

The Democracy Puzzle in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Redefining Power, Challenges, and Future Scenarios

Seyed Mohammadsadegh Talebian*^{ID}

(Corresponding author) Master of Political Science, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science,
Imam Sadeq University, Tehran, Iran, ms.talebian@isu.ac.ir

Seyed mohammadhosein Badie Khamseh Fard^{ID}

PhD Student in Futures Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Management, Imam Sadeq
University, Tehran, Iran sm.badiey@isu.ac.ir

Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the various dimensions of the interplay between artificial intelligence (AI) and democracy in shaping power structures within democratic societies and to propose potential future scenarios. In this regard, the study seeks to answer how AI can alter power structures and what possible futures can be envisioned for democracy in this era.

Methodology: To achieve the research objectives, a descriptive-analytical and mixed-method approach was employed. Data collection tools included document analysis, expert panel discussions with specialists in relevant fields, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques and the study's theoretical framework.

Findings: The research findings are categorized into three key areas: "Weight of the Past," "Pressures of the Present," and "Attraction of the Future." The results indicate that democratic legacies and historical experiences, opportunities and challenges posed by AI, and democratic aspirations are crucial forces shaping the future of democracy in the AI era. Scenario analysis reveals that AI can both enhance democracy and citizen participation while also leading to power concentration, mass surveillance, and public opinion manipulation.


Conclusion: The scenarios highlight that the future of democracy in the AI era is highly dependent on current decisions and policymaking. A set of recommendations at the policy, institutional, social, and individual levels is proposed, including the formulation of smart regulations, strengthening oversight institutions, empowering citizens, and supporting democratic initiatives. The study emphasizes that through collaboration among various stakeholders, AI can be leveraged to enhance democracy.

Key Words: Futures Studies, Democracy, Policy-making, Power, Futures Triangle, Artificial Intelligence

Cite this article: Talebian, Seyed Mohammadsadegh Badie Khamseh Fard, Seyed mohammadhosein. (2025) The Democracy Puzzle in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Redefining Power, Challenges, and Future Scenarios, Volume 9, NO.2 fall & winter 2025, 218-241

DOI: 10.30479/jfs.2025.21741.1618

Received on: 23 June 2025 **Accepted on:** 14 July 2025

Copyright © 2025, The Author(s). 

Publisher: Imam Khomeini International University

Corresponding Author/E-mail: Seyed Mohammadsadegh Talebian / ms.talebian@isu.ac.ir

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) presents a fundamental paradox for 21st-century societies. On one hand, AI offers unprecedented potential to enhance democracy through optimized public services, increased transparency, and facilitated citizen participation. On the other hand, its capabilities for mass surveillance, public opinion manipulation, and automated decision-making pose a significant threat to foundational democratic values such as freedom, equality, and the rule of law. This duality has turned the relationship between AI and democracy into one of the most complex puzzles of our time (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021). While much of the discourse focuses on visible consequences like fake news or algorithmic bias, a more profound challenge lies in AI's capacity to structurally transform the architecture of power. This technology is not merely a neutral tool but an active force that disrupts the balance of power among citizens, governments, and tech giants. Despite a growing body of literature, a significant research gap remains: most studies adopt a one-dimensional (threat- or opportunity-focused) approach and lack a futures-oriented framework to move from analyzing current trends to envisioning alternative scenarios. This research aims to fill this gap by employing a systematic futures studies approach to provide a holistic analysis of the interplay between AI and power structures, ultimately shaping the future of democracy (Puran, 2024). Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the central question: *How does artificial intelligence alter the structure of power in democratic societies, and what scenarios can be envisioned for the future of democracy in this era?*

Methodology

This applied research employed a descriptive-analytical design with a mixed-method approach. The primary analytical framework chosen for structuring the analysis and developing scenarios was the Futures Triangle, a method developed by Sohail Inayatullah (2014). This framework was selected for its holistic capacity to analyze the dynamics of change by systematically examining the interplay of three shaping forces: the Weight of the Past (deep structures and historical patterns), the Push of the Present (quantitative trends and current challenges), and the Pull of the Future (visions and aspirations for the future). The data collection process involved three main tools. First, a comprehensive document analysis of academic literature and policy reports was conducted to establish the theoretical framework and identify the "Weight of the Past." Second, two expert panels and a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 14 experts from academia and policy sectors, with the process continuing until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews were designed to elicit deep insights into all three dimensions of the Futures Triangle. Finally, the qualitative data

from the panels and interviews were systematically analyzed using the six-step Thematic Analysis model proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Findings

The research findings, structured around the three vertices of the Futures Triangle, provide a comprehensive map of the forces shaping the future of democracy in the age of AI. The Weight of the Past is characterized by a dualistic legacy: the robust heritage of democratic institutions, rule of law, and human rights serves as a defensive barrier against the misuse of technology. Concurrently, historical experiences with previous technologies (e.g., radio, the internet) offer cautionary tales about their dual-use potential for both enlightenment and propaganda. The Pressures of the Present are dominated by significant challenges, including mass surveillance, the manipulation of public discourse through filter bubbles, systemic algorithmic bias, the concentration of power in the hands of a few tech corporations (a phenomenon aligned with Zuboff's (2019) theory of "surveillance capitalism"), and the potential emergence of what Harari (2017) terms a "useless class," which could destabilize societies. These pressures are countered by opportunities such as enhanced public services and data-driven policymaking. Finally, the Attraction of the Future is shaped by powerful visions of a more advanced democracy, including an "empowered participatory democracy" where citizens use AI for informed decision-making, a "smart democratic governance" model with heightened efficiency and transparency, and the aspiration for a more just and equitable society where AI is used to mitigate inequality.

