

Generative AI like ChatGPT could help boost democracy—if it overcomes key hurdles

November 8 2023, by Kaylyn Jackson Schiff and Daniel S. Schiff

Sample prompts to show how generative AI could boost political knowledge and participation

Below are some prompts people could input into generative AI systems like ChatGPT to learn more about politics and policies. Note that current technology cannot guarantee accurate, or even useful, responses.

I'm not sure how I feel about the proposal to speed up vaccine trials for rare medical conditions. Can you help me think through this?

Who are the candidates I can vote for in my upcoming election? As a student living abroad, how can I still vote?

I'd like to know whether my city council member is being honest about their position on education funding. Can you summarize how they have voted on education policy in the past and how their views fit in compared to other politicians in my state?

I've heard that our political party has split into two competing groups, one of which is forming a new coalition. Could you help me understand who is in charge of the new coalition and if it aligns with my values?

Can you provide an estimate of where my tax dollars would go under the new proposed bill? How much is going to military spending versus health care spending, and how does this compare to other countries?

Some prompts may be more effective with more advanced AI systems that can access real-time information through the internet.

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The dawn of artificial intelligence systems that can be used by almost anyone, like ChatGPT, has [revolutionized business](#) and [alarmed policymakers](#) and the [public](#).

Advanced technologies can feel like unstoppable forces shaping society. But a [critical insight](#) from scholars of philosophy and the history of technology is that people can exert a lot of control over how and where we use these tools.

To us, as [political scientists](#), this new technology offers some exciting opportunities to improve democratic processes, such as through increasing civic knowledge and facilitating communication with elected representatives—if critical challenges are met. And we've begun to research how this might happen.

Increasing civic knowledge

Politics can feel impossibly complicated, with emotion-laden negative marketing campaigns and political winds that seem to change almost daily. Many cities, states, and countries provide [little to no information](#) to the public about policy issues, political candidates or policy referendums. So, even when citizens can exercise their democratic freedoms, they may not feel informed enough to do so.

Generative AI could help. Building on platforms like [isidewith.com](#), [politicalcompass.org](#) and [theadvocates.org](#), AI could help people answer questions about their core beliefs or policy positions, and then help them determine which political candidates, parties or choices best match their views.

Existing websites like [Ballotpedia](#), [Vote Smart](#) and [Vote411](#) have made tremendous advances in providing critical information like sample ballots, polling place locations and candidate positions to voters.

However, these websites can be challenging to navigate. AI technologies may provide enhanced services at local, state, regional, national, and international levels. These systems may eventually be able to use automation to provide continuously updated information on candidates and policy issues.

AI chatbots could also [interactively help people think](#) through complex issues, [learn new skills](#) and determine their policy stances, while also providing relevant news stories and facts.

However, at the moment, generative AI systems aren't ready to answer democracy-related questions reliably or without bias. Large language models generate text based on [statistical frequencies](#) of words in their training data, with little regard for whether the statements are fact or fiction.

For example, AI systems could hallucinate by fabricating nonexistent politicians or generating inaccurate candidate positions. These systems also appear to generate output with [political biases](#). And the rules protecting the [privacy of users and compensating individuals or organizations](#) whose data are used by these systems are not yet clear, either.

Before generative AI is ready to enhance democracy, there's much to understand and address.

Facilitating constituent communication

One area for inquiry: Could generative AI help constituents communicate with their elected representatives?

Contacting a politician can be intimidating, and many Americans may need help knowing where to start. [Survey research](#) reveals that fewer

than half of Americans can name the three branches of government. Knowing the names of their representatives, much less getting in contact with them, is even less common. For example, in 2018, only 23% of survey respondents in a [poll by the Pew Research Center](#) indicated that they had contacted an elected official in the past year, even at a time with significant developments in national politics.

To encourage greater outreach to representatives, generative AI could help citizens identify their elected officials and even draft detailed letters or emails to them.

We examined this idea in a recent study we conducted as part of our work at the [Governance and Responsible AI Lab](#) at Purdue University. We ran [a survey](#) of American adults in June 2023 and found that 99% of respondents had at least heard of generative AI systems like ChatGPT, and 68% had tried them out personally. However, 50% also reported never contacting any of their elected political representatives.

As part of the survey, we showed some survey respondents an example of a message written by ChatGPT to a state legislator about an education funding bill. Other respondents, the control group, saw the same example email without indication that AI wrote it.

Survey respondents who heard about this possible use of AI said they were significantly more likely than those in the control group to support using AI for communication with politicians, both by individuals and advocacy groups. Because they keep using this new technology, we had expected they would be [inclined to reach out to politicians more frequently](#) and see AI as making that process easier. But we found that not to be true.

Nevertheless, we have identified an opportunity. For example, public interest groups could use AI to improve mass advocacy campaigns by

helping citizens personalize emails to politicians more easily. Suppose they can ensure the AI-generated messages are factual and valid reflections of citizens' views. In that case, many more people who might not historically have contacted their politicians might consider doing so.

There are risks, though, including that politicians might be skeptical of communications they think are written by AI.

Maintaining authenticity. The human touch

One of the most significant drawbacks to using generative AI for political communication is that it might make the receivers of messages suspicious that they are not actually in conversation with an actual human. To test this possibility, we warned some of the people taking our surveys that using mass AI-generated messages could lead politicians to doubt whether humans authentically created the messages.

Compared to those in the [control group](#), we found that these people felt that legislators would indeed be less likely to pay attention to email and that emails would be less effective at shaping policymakers' opinions or decisions.

Strikingly, however, these people still supported the use of generative AI in political communication. One possible explanation for this finding is something called the ["trust paradox"](#) of AI: Sometimes, even when people find AI untrustworthy, they still support its use. They may do so out of believing that future versions of the technology will be better or because they lack effective alternatives.

So far, our early research into the implications of generative AI for political communication suggests a few key lessons.

First, even with ostensibly easy-to-use AI tools, politics is still out of

reach for many who have historically lacked opportunities to share their thoughts with politicians. We even found that [survey respondents](#) with higher baseline trust in the government or who had had prior contact with the government were less likely to support AI use in this context, perhaps to preserve their heightened existing influence in government. Therefore, greater availability of AI tools might not mean more equal access to politicians unless these tools are carefully designed.

Second, given the importance of human contact and authenticity, a critical challenge is using AI's opportunities while preserving the human touch in politics. While generative AI could enhance aspects of politics, we shouldn't be too quick to automate away the relationships that underpin our social fabric.

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