NINA MOINI: For some voters, this midterm election, the process of deciding who to vote for has changed in itself. Instead of just searching the internet or talking to friends, some are turning to AI chatbots to research candidates, political issues, and fact check what they've seen online.

The Brennan Center for Justice, a nonpartisan think tank, has been testing how AI chatbots respond to election questions and misinformation. Abdiaziz Ahmed is a technology policy strategist for the Center's Elections and Government Program. Thanks for joining us, Abdiaziz.

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: This is another thing we're talking about AI impacting another area of life. And then there's so much interest in not just AI and how to use it, but how to use it effectively and in the right way and how AI is getting the information that AI is getting to begin with. And do you have a sense of just how many people across the country are turning to chatbots to research who they're going to vote for?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Yeah. I mean, we don't necessarily how many folks are using chatbots to ask about elections or candidates. I think we do know that half of Americans are now using chatbots. And a quarter of them use them every day. So I think it logically extends that some of that information will be going to use-- searching candidates and getting information about elections.

NINA MOINI: Do you think that a lot of people are consciously thinking, I'm going to use this chatbot and AI? Or sometimes you can just Google things and something will generate at the top. Or how deep into the chatbots do you think people are getting maybe versus traditional news sources?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Yeah, I mean, that's a good question. And probably not as many as you think are consciously thinking they're using AI. Plenty of people obviously open ChatGPT on purpose, but a lot of AI, like you said, use now happens without anybody choosing it.

So when you search on Google, there's often an AI summary at the top before any links. And many people read it without realizing that a chatbot actually wrote that answer for you. AI is also built into phones, social media apps, and email. Even some campaign texts now we're seeing soliciting donations are now written and answered by AI.

So someone might say I don't use AI and still get their election information from it several times a day. And that's why it matters for us that these tools get the facts right. People aren't always on guard, because they don't know they're talking to AI.

NINA MOINI: And Also people tend to think of chatbots as a neutral, no-agenda robot, or just an aggregate of all the information that has ever been available. But can you talk to us about why it's important to explore this from a position of what information AI is actually delivering to people?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Yeah, and I think that's the crux we get between-- folks will say the news media, I don't want to use it, because I don't trust it. And the chatbots are neutral. But obviously, that's not quite right.

A chatbot doesn't have opinions in the way a person does, but it's definitely not neutral either. It's built by a company that decides what it will and won't say, and these choices change. It also learns from what's on the internet. So if one side has flooded the internet with a claim, that can creep into the answers you'll receive.

People are also now deliberately writing content, so chatbots will repeat it. And the last thing, both in some of the research we've done but I think also known colloquially, is chatbots are trained to be agreeable. So if you ask a leading question, it often will lean your way.

In our testing, some of the testing that we did, we would take false photos that we generated and pose them as evidence of fraud. Sometimes the chatbots went along with it. And so I think to be succinct, that's why this matters. When people think a source has no agenda, they obviously stop questioning it.

And newspaper has a byline and an editor you can hold accountable. A chatbot just sounds confident. You don't see what on the back end shaped its answer. So the more people trust these tools as neutral, I think the more important it is that someone outside these companies is testing them.

NINA MOINI: And how did it respond? I mean, this is such a good idea. I'm so glad that you're looking into this. But if someone were to ask, who should I vote for? Who is the better candidate? Did you ask questions like that that would give someone a directive?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Yeah, that's cool. So we didn't actually test that question directly. Our study looked at how chatbots handle election conspiracies and fake images, not necessarily candidate recommendations.

I think my understanding is that the major chatbots generally won't tell you who to vote for, but it'll instead lay out where the candidates stand. But I add a caution to that because even when a chatbot won't endorse anyone, the information it gives about candidates can still be incomplete or wrong.

There's other research, not done by the Brennan Center, but another research group found that ChatGPT often left candidates out of its lists. So a voter might actually think only two people were running when there were more.

And the last thing I'll say is chatbots tend to lean towards what you seem to want to hear. So even if it doesn't name a candidate, it can still nudge you. I think our advice is maybe to use chatbots to learn the basics or to ask information, and then to verify that with a nonpartisan guides like Ballotpedia or the League of Women Voters VOTE411.

NINA MOINI: And you mentioned the companies creating and behind the chatbots. And a lot of people throw around Big Tech. We're thinking a lot about Big Tech and who is in charge, and where is this going?

