

U.S. PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Declining Support for Development and Divided Views on Facial Recognition

Paul Brewer, David Wilson, James Bingaman, Ashley Paintsil, and Lucy Obozintsev

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Prepared by

Paul R. Brewer, PhD, Co-Principle Investigator
Professor, Communication and Political Science & International Relations
University of Delaware

David C. Wilson, PhD, Co-Principle Investigator
Professor, Political Science & International Relations and Psychological & Brain Sciences
University of Delaware

Lucy Obozintsev, Co-Investigator

University of Delaware Research Staff

James Bingaman, Department of Communication
Ashley Paintsil, Department of Communication

Production Design: Mark Barnes

Graphic Design: Bill Webster

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A national survey supervised by researchers at the University of Delaware finds that the American public holds favorable views on artificial intelligence (hereafter, “AI”) but also worries about its implications. This study, conducted in fall 2020, re-interviewed 1,205 respondents who took part in a [March 2020 survey](#) supervised by the same research team.

Public opinion about AI was largely stable across the two waves of the study. The new survey found that most Americans favor regulating the technology, a majority support developing it, a plurality favor public funding for it, and few support banning it. However, support for developing AI has declined by 7 percentage points.

The new survey also found ongoing support for AI uses involving military drones and diagnosing diseases. Opinions are more divided on self-driving vehicles, and support for facial identification applications has eroded.

Americans remain split on whether AI will have mostly positive or mixed effects on society, though only a small percentage believe the technology will do more harm than good. Most Americans continue to say they are hopeful that AI will create jobs, improve health care, help stop harmful content online, prevent terrorism, catch criminals, and make day-to-day life easier. Yet some of these hopes have faded. Moreover, large majorities are still worried that AI will eliminate jobs, invade people’s privacy, help spread harmful content online, and enable cyber-attacks. More than half of Americans say they worry that AI may eventually pose a threat to the existence of the human race.

The survey results show that the public trusts university researchers, the U.S. military, and technology companies to develop and use AI. Meanwhile, fewer than one in three Americans trusts the government in Washington to do so.

Given recent controversies about policing, including debates over AI applications, and the wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the nation, the September 2020 survey included two new questions about law enforcement uses of facial recognition technology. The results show that most Americans support law enforcement agencies using this technology to identify suspected criminals. However, public opinion is divided on whether law enforcement agencies should use facial recognition technology to monitor public protests. Republicans, older Americans, and those who watch three or more hours of television a day are particularly likely to support using AI to identify suspected criminals. Women, Americans under the age of 30, college graduates, and Democrats are especially opposed to using facial recognition technology to monitor public protests.

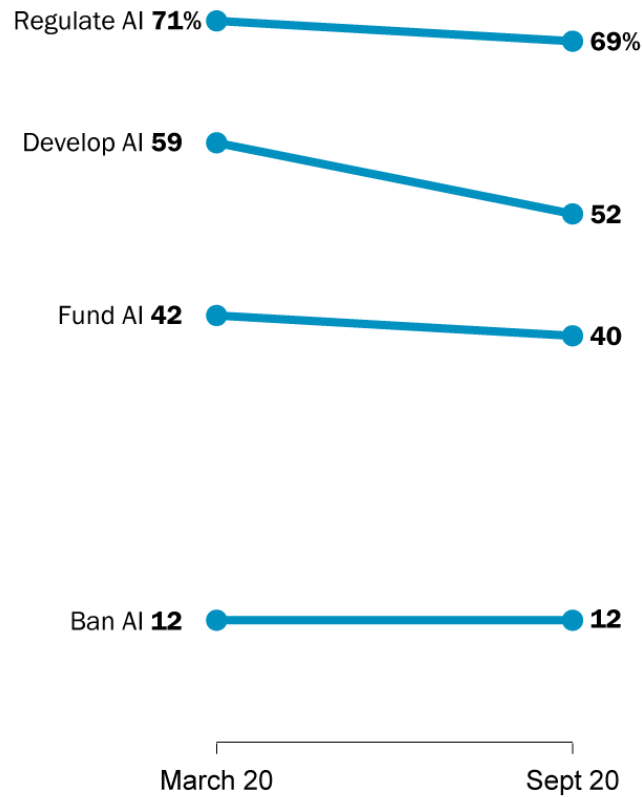
The study was funded by a grant from the Charles Koch Foundation. The two waves of the survey were conducted March 17-27, 2020, and Sept. 21-Oct. 1, 2020, by the National Opinion Research Center. A nationally representative sample of 1,205 adult U.S. residents in NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel were interviewed online in both waves of the survey. Results were weighted by age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, housing tenure, telephone status, and Census Division to reflect U.S. population values. The research team at the University of Delaware bears all responsibility for the study’s design and conclusions.

