



Book Review — Rewiring Democracy: How AI Will Transform Our Politics, Government, and Citizenship

Link

<https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/42738191>

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access License Articles (IOAL), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

Book Review – Rewiring Democracy: How AI Will Transform Our Politics, Government, and Citizenship

Bruce Schneier and Nathan E. Sanders, MIT Press, 2025

Paulo Carvão¹

¹ Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, USA

***Column Editor’s Note:** This review situates *Rewiring Democracy* within debates on artificial intelligence, democratic governance, and institutional design. In contrast to work that emphasizes technological determinism or narrowly defined risk mitigation, the review engages Bruce Schneier and Nathan E. Sanders’ argument that AI is becoming embedded in democratic institutions and everyday civic practices, shaping how governments process information, allocate authority, deliver public services, and mediate civic participation.*

The book is positioned alongside scholarship on surveillance capitalism, infrastructural power, and sociotechnical governance, while highlighting its distinctive contribution: a pragmatic framework for examining how AI may reconfigure legislatures, administrative agencies, courts, and civic life under conditions of democratic constraint. The review argues that the book is strongest when it treats AI as a governance challenge rather than merely a technical tool, but less complete when it moves from plausible use cases to durable institutional reform. It also assesses the book’s methodological orientation, noting both its strengths in conceptual synthesis and its limits in institutional specification, political economy, and democratic theory.

Keywords: AI and democracy, democratic governance, institutional design, trustworthy AI, civic participation, AI governance

Rewiring Democracy: How AI Will Transform Our Politics, Government, and Citizenship, by Bruce Schneier and Nathan E. Sanders, offers a timely contribution to one of the central questions of the digital age: how artificial intelligence is reshaping democratic systems.

Whereas prior scholarship has centered on the harms associated with the technology and its political economy, Schneier and Sanders shift the analytic frame toward a practical review of the possibilities wrought by AI. In doing so, the book occupies a space adjacent to, but distinct from, seminal works

like Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) or Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI* (2021). Zuboff diagnosed the corporate extraction of personal data to dominate behavior and markets, and Crawford added a view of the political infrastructures that make AI possible and how harms are hidden beneath technological narratives. Schneier and Sanders' exploration of the intersection of democracy and AI challenges scholars and practitioners to think critically about when to adopt AI, what effects we should allow it to have, and, most importantly, how to make AI work to the benefit of democracy.

The writers explore how AI will affect legislatures, executives, courts, civic participation, and the informational environment that undergirds democratic legitimacy. Their core claim is that AI will play a central role in the evolution of democracy. The book closes with a call for reflection about the failures of our democratic systems, most of which predate AI, and how to find in a moment of crisis the opportunity to use responsible AI to reorganize democracy to serve us all.

The authors' thesis rests on a deceptively simple insight: AI is an information-processing system that scales political work in four dimensions: speed, scale, scope, and sophistication (pp. 21-25). Democracies, in turn, are information systems that convert public preferences into policy and execute them through society. Once AI becomes integrated into the machinery of politics and government, it will alter what institutions can do, what citizens can expect, and how political actors compete. This reframing is among the book's major contributions: AI is not external to democracy but can be part of it.

This approach is analytically powerful, especially for a book interested in institutional capacity. But it is also a simplification. Democracies do not merely process preferences; they also stage disagreement, cultivate political judgment, and mediate conflicts over values that cannot simply be delegated to a technology. One may question, then, whether the book's informational lens illuminates democratic reform or narrows it.

A risk of engaging with an increasingly ubiquitous topic is a loss of definitional precision. To avoid confusion, "AI" in both the book and this review refers primarily to machine-learning and generative systems that serve as core tools of modern data science, applied to prediction, classification, language, automation, and decision support in political and administrative contexts.

The review proceeds in four steps. It first examines the book's framing of AI as a structural force in democratic life, then turns to the institutional domains in which that force may operate. It next considers the book's account of trustworthy AI for democratic use before assessing its methodological strengths and limits.

AI as a structural force in democratic life

From the outset, the authors resist deterministic narratives. AI is not inherently emancipatory or authoritarian; its democratic impact is contingent on design choices, institutional constraints, and civic norms. Schneier and Sanders argue that instead of focusing narrowly on catastrophic scenarios, the debate should be expanded to consider how AI will reshape everyday governance tasks, such as drafting legislation, interpreting regulations, delivering services, adjudicating disputes, and mediating civic life.

The book, therefore, sits comfortably within traditions of sociotechnical inquiry that reject technological inevitability. Schneier and Sanders offer a perspective that is occasionally reminiscent of Zuboff's political economy critique of behavioral extraction and market power, yet their goal is less diagnostic than constructive, seeking to identify opportunities for AI to promote democracy.

