

Survivor Governance: Authority Concentration under AI-Driven State Contraction

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly integrated into governmental operations, enhancing administrative efficiency, analytical capacity, and policy execution. At the same time, it induces a structural contraction of the human apparatus of the state by automating large portions of routine and procedural work. This dual transformation—capacity expansion alongside organizational shrinkage—creates a fundamental asymmetry: while governmental functions can be automated, political authority cannot. Consequently, power does not disappear with institutional downsizing; it concentrates within a narrowing circle of human officials who remain institutionally indispensable.

This article introduces Survivor Governance as a political form emerging from this transformation. Survivor Governance does not denote technocracy, nor rule by AI experts. Rather, it describes a mode of governance in which authority accumulates by default among those who survive AI-driven functional contraction of government, regardless of whether they are optimally suited for governing in an AI-enabled state. By focusing on the internal transformation of government rather than democratic decline per se, the article provides a structural explanation for emerging patterns of political closure, institutional conservatism, and declining administrative mobility under AI-enabled governance.

1. Introduction — The Paradox of AI-Enabled Government

Contemporary debates on AI and governance tend to focus on whether AI will weaken the state, replace bureaucratic labor, or empower technocratic elites. While these concerns are understandable, they obscure a more fundamental transformation already underway. AI neither simply substitutes for government nor merely augments existing institutions. Rather, it reconfigures the internal structure of the state itself.

Under AI-enabled governance, governments may contract in organizational scale while retaining political authority—and in some cases expanding governing capacity. Administrative processes accelerate, regulatory and surveillance reach becomes more precise, and policy modeling grows increasingly sophisticated. These gains, however, do not require a proportional expansion of human personnel. Instead, they frequently justify reductions in staffing, particularly within routine administrative and middle-layer bureaucratic roles.

This dual dynamic generates a structural paradox. Government becomes simultaneously more capable and less populated. Because AI cannot assume political authority, legitimacy, or responsibility, the contraction of human institutions does not diminish power. Rather, authority persists and concentrates by default among those human actors who remain institutionally indispensable. This article argues that it is under these conditions that Survivor Governance emerges

as a distinct political form in the AI era.

2. Government and AI — Capability Expansion and Human Contraction

2.1 What AI Can Do for Government

AI is increasingly capable of performing a wide range of governmental functions, including administrative processing, regulatory enforcement, data integration, risk assessment, and policy modeling. These capabilities enable governments to operate with greater speed, scale, and consistency than traditional bureaucratic systems.

AI systems are particularly effective in tasks that are rule-based, data-intensive, and repetitive. In many contexts, they outperform human officials in accuracy, efficiency, and consistency. Consequently, AI is no longer introduced merely as an experimental or auxiliary tool, but increasingly functions as a core component of contemporary governance infrastructure.

2.2 What AI Cannot Do

Despite these expanding capabilities, AI remains fundamentally incapable of holding political authority. It cannot vote, bear responsibility, claim legitimacy, or be held accountable in the political sense. AI may execute authority, but it cannot possess it.

This limitation establishes a structural boundary within AI-enabled governance. While governmental functions can be automated, political authority remains irreducibly human. Any governance system that integrates AI must therefore retain human actors as the final holders of power, responsibility, and legitimacy.

Even in systems of automated or algorithm-assisted decision-making, responsibility and legitimacy remain institutionally assigned to human actors. Contemporary legal and regulatory frameworks consistently prohibit AI systems from serving as final decision-makers in matters involving public authority, rights allocation, or coercive state power (European Union, 2024; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

In the United States, administrative law and executive guidance similarly require that decisions with legal or rights-impacting consequences remain subject to human responsibility and review, even when AI systems are used to support decision-making processes (Office of Management and Budget [OMB], 2024; United States Congress, 1946; White House, 2022).

2.3 The Dual Transformation of the State

The integration of AI produces a dual transformation of the state: governing capacity expands while the human institutional core contracts. This transformation is neither accidental nor transitional. It reflects rational organizational responses to efficiency gains, fiscal constraints, and risk management imperatives.

The outcome is not a weaker state, but a more concentrated one—in which enhanced capacity coexists with a reduced number of human authority holders.

3. Functional Contraction of the State Apparatus

Here, “functional contraction” refers to the reduction of human institutional roles within the state apparatus as administrative and procedural functions are automated, without a corresponding reduction in political authority. **This process does not unfold evenly across government, but**

produces asymmetric contraction within the state apparatus.

Routine administrative roles, procedural enforcement positions, and data-handling functions are the most susceptible to automation. Middle-layer bureaucracies—historically responsible for policy implementation, coordination, and information processing—are particularly exposed. By contrast, positions involving legal responsibility, coercive authority, political judgment, or high-stakes accountability exhibit greater resistance to automation, as they require legitimacy-bearing decision-making and responsibility attribution that cannot be delegated to artificial systems.

