August 2025

HOW CALIFORNIANS FEEL ABOUT AI

Findings from the 2025 California AI Compass

TECH EQUITY

INTRODUCTION

The rise of AI has been rapid and far-reaching. Today, AI-powered systems make decisions on who gets access to food, housing, healthcare, and more. Everyday people are feeling its impact everywhere from our homes to our workplaces to our grocery bills.

This July, the California Privacy Protection Agency unanimously voted—against objections from consumer and labor advocacy groups—on new rules governing automated decision-making tools.[1] The approved regulations, which the CPPA was mandated to adopt as a result of a voter-approved ballot initiative in 2020, were substantially weakened under intense pressure from the tech industry and other business groups. The result is an erosion in the protection that many Californians believe they voted for when they enacted the CPPA.

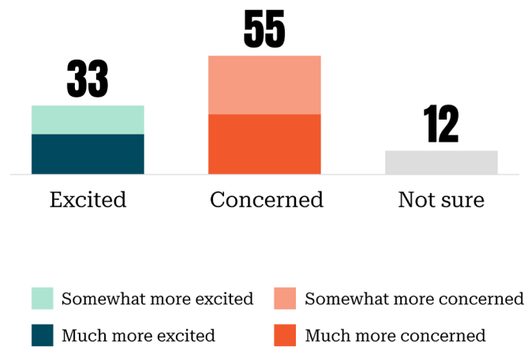
The CPPA (echoing industry's voice) argued that the voters did not want restrictions on AI systems—despite ample evidence to the contrary—placing government, yet again, far behind the pace of technological advancements and their impact on everyday people. This decision seemed at odds with two current realities: that many of the impacts of AI are already well-documented, and that constituents strongly believe the government should be protecting them against these harms, even if it is done at the expense of winning a geopolitical competition.[2][3]

Earlier this spring, TechEquity commissioned a study led by communications expert Daniel Stone of Diffusion.Au and Lake Research Partners to gain a deeper understanding of how Californians are thinking and feeling about artificial intelligence. We surveyed 1,400 California adults and conducted focus groups with 21 participants from April 29 to July 10, 2025, to glean their knowledge of AI, identify their hopes, fears, and expectations about AI and the tech industry, and understand how they feel the government should respond.

HOW MUCH DO CALIFORNIANS TRUST AI?

AI advancements are causing more concern than excitement

A majority of Californians (55%) are more concerned about future AI advancements than excited, and 28% of Californians are very concerned. Only 33% feel excited and 12% remain unsure. The only groups more likely to be excited than concerned are younger men, adults in Orange County, and tech-savvy adults. The most concerned are older women, older non-college-educated adults, and adults in the Inland Empire and Sacramento.



Gender is the strongest dividing line and the biggest predictor of excitement versus concern about AI. Men, especially those with higher levels of education, are markedly more excited about AI. Women, particularly those unemployed and over 50, are significantly more concerned.

> **"COMPANIES ARE RAMMING THINGS THROUGH FAST, AND IT FEELS SKETCHY. HONESTLY, IT'S FREAKING ME OUT."**
>
> – Focus group participant

When we try to understand why Californians are concerned, a clear message emerges:

Almost half (48%) of Californians think AI is advancing too fast, while just one third (32%) think it's advancing at just the right speed, and another 15% aren't sure.

59% are concerned that the benefits of AI will accrue only to the wealthiest households and corporations, not working people and the middle class. This is true across Democrats and Republicans alike. This anxiety goes beyond economic benefits. Focus group respondents fear that a small group of ultra-elites is quietly rewriting society's rules in their favor. It's a constitutional concern—people expect legislators to defend society's guardrails against the rapid and opaque changes driven by technology companies.

"I JUST KEEP THINKING...WHO'S GOING TO STEP IN? SOMEBODY HAS TO DO SOMETHING BEFORE IT GOES TOO FAR."

– Focus group participant

"I'M MORE CONCERNED THAT BIG CORPORATIONS WITH ALL THEIR MONEY AND ALL THEIR LOBBYISTS WILL CONTROL WHATEVER COMMISSION WE SET UP, AND WE'LL LOSE CONTROL OF IT."

– Focus group participant

While voters are more receptive to state governments regulating than the federal government, overall, they worry that government officials may be responsive only to industry

Over two-thirds of Californians (70%) want the government to establish safeguards around AI systems that prevent the most common harms. They do not trust industry to develop or abide by voluntary standards to reduce risk.

