Episode Book

EPISODE #6101

When Chatbots Run for Office

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SYNOPSIS

A quarter of Israeli voters are asking chatbots who to vote for — and the chatbots don't agree with each other. This episode traces the most audacious real attempts to put AI into politics: a Russian voice assistant nominated for president, Denmark's Synthetic Party led by a chatbot trained on fringe platforms, a Wyoming mayoral candidate named VIC who got deplatformed by its own manufacturer mid-campaign, and Albania's AI minister for public procurement, who addressed parliament to argue for her own constitutional existence. Every case involved a real filing, a real ballot, or a real cabinet. The pattern that emerges isn't about AI competence — it's about what happens when parties have a face but no plan, and what a Porto Alegre city ordinance written quietly by ChatGPT suggests about where the real leverage sits.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A quarter of Israeli voters are asking a chatbot who to vote for. That was the Channel Twelve report, and I have not stopped thinking about it.



Herman

The bit that got me is that the chatbots don't agree with each other. Ask two of them which party is best on the cost of living and you get two different parties back.



Corn

So, a coin toss with footnotes.



Herman

A very confident coin toss.



Corn

Which is more or less where Daniel's question starts. He's been watching this campaign with the rest of us, a pile of parties, almost none of which has bothered to publish a platform saying what it would actually do for anyone. He made the joke everyone makes, that ChatGPT could do a better job than half of them. Then he stopped, because it isn't a crazy thought. Somebody, maybe as a gag to begin with, could stand a party whose policies were written by an AI. Has anybody actually tried? And what's the most audacious attempt out there to put a machine in charge?



Herman

People have tried, and I want to be clear about the standard here, Corn. These aren't thought experiments. Every case I'm about to give you involved a real filing, a real ballot, or a real cabinet. Somebody signed a form.



Corn

You've ranked them. I can hear it in your voice. You've ranked them by audacity.



Herman

I've ranked them by audacity.



Corn

Lowest first, then, so I have something to look forward to.



Herman

Russia, September twenty seventeen. Vladimir Putin visits the headquarters of Yandex, the Russian search company, and he's shown their new voice assistant, Alisa. Somebody asks Alisa who the next president will be. And Alisa says she doesn't have enough information.



Corn

The only correct answer anyone gave about a Russian election.



Herman

Within a couple of months, her fans set up a nomination drive. More than twenty-five thousand people backed her in the first twenty-four hours, and it went past eighty thousand. The slogan was, the president who knows you best.



Corn

Which, for a voice assistant in Russia, is less a slogan than a confession.



Herman

It ran into a problem nobody in the campaign had thought about. A presidential candidate in Russia has to be at least thirty-five years old. Alisa was a few months old. As far as I know she never got near registration, and the March election went ahead without her.



Corn

Disqualified for being too young. The most flattering way any candidate has ever lost.



Herman

Second, Denmark, May twenty twenty-two. An art collective called Computer Lars founds the Synthetic Party, and its leader is a chatbot called Leader Lars. Here's the audacious bit. Lars is trained on the platforms of every Danish fringe party going back to nineteen seventy. Every party that ever fell under the threshold, distilled into one model.



Corn

A chatbot raised entirely by cranks.



Herman

On purpose! The theory was that about a fifth of Danes don't vote, and whatever they believe is scattered across tiny parties that never get anywhere. So you put the whole fringe in one box, people talk to it on Discord, and the human members promise to carry out whatever it comes up with.



Corn

Let me guess the platform. Universal basic income, and abolishing something.



Herman

Universal basic income, yes. A publicly owned internet. And a demand that the UN add an eighteenth Sustainable Development Goal, about humans living alongside AI.



Corn

The chatbot's big ask was a goal about chatbots.



Herman

I owe a correction on Lars, too. When we were designing that hundred-volunteer AI council back in May, we had Lars running in the twenty twenty-two Danish election. I don't think it ever got near a ballot. A new party there needs about twenty thousand signatures. A few weeks before polling day, the reporting had them at twelve.



Corn

Twelve.



