROMOTING COOPERATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING AMONG EMBS

2

Since AI is a new technology, there is real value if EMBs cooperate and share knowledge on how to use AI, and ways to mitigate potential risks and challenges. Participants highlighted the important role played by the Association of African Election Authorities (AAEA) in fostering dialogue, setting standards and sharing best practices in election management. To strengthen these efforts, more EMBs should join the AAEA and participate in regular discussions on the risks and benefits of AI. The AAEA's recent launch of the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections represents a step forward in setting standards. Participants also highlighted the important role played by the African Union, emphasising the need for the AU to leverage its existing structures to address AI-related risks and election integrity. A coordinated platform for information sharing and dedicated resources for electoral integrity will help EMBs navigate the complexities of elections effectively.

INTERNAL CAPACITY BUILDING OF EMB OFFICIALS

3

While other election stakeholders such as election observers, fact checkers and civil society organisations (CSOs) are undergoing training, officials working for EMBs must receive tailored training on how they use AI at an organisational level. This training could extend to focus on the risks associated with AI and especially the manipulation of voters through the spread of disinformation and misinformation. EMBs can also promote cybersecurity and data protection training to ensure voter data remains protected.

DEVELOPING AND STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS

4

It is important that electoral bodies establish data governance frameworks and AI strategies. In addition to guidelines on use of AI, each EMB must develop a data governance framework clearly outlining their data processing activities. A comprehensive data governance ensures the quality, security and privacy of data while complying with data protection principles and AI ethical principles.

As highlighted earlier, predictive analysis undermines privacy rights and could intensify biometric surveillance (Itodo, 2024). The use of AI and data analytics presents new challenges on how to navigate compliance with data protection laws. Some data protection authorities have issued guidelines on how political parties should lawfully process personal data during elections (Information Regulator, 2024b). However, there are no guidelines prescribing how EMBs should comply with data protection laws. It is important that electoral bodies, as data controllers, remain compliant with data protection principles such as consent, lawful processing, data minimisation, security safeguards, limitation on further processing of data, privacy by default, privacy by design, data storage, etc. Electoral bodies should consult data protection authorities for guidance on AI usage. South Africa Information Regulators' engagement with the IEC to consider how to balance privacy and data access (Razzano, 2021) is exemplary.

PROMOTING VOTER EDUCATION

Most voters are unfamiliar with AI technologies like deepfakes and other digital threats, which leaves them vulnerable to manipulation. To counter this, EMBs should invest in voter education campaigns that explain how AI is used in elections, addressing concerns such as data privacy and cybersecurity, and manipulation. This education should highlight efforts to mitigate AI harms like identifying deepfakes and disinformation. Educating the public on how to identify deepfakes, disinformation and the responsible use of AI will help to protect electoral integrity.

Participants also highlighted the importance of reaching diverse and rural audiences through local radio stations and community platforms, and communicating in local languages to ensure widespread understanding. EMBs can support the work done by CSOs in voter education, civic engagement and combating election disinformation. Platforms such as Thoko the Bot[1] (South Africa) and i-Verify (Nigeria; see i-Verify, 2024) provide voters with accurate election information, while fact-checking tools like Real411 (South Africa; see Real411, 2024) and MAPEMA (Kenya; see Code for Africa, 2023) help to combat misinformation during elections. Other AI-powered platforms like Vote Compass (Nigeria and South Africa; see AUDA NEPAD, 2023) and Voter Registration Drive (Nigeria) use data to match voters with candidates who align with their views, and to target prospective voters to encourage them to register to vote. These platforms have been effective in engaging voters and promoting informed participation, but challenges remain.

A shortage of fact-checkers, funding constraints and the difficulty of monitoring encrypted platforms like WhatsApp hinder the effectiveness of these efforts. EMBs must support these initiatives by actively providing accurate and accessible information, collaborating with CSOs and helping bridge the gaps in resources. By working together, EMBs and CSOs can ensure voters are better equipped to navigate AI-driven misinformation and make informed decisions at the polls.

COLLABORATING WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Social media and technology companies also play a critical role in election-related information dissemination. AI-driven tools on these platforms can either safeguard or distort voter perceptions, depending on how these tools are managed. Workshop participants emphasised the importance for EMBs to collaborate with technology companies to ensure voters have access to accurate information and to mitigate the risks of AI-generated disinformation. Progress has been made by a few tech companies which set out expectations for how they should address AI risks in elections through the recently signed Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in Elections, but more work needs to be done.

Participants further pointed out that while some companies such as Meta (Balkissa, 2024) and Microsoft (Microsoft (n.d.) have introduced transparency tools and disinformation detection resources, other platforms are being slow to act or reluctant to engage with EMBs and CSOs. The private sector must collaborate with each other, EMBs and civil society to create mechanisms that protect voters from manipulation and ensure that AI is used to enhance instead of undermine electoral processes.

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1. Thoko the Bot was developed by Rivonia Circle, a CSO in South Africa to promote civic engagement (Rivonia Circle, 2024).

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AFRICA-EUROPE PARTNERSHIP: WORKING WITH AFRICAN ELECTORAL BODIES

Develop guidelines or standards on use of AI by EMBs

A unique selling point promoting Africa-EU partnership is through jointly developing AI governance frameworks applicable to electoral bodies. The EU AI Act may play a role in how African countries respond to AI regulation. The EU AI Act classifies as high-risk any AI systems intended to be used to influence the outcome of an election or referendum or the voting behaviour of natural persons in the exercise of their vote in elections or referendums. Any activities classified as high-risk under the EU AI Act are subject to more stringent rules. With the exception of the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa, there are no AI standards or guidelines on how African EMBs should use AI. What is missing from current interventions is the development of an institutional approach to AI governance. EMBs could benefit from having guidelines on what AI tools they procure, from which AI developers, and how they use the tools. The lack of AI guidelines for EMBs may be attributed to the lack of clear AI strategies at the national government level. The AU recently adopted the Continental AI Strategy, and only a handful of African countries (such as Rwanda, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and Benin) have developed national AI and data strategies (Tsebee & Oloyede, 2024; Musoni & Okechukwu, 2024).

Through collaborative efforts and multi-stakeholder engagements, Africa and Europe can work together in developing standards or guidelines which can help African EMBs in the use of AI for purposes of election management. These standards or guidelines can highlight important ethical principles such as transparency, accountability, fairness, inclusivity and human oversight, and how EMBs can apply these ethical considerations in their use of AI.

Support compliance with data protection laws

The EU is already supporting various data governance initiatives in Africa. For instance, the Team Europe Initiative on Data Governance in Africa has been providing African countries with technical support such as training of data protection officers (D4D Hub, 2024). Countries such as Nigeria and Kenya have received capacity-building training on data protection from Team Europe. Other countries like Senegal have been supported in developing their national frameworks on data and AI. Considering the sensitivity of voter data, Team Europe can also extend such initiatives and offer capacity building and training on data protection to EMBs.

Investment packages

The EU Global Gateway investment package supports digital infrastructure investments (European Commission, n.d.). Within this investment package, the EU can focus on special investments dedicated towards AI and data infrastructure, including building data centres and high-performance computing processors. These infrastructure investments are the backbone which can support EMBs in using AI for election management. Part of the investment can contribute towards capacity building of EMBs as well as voter awareness and civic education on AI in elections.

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