

# Putting AI to work for the public good

## Research, teaching and community partnerships are helping officials apply AI responsibly

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News  
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The midterm elections are less than three months away, and artificial intelligence is already a factor, shaping the information voters see about candidates, referendums and where to cast their ballots.

Increasingly, it is also becoming a valuable tool for elections officials, helping make the process more accurate and streamlined before voters cast their ballots, according to [Bill Gates](#), executive director of the [ASU Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory](#) and creator of the laboratory's [AI + Elections Clinic](#), a program that trains officials to use AI to improve efficiency and professionalism while also strengthening the security of elections.

The clinics are part of a broader effort at the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#) to explore how AI, and future technologies, can strengthen public services.

Through training, research, leadership committees and special-topics courses, the college is moving beyond the “good vs. bad” dichotomy surrounding AI to advance context-driven, ethical applications that solve real-world challenges.

In the process, the next generation of public servants is gaining the skills and adaptability needed to address complex problems.

“At its core, public service is about efficiency, effectiveness and equity, and how we balance those three core values,” said Shannon Portillo, director of the [School of Public Affairs](#). “AI isn’t good or bad, it is a change, and it gives us another tool in our tool box to meet our values.”

### AI transforming elections

Since last November, the Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory has hosted six daylong AI + Elections Clinics, as well as more than 10 shorter sessions, across 12 states and Washington, D.C.

Participants' AI experience varies greatly, so the clinics begin with hands-on instruction that introduces attendees to different AI tools through interactive exercises. Throughout the day, participants discuss practical applications of AI, examine threats such as phishing and deepfakes,

and learn strategies to strengthen election system security.

Gates said the most common question at the clinics is how are other officials using AI in their offices. This peer analysis reflects a political climate where some Americans think elections use too much technology, Gates said.

“There is a not-insignificant portion of the population who thinks we’re already using too much technology in our elections. They would like to see all the ballots be hand counted,” Gates said.

Some AI uses — such as tabulating ballots or certifying an election — are considered “off limits” in the election process, Gates said. Instead, the clinics focus on back-of-house AI opportunities that can save time and resources, such as proofing ballots, creating social media posts, translating languages and developing training modules for poll workers.

Gates acknowledges the concerns with AI being used to spread misinformation and create “slopaganda” — low-quality fake media produced with AI. But he also sees AI as a valuable tool for helping election officials communicate accurate information more effectively and reducing the likelihood of errors in ballots and other election materials.

## Teaching AI for the public good

In spring 2026, the Watts College offered two AI special-topics courses: “AI and the Future of Government” in the School of Public Affairs and “AI Literacy: Navigating Technology for Social Good” in the School of Community Resources and Development.

[Korrie Brown](#), instructor and academic programs manager in the [School of Community Resources and Development](#), worked with the provost’s office to develop the online-only AI literacy course.

“Faculty were noticing students using AI for things that were not appropriate, while others were afraid to use it when it could be useful. We wanted to create a course that would help teach students when they could use AI thoughtfully, ethically and correctly, and to identify when they shouldn’t use it,” Brown said.

Many students entered the class wary of AI, Brown said, but the lessons reframed it as a tool to enhance efficiency not replace critical thinking. By learning to use different AI services, students said they felt more confident and empowered.

**The most important lesson for students is that AI is no longer a future technology, it is a must for current and future public servants.**

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**Joe Zhao**

Adjunct professor in the School of Public Affairs

After developing a city's first comprehensive AI policy, [Joe Zhao](#), adjunct professor in public affairs, reached out to Portillo about developing an AI course for public servants.

"AI is fundamentally transforming both what future public affairs students need to learn and how they will perform their work as public servants. ... AI competency should become a foundational component of preparing the next generation of public leaders," he said.

Zhao's course follows his tiered approach in AI education of public affairs: Students should first learn foundational public administration theories and principles to critically identify and evaluate AI-generated information in the field.

Next, students learn AI guardrails by examining AI risks, biases, privacy issues and governance.

Equipped with foundational knowledge and AI guardrails, in the third stage, students learn how to use AI responsibly to solve complex public-sector challenges with transparency and accountability.

"The most important lesson for students is that AI is no longer a future technology, it is a must for current and future public servants," Zhao added.

Both courses have received positive feedback from students and continue to evolve alongside rapidly advancing AI technologies.

## Using AI to advance complex challenges

While colleagues worried about students using AI on assignments, [Hyunsung Oh](#), associate professor in the [School of Social Work](#), saw its potential to support him personally and in his research. English is Oh's second language, so he began using AI to edit emails, presentations and other writings.

Language is also a key focus of Oh's research on barriers to behavioral health and primary care services. Providers are predominantly monolingual, he said.

"The big elephant in the room when it comes to mental health and substance abuse providers is that we don't have therapists who speak more than one language," he said.

Among the 14,091 providers surveyed in the [National Substance Use and Mental Health Services Survey](#), only one-quarter offer services in Spanish, and fewer than 1 in 10 provide services in other languages.

Although the national survey is comprehensive, patients cannot use it to search for care. To fill that need, Oh used AI chatbots and assistants to transform the survey's data into [CareConnectAZ](#), an Arizona-specific website that helps people find mental health and substance use providers by age, language and client characteristics such as veteran or LGBTQ+ status.

AI is also improving another complex public-sector challenge: the review of footage from police officers' body-worn cameras.

[Michael White](#), professor in the [School of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#) and associate director of [ASU's Center for Violence Prevention and Community Safety](#), said without AI resources, only

about 5% of footage ever gets reviewed.

Most of those reviews stem from use-of-force incidents, arrests or requests from the media and the public.

“Body worn cameras have been rapidly adopted in policing over the last decade,” White said. “Thousands and thousands of officers in jurisdictions across the country are recording a ton of encounters. Video and audio departments maintain, but they have no reasonable way to analyze, all that footage.”

For the past two and a half years, White and researchers from Texas State University and California State University, Long Beach, have evaluated the impact of using the AI platform Truleo to review officers’ body-camera footage in Apache Junction and Casa Grande police departments.

Results from the [study](#), funded by [Arnold Ventures](#), suggest that Truleo expands departmental review of footage and may encourage positive behaviors among officers in their encounters with the public.

The researchers also examined how officers adopted the technology because they are “notoriously resistant to change,” White said. Focus groups found that most officers viewed Truleo neutrally, a response White attributes to the departments’ communication efforts before deployment.

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## Related story

[ASU lab to train elections officials on using AI effectively](#)

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

## Main image



Bill Gates (second from left), executive director of the ASU Mechanics of Democracy Laboratory, brainstorms ideas with attendees at a mini AI + Elections Clinic during the Election Science Reform Administration Conference hosted by ASU at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law on June 3. ASU photo

**Text image(s)**



Attendees respond to prompts on posters at the Election Science Reform Administration Conference in June. Two participants write ideas on a poster that asks, "We'll know AI has matured in election administration when ..."

ASU photo