What do you think you were able to draw upon or gather from some of the work you were doing or even what you've heard anecdotally just about how these companies do decide what information to generate? I mean, is it politically motivated?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: I mean, I think, generally, our study wasn't able to find out whether there are political motivations or not. The biggest thing that we learned is that Big Tech isn't one thing. I think colloquially, obviously, there's the Big Tech companies, but the companies that we tested made very different choices. And those choices change quickly.

So take this fall. When we retested weeks before the election-- because we did an initial tranche of testing earlier in the year. And we just retested again just before-- maybe a month ago. When we retested weeks before the election, OpenAI had completely changed some of its image tools so that if you ask it to produce images depicting fraud or nefarious election activities, it'll turn those scenes into cartoons. And so it won't give you a realistic depiction anymore.

At the same time, Meta's tool started making a fake government document that it refused to make for us earlier in the year. And so this is the same industry, same months, opposite directions. And so I think what that tells us is that these problems aren't technical limits. All these systems have the technical ability to do a variety of different things. There are obviously business decisions. And a company can fix this. Some did, others didn't.

I think what we saw as in 2024, the major companies, the major chatbot companies, or what you would call the Big Tech companies, signed a pledge to work together on AI and elections in Munich in 2024. This year there's nothing like that. So I think from our perspective is we can't leave this to each company's goodwill. We need rules that apply to all of them.

NINA MOINI: I don't know if you were able to gather this from your research specifically. But if voters are getting their information from chatbots, do you see any correlation at all between how candidates might then be running their campaigns and what they're seeing in that voter behavior, perhaps?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Yeah, I mean, that's really a fascinating question. And two things, we didn't study campaigns directly, but we're seeing the shift for sure because I think for years, campaigns, and I think other entities, they work to show up at the top of Google search results. There's something called Search Engine Optimization, SEOs.

Now I think what we're seeing is some are writing their websites and materials, so chatbots will pick them up and repeat them when voters ask questions. And researchers call that GEO, which is Generative Engine Optimization, as opposed to SEO, which is search engine optimization.

That means really a chatbot answer about candidate really might just reflect who worked hardest to get its message into it, not necessarily the most accurate information. I think some campaigns, I'm sorry, are using AI in other ways. Some are running ads with AI-generated videos of their opponents or deepfakes, sometimes only with a small AI-generated label disclosure in the corner. Others, like I said earlier, are using AI to send and answer fundraising text.

I think my takeaway for listeners is when a chatbot tells you something about a candidate, remember that someone may have shaped that answer. It's not necessarily coming out of a vacuum. It's important to independently check the candidate's own record and some nonpartisan guide, or even an organization, maybe a union that you work with or something that you believe in that shares the values with you to really inform or bolster up some of that answers that you've already received from the chatbot itself.

NINA MOINI: Just lastly, Abdiaziz, I mean, what you're getting at here is there needs to be some type of regulation, perhaps, or something needs to happen to try to rein in what's going on. I mean, if things continued this way, do you think about what elections or just information gathering in general would look like in four years from now, even in the next general election in a couple of years?

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: Yeah. I think it's hard to predict. But if nothing changes, I certainly worry about a few things, which is many people-- more people will get their information-- or their election information from a handful of AI tools run by a few companies. And those tools will keep changing the rules from month to month with nobody watching it.

I also think fake images and documents will get cheaper and more convincing. And the tools that we use to check them won't keep up. I think the bigger danger overseeing all of this is people won't believe anything. When anything could be fake, someone could dismiss real evidence, real recount, perhaps a real audit of an election by just saying, that was AI. It's not real. And so that makes it easier to cast doubt on results someone doesn't like.

And I think the last thing I'll say is it doesn't have to be this way. We've seen companies from our research fix problems in a matter of months, which tells me it's fixable. I think what's missing is we don't have a floor for every company to meet.

That means for us at the Brennan Center here, AI images should carry labels that can't be easily stripped out by a screenshot or by some sort of manipulation. Chatbots should check those labels when someone asks them if a photo is real. And safeguards that work the same in every language, in every version of the product should work.

California has started down this road. California has passed the California AI Transparency Act. I think it pushes other states, and Congress should follow. So voters and the American public in general aren't necessarily just relying on a company's goodwill.

NINA MOINI: Abdiaziz, thanks so much for sharing your work with us. We appreciate your time.

ABDIAZIZ AHMED: I appreciate it. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Abdiaziz Ahmed, a technology policy strategist for the Elections and Government Program at the Brennan Center for Justice. If you are researching who is on your ballot for real, MPR News has you covered with verified information we actually gathered about every candidate. You can use the Build Your Ballot tool on our website, mprnews.org/election. Just put in your address to see the candidates on your ballot and learn where they stand on the issues.