

Political attitudes shape public perceptions of artificial intelligence

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The public's attitudes towards artificial intelligence (AI) are strongly influenced by their political values, according to the latest British Social Attitudes (BSA) report from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). While some applications of AI are widely viewed as beneficial, there is considerable variation in how people evaluate its risks and advantages, particularly when it comes to the government's use of AI for surveillance or welfare decision-making.

These findings come at a time when the UK Government is seeking to accelerate the use of AI in public services and the economy, and as public concern grows over the rapid deployment of emerging technologies.

Concern about surveillance and discrimination

- 63% of people with left-wing views are concerned that facial recognition in policing could lead to false accusations, compared with 45% of those with right-wing views
- 57% of people from a Black minority ethnic group are concerned about facial recognition for policing, compared with 39% of the public as a whole
- 23% of those with left-wing views are worried about discriminatory outcomes in the use of AI to determine welfare eligibility, compared with just 8% of those with right-wing views

Concern about job losses

- People who are left-wing are more concerned than those with right-wing views about inaccuracy, discrimination and job loss
- 62% of left-wing respondents are concerned that robotic care assistants will lead to job losses, compared with 44% of right-wing respondents
- 60% of left-wing respondents are concerned about job losses from driverless cars, compared with 47% of right-wing respondents
- How views vary by AI applications

Those with libertarian views tend to be more likely to see speed and efficiency as key benefits of most AI applications

40% of libertarian respondents see driverless cars as offering speed and efficiency benefits, compared with 25% of authoritarian respondents

For all the AI applications, those with left-wing views are more concerned than those with right-wing views about potential job losses

Opinions are divided on mental health chatbots irrespective of political orientation with half (52% left-wing and 50% right-wing) feeling a key benefit of this tool to be faster access to mental health support

Around 7 in 10 people say they would feel more comfortable with AI technologies if it were governed by laws and regulations, a sentiment held widely across political orientations

Alex Scholes, Research Director at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), said: "As AI becomes more embedded in society, understanding how people respond to its different uses will be critical for both policymakers and developers. This research, in collaboration with the Alan Turing Institute and the Ada Lovelace Institute, shows that public attitudes are far from uniform. They are shaped not only by demographic factors but also by people's political values. Importantly, even with the public's diverse views about the benefits and risks of AI, there is widespread public agreement on the need for effective regulation."

Octavia Field Reid, Associate Director at Ada Lovelace Institute, said: "It is clear that people's understanding, trust and comfort with AI are shaped by their political values and their experiences of every specific technology and the institutions using it. Policymakers need to ensure that the current AI adoption agenda aligns with public attitudes and expectations, especially within the public sector.

"This important research can help policymakers better understand the different concerns about AI across

society, including those from minoritised groups, and how these intersect with other areas of public policy, such as the job market and policing.”

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Notes to editors:

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) is a registered charity and is the largest independent, not-for-profit social research organisation in the UK. Founded in 1969 by Sir Roger Jowell and Gerald Hoinville, NatCen aims to conduct rigorous social policy research to improve society (www.natcen.ac.uk)

British Social Attitudes (BSA): the 42nd Report is published at www.natcen.ac.uk/british-social-attitudes. The editors are Curtis Jessop, Elizabeth Clery and Professor Sir John Curtice. The views expressed in the report are those of the authors and editors alone.

NatCen's British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has been conducted annually since 1983. It is the longest-running measure of public opinion in Britain, providing authoritative data on a range of social and political issues. Each year the survey asks people what it's like to live in Britain and what they think about how Britain is run.

The latest data used in this report was taken from the NatCen Opinion Panel. The Panel is based on a random probability design, with members recruited from BSA and the Life in Northern Ireland Survey respondents.

The Panel survey consisted of 3,513 interviews with a representative sample of adults in the UK and was conducted between 25th October to 24th November 2024.

An embargoed copy of this report is available on request.

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