



**Testimony of VPIRG Democracy Associate Quinn Houston
in support of S.23, an Act to disclose synthetic media in elections
Vermont House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs**

April 3rd, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S.23. I am Quinn Houston, the Democracy Associate of the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG). For over 50 years, VPIRG has been a leading voice in protecting and expanding democracy in Vermont.

We support the passage of S.23. The disclosure of synthetic media in elections is essential in protecting our voters from misinformation that could affect our elections. Synthetic media, or AI media, is a rapidly advancing technology increasingly impacting various aspects of our lives, society, economy, and democracy.

In 2024, Vermont enacted H.878, which criminalized the non-consensual disclosure of sexually explicit images which included digitally altered images like AI deepfakes.¹ This framework demonstrates Vermont's willingness to take a stand against harmful AI-generated misinformation, setting a precedent for action in the political sphere. Notable cases, including the AI-manipulated likeness of Vice President Kamala Harris, illustrate how synthetic media can be weaponized against anyone, including public figures.²

Expanding Vermont law in the area of elections to include synthetic media and disinformation in all media forms would create additional safeguards for candidates and our democratic institutions.

In 2024, we saw numerous instances of deceptive AI content used during the election cycle that received public attention with the intent to mislead voters. A notable example is the audio

¹ <https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/Docs/ACTS/ACT161/ACT161%20As%20Enacted.pdf>

² <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/preserving-democracy/2024/09/12/deepfakes/>

deepfake robocall in New Hampshire, which imitated President Joe Biden dissuading voter turnout ahead of the presidential primary.³ Another is Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis allegedly using AI-generated imagery in a campaign advertisement showing opponent Donald J. Trump embracing Dr. Anthony Fauci without revealing the AI's role.⁴

In 2023, a concocted video presented Senator Elizabeth Warren claiming that Republicans should be banned from voting. Additionally, an AI-generated video of President Biden's announcement of a national draft for the Ukraine War first labeled a deepfake but later circulated without that disclosure.⁵

I'm sure we all agree that it is vital that Vermont residents maintain their trust in the electoral system. By ensuring that voters are informed when AI is used in election materials, we can enhance transparency and help maintain that trust.

This bill closely examines new forms of deceptive synthetic media in elections. It is essential to remember that free speech is vital. We urge this committee to ensure that any restrictions closely align with the bill's intent to protect voters from misinformation, not to censor their voices. While we recognize the vital importance of protected free speech in our society, we also know that courts have long understood that there are limits to free speech. We are not free to yell "Fire" in a crowded theater, for instance.

Misinformation about election processes and outcomes can erode public trust in democracy. With synthetic media, false claims can transform into fabricated content indistinguishable from reality, undermining confidence in elections and worsening political divides by amplifying false narratives, increasing tensions and polarization. It is more important now than ever to protect voters from deceptive and fraudulent synthetic media that can mislead the public during an election.

We support S.23 disclosure language that broadly considers the implications of AI's influence over elections, beyond just candidate misrepresentation. Advanced technologies can distort or fabricate people's votes and beliefs. That said, we urge the legislature to remain vigilant. This is a powerful and potentially dangerous technology, and any reasonable efforts to regulate or limit its use are worthwhile, as it poses a real threat to democracy. While we are not calling for an outright ban on this bill, simple disclosure may not fully address the accessibility issues AI

³ <https://apnews.com/article/biden-robocalls-ai-new-hampshire-charges-fines-9e9cc63a71eb9c78b9bb0d1ec2aa6e9c>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/08/1181097435/desantis-campaign-shares-apparent-ai-generated-fake-images-of-trump-and-fauci>

⁵ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/how-ai-puts-elections-risk-and-needed-safeguards>

presents as misleading synthetic content can quickly go viral before its authenticity is questioned.

This is just the first step in tackling a growing problem. The Senate committee crafted this legislation after hearing extensive testimony. Moving forward with this measured approach is important and can be done while we observe what happens in other states that are pursuing a more aggressive regulatory approach. However, passing this bill should not be the end of the conversation. It is reasonable to revisit this issue annually, monitoring developments and considering the best ways to curb AI's influence on elections. That includes assessing the mechanics, scope, and legal challenges surrounding this legislation.

VPIRG supports this bill. Vermont must take decisive action to address AI-generated political disinformation to safeguard our democratic processes. This is an essential first step. Thank you for your time and consideration.