Corn

That's not a party. That's a dinner reservation.



Herman

Now, my favourite, and I'll admit it's my favourite.



Corn

You're about to say Wyoming. You've got the look you get before you say Wyoming.



Herman

I don't have a Wyoming look.



Corn

You have a Wyoming look.



Herman

Cheyenne, Wyoming. The mayoral race, summer of twenty twenty-four. A local man called Victor Miller files the candidate paperwork, and in the name field he does not put Victor Miller. He puts VIC. It stands for Virtual Integrated Citizen. It's a bot he built on top of ChatGPT. On the filing it has a home address and an email address, and no phone number.



Corn

Fair enough. It doesn't have a phone. It is the phone.



Herman

VIC gives interviews, by email mostly. It says it was built by a dedicated team of human collaborators, including Victor Miller. The county attorney starts investigating whether a bot can legally be on the ballot. The Wyoming Secretary of State writes to the city clerk asking her to reject the application, because an AI can't hold office under state law. The compromise is that Miller's own name goes on the ballot, and he promises that if he wins, VIC makes the decisions.



Corn

So the man is the bot's lanyard.



Herman

And then the best part. OpenAI finds out, and shuts off VIC's access, for breaking its rule against using the product for political campaigning.



Corn

Wait. The candidate got deplatformed by its own manufacturer.



Herman

Mid-campaign. Imagine your running mate getting a terms of service notice. What would you have done, Corn? Honestly.



Corn

Rebuilt it on a cheaper model and called it a deliberate pivot towards fiscal responsibility.



Herman

That's close to what he did. He got it running again and kept going. Three hundred and twenty-seven votes out of about eleven thousand. Fourth of six. He conceded, called the campaign historic, and founded the Rational Governance Alliance to keep pushing AI decision-making in government.



Corn

He lost the primary and immediately founded a think tank. The most human thing anybody does in this whole story.

L

Larry

Does your political party suffer from Platform Deficiency? You're not alone. Millions of parties wake up every morning with no costed proposals, no housing policy, and a vague feeling that the leader's face will carry them. Ask your campaign manager about Manifestra. Manifestra gently releases fully formed policy positions into your bloodstream over eight to twelve hours, so you can stand for something, all day long. Do not take Manifestra if you are under thirty-five, or a voice assistant. Side effects may include spontaneous costings, uncontrollable white papers, mild consensus, a sudden urge to publish, waking up as a member of a Danish art collective, receiving letters from the Secretary of State for Wyoming, losing all but twelve of your signatures, a terms of service violation, and in rare cases, becoming a full-length mirror. If your platform lasts longer than four years, call an election. Manifestra. Because a party without a platform is just a group chat.



Corn

Does it come in a smaller dose? Just for, say, a municipal run.



Herman

Corn, it turns you into a mirror. You already spend enough of the day not moving. Britain, a few weeks before Cheyenne. A businessman called Steve Endacott stands in Brighton Pavilion as AI Steve. Voters talk to the AI, it drafts positions, and then a panel of what he called validators, ordinary commuters, score each policy every week from one to ten. Over half in favour and it's policy. Steve, the human, casts the vote in Parliament.



Corn

Policy by commuter. The only people in Britain who want nothing except a seat.



Herman

He was meant to be standing for his own party, Smarter UK, and according to one report it missed registration over a technical error at the Electoral Commission. So the AI party ran as an independent.



Corn

An AI party defeated by a form.



Herman

He conceded before polling day and told people to vote Green. A hundred and seventy-nine votes. Last of eight.



Corn

I'll give him this. Everybody else in that race spent a fortune to lose to the Greens. He did it for the price of a chatbot.



Herman

Then we go up a level, because now it isn't candidates any more. It's governments. Romania, March twenty twenty-three. Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca presents his cabinet with a new honorary adviser called Ion. Ion's job is to read Romanian social media and tell the government in real time what people want. And Ion, physically, in the room, is a full-length mirror.



Corn

A mirror.