The interplay of these forces led to the development of three distinct future scenarios:

- **Scenario 1: Empowered Democracy.** In this optimistic scenario, the strong pull of democratic ideals and the solid weight of democratic institutions successfully manage the pressures of AI. Technology becomes a tool for citizen empowerment, algorithmic transparency is a public right, and AI-driven platforms facilitate direct participation in governance.
- **Scenario 2: Algorithmic Authoritarianism.** In this pessimistic future, the negative pressures of surveillance and control, combined with an authoritarian pull, prevail. AI is weaponized for social control, dissent is suppressed, and a "digital social credit" system dictates citizens' access to basic services, effectively eroding fundamental freedoms.
- **Scenario 3: Precarious Democracy.** This scenario, considered the most likely, depicts a future of constant struggle. The democratic landscape is unstable, with citizens caught between empowering technologies and sophisticated disinformation campaigns. Trust in institutions is severely eroded, and the future of democracy hinges on an ongoing, uncertain battle between progressive and regressive forces.

Conclusion

This research set out to unravel the puzzle of democracy in the age of AI and concluded that this technology is not a neutral force but an active agent in reshaping power structures. It fundamentally alters democratic societies by enabling algorithmic control over public discourse, creating a new logic of power accumulation based on data (surveillance capitalism), and eroding the principles of informed participation and political equality. The future of democracy is not a predetermined path but the outcome of the ongoing contestation between these forces. The analysis yielded three potential scenarios—Empowered Democracy, Algorithmic Authoritarianism, and Precarious Democracy—which highlight that the trajectory of the future is critically dependent on present-day policy choices. Theoretically, this study underscores the need to update classical theories of power and democracy with concepts like "non-human agency" from Actor-Network Theory. Practically, the scenarios serve as a stark warning against policy inaction. While the study's focus on Iranian experts is a limitation, it suggests a critical path forward. Future research should focus on comparative analyses across different political contexts and, more importantly, on the design of new democratic institutions and value-aligned algorithms. The study's primary recommendation is that shaping a future where AI serves democracy requires proactive, collaborative, and deliberate action from all stakeholders.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the Iranian Futures Studies Journal and its esteemed editor, as well as the anonymous referees for their insightful comments that significantly improved the quality of this article.

References

- Ahmadian, M., Heydari, M., & Tavousi, M. (2024). Future scenarios of the impact of artificial intelligence on national and international governance in a 10-year horizon. *Journal of Iran Futures Studies*, 14(48), 75-91. (In Persian)
- Ameri, Z. (2023). *Futures study of the use of artificial intelligence in elections: A threat or an opportunity for democracy?* [Conference paper]. First National Conference on Futures Studies in Jurisprudence, Law and Political Science, Iran. (In Persian)

- Abouzhari, M. (2024). Artificial intelligence as a soft power tool in the public policy domain. *Strategic Studies of Public Policy*, 13(35), 81-100. (In Persian)
- Bagheri Dolatabadi, A. (2024). The impact of artificial intelligence on the soft power of governments. *Strategic Studies of Public Policy*, 13(35), 223-244. (In Persian)
- Barkan, M., & Solhchi, S. (2024). Artificial intelligence and democracy; The impact of misinformation, social bots and political targeting. *Legal Civilization*, 6(18), 155-172. (In Persian)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Dahl, R. A. (1991). *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.
- Enayatullah, S. (2014). *Questioning the future*. Institute for Defense Industries Education and Research. (In Persian)
- Gautier, A. (2023). *The impact of artificial intelligence on human rights legislation*. Lithuanian University of Health Sciences.
- Grunwald, A. (2018). *Technology assessment in practice and theory*. Routledge.
- Harari, Y. N. (2017). *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow*. Signal.
- Kastelz, M. (2019). *The power of communication* (H. Basirian Jahromi, Trans.). Elmi-Farhangi Publications. (In Persian)
- Kissinger, H., Schmidt, E., & Huttenlocher, D. (2021). *The age of AI: And our human future*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Kouklberg, M. (2024). *An introduction to the political philosophy of artificial intelligence* (A. A. Raiszadeh, Trans.). Deksa. (In Persian)
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Malaei, A., & Kafi, M. (2023). The place of artificial intelligence in diplomacy; Considerations for the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Quarterly of Politics*, 25(98), 311-331. (In Persian)
- Mirzaei, A. (2024). Future scenarios of the impact of artificial intelligence on different dimensions of human life. *Journal of New Research Approaches in Management and Accounting*, 3(9), 7-30. (In Persian)
- Newman, S. (2022). *Power and politics in poststructuralist thought* (J. Jahangiri, Trans.). Mehrandish. (In Persian)
- Nye, J. S. (2019). *The future of power* (A. Azizi, Trans.). Nashr-e Ney. (In Persian)
- Puran, A. (2024). Dimensions of artificial intelligence ethics from an international and EU perspective. *Agora International Journal of Juridical Sciences*, 18(2), 245–251.

- Shariati, M., & Salimi, H. (2018). Future trends of democracy in the Middle East until 2025 and its impact on the national interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Rahbord Journal*, 7(55), 41-72. (In Persian)
- Torki, H. (2024). The new approach to power based on artificial intelligence (Case study of US-China competition from 2010 to 2023), *Journal of Political-International Approaches*, 4(14), 91-114. (In Persian)
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.