Instead of asking whether AI will break democracy, they ask how democratic systems must evolve to absorb a technology capable of processing political information at an unprecedented scale. Instead of imagining AI as a threat to human agency, they explore how it might give more citizens practical access to democratic processes, enhance deliberation, and augment civic participation. And instead of accepting the current distribution of power between governments and technology firms as static, they argue that democratic societies still possess meaningful leverage. Their view is that technological progress tends to happen from the bottom up and incrementally.

This is a useful shift because it treats democratic AI as a matter of institutional choice rather than technological fate, although the book is less specific about the political mechanisms through which those choices would be made.

Transformation of democratic institutions and processes

The book outlines key aspects of democratic institutions and examines AI's impact on politics, including how politicians use AI for communication, issue analysis, campaign coordination, and fundraising. It discusses the importance of understanding AI errors, accuracy standards, and human oversight in political contexts.

In an example of the pragmatic approach taken in the book, the authors remind us that "Neither perfect humans nor perfect AIs are possible. In many cases, our choice is not between AI and human; it's between AI and nothing." (p. 47) Across legislatures, administrations, and courts, the book's central promise is that AI can expand institutional capacity by helping democratic actors process more information, respond more quickly, and operate with greater sophistication. This is where Schneier and Sanders are at their most persuasive. They show that AI is not limited to spectacular or futuristic uses; it is likely to enter democracy through ordinary functions such as drafting, analysis, enforcement, and adjudication. Yet the same examples also expose a recurring tension that the book does not fully resolve: the more political institutions rely on systems that classify, recommend, or prioritize at scale, the more they risk obscuring the normative judgments embedded in those processes. Appeals to fairness, oversight, and trust are necessary, but they do not by themselves answer the deeper problem of how contested values are translated into systems that may appear neutral while narrowing the space for democratic disagreement.

Across its many scenarios, the book is most persuasive when it links AI to concrete institutional functions, such as drafting, analysis, enforcement, and adjudication, and shows that these uses raise governance questions rather than merely technical ones. It is less persuasive when the institutional arrangements needed to authorize, audit, contest, or revise those tools remain at a relatively high level.

The same pattern appears in the book's treatment of civic life. One of its distinctive claims is that AI could strengthen democracy by expanding the practical capacities of ordinary citizens, creating what the authors call AI-enhanced citizens (p.203). The tools that help people navigate public systems,

organize collectively, monitor government, or advocate more effectively could broaden access to democratic participation. But this promise only holds if AI does not worsen existing power imbalances and can be trusted to act in citizens' interests. The book recognizes risks from concentrated power (p.205), but it could say more about the political economy of democratic technology itself, from who designs these tools to who owns the infrastructure, who sets the defaults, and who has standing to challenge their operation.

Will the technologies that make participation easier also affect the habits of judgment on which democratic life depends? A system that helps citizens act on their preferences does not necessarily strengthen deliberation, independence of mind, or the habits of self-government on which democratic life depends.

AI for a better democracy

Schneier and Sanders note that democracy is fragile, citing risks from AI developed by powerful groups for self-interest. They argue that the biggest threats include overreliance on poorly understood AI, corporate concentration of power, and the decline of civic trust. Against that backdrop, the final chapters outline practical steps aimed at ensuring that AI strengthens rather than weakens democracy. The opening to the last part of the book encapsulates this approach: "By now, we hope you are convinced that AI will have a real impact on democracy and that, in spite of the risks and challenges that exist, it's possible for that impact to be positive." (p. 249)

The book's distance from accounts that treat AI's political effects as inevitable, including some associated with Silicon Valley accelerationists and the investment community around them, as analyzed in *The People Have Spoken* (Carvão et al., 2025), lies in its insistence that those effects are shaped by institutional design, incentive structures, and public capacity.

The book establishes a set of principles for trustworthy AI in democratic contexts and notes that these are no different than what one should expect from any public institution: "to be capable, available, transparent, responsive, debiased, secure, and not exploitative." (p. 265) These principles closely resemble familiar rule-of-law and public-administration values. Still, it is worth asking whether such general-purpose standards are sufficient for AI systems, or whether democratic use also depends on more specific means of assessing, tracing, and challenging these systems, including regulatory mechanisms capable of reviewing their operation and contesting harmful outcomes.