70%
OF CALIFORNIANS SAY WE NEED STRONG LAWS TO MAKE AI FAIR AND BELIEVE THAT VOLUNTARY RULES SIMPLY DON'T GO FAR ENOUGH.

While trust in the government to control AI is low across the board, the state has a small edge, pointing to slightly greater public confidence in state-led regulation. In net trust terms (that is, trust minus don't-trust), Californians rate the state government at -24 (35% trust vs 59% don't) and the federal government at -33 (32% vs 64%)—a nine-point advantage for the state. In plain terms: people are less negative about Sacramento than Washington, but mistrust still outweighs trust overall. In focus groups, respondents said this distrust stems from a deep concern that legislators are overly influenced by the tech industry—and made clear that their support for policymakers depends on visible independence from it.

At the same time, an overwhelming majority favor policies that establish guardrails and accountability, including protecting privacy (81%), civil rights (73%), and enacting non-discrimination rules (73%).

"I WANT YOU ALL TO ENSURE THAT AI COMPANIES CANNOT LOBBY POLITICIANS TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT BENEFIT THEM."

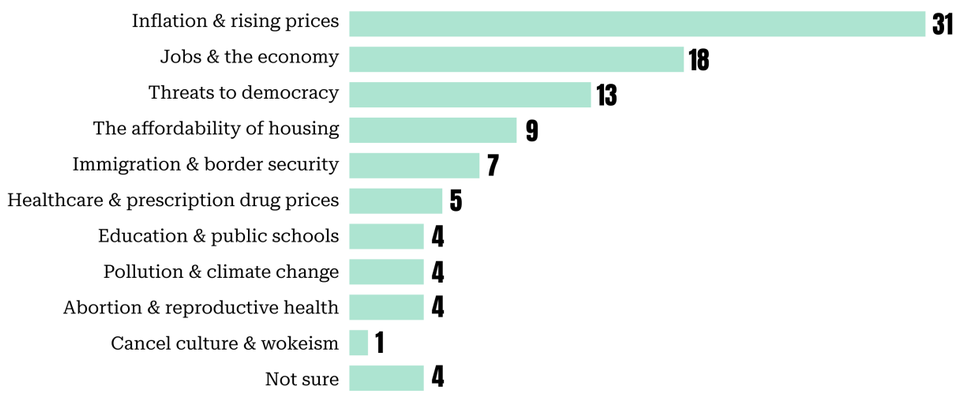
– Focus group participant

WHAT DO CALIFORNIANS SEE AS THE OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS OF AI?

Californians expect AI to impact their jobs

Tangible and everyday economic issues like inflation, rising prices, jobs, and the economy more broadly are the most important issues for Californians in this survey.

Which of the following issues do you think is most important for your elected leaders to prioritize?



Only 25% of people believe that AI will have a positive impact on them, and many find it unlikely that AI will create new jobs and industries (42%) or increase equality (49%). More than half (52%) of Californians are concerned AI will replace low-paying jobs, and 43% are concerned AI will replace high-paying jobs.

While the positive impacts of AI are less likely to respondents than the negative impacts, a significant number think that AI is likely to find solutions to problems that we cannot solve (43%) and improve creativity and innovation (42%). Because these terms can be ambiguous, we probed in focus groups to clarify. People told us they see innovation as technology that improves daily life — cheaper groceries, lower energy bills, easier access to doctors, and better care. This is very different from definitions used by business groups, who often refer to cutting-edge breakthroughs, faster chips, cutting costs, or boosting productivity.

Californians are most concerned with near-term risks from AI rather than catastrophic risks

When it comes to the risks from AI, Californians are most concerned about impacts they are already seeing, such as deepfakes (64%), disinformation (59%), and intrusions on their personal privacy (58%). They are also concerned about risks they see as becoming more common, such as replacing low-paying jobs (52%), and reducing wages (55%). They see the risk that AI may take control of nuclear weapons (34%) or manipulate financial markets (40%) is much lower.

Everyone shares the top few concerns. Women, Democrats, and Latinos are most concerned with the creation of deepfakes. Black adults are less concerned than most about deepfakes, or disinformation from AI, but are extremely concerned about AI's potential to reduce personal privacy and reduce people's wages.

While a majority of Californians report being familiar with AI (64%) and have used AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, or Copilot (66%), only 17% of Californians demonstrate high degrees of AI literacy. In comparison, 62% have moderate or limited literacy based on an AI Literacy Index, which assesses deeper familiarity with AI concepts, risks, and technologies. It is worth noting that those with higher AI literacy also feel more sanguine about the risks, while at the same time feeling more strongly that the technology should be regulated. This finding may indicate that those who feel empowered to control how the technology is used in their lives may be more receptive to its adoption when compared to those who feel these tools are being used on them to limit their agency and life prospects. Importantly, the lower literacy cohort is disproportionately composed of women, people of color, and other marginalized groups.

CONCLUSION

While many Californians are optimistic about the potential for AI to improve health, housing, and the economy, that optimism depends on one key condition: that the government plays an active role in setting the ground rules to protect fairness, privacy, and civil rights. Concerns about near-term risks like job loss, privacy violations, and discrimination are front of mind for a strong majority of California voters across demographic differences and in every corner of the state. Our results also demonstrate that everyday Californians do not believe that "winning the AI race" is the most important consideration, and certainly do not believe lawmakers should prioritize "winning" over ensuring these tools are trustworthy.

Our findings echo those from a variety of other surveys that also show strong majorities worry that AI will increase inequality and job loss, rather than acting as an engine of opportunity and prosperity.[4]

In a political era defined by voters' cynicism, lack of trust in government, and simmering anti-corporate sentiment, our findings—and those of many other pollsters and researchers—indicate that decision-makers who align too closely with the AI industry may find themselves on the receiving end of a popular backlash.[5]

METHODOLOGY

Survey and Sample

This study was conducted by Diffusion.Au, Voss Strategy, and Lake Research Partners using an online panel of California adults. The sample included 1,000 California adults, with oversamples of 100 Black adults, 100 Asian American and Pacific Islander adults, and 200 adults classified as "tech-savvy", for a total sample of 1,400 people. The survey was fielded from 29 April to 8 May 2025. The margin of error for the full sample is ±3.1%, with larger margins for subgroups.

Using a discussion guide developed by DIffusion.Au, Lake Research Partners conducted two online focus groups of 21 California adults on July 10th. Each group was screened to match the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of cluster segments identified in the previously conducted survey.

Tech-savvy respondents were defined as registered voters who met all of the following criteria: they consumed at least two news sources multiple times per week; engaged in at least two political activation behaviours (e.g. signing petitions, attending meetings); used three or more online platforms regularly; and posted political or social opinions on social media at least a couple of times per week. Tech-savvy adults made up 12% of the final weighted sample.

Post-stratification weighting was applied by gender, age, race, region, and education to ensure representativeness of the adult California population. As with all sample surveys, results are subject to sampling error. For example, a 50% response from a question answered by the full sample would, with 95% confidence, fall between 46.9% and 53.1% in repeated samples of the same size drawn from the population.

Full toplines and cross tabs can be accessed at diffusion.au/aicompass.

CHAID Analysis

To identify demographic and attitudinal subgroups driving differences in AI sentiment, we conducted a CHAID (Chi-Square Automatic Interaction Detection) analysis using responses to Q24–Q26.

Responses were recoded to a five-point ordinal scale ranging from 1 (“much more concerned”) to 5 (“much more excited”). CHAID then split the sample into mutually exclusive nodes based on statistically significant interactions with key demographic and behavioural predictors (e.g., age, gender, education, tech use). Each terminal node represents a distinct subgroup with internally similar and externally distinct attitudes. Mean scores were computed for each node to interpret group differences, with higher values indicating greater excitement about AI.

AI Literacy Index

Each respondent’s AI Literacy Score was calculated as the average of their z-standardised responses to eight five-point Likert items (Q22) measuring familiarity with AI’s outcomes, risks, core concepts, and enabling technologies. These values were then linearly rescaled to a 0–100 scale, where higher scores reflect greater conceptual understanding.

For interpretability we assigned respondents to four ordered literacy segments using pre-defined cut-offs on the 0 – 100 scale, derived from the distribution observed in the Californian sample: the high AI literacy segment have scores between 75-100, the advanced segment is between 63-75, the moderate segment is 50-62, and the lowest segment have scores of less than 50.

CITATIONS

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