

trust.photography: A Campaign to Authenticate Free and Fair Elections in 2024

“The largest coordinated deepfake attack in history took place the day after the November 2024 election. Every U.S. social media channel was flooded with phony audio, video, and still images depicting election fraud in a dozen battleground states, highly realistic content that within hours was viewed by millions. Debunking efforts by media and government were hindered by a steady flow of new deepfakes, mostly manufactured in Russia, North Korea, China, and Iran. The attack generated legal and civil chaos that lasted well into the spring of 2025.”

—Michael Rogers, [A FAQ from the future—how we struggled and defeated deepfakes](#) (*Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2024).

This future scenario is entirely plausible because of what happened in 2020, and what has happened since. What is required is a present-day and large-scale response—using authentic photography—to help avert it. Fortunately, many of Roger’s envisioned steps have already begun to be implemented. **trust.photography** will accelerate the future outlined in the FAQ.

In the last US presidential election, authoritarians succeeded in eroding public trust in our system of elections. These threats have started again and will continue throughout 2024. Two courts will help avert further and potentially irreparable damage to democracy in America:

- The courts of law—which remain the primary bulwark protecting democracy—will adjudicate disputes based on verifiable evidence about election processes; and
- The court of public opinion—influenced by what people view in the traditional media and on social media—will be informed by visual representations, verifiable or otherwise.

In both cases, solutions exist that will enable citizen witnesses to capture verifiable visual evidence that protects the trust relationship that photography (and more recently videography) has developed with democracy for nearly 200 years: “Seeing is believing.” The [ethical use of photography](#) has helped knowledge about the world to be widely shared and accepted. However, that trust relationship has been significantly eroded with the wide adoption of generative artificial intelligence in 2023. Already, images generated by AI are indistinguishable—by the vast majority of people—from lens-based photographs (see [Test Yourself: Which Faces Were Made by A.I.?](#), especially the results: 80-90% of respondents guessed wrong!).

The first solution, which the FAQ called a FACStamp, is essentially an indelible watermark that can be used by visual witnesses and their publishers to indicate that an image is *not* the product of artificial intelligence. In the real world, such a system exists, called a “[content credential](#)” developed by the [Content Authenticity Initiative](#) (CAI). Clicking on an icon reveals an image’s provenance. The CAI credential unfortunately can be applied to any content—including content generated by artificial intelligence. *A different credential used in this campaign will not be applied to AI content and will be removed if AI is used to alter it.* Therefore, anyone can trust that AI is not in an image’s provenance without clicking on the credential, but can still see other opt-in/opt-out provenance details, such as where and when an image was taken and by whom.

Rogers also envisions a second solution: the underlying technology, built into every recording device, that authenticates that an image is produced by a camera and documents that an image has been altered in any way by AI. As soon as the recording is made, the CAI identifier is applied in such a way that it can authoritatively reveal the image’s provenance. Again, such technology currently exists in the real world, developed over the last few years by the [Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity](#) (C2PA). It is an open-source technology that can be built into any recording device. A few companies are building this technology directly into

DSLR cameras that many visual journalists use, but some apps can also be installed on any smartphone.

Beyond these solutions, however, a third effort must be made immediately to widely deploy these solutions *before* Election Day 2024. **trust.photography** is a nonpartisan campaign—*aimed at poll workers, poll watchers, and voters*—to recruit an army of citizen witnesses equipped with smartphones and appropriate software to authoritatively document what they see as they participate in the 2024 election. These recordings can be used both in court proceedings as evidence and by journalists and citizens on traditional and social media.

To prepare for Election Day 2024, the **trust.photography** campaign coalition will:

- Establish essential campaign infrastructure throughout the spring, including public relations/media capacity and legal/logistical support;
- Work with leading citizen organizations during the summer and fall to recruit, train, and deploy volunteers (prioritizing “swing” states but open to all) to use their cameras privately and securely; and
- Reinforce relationships between participants online at **trust.photography**, on [Discord](#).

Scaling this campaign to match the need is the first critical problem to solve. Toward that end, a national coalition will be established by **trust.photography** to direct the effort. Initial coalition partners will represent various interests (partners in formation): the technology community (CAI, Click, other tools), legal and logistical support (The Carter Center, Democracy Docket), public relations/marketing (Fenton Communications, M&R Strategic Services), journalists/editors/publishers (States Newsroom, Institute for Nonprofit News, ProPublica, etc.), election administration (The Election Center), citizen organizations (mobilizing primarily young people and marginalized communities); and foundations/donors (Press Forward/More Perfect, Open Society Foundation, Knight Foundation, etc.).

trust.photography will manage the campaign to use photography to protect free and fair elections in America in 2024. [Marshall Mayer](#), the founder of **trust.photography**, is producer of the [Writing with Light Bibliography](#), was awarded a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of California at San Diego, and has experience managing national campaigns both in the nonprofit and private sectors. Mayer will coalesce representatives from the above and other potential coalition partners to provide oversight for the campaign.

Together, we can rebuild trust in our election system, as well as in photography’s power to represent the visible world. Of course, election deniers never produced evidence that an election was “stolen.” However, if they are active at polling places, **trust.photography** volunteers can document their activities while citizens vote and election officials conduct the count. The vast majority of elections in America are free of fraud, and election deniers will again walk away empty-handed. But that does not mean they will not try. We will document their efforts in a way that will both hold up in a court of law as well as in the court of public opinion.

“Democracy places a unique demand on trust” (Jedediah Britton-Purdy, [We’ve Been Thinking About America’s Trust Collapse All Wrong](#) (*The Atlantic*, January 8, 2024). When this campaign is documented to work, additional campaigns will be developed in 2025 and beyond by **trust.photography** to help reestablish the trust relationship between photography and democracy. Eventually, image democrats will demand that publishers only use images that have been authentically produced.

There are some things that AI just should not do. One of them is to take photographs for us.