One of the last chapters in the book serves as a handbook on rewiring a democracy. After rejecting the dominant discourse of the existential threats posed by AI or its role in a new Cold War between the US and China, the writers introduce their four paths towards a rewired democracy (pp.270-272): reforming today's AI ecosystem, resisting harmful uses of AI, encouraging responsible use of AI in society, and renovating society itself, including its laws and democratic processes. These four paths highlight human agency and mark the beginning of a long journey.

Methodological approach and where the book falls short

A notable feature of the book is that many of its democratic questions are, at bottom, also data questions. Issues such as accuracy, bias, representativeness, explainability, benchmarking, and

human oversight sit beneath the use cases the authors describe. In that sense, the book not only invites reflection on AI and democracy but also points, if only implicitly, to the constructive role of data science in shaping whether these systems become trustworthy tools of public life through better measurement, evaluation, and oversight.

The book draws together political theory, governance scholarship, computer science, and contemporary policy debates in a synthetic and accessible way. Schneier's longstanding contributions to security studies and Sanders's background in data science give the book a dual lens: it is both technically fluent and politically attuned. Their contribution lies less in offering a new theory of democracy or technological change than in showing, in a clear and accessible manner, how AI-based technologies could transform democratic institutions and processes across multiple domains. The evidence presented spans case studies, emerging applications of generative AI, analysis of institutional structures, and informed projections. The result is a book with considerable range, even if some of its central claims remain more suggestive than fully developed.

The book is at its best when it shows how AI may enter the ordinary work of democratic governance. Some of its limitations become clearer in the final chapters. The democratic focus gives the book normative coherence, but not all the mechanisms it describes are uniquely democratic; many apply more broadly to politics, administration, and institutional decision-making across regime types. This leaves an important question somewhat open: what, exactly, is distinctively democratic in the transformations the authors describe, and what belongs to a more general account of AI-mediated governance? A related issue is that the book sometimes moves quickly from plausible use cases to workable institutional tools. In a field marked by technical uncertainty, commercial overclaiming, and what critics have called "AI snake oil" (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2025), democratic reform cannot assume that AI tools will perform as advertised.

That concern matters because, unlike earlier digital infrastructures such as social media, which primarily reshaped communication and coordination, the forms of AI discussed here aspire to intervene more directly in reasoning, classification, recommendation, and decision support within institutions themselves. Even so, the earlier comparison still matters since expanded participation and mobilization do not necessarily translate into durable institutional change and may instead expose or intensify institutional fragility as highlighted by Zeynep Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas* (2017).

For that reason, the book's optimism may strike some readers as overly hopeful. The optimism is not simply about democratic institutions adapting to AI, but about AI helping catalyze new institutional capacity in democracies already strained by polarization, distrust, and limited state capacity. AI may amplify those weaknesses as much as alleviate them. Schneier and Sanders recognize these constraints, but the path from institutional possibility to durable democratic reform remains less developed than the book's broader vision. Taiwan's use of Pol.is as a deliberation tool, for example, is mentioned but not fully developed (p.229). A richer engagement with Audrey Tang and E. Glen Weyl's *Plurality* work (2024), which offers a firsthand account and analysis of how digitally mediated participation can build consensus across social difference, would have helped ground some of the book's claims with one of the first real-world examples at scale.

A timely contribution

These limits do not diminish the book's importance. *Rewiring Democracy* makes a clear contribution by shifting the discussion from diagnosing AI's democratic risks to examining how AI may become part of the ordinary work of institutions and citizenship. Its value lies in giving readers a practical vocabulary for thinking about legislatures, administrations, courts, and civic life as AI becomes embedded in governance and government.

Yet the book does not fully resolve whether an informational model of democracy can capture the deliberation and judgment that democratic life requires, whether tools that make participation easier might also weaken civic autonomy, or whether the constructive uses of AI it envisions depend on broader institutional change than the book itself develops.

The book's lasting contribution is to press democratic societies toward the harder task of deciding how AI should be embraced, governed, contested, and, eventually, absorbed into public life.

Disclosure Statement

Paulo Carvão has no financial or nonfinancial disclosures to share for this article.

References

Carvão, P., Yashiro, M., and Jeloka, S. (2025). *The People Have Spoken: The Tech Industry, Civil Society, and the U.S. Artificial Intelligence Action Plan*. M-RCBG Associate Working Paper No. 251. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/publications/awp/awp261>

Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*. Yale University Press.

Narayanan, A. & Kapoor, S. (2025). *AI snake oil: What artificial intelligence can do, what it can't, and how to tell the difference*. Princeton University Press.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

Weyl, E.G., Tang, A., and Community. (2024). *Plurality: The Future of Collaborative Technology and Democracy*. <https://plurality.net/>

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs.