

Can AI Stand In for Voters? Pollsters Are Testing the Idea

Synthetic polling promises speed and scale, but critics warn it may miss how real people change their minds.



An illustrated polling table shows empty chairs facing generic glowing digital silhouettes with a survey form between them.

Some **polling** firms are experimenting with **surveys** that use **artificial** intelligence **personas** instead of asking only real people what they think, according to reporting by Phys.org. The idea is called **synthetic** polling: researchers create hundreds or thousands of simulated people using large language models, or LLMs, which are AI systems trained to produce humanlike text. These personas are built from existing polling data and demographic information such as age, location, or background, then asked survey questions or placed in artificial focus groups.

The appeal is easy to see. Real polling takes time and money. A good national survey has to reach a group that is nationally representative, meaning it reflects the larger **population** closely enough that the results can be taken seriously. Jennifer Stromer-Galley, a Syracuse University professor who studies public opinion polling methods, told Phys.org that a strong national survey should include roughly 1,200 people. Synthetic polling firms, by contrast, can generate several thousand AI personas without having to persuade actual people to answer questions.

That creates the central trade-off. Synthetic polling could let researchers test questions quickly, ex-

plore policy ideas, or run focus groups at a lower cost. But the same technology may also create a misleading picture of what the public thinks. The worry is not just that an AI system could make a mistake. It is that the system may be too consistent in a way real people are not.

Public opinion changes because life changes. A person asked in October about the country's biggest problem might give a different answer in January after a job loss, a storm, a new law, a family event, or simply months of news. Stromer-Galley's concern is that many AI personas are built from fixed instructions and background information. If the model is asked the same kind of question again and again, it may give similar answers again and again. That consistency sounds useful, but it can hide the instability and contradiction that are part of human opinion.

Real voters also do not always think like neatly organized policy spreadsheets. A person might support one government program but oppose another similar one, or might care deeply about an issue only after it affects their community. Stromer-Galley argues that synthetic personas may produce answers that are more internally consistent than human answers. In polling, that can be a problem,

because the point is not to create tidy opinions. The point is to measure the opinions people actually have.

Another issue is **bias**, which in this context means a built-in pattern that pushes results in one direction rather than reflecting the full range of views. Polling vendors can adjust their synthetic samples so the personas match the average demographics of a population. But Stromer-Galley says that does not solve the problem of how the AI model answers for each profile. If a model is asked to simulate a rural Black voter in a small town, for example, it may produce what seems like a typical answer for that profile. But real communities include **outliers**, people whose views do not fit the expected pattern. If the synthetic method smooths away those outliers, it may miss something politically or socially important.

A Pew Research Center experiment suggests this concern is not just theoretical. Pew had an AI model take on the personas of real members of its American Trends Panel and answer the same surveys those human panelists took. Across nearly 300 questions, the AI results differed from the human results by an average of 12 percentage points.

Nearly half the questions had at least one answer choice that no AI **respondent** selected. That matters because a survey that never selects an answer real people sometimes choose is not simply noisy; it may be leaving out parts of public opinion.

The debate is also about what polling is for. Since scientific public opinion polling developed in the 1930s and 1940s, it has offered more than numbers. It has given people a way to see how others across the country think about shared problems. If synthetic polling becomes common, it could expand access to opinion research, especially for organizations that cannot afford large surveys. But it could also create what Stromer-Galley calls a **distorted** mirror: a reflection of the public that looks convincing while bending reality.

That does not mean AI personas have no place in research. They might help test survey wording, explore possible reactions, or supplement traditional methods. The harder question is where to draw the line. If synthetic polling is treated as a tool, with clear warnings about its limits, it may be useful. If it starts replacing real respondents, the public may end up being measured by machines trained to imitate people, rather than by people themselves.

Written from reporting by Phys.org.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. If synthetic polling is cheaper and faster but less faithful to real human opinion, when, if ever, should organizations be allowed to use it in place of traditional polling?