This pattern results in functional contraction rather than institutional replacement. Governments do not disappear; they persist with a reduced human core. Crucially, this contraction is frequently framed as administrative modernization or efficiency reform rather than as organizational downsizing. Such framing obscures its long-term political implications, particularly the concentration of authority within a shrinking subset of human officials.

3.1 Indicative Evidence of Government Contraction and AI Automation

Recent developments in the United States provide indicative evidence that state institutions are actively reshaping their workforce under the influence of automation and AI-enabled technologies. Across multiple federal agencies, workforce restructuring initiatives have coincided with broader efforts to digitize and automate administrative functions. As part of efficiency drives and administrative reform plans, the U.S. federal government has pursued large-scale reductions in its civilian workforce, with reports indicating planned cuts affecting tens of thousands of positions across multiple agencies, including the Internal Revenue Service (Reuters, 2025).

At the same time, federal agencies are expanding the use of AI systems to augment internal operations. The Internal Revenue Service has begun deploying generative AI-based tools across key divisions following periods of workforce downsizing, illustrating a parallel trajectory of automation adoption alongside reduced staff numbers (Axios, 2025). In addition, the U.S. federal government has launched multiple official initiatives to strengthen in-house digital and AI capacity within a leaner workforce structure.

These developments do not, by themselves, establish causal attribution between AI adoption and workforce contraction. However, institutional assessments further corroborate this pattern. Government Accountability Office reports document the growing reliance on AI tools across federal agencies alongside ongoing workforce restructuring, indicating that automation and labor reconfiguration are proceeding in parallel across the federal government (GAO, 2023). Taken together, these developments signal a structural shift in government labor composition consistent with the theoretical pattern outlined above: automation and AI adoption coinciding with workforce contraction and a reconfiguration of institutional labor needs within the state apparatus.

Comparable dynamics have also been observed in other advanced administrative states pursuing AI-driven public sector reform, suggesting that this pattern is not uniquely American. As functional contraction reshapes the internal composition of the state, the question becomes not whether authority persists, but who remains to hold it.

4. Survivors Within the State

4.1 Who Are the Survivors?

Within a contracting state apparatus, certain individuals and roles persist despite widespread

AI-driven automation. These survivors do not constitute a homogeneous category, nor are they defined solely by technical expertise. Rather, they occupy positions that remain institutionally indispensable under conditions of functional contraction.

Survivors typically include technical experts responsible for overseeing and validating AI systems; officials occupying legally or constitutionally irreplaceable positions; actors bearing high political, legal, or security responsibility; individuals whose experiential knowledge cannot be readily codified; and roles preserved to ensure institutional continuity or political stability. What unites these actors is not superior governance capability, but structural non-replaceability.

Crucially, survivorship should not be conflated with meritocratic selection or optimal fitness for AI-era governance. Instead, it emerges from a combination of institutional necessity, legal constraint, and political risk management. Survivors persist not because they are the most capable governors, but because certain functions of authority cannot be automated, delegated, or eliminated without destabilizing the state.

This article treats survivorship as structurally produced rather than individually strategized, without denying that actors may subsequently adapt to consolidate their position.

4.2 From Individuals to a Survivor Group

As the human core of government contracts, survivors increasingly interact with one another within a narrowing institutional space. Over time, these interactions generate a bounded survivor group characterized by elevated entry barriers, intensified internal coordination, and growing concentration of authority.

This process transforms survivorship from a contingent condition into a structural status. Entry into survivor positions becomes progressively restricted, while internal circulation replaces broader administrative mobility. Authority, no longer widely distributed across a large bureaucratic workforce, consolidates within this shrinking group. What begins as a functional response to automation thus evolves into a durable governance configuration, setting the stage for Survivor Governance as a political form.

5. Survivor Governance — Definition and Core Logic

Survivor Governance refers to a political form in which governing authority becomes concentrated within a shrinking group of human officials who remain institutionally indispensable following AI-driven functional contraction of the state.

This form of governance does not originate from democratic authorization, technical expertise, or deliberate institutional design. Rather, it emerges from a structural asymmetry inherent in AI-enabled governance: while AI can perform an expanding range of governmental functions, it cannot assume political authority. As a result, authority does not migrate to machines; it persists and accumulates by default among those human actors whose roles cannot be automated, delegated, or eliminated without undermining institutional continuity.

