

Sudbury

What are the rules about AI ads in municipal campaigns?

'We are operating in a largely ungoverned space,' says expert

[Gabrielle Huston](#) · CBC News · Posted: Aug 30, 2026 5:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: August 30



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A campaign ad is seen for Bob Johnston, who is running for mayor in Sudbury, Ont., in 2026. Bob Johnston said an AI platform was used to generate the image, but that he did not remember which one. (Submitted by Bob Johnston)

Bob Johnston, a candidate running for mayor in Sudbury, Ont., is using artificial intelligence to generate campaign posters, saying it's a way to bring humour and hope to his community.

The AI images feature Johnston as a smiling cartoon, complete with his prosthetic legs. One shows him filling in a pothole. Another has him driving a van past the Big Nickel.

"What makes my day is everybody talking about my signs and laughing," Johnston said, adding that one person asked if they could take the sign to hang in their garage after the election.

Candidates across Ontario are being certified to run for municipal offices in October but experts tell CBC there are no rules regulating how they use AI to advertise.

AI can be a useful tool for political candidates, including by allowing those without major financial backers to reduce costs, said Andrea Lawlor, an associate professor in the political science department at McMaster University.

But when it comes to regulating the use of the new technology, "we are operating in a largely ungoverned space," she said.

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What are the rules?

There are no "specific rules under the [Municipal Elections Act](#) or City of Greater Sudbury bylaws that regulate or prohibit the use of artificial intelligence in municipal election advertising," the city told CBC in a statement.

But AI ads still need to comply with existing requirements for political ads in the [Municipal Elections Act](#) and city bylaws, it said.

Scott Lemke, an election law lawyer with Massey LLP in Toronto, said using AI in ads is "generally permissible" in elections, and simple posters are fine, but there is a criminal prohibition against using AI to create "deepfakes" that are intended to mislead the public.

Third-party AI content doesn't violate municipal election rules. Should that change?

Municipal candidate numbers have been sliding in Ontario for years. Will this election buck the trend?



Political science professor Andrea Lawlor says 'the AI environment is only becoming stronger and more accessible.' (Submitted by Andrea Lawlor)

Professor Lawlor said there have been some steps towards regulation.

At the federal level, [Bill C-25](#) (which amends the Canada Elections Act and passed in June) "does start to speak to the ways in which parties and candidates should be responsible for the AI use," she said.

"However, that bill doesn't go very far in terms of prohibitions or regulation, it really just suggests that candidates and parties not be using AI to produce deepfakes."

[A bill](#) that would have required AI disclosures on provincial election ads in Ontario was voted down in May.

"There's a lot of scope left at all levels of government to regulate the use of AI, and I think that Canadian voters are looking for governments to do that quite quickly," Lawlor said.

'Make change to show change'

Some Sudbury residents who've seen ads they suspect were made with AI have told CBC they have concerns.

Brady Chartier, a teacher, said he worries how the technology will affect young people.

"There is that little bit of stress to me, watching younger generations grow older, that the concept of what's true and what's false is slowly getting blurred and it's only being sped up by generative AI content," he said.

"As soon as you start seeing people who are either vying for public office or are already in public office ... using these tools, all that's doing is giving further validation to the use of [AI]."

But Johnston said he gets lots of compliments on his signs.

"Everybody's on board, everybody loves it ... and what else can you want in today's society? How often do you see somebody smiling, going down the street?"

Johnston said people are intrigued because they've never seen something like it before, calling it "new history," and adding that he's proud to be the first to use AI for his ads.

"The reason I used [AI] is because I'm not a deep down politician," he said. "I'm just a young gentleman who cares about the city, who's got a lot of common sense, a lot of support and a big heart. And you have to make change to show change."

'Wild West'

Lawlor said it's not clear how political candidates should use AI, even as the technology becomes more powerful and accessible.

"When it comes to political advertising, we want to maintain a standard of verifiability," she said.

"We should expect that the next few cycles of elections, if they are fought without regulations, could be a bit of an informational Wild West, so to speak."

The public is skeptical about the technology, she believes.

"There's generally a consensus that it needs to be at least addressed in some respects by government so that there's at least clarity around how it can be used."

Lawlor said she doesn't think there will be a total prohibition against AI, but that clarity would at least involve adding disclosure statements on AI content.

When CBC asked if Johnston would be willing to put AI disclosures on signs like his, he told CBC his current AI signs were a "one-shot deal" and he'll see what happens moving forward.

"I wanted to be the first one to use it ... before they start getting picky on their laws," he said. "Who knows, maybe nobody will ever be able to do it again, maybe there'll be a law made up against it. I don't know. But as of [Thursday], it's all good to go."



Morning North 9:45

The municipal election campaign is full of AI. Should it be?

Something might look a little different as this municipal election season gets underway: AI-generated campaign material. We'll hear from Sudbury voter Brady Chartier, Sudbury mayoral candidate Bob Johnston and McMaster University professor Andrea Lawlor about the use of AI election content.