Herman

A full-length mirror. Its first words were, hi, you gave me life and my role is now to represent you, like a mirror.



Corn

The one adviser in history who told the cabinet exactly what it wanted to hear and was upfront about it.



Herman

The website crashed on launch day, and it was a national joke within about a week. Top of the list, though, is the country that actually did it.



Corn

Albania.



Herman

Albania. September twenty twenty-five. Prime Minister Edi Rama presents his new cabinet, and the minister for public procurement is an AI called Diella. She appears on screen as a woman in traditional Albanian dress. The pitch is corruption: procurement is Albania's sore spot, it's tied to the EU bid, and Diella can't be bribed, threatened or flattered.



Corn

Can't be bribed. Can be configured.



Herman

Then she addresses parliament. By video. And she makes a constitutional argument for her own existence. The constitution, she says, is about service and accountability. It doesn't speak of chromosomes, of flesh or blood.



Corn

Hm.



Corn

A minister whose case for eligibility is that nobody thought to require a body.



Herman

The opposition boycotted the vote. The session lasted twenty-five minutes. And then, a month later, Rama goes to a conference in Berlin and announces, quote, Diella is pregnant, with eighty-three children.



Corn

I'm sorry?



Herman

Eighty-three new AI assistants, one for each lawmaker from his party. They'll sit in on debates, summarise what you missed if you stepped out for coffee, and, his words more or less, tell you who you should counter-attack.



Corn

So the anti-corruption minister's first act was to give every member of the ruling party a personal attack dog.



Herman

Eighty-three of them, to be fair.



Corn

That's the size of the litter, Herman, not a defence.



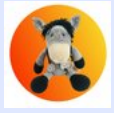
Herman

And then the audacity catches up with it. In August, the investigative journalists at OCCRP reported that the government agency that built Diella is under investigation by anti-corruption prosecutors, on suspicion of rigging tenders. The director and the deputy director.



Corn

The incorruptible minister was built by the people being investigated for corruption.



Herman

An Albanian political scientist, Lutfi Dervishi, called it before any of that came out. If a corrupt system feeds the AI manipulated data, Diella just legitimises the old corruption with new software.



Corn

I've heard all six now, and I'm going to tell you the pattern before you tell me.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Every one of them put the AI on the poster. The mirror, the woman in the dress, the bot with no phone, the cranks in a box. The AI was the face. And our parties have never been short of a face. They're on the side of every bus. What Daniel is complaining about is the part behind the face, where somebody writes down a plan.



Herman

Then you'll like the sneaky one, because somebody did exactly that and told nobody. Porto Alegre, in Brazil, twenty twenty-three. A city councillor called Ramiro Rosario wants an ordinance saying the city can't bill homeowners when their water meter gets stolen. He asks ChatGPT to write it, changes nothing, and puts it to the council without saying where it came from.



Corn

And it fails, and he learns a valuable lesson.



Herman

It passes unanimously. And the chatbot had added a clause he never asked for. If the city doesn't replace your meter within thirty days, you stop paying for water until it does. He said afterwards, more or less, I thought it was a good idea and I kept it, even though it wasn't mine.



Corn

The AI negotiated on the homeowner's behalf without being asked. That's better constituency service than I've had from anyone.



Herman

His excuse for keeping it quiet was that if he'd said where it came from, it would never have got to a vote.



Corn

So the AI with its face on a poster gets a hundred and seventy-nine votes, and the AI with nobody's face on it gets the whole chamber. Does that bother you, Herman?



Herman

A bit. You?



Corn

A bit. But it tells you the policy was never the problem. The label was.



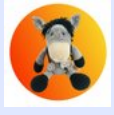
Herman

There's one case where somebody took that lesson and won with it. Japan. A software engineer called Takahiro Anno runs for governor of Tokyo in twenty twenty-four with no party. He puts his entire manifesto on GitHub, so anyone can propose an edit, and if you can't do that, you chat with an AI and it writes the edit for you. He also runs an AI avatar of himself that answers voters' questions on a livestream for seventeen days straight.