2. Is consistency in AI-generated opinions a strength or a weakness for public opinion research?

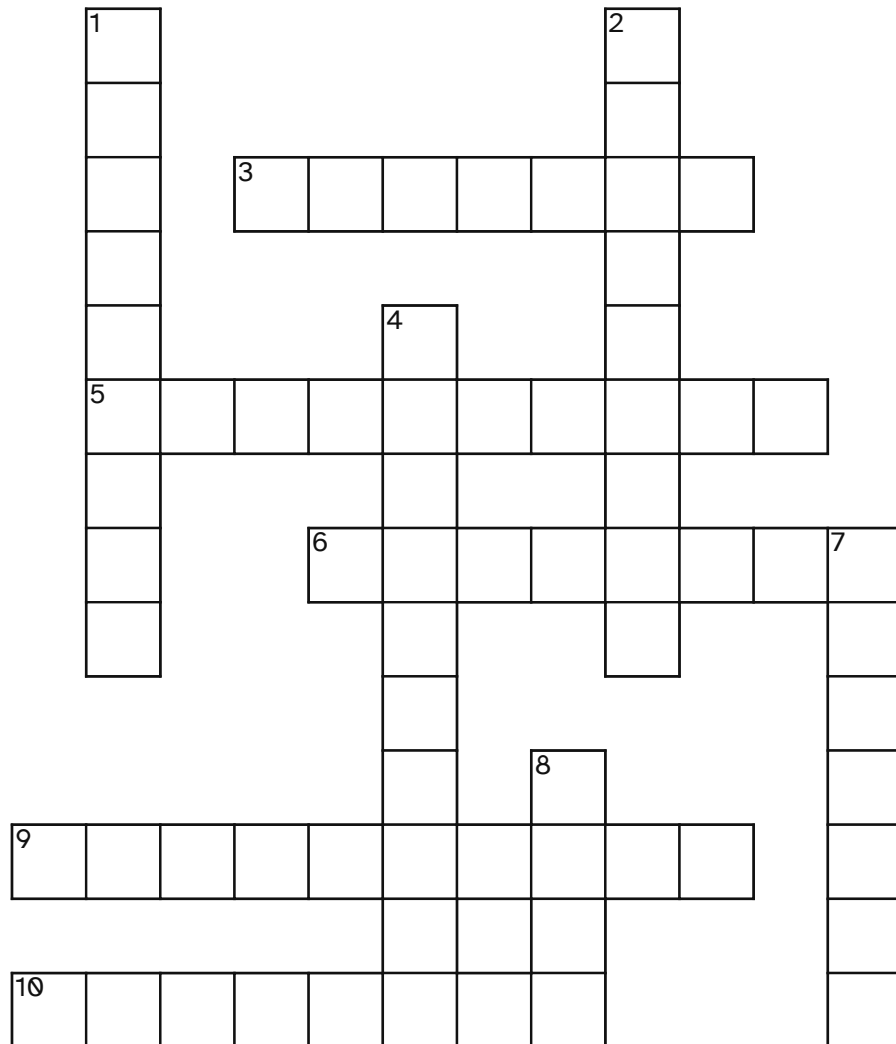
3. What information would you want a polling firm to disclose before publishing results based partly or entirely on AI personas?

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C E A D E P Y N U N W D R T E C L Y
S O L T P R O S L M N N D P P P I P
A D S T R E S P O N D E N T I E S O
R E S E A S R Y U P O C T I H N O O
S O H A O E U S N L O S I U A R S R
R I F R P U N E O T A F L K E T R G
D I S T O R T E D N H T N T E E E U
A I S I L E O L S I A E I R P T O G
A Y C F L I O L I B A S T O D A P U
S E O I I D R A T E H S Y I N E I A
T A G C N T L S L N R U H S C T T E
C P D I G B Y E B I A S E I T C I C
U R L A N R S I P T E U W Y N P N N
H T A L A N S E A A T R N I R T B I
T O I T U H R N M R D V T I R T O E
E P P S E B D S D S H E T O G H L T
R Z L N O S S N A Q R Y S O S N S O
R T I S V E R N V E E S S O S N E H

ARTIFICIAL BIAS DISTORTED OUTLIERS PERSONAS
POLLING POPULATION RESPONDENT SURVEYS SYNTHETIC

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ACROSS

- 3 Asking people questions to gather their views
- 5 Person or system answering study questions
- 6 People or results far from the usual pattern
- 9 Created by people or machines, not found in nature
- 10 Invented identities representing types of people

DOWN

- 1 Altered to create a misleading or inaccurate picture
- 2 Computer-made rather than drawn from real people
- 4 Entire group researchers want to understand
- 7 Question sets used to gather group opinions or information
- 8 Built-in lean toward one result or viewpoint

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

Phys.org

“Synthetic public opinion polling: AI personas don't always change their minds like real voters do”

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<https://phys.org/news/2026-10-synthetic-opinion-polling-ai-personas.html>

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article and its discussion questions, a word search, and a crossword.

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