

5 takeaways about artificial intelligence and elections

Election officials gather for 2-day event at ASU to hear about AI benefits, challenges in their jobs

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Next year's midterm elections are happening at a crucial time in the adoption of AI, with concerns that the new technology could pose threats to the process but also have the benefit of easing the workload for elections officials and educating voters.

Election officials from around the country came to Arizona State University this week to talk about these issues and learn how to use some AI tools that are already available. The two-day event, sponsored by the Mechanics of Democracy Lab in the School of Public Affairs, featured two panel discussions on Wednesday night. On Thursday, the election officials participated in a hands-on workshop.

The first panel, sponsored by the [Mechanics of Democracy Lab](#), gathered experts at the forefront of AI. The second panel, sponsored by the [McCain Institute](#), discussed principled leadership by elected officials in the context of a polarized electorate and the complications of AI.

Here are five takeaways from the evening.

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You're already using AI

Even people who are unsure about AI are already using it when they do a search on Google, use Microsoft Office or look at posts on social media, according to Katie Harbath, CEO of Anchor Change, who worked at Facebook for 10 years.

"I really appreciate that this conference is approaching AI, understanding that there are real problems that we have to be concerned about, but there are real opportunities that we can be looking at too when we think about this," she said.

To regulate or not

Earlier on Wednesday, news broke that the Trump administration is planning an [executive order](#) banning state regulation of AI, which left Harbath conflicted.

“I do firmly believe in states having that right to do their own legislation. But I also work with a lot of clients who are in the mid- to smaller company size that have one person trying to help multiple brands figure out how to comply with 50 different state regulations plus regulations all around the world,” she said.

Bill Gates, executive director of the Mechanics of Democracy Lab and former chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, who moderated the panel discussion, said: “We’re very proud of the decentralization that we have in elections.”

Transparency is crucial

Nadine Farid Johnson, policy director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, said that people are rightfully distrustful of tech companies.

“I think one of the biggest issues that we have in this country, legislatively, is that we do not have a comprehensive data privacy law,” she said. “I think there's something ... we could do in the AI sphere to allow for third-party evaluations of these platforms and share that information in the public interest in a way that would lead to transparency, lead to greater trust and then hopefully be able to teach us where the flaws are so we have a better, more robust and more open system.”

Darwin Mastin, CEO and founder of TwinWise AI and Synaptic Spike GenAI, said his companies employ a “glass box” model of construction, as opposed to an opaque “black box.”

“We actually break things within our model so that they will front to the user the actual reasoning that it took before it started making predictions,” he said.

AI could further segment voters

Ben Ginsberg, the Volker Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution and an election attorney, said that politics have always tried to send specific messages to specific voters.

He described an AI product that monitors computer activity and then gives suggestions.

“That’s eventually going to be sold to political campaigns. And so you may have messaging geared to each individual so campaigns never have to have a common theme. And that scares me more than anything else. I want to know in a broad philosophical sense what my candidates believe and what they're going to do if they're elected to office,” he said.

Face-to-face interactions are best for building trust

Lea Márquez Peterson, who was elected to the Arizona Corporation Commission and is the first Hispanic woman to hold statewide office in Arizona, said she succeeded by driving 40,000 miles around the state to talk to people.

"I'm making sure that I'm engaging with folks in rural Arizona and urban Arizona. It's having conversations with everyone. I've just really tried to stay authentic, reasonable and just respond to people if they have an issue: 'Send me your bill. We're gonna figure it out for you.'"

"My experience in life has been that it's harder to hate people who you come to know," said David Axelrod, ASU professor of practice, founder of the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and chief political analyst at CNN. "Generally, you can pretty quickly defeat caricatures when you meet people. And one of the problems with social media is that it's really anti-social, because we're so tied to our phones and we don't actually get together. And so forums where people can share their views and not feel like they're going to target themselves by sharing those views are things to be encouraged."

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

Main image



Bill Gates, executive director of the Mechanics of Democracy Lab and former chairman of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, moderated a panel on AI and elections Wednesday, Nov. 19, at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

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The McCain Institute held a panel discussion on "Governing, Integrity and the Future of Politics" at a two-day event sponsored by the Mechanics of Democracy Lab at ASU. The panelists were (from left) Lea Márquez Peterson, who was elected to the Arizona Corporation Commission and is the first Hispanic woman to hold statewide office in Arizona; David Axelrod, ASU professor of practice, founder of the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and chief political analyst at CNN; and Ben Ginsberg, the Volker Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution and an election attorney.



Katie Harbath, CEO of Anchor Change and an AI expert, told the gathering of election officials at the ASU event that they should be providing feedback to the technology companies and creating datasets to better train AI models.



Bill Gates (far left), the executive director of the Mechanics of Democracy Lab at ASU, moderated a panel discussion on AI and elections that featured (from right) Nadine Farid Johnson, policy director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University; Darwin Mastin, CEO and founder of TwinWise AI and Synaptic Spike GenAI; and Katie Harbath, founder and CEO of Anchor Change.