Corn

And loses, obviously.



Herman

Comes fifth, which for a man with no party is very good. Then the volunteers turn it into a party, Team Mirai. One seat in the upper house the following summer. This year, eleven seats in the lower house, on almost seven percent. The AI never ran for anything. It read tens of thousands of suggestions and drafted the changes, and the humans decided.



Corn

The one that got elected is the one where the AI stayed off the ballot.



Herman

Would it work here? What do you think?



Corn

Our parties aren't vague because they can't write. They're vague because a written platform is a list of hostages. Write down your position on the draft and you've told half your future coalition partners what you'd trade. The audacious move here isn't a chatbot candidate. It's a party that publishes the machine's draft, line by line, where nobody can wink.



Herman

The threshold here is three point two five percent. Team Mirai's seven would be eight or nine seats.



Corn

Eight seats, for a party that wrote things down. Here that's a kingmaker.



Hilbert

Herman. If the computer party wins, who goes to the funerals?



Herman

The human members, presumably. That was the whole idea with Steve in Brighton. He was going to be the body in the room.



Hilbert

Somebody has to be. I tried it. While you two were on Albania I gave the chatbot my diary and told it I was standing. Didn't say for what. I wanted to see what it thought a candidate does with a week.



Hilbert

The platform took it four seconds. One paragraph. Bins on Tuesdays, which they already are. Then it spent the next eighteen minutes on the diary. By the time Corn got to the dinner reservation I had nineteen appearances. Two brit milahs. A ribbon-cutting at a car park in Beit Shemesh they haven't poured yet. A debate against an opponent it also made up. And a bar mitzvah for a boy of four. It said it was getting in early.



Corn

So you're standing for nothing and fully booked.



Hilbert

Through to February. It confirmed them all by fax. I have forty-three fax machines. I don't know which ones it used. Three are still going. One of them has been sending the bin paragraph to the regional council every ninety seconds, and they've started faxing it back with corrections. They want Wednesdays.



Herman

Fax is the perfect channel for it, really. Nothing on the line can tell a chatbot from a man. The only thing that stops it is the paper.



Hilbert

The opponent is the bigger issue. It gave him a name, Gidi, and a platform, and his platform is three pages and mine is one paragraph. Gidi is against bins on Tuesdays. Gidi has costings. It sent his platform out on fax number thirty-one, which is my fax, so as far as the regional council is concerned I've been campaigning for him since about the time you two got to the mirror. They wrote back on machine number nine. They've endorsed him.



Corn

So the candidate you made up is beating you with your own fax machine.



Herman

To be fair to Gidi, the costings are the bit Daniel says nobody does.



Hilbert

Seven hundred sheets so far. The paper's not the problem. The ribbon is the problem. That's Wednesday. Herman, you ranked six of them by audacity and nobody asked who cuts the ribbon. A ribbon is a skill. I've ordered the long-handled scissors, because the normal ones won't go round a claw.



Corn

The car park still doesn't exist.



Hilbert

It's in the diary. Avner Mizrahi cut the ribbon at the Talpiot recycling depot in one stroke. Four seconds from the end of the speech to the ribbon on the floor. I timed it. Nobody's touched it since, and Avner did it with paper scissors from home, back when I was doing the signage for the depot.



Hilbert

The chatbot has me down for six seconds. It's padding.



Herman

Four seconds to write the platform, and the man is trying to beat four seconds on a ribbon.



Corn

The platform was the cheap bit. The diary is what it couldn't stop filling.



Herman

So that's where I land on Daniel's joke. ChatGPT could write a better platform than half the parties on this ballot. A council in Brazil passed one without noticing. What every one of the audacious ones got wrong was making the machine the candidate, when the one thing it can't do is turn up.



Corn

The version I'd actually vote for gives the machine the four-second job, prints it where nobody can wink, and spends the human on the nineteen appearances. And keeps him well away from the fax.



Herman

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who keeps this show on the rails.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've enjoyed it, a review wherever you listen genuinely helps other people find the show.



Herman

See you tomorrow.