1. General Opinions About AI

Public opinion about policies regarding artificial intelligence

Public support for developing AI declined from 59% in March 2020 to 52% in September 2020. Meanwhile, public opinion on other AI-related policy questions changed little over the same period. A large majority of Americans supported regulating AI in both March (71%) and September (69%), whereas only a small minority favored banning AI in either wave of the survey (12% for each). A plurality of Americans favored public funding for AI in March (42%) and September (40%).

Figure 1. Public opinion about artificial intelligence



2. The Role of AI in Society

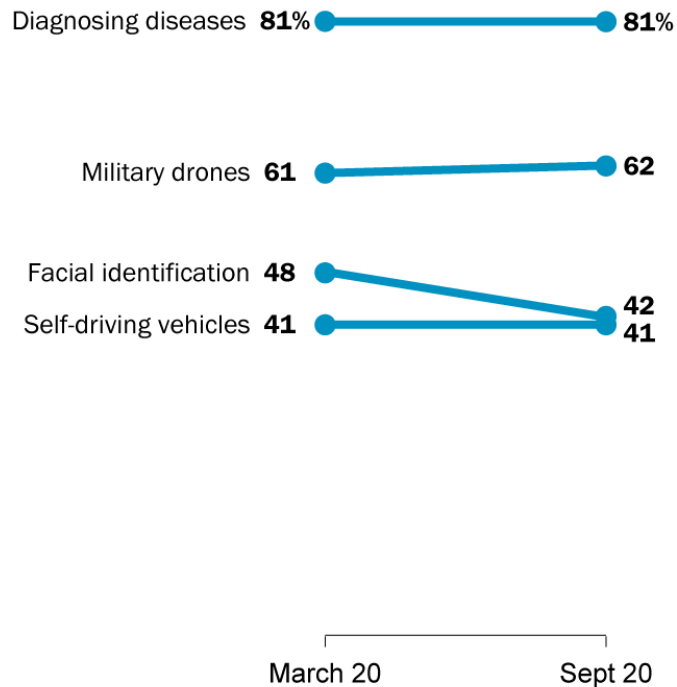
Perceptions of artificial intelligence's effects on society

The survey results reveal an ongoing divide in opinions about the benefits of AI. In March 2020, views were almost evenly split on whether AI will be good for society as a whole (41%) or do about an equal amount of harm and good (42%). Six months later, 39% of Americans said AI would mostly benefit society while 46% said it would do an equal amount of harm and good. In each wave of the survey, only a small minority said AI will do more harm than good: 16% in March and 17% in September.

Public opinion about specific uses of artificial intelligence

Support for AI continues to vary widely depending on the type of use in question. An overwhelming majority of Americans supported using AI to diagnose diseases in each wave of the survey (81% for each). A majority also consistently favored using AI for military drones: 61% in March 2020 and 62% in September 2020. Support for using AI for self-driving vehicles was lower but similarly stable at 41% in each wave. However, support for using AI to identify people's faces dropped from 48% in March to 42% in September.