Unlike classical elite, oligarchic, or technocratic rule, **Survivor Governance** does not arise from social stratification, political competition, or meritocratic selection. Elite rule selects upward through competition or hierarchy; Survivor Governance selects by residual necessity. Technocracy selects by expertise; Survivor Governance selects by non-automatable authority. Authority under Survivor Governance accrues not from superiority, but from the irreducibility of institutional functions that authorize power. Instead, it is produced by technologically induced organizational

contraction within the state itself. Survivors are not necessarily those who best understand AI, nor those optimally suited to govern in an AI-enabled environment. Their political centrality derives from **institutional non-replaceability rather than superior competence**, defining a mode of rule grounded in residual human necessity rather than technological expertise or democratic mandate.

6. Governance Dynamics Under Survivor Rule

As Survivor Governance consolidates, the orientation of public policy shifts accordingly. Governments become increasingly attentive to the interests, risks, and stability of core survivor groups—those actors whose continued participation is deemed essential to institutional functioning. Under these conditions, institutional preservation increasingly takes precedence over broad-based participation, and governance priorities narrow toward maintaining continuity and minimizing disruption within the shrinking human core of the state.

This dynamic gives rise to what may be described as the “Shark Effect,” an analytical metaphor for defensive consolidation behavior among institutional survivors under conditions of persistent institutional contraction. The term is employed here as an interpretive device rather than a formal analytical model.

Operating under conditions of persistent technological displacement and institutional contraction, survivors adopt defensive and exclusionary governance behaviors aimed at avoiding replacement, marginalization, or loss of authority. Entry barriers harden, internal coordination intensifies, and both administrative and political mobility decline. Governance under survivor rule thus exhibits a pronounced conservative bias, favoring risk aversion and boundary maintenance over openness and reform.

Over time, non-replaceability ceases to function merely as an operational characteristic and becomes a political privilege. What initially emerges as a functional response to automation evolves into a durable logic of exclusion, reinforcing authority concentration and further stabilizing Survivor Governance as a governing form.

7. Political and Social Externalities

Although Survivor Governance originates in the internal transformation of the state, its consequences extend well beyond governmental institutions. As authority concentrates within a shrinking human core, populations excluded from administrative participation remain governed but increasingly lose effective access to influence. Political inclusion persists in principle, yet participation capacity erodes in practice.

Democratic institutions may continue to operate formally—elections are held, procedures remain intact—but their social and administrative foundations weaken. As governments rely less on mass participation and broad-based bureaucratic labor, the demographic base that historically sustained democratic accountability contracts. Political relevance becomes progressively decoupled from population size, and representation loses much of its material anchoring in everyday governance.

In this sense, democracy under Survivor Governance is not displaced by force, nor deliberately dismantled. Rather, it is structurally sidelined—retained as a formal framework while its functional role in shaping authority and policy outcomes diminishes.

8. Governing the Transformation

Preventing the rigidification of Survivor Governance requires institutional design rather than moral appeal. Because authority concentration emerges from structural conditions rather than individual intent, corrective responses must operate at the level of rules, procedures, and organizational architecture.

Institutional mechanisms such as term limits, role rotation, transparency requirements, and formal re-entry pathways can mitigate survivor lock-in by disrupting the self-reinforcing consolidation of authority within a shrinking human core. These measures do not seek to eliminate survivorship—an unavoidable consequence of functional contraction—but to prevent its stabilization into a closed and permanent governing class.

Crucially, AI should function as a constraint on power rather than a substitute for human authority. When properly designed, AI systems can enhance oversight, auditability, and procedural accountability, limiting discretionary dominance without assuming political legitimacy. In this sense, AI's governance value lies not in replacing human decision-makers, but in structurally bounding the authority of those who remain.

9. Conclusion

Survivor Governance is neither a conspiracy nor an ideological project. Its analytical value lies in revealing how political power can consolidate without overt authoritarian intent, democratic rupture, or explicit elite design, emerging instead as a structural byproduct of AI-driven institutional contraction. It is the unintended outcome of a state that becomes more capable while employing fewer people. As governments grow stronger and more efficient through AI-enabled governance, the circle of those who hold political authority narrows accordingly.

The significance of Survivor Governance lies not in its normative implications, but in what it reveals about contemporary state transformation. When governing capacity expands alongside institutional contraction, authority does not dissipate; it consolidates. Power persists precisely where automation ends—among the human actors who remain institutionally indispensable.

The warning, therefore, is structural rather than moral. When the state becomes smaller but stronger, governance risks solidifying around those who remain. Survivor Governance names this condition not to condemn it, but to make visible a political form emerging from the internal reconfiguration of the modern state under AI.

Future research may examine whether Survivor Governance stabilizes into a new equilibrium through comparative and longitudinal analysis of AI-driven administrative reform across political systems.

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