

ASU lab to train elections officials on using AI effectively

Technology can help with communication, information management

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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When Bill Gates was the chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, he faced an uproar over the 2022 midterm elections as people questioned the results and harassed county employees.

“I was making it a point in my press conferences to emphasize the fact that we weren't using AI,” he said.

“We had this anti-technology bent in the election space.”

Now, Gates will be helping to train elections officials on how they can use the technology ethically to streamline parts of their jobs. And in May, Gov. Katie Hobbs appointed Gates and other technology and law experts to a [new committee](#) that will develop AI policy guidelines for the state government.

After 15 years as an elected official, which includes serving on the Phoenix City Council as well as the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, Gates joined ASU last year to launch the [Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory](#), which will address misinformation around elections and promote careers in election management. As a professor of practice in the [School of Public Affairs](#), he'll teach a course in the fall semester called “Public Service and American Democracy.”

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Gates said his perspective on AI started changing earlier this year when a committee convened by Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes released a [report](#) recommending that a research university create an elections clinic on AI.

“One of the big concerns about AI in 2024 was that it would be used to create a deep fake of an elections official saying, ‘The polls are closed,’ Gates said. A [fake audio recording](#) purporting to be President Biden was circulated during the primary in New Hampshire.

“But now the thought is that we’ve gotten through that. We’ve learned more about AI and there could be ways that elections officials could be using AI to do their jobs better — with the underlying goal of helping to restore trust and faith in elections,” said Gates, who is the executive director of the lab.

Earlier this year, the lab convened election officials from both parties as well as AI experts and representatives from Amazon and Microsoft to explore how the technology can be helpful.

So far, some elections officials have been experimenting with AI informally.

Gates said one official asked AI to compile 50 posts for X, formerly Twitter.

“It was positive messages like, ‘Don’t forget to vote’ and ‘One vote can make a difference’ that she can now schedule throughout an election,” he said.

AI can also manage large amounts of information, such as creating summaries of the numerous election-related bills proposed in state legislatures.

One place that reported using AI in the 2024 election was Broward County, Florida. The county’s election director told the February gathering that they used an AI-powered chat bot to answer phone calls about polling hours, ballot drop-off locations and other straightforward information.

After the gathering, the Mechanics of Democracy Lab created the AI and Elections Clinic, which has a bipartisan advisory board and will embark on a three-step process leading up to the 2026 midterms, starting with speaking at election conferences around the country this summer.

“It’ll be, ‘Have you thought about how AI might make your job easier as an elections official?’

“We’ll continue to emphasize that this is still a fairly new technology and that we have to use ‘HIL’ — that’s a human in the loop,” Gates said. “Let AI put together that project and then have the human in the loop reviewing it.”

Stage two will be regional boot camps around the country.

“This will be an opportunity for elections officials to spend a few hours with us in a room with computers, put fingers on keyboards, and really see what AI can do and can’t do,” he said.

He sees AI streamlining communication and information management.

“I don’t know anyone suggesting that AI be involved in tabulation,” he said.

Gates hopes to reassure people who might already be wary of elections security.

“It would be naive to think that there won’t be challenges,” he said.

“From my experience and others who’ve been in elections the past few years, we know that there are people who have objected to even a mid-20th-century technology in tabulation.”

The clinics will also address ethical concerns.

“If we use AI to produce 50 tweets, do we need to disclose that? If the chat bot has been trained on AI, do we need to disclose that? Does that matter to voters?”

“Those are some really interesting topics that we'll have to discuss from an ethical or moral perspective — and we already have.”

But AI is here, whether some like it or not.

“We would argue that, as opposed to trying out AI in a live election, the right place to really grapple with these issues, both the technological challenges and the moral and ethical considerations, is an academic environment like ASU,” he said, noting that ASU is already a leader in AI with partnerships with [Open AI](#) and [FYI AI](#).

The Mechanics of Democracy Lab will also be launching a fellowship to produce a pipeline of elections officials. The fellow, who will be a public administration graduate student, will get real-world elections experience.

“There has not been a career path for this in the past and there should be because of all the skills that our elections directors have to know. They have to be an expert in election law, in HR, in procurement, in logistics and in communication.

“We’re seeing our elections directors on TV and on the radio as much as anyone in the county these days.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



A view of polling signage at the Sun Devil Fitness Complex in Tempe on Nov. 5, 2024. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University