2024 is a global year for election campaigns. In addition to a Presidential campaign in the US, elections to the European Parliament, and national elections in countries including Brazil, India, Croatia, Mexico, it seems increasingly likely that Rishi Sunak will trigger a general election (with early whispers that the end of October is likely). As political parties, candidates and campaign bodies around the globe prepare to intensify their campaigns, we're hearing repeated claims that these elections will be conducted as never before.

With the dramatic explosion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the public consciousness prompted by the rise of ChatGPT, Google Bard and, in the University context, numerous AI essay writing and proofing tools, it seems likely that AI could be poised to transform election campaigns as we know them. And it's a scary thought. We're greeted by the prospect of AI generated deep fakes of politicians speaking or acting in unconscionable ways, the chance of ever more convincing fake accounts spreading misleading news, and the use of image generators deployed to paint candidates in the most favourable light. At core, these possibilities pose urgent questions about how we know what to believe – how we can uphold the idea that citizens should be able to make (well) informed decisions about who to vote for and be able to have trust and confidence in the electoral process.

Alongside these concerns, there are also still lingering fears from previous elections. In 2019 the legacy of the Cambridge Analytica scandal was still felt. We heard that parties possessed vast troves of personal data and had the capacity to target us at an individual level with manipulative messages that could affect our vote or dissuade us from turning out. We also heard about record levels of foreign interference, and the use of bots and trolls determinedly spreading misinformation and fuelling record levels of hate. Technology, it seems, was making election campaigns more problematic than ever before.

At the time of the last election, we had little empirical evidence to assess these claims. We were reliant on the rhetoric of companies and campaigners who may have had a fair incentive to emphasise the significance and impact of their own campaign tools. Now, four years on from the last general election we know much more about the use and impact of technology. We know, for example, that for all the fears about political parties conducting highly personalised targeting, for the most part – in the UK and elsewhere – parties use few targeting criteria, and mainly focus on broad age groups or large electoral geographies. We know that the data political parties hold is often fairly basic. It is more likely to include public data about whether you turned out to vote at previous elections, or indications of your voting intention declared to a doorstep canvasser than it is to focus on your browsing history or magazine subscriptions. We also know that online political adverts – a medium that was claimed to play a key role in manipulating voters at the last US election – have a limited effect on people's support and voting intention. Indeed, one recent study found an effect of just 0.7%. of online political adverts on an individual's vote choice.

These findings mean that when we hear calls that this will be the AI election and are warned that we will see a fundamental challenge to democracy from this new technology, we should pause to consider whether the fears are likely to be borne out in practice. It is undoubtedly true that AI has the *potential* to play a role in forthcoming campaigns. We're already seen examples of deep fake videos and audio that profess to be from mainstream political candidates. But the reality is that, for the most part, AI is not going to play a role in the bread and butter of most campaigns. One of the most surprising things for most people who haven't devoted far too much of their brain space to the study of political party campaigns is how small, temporary, and overworked

most campaign teams are. Even the major political parties will rarely have more than 10 people in their headquarters running the digital campaign– and these people are singlehandedly responsible for maintaining and updating databases, editing websites, constantly creating social media content and dealing with security threats and IT issues. For smaller parties, they are lucky to have more than 2 staff. In these contexts, the appeal of AI lies more its ability to automate routine tasks and free up manpower, than it is to create and send vast troves of personalised campaign material. And the reason is simple. Parties and candidates cannot risk the potential backlash and reputational risks of getting it wrong. Imagine using AI to design a social media ad, only to realise too late that it had included a policy from your opponent, or an image not from your, but a neighbouring constituency. In a climate of extreme scrutiny, the potential costs are just too high.

You may be unconvinced by optimism, but it is worth considering two things. First, take practically any technological innovation in history and you'll find evidence of moral panic. Of course, AI is new and in many ways unprecedented, but the tendency to react with fear and concern is well-established. As Amy Orben has detailed [elsewhere](), innovations ranging from radio, television, blogs and even novels have all been greeted with alarm. But repeatedly our worst fears fail to translate into practice, and I believe AI's impact on elections will follow this trend. My second reason for optimism is perhaps counter-intuitive. I am by no means saying that AI will not be relevant, but I do believe that the examples that do emerge will be outliers rather than the norm. They will likely come from unknown accounts and sources and whilst they will be shared and disseminated, they won't be commonplace. And yet, here is where my optimism is contingent on our response. In the past few months, the examples of AI that have emerged have been amplified and widely profiled within the mainstream media. And in so doing we direct disproportionate attention to these practices. We are, in essence, creating a self-fulling prophecy, if those concerned about AI end up amplifying the very practices that they profess to fear. And this leaves us with an interesting question. If AI should not be the story of this election campaign, then what should be?

When it comes to digital campaigning, we are able as never before to get insight into the strategic choices being made by political campaigns. We can see, in real time, where they are investing money, what messages they are deploying and where they are targeting attention. Whilst in the past we were reliant on spin doctors disclosing their strategies, or local reporting to work out where party activists were being deployed, now we can use online content archives to map and trace the political campaign. And that information allows us to offer unprecedented insight into the dynamics of the modern election campaign, showing which seats parties consider marginal, where has been written off and where local campaigners are seeking to buck the national trend.

Yet the digital landscape is not where we should focus all our attention. The often-untold secret of campaigning is that whilst digital has become an important site of investment, it has by no means supplanted the ground campaign, and indeed we're found that parties continue to invest most resource in leaflets, posters and print advertising (although spend on digital is increasing). We overlook the importance of such traditional activity at our peril. The ability to mobilise activists and run a strong ground campaign – ideally complemented with a strong online presence – is vital for campaigners, but it is becoming increasingly challenging. The legacy of covid has made activists and voters alike less willing to interact on the doorstep and party membership and activism levels are continuing to fall, and are by no means evenly distributed across the country. The ability for each party to wage strong national campaigns is therefore not guaranteed. Indeed, its improbable that we'll see the level of campaigning evident in recent by-elections as parties won't be able to concentrate their resource in particular areas. A key question for those reporting campaigns is therefore whether traditional campaigning is dead and, if so,

how are people learning about the election. What, in essence, is cutting through? To these ends, ongoing research projects such as Caitlin Milazzo's [Election Leaflet Archive](#) will be a fascinating resource for mapping activity on the ground.

So, as the next general election approaches, we need to think again about the type of stories that will and should be covered. And in doing so, we should resist the temptation for technological sensationalism, and instead focus on capturing the real dynamics of the modern election campaign.