Figure 2. Public opinion about uses of AI

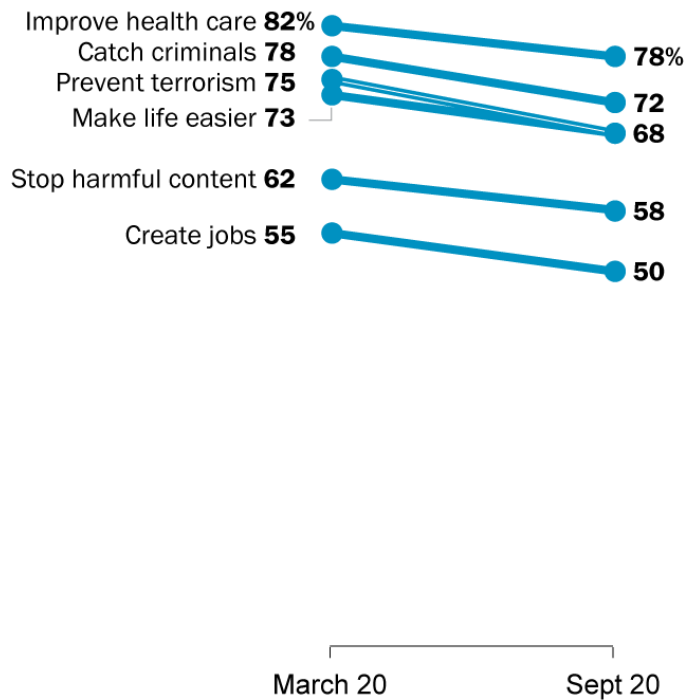


3. Hopes and Fears About AI

Public hopes about artificial intelligence

Many Americans felt hopeful about the potential benefits of AI, though some of these hopes faded slightly from the spring to the fall. The percentage of Americans saying they were very or somewhat hopeful that AI will improve health care was 82% in March 2020 and 78% in September 2020. Meanwhile, the percentage feeling hopeful about the benefits AI went from 78% to 72% when it came to catching criminals, 75% to 68% for preventing terrorism, 62% to 58% for stopping fake and harmful content online, and 55% to 50% for creating jobs. The percentage of Americans saying they were hopeful that AI will make day-to-day life easier was 73% in March and 68% in September.

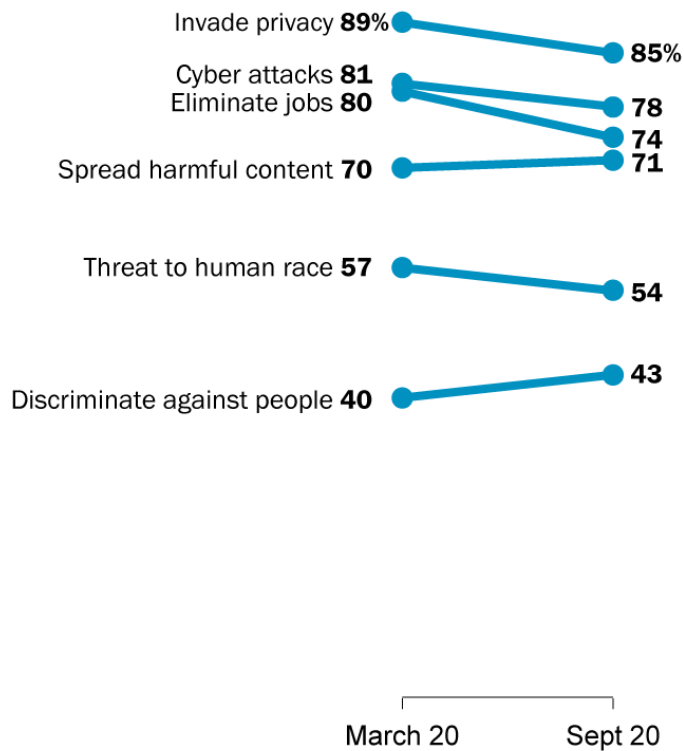
Figure 3. Public hopes about AI



Public worries about artificial intelligence

No consistent pattern over time emerged in public concerns about AI. The percentage of Americans who felt very or somewhat worried that the technology will be used to invade people’s privacy was 89% in March 2020 and 85% in September 2020. For worries about cyber-attacks, the figures were 81% and 78%, respectively. For eliminating jobs, they were 80% and 74%. The percentage who were worried that AI would help spread fake harmful content online was 70% in March and 71% in September, while the percentage who felt worried that AI will discriminate against people based on race and gender was 40% in the first wave and 43% in the second. In each wave of the survey, more than half the public was worried that AI could eventually pose a threat to the existence of the human race: 57% in the spring and 54% six months later.

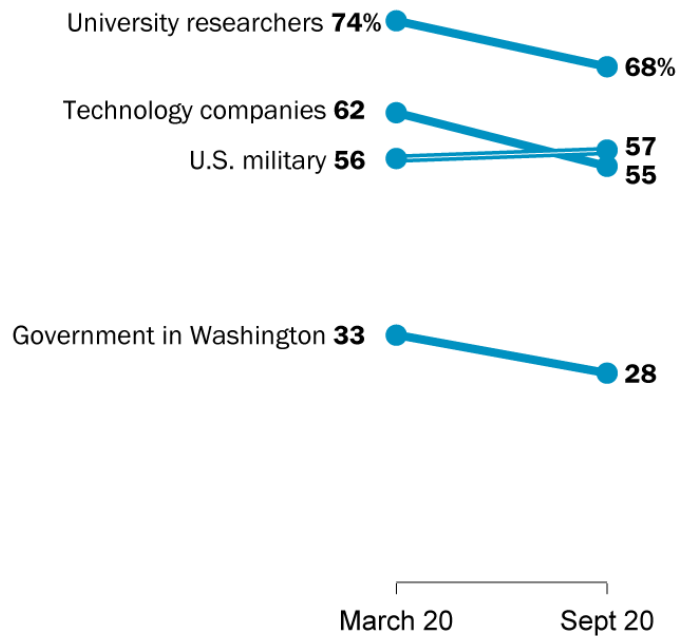
Figure 4. Public worries about AI



4. Who Should Develop and Use AI?

Americans trusted university researchers to develop and use AI, though slightly fewer did so in September 2020 (68%) than in March 2020 (74%). Trust in technology companies followed a similar track: 62% in the spring and 55% in the fall. Only 28% of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington to handle AI in September, compared to 33% half a year earlier. A steady majority trusted the U.S. military to develop and use AI: 56% in March and 57% in September.

Figure 5. Whom the public trusts to develop AI



5. Opinions about Law Enforcement Uses of Facial Recognition Technology

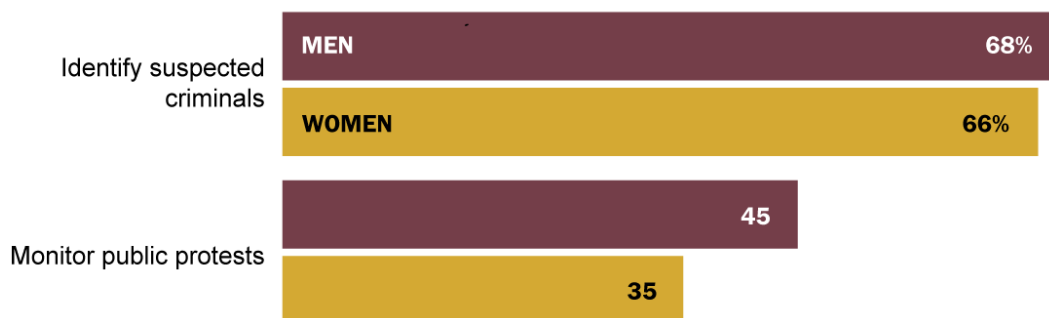
The September 2020 results show stronger support for using facial recognition technology to identify suspected criminals than for using it to monitor public protests. Around two-thirds of Americans (68%) supported law enforcement agencies using the technology to identify suspected criminals, with only 17% opposed. Opinion about using facial recognition technology to monitor protests was more divided, with 40% in favor and an identical percentage opposed. A quarter of the public strongly disagreed with this use of the technology, while 16% strongly agreed with it.

A closer look at the survey results on law enforcement uses of facial recognition technology also reveals divides across respondent gender, age, education, party affiliation, and television viewing habits.

Gender

The role of gender depended on the use in question. Men were 10 percentage points more likely than women to favor using facial recognition technology to monitor public protests. However, women and men differed little on support for using the technology to identify suspected criminals.

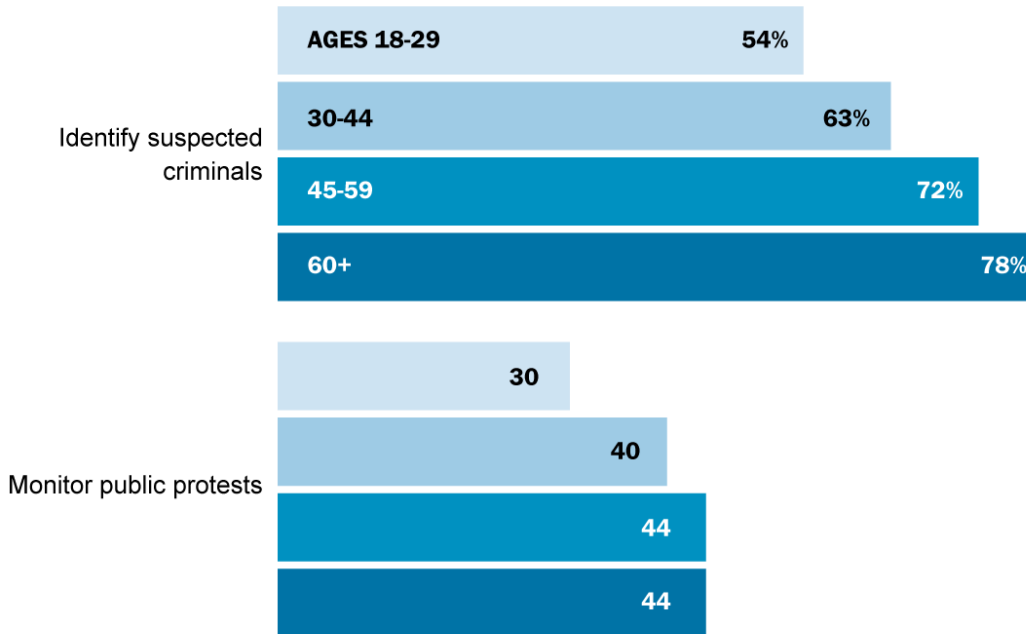
Figure 6a. Support for uses of facial recognition technology, by gender



Age

The survey also found a generation gap on law enforcement uses of facial recognition technology. Compared to Americans under the age of 30, those 60 years of age or older were 24 points more likely to favor using the technology to identify suspected criminals and 14 points more likely to favor using it to monitor public protests.

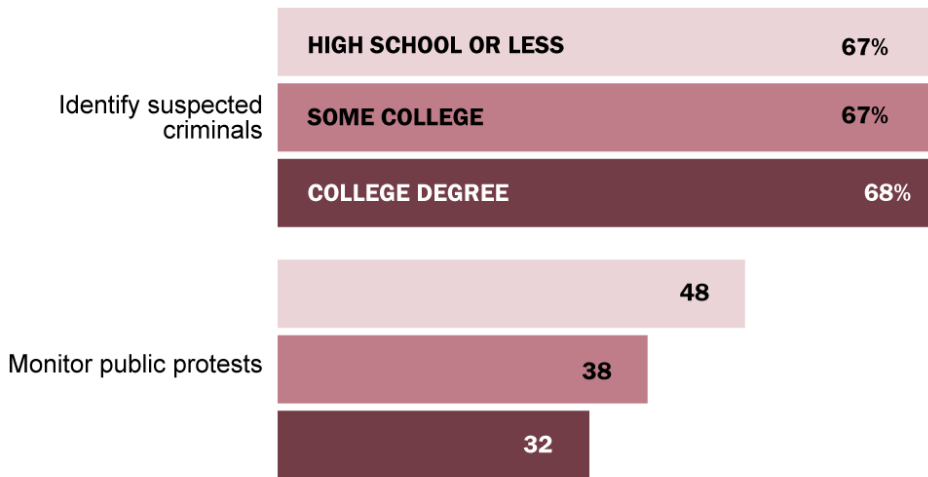
Figure 6b. Support for uses of facial recognition technology, by age



Education

As with gender, the role of education depended on the use of facial recognition in question. Support for using the technology to identify suspected criminals varied little across education levels. However, there was a clear education gap in support for using facial recognition technology to monitor public protests: support for this use of the technology was 16 points higher among Americans who had never attended college than among those with a college degree.

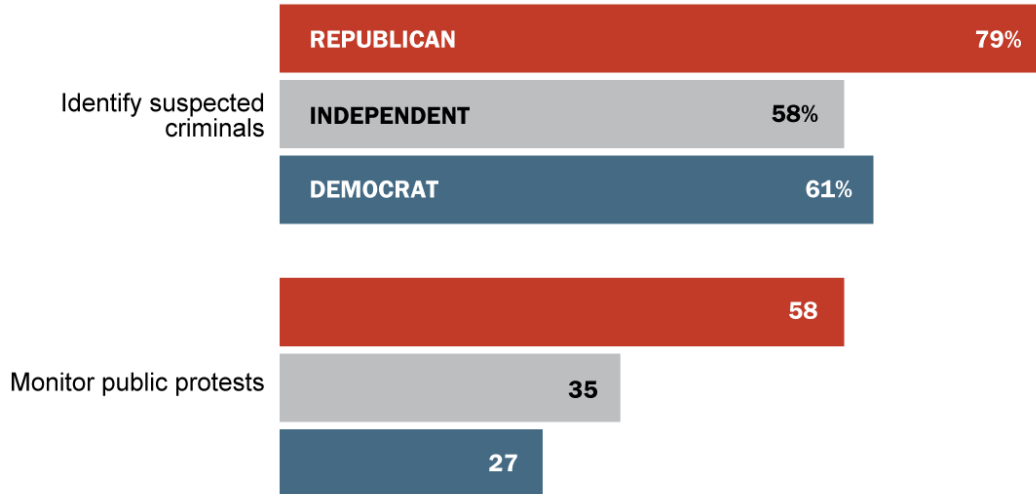
Figure 6c. Support for uses of facial recognition technology, by education



Partisanship

Compared to Democrats and independents, Republicans expressed more support for law enforcement uses of facial recognition technology. The gap between Democrats and Republicans was 18 points on using the technology to identify suspected criminals and 31 points on using it to monitor public protests.

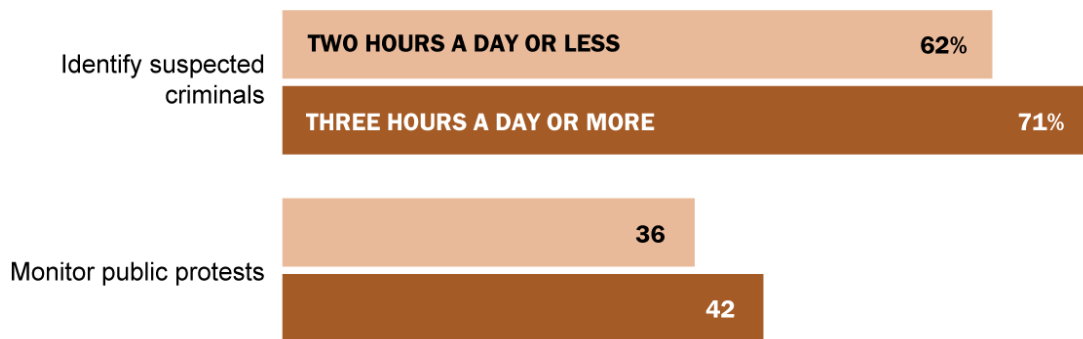
Figure 6d. Support for uses of facial recognition technology, by party ID



Media use

The survey results show a modest link between overall television viewing and support for law enforcement uses of facial recognition technology. Compared with Americans who watched two hours of television a day or less, those who watched three or more hours were 9 points likelier to support using the technology to identify suspected criminals and 6 points likelier to support using it to monitor public protests.

Figure 6e. Support for uses of facial recognition technology, by overall TV viewing



By contrast, the survey revealed no clear links between science fiction television viewing and attitudes toward law enforcement uses of facial recognition technology. Nor was following technology news linked to opinions about such uses.

6. Commentary

For the most part, Americans held fairly stable views on AI across March and September 2020. In each wave of the survey, a large majority favored regulating this technology, a smaller majority favored developing it, a plurality supported public funding for it, and few endorsed banning it. Majorities in each wave were hopeful that AI will bring a range of benefits to society and make life better. Americans also held a consistent set of concerns about AI, including worries that it could pose an existential threat to humanity itself.

At the same time, the survey found several modest shifts in public opinion about AI. Support for developing the technology declined, as did support for using it to identify people's faces. Some of the public's hopes for the technology dimmed, as well. Furthermore, public trust in university researchers, technology companies, and the government in Washington to handle the use of AI may have eroded.

These shifts in public opinion could reflect specific doubts about AI, including concerns about facial recognition applications, or broader reservations about science and technology. In terms of the latter, the period from spring to fall 2020 witnessed high profile debates about how much to trust scientific conclusions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and how much to trust technology companies in the context of the 2020 election campaign. Another possibility is that increasing reservations about AI reflect a deeper public cynicism prompted by the pandemic itself along with its economic fallout.

The topic of facial recognition technology in law enforcement has risen on the public agenda over the past half year, driven by controversies surrounding policing, race, and equal justice. In recent months, [cities](#) and [states](#) have weighed new bans on the use of this technology. Moreover, some [tech companies](#) have implemented new policies against selling facial recognition technology to police departments.

The results of the September 2020 survey suggest a split picture on public opinion about the topic. A majority of Americans favor law enforcement agencies using facial recognition technology to identify suspected criminals, but support is lower when it comes to monitoring public protests. Beneath these broad patterns, there are divides along demographics and partisanship in support for law enforcement applications of the technology. Differences of opinion across education and television viewing levels suggest the potential for both knowledge and media messages to influence views on facial recognition technology. The decline in support for using AI to identify people's faces also points to the possibility for further shifts in public opinion about the issue.

At present, public attitudes toward AI and facial recognition technology remain complex and ambivalent. It will be important to continue monitoring Americans' policy opinions, hopes, and concerns about these technologies as their development proceeds and debates about them unfold.

Acknowledgments

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Paul R. Brewer, PhD, Co-Principle Investigator
Professor, Communication and Political Science & International Relations
University of Delaware

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Survey Methodology

NORC conducted the survey on behalf of the University of Delaware using NORC's AmeriSpeak® Panel for the sample source. Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by US mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings. While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations. For more information, email AmeriSpeak-BD@norc.org or visit AmeriSpeak.norc.org.

This study was administered through a Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020 web-only survey and was offered in English-only. It was a follow-up to the [March 2020 study](#) conducted by NORC on behalf of the University of Delaware.

Sampling

A general population sample of U.S. adults age 18 and older was selected from NORC's AmeriSpeak Panel for this study. Cases sampled for this survey were drawn exclusively from the previous study's sample of survey completes from March 2020. Of the original 1,936 completes from the March 2020 survey, 1,500 panelists were sampled. To encourage study cooperation, NORC sent email reminders to sampled web-mode panelists on Sept. 21 (the start of the field period), Sept. 24, Sept. 29, Oct. 4, and Oct. 9. Panelists were offered the cash equivalent of \$2 for completing this survey. In total, NORC collected 1,205 interviews.

Data processing

NORC applied cleaning rules to the survey data for quality control. In total, 44 cases were removed from the final set of completed interviews based on three cleaning rules. Descriptions of the cleaning criteria and the counts from each are below (counts are overlapping).

- Removing Speeders (i.e., those who completed the survey in less than 1/3 the median duration)
 - o n=33 removed for speeding
- Removing Respondents with High Refusal Rates (i.e., those who skipped or refused more than 50% of the eligible questions)
 - o n=1 removed for high refusal rates
- Removing Straight-liners (i.e., those who straight-lined all eligible grid item questions)
 - o n=13 removed for straight-lining grid questions.

Of those 53 cases removed:

- n=41 were marked with one of the three flags above
- n=3 were marked with two of the three flags above

Statistical Weighting

Statistical weights for the study eligible respondents were calculated using *panel-base sampling weights* to start.

Panel-base sampling weights for all sampled housing units are computed as the inverse of probability of selection from the NORC National Frame (the sampling frame that is used to sample housing units for AmeriSpeak) or an address-based sample. The sample design and recruitment protocol for the AmeriSpeak Panel involves subsampling of initial non-respondent housing units. These subsampled non-respondent housing units are selected for an in-person follow-up. The subsample of housing units that are selected for the nonresponse follow-up (NRFU) have their panel-base sampling weights inflated by the inverse of the subsampling rate. The base sampling weights are further adjusted to account for unknown eligibility and nonresponse among eligible housing units. The household-level nonresponse adjusted weights are then post-stratified to external counts for number of households obtained from the Current Population Survey. Then, these household-level post-stratified weights are assigned to each eligible adult in every recruited household. Furthermore, a person-level nonresponse adjustment accounts for nonresponding adults within a recruited household.

Finally, panel weights are raked to external population totals associated with age, sex, education, race/Hispanic ethnicity, housing tenure, telephone status, and Census Division. The external population totals are obtained from the Current Population Survey. The weights adjusted to the external population totals are the *final panel weights*.

Study-specific base sampling weights are derived using a combination of the final panel weight and the probability of selection associated with the sampled panel member. Since not all sampled panel members respond to the survey interview, an adjustment is needed to account for and adjust for survey non-respondents. This adjustment decreases potential nonresponse bias associated with sampled panel members who did not complete the survey interview for the study. Thus, the *nonresponse adjusted survey weights* for the study are adjusted via a raking ratio method to general population totals associated with the following socio-demographic characteristics: age, sex, education, race/Hispanic ethnicity, and Census Division. The weights adjusted to the external population totals are the *final study weights*.

At the final stage of weighting, any extreme weights were trimmed based on a criterion of minimizing the mean squared error associated with key survey estimates, and then, weights re-raked to the same population totals.

Raking and re-raking are done during the weighting process, such that the weighted demographic distribution of the survey completes resemble the demographic distribution in the target population. The assumption is that the key survey items are related to the demographics. Therefore, by aligning the survey respondent demographics with the target population, the key survey items should also be in closer alignment with the target population.

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University of Delaware
Wave 1: March 17-27, 2020
Wave 2: Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020
N = 1,205

Note: Not all percentages sum to 100% due to rounding.

Q14. How much do you support or oppose each of the following? [RANDOMIZE ORDER, ANCHOR FIRST ITEM]

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
The development of artificial intelligence					
March 17-27, 2020	20%	40%	26%	10%	4%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	13%	39%	32%	12%	4%
Regulations on artificial intelligence					
March 17-27, 2020	38%	33%	24%	3%	2%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	36%	32%	25%	4%	3%
Public funding for research on artificial intelligence					
March 17-27, 2020	14%	28%	34%	14%	10%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	10%	29%	35%	17%	9%
Banning artificial intelligence altogether					
March 17-27, 2020	4%	9%	30%	27%	32%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	3%	9%	37%	28%	23%

Note: Skipped ≤ 1% for each item.

Q15. What effect do you think artificial intelligence will have on society as a whole?

	March 17-27, 2020	Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020
It will do a great deal of good	15%	12%
It will do a moderate amount of good	26%	25%
It will do about equal amounts of harm and good	42%	46%
It will do a moderate amount of harm	9%	10%
It will do a great deal of harm	7%	6%
Skipped	1%	0%

Q16. How much do you support or oppose each of the following uses of artificial intelligence?
[RANDOMIZE ORDER]

	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
For military drones					
March 17-27, 2020	27%	34%	20%	10%	9%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	23%	39%	19%	10%	10%
For self-driving vehicles					
March 17-27, 2020	15%	26%	21%	18%	20%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	16%	25%	20%	22%	16%
For diagnosing diseases					
March 17-27, 2020	48%	33%	12%	4%	4%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	47%	34%	12%	4%	3%
For identifying people's faces					
March 17-27, 2020	18%	31%	22%	18%	12%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	11%	32%	23%	19%	16%

Note: Skipped ≤ 1% for each item.

IF RND_01=0 SHOW Q17 AND THEN Q18; IF RND_01=1 SHOW Q18 AND THEN Q17

Q17. How hopeful are you about each of the following? [RANDOMIZE ORDER]

	Very	Somewhat	Not too much	Not at all
That artificial intelligence will create jobs				
March 17-27, 2020	19%	36%	31%	14%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	17%	33%	34%	16%
That artificial intelligence will be used to improve health care				
March 17-27, 2020	40%	42%	13%	5%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	34%	44%	16%	6%
That artificial intelligence will be used to stop fake and harmful content online				
March 17-27, 2020	21%	41%	28%	11%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	20%	38%	30%	12%
That artificial intelligence will be used to prevent terrorism				
March 17-27, 2020	32%	43%	18%	7%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	29%	39%	24%	8%
That artificial intelligence will be used to catch criminals				
March 17-27, 2020	30%	48%	15%	7%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	27%	46%	20%	8%
That artificial intelligence will make day-to-day life easier				
March 17-27, 2020	25%	48%	21%	6%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	25%	43%	25%	7%

Note: Skipped $\leq 1\%$ for each item.

Q18. How worried are you about each of the following? [RANDOMIZE ORDER]

	Very	Somewhat	Not too much	Not at all
That artificial intelligence will eliminate jobs				
March 17-27, 2020	36%	44%	14%	6%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	29%	45%	20%	6%
That artificial intelligence will be used to invade people's privacy				
March 17-27, 2020	47%	42%	9%	2%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	45%	40%	13%	2%
That artificial intelligence will be used to spread fake and harmful content online				
March 17-27, 2020	25%	45%	23%	7%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	30%	41%	23%	6%
That artificial intelligence will be used for cyber-attacks against governments and companies				
March 17-27, 2020	33%	48%	15%	4%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	30%	48%	18%	4%
That artificial intelligence will discriminate against people based on race or gender				
March 17-27, 2020	15%	25%	35%	25%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	17%	25%	32%	25%
That artificial intelligence could eventually pose a threat to the existence of the human race				
March 17-27, 2020	21%	36%	31%	12%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	19%	35%	33%	14%

Note: Skipped $\leq 1\%$ for each item.

Q19. How worried are you that the job you have now will be eliminated as a result of artificial intelligence?

	March 17-27, 2020	Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020
Very	7%	4%
Somewhat	16%	13%
Not too much	31%	30%
Not at all	47%	53%
Skipped	0%	0%

Q20. How much do you trust each of the following to manage the development and use of artificial intelligence? [RANDOMIZE ORDER]

	A great deal	A fair amount	Not too much	Not at all
The government in Washington				
March 17-27, 2020	6%	27%	43%	25%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	4%	24%	48%	25%
Technology companies				
March 17-27, 2020	15%	47%	27%	11%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	14%	42%	32%	13%
The United States military				
March 17-27, 2020	18%	39%	28%	15%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	13%	44%	28%	15%
University researchers				
March 17-27, 2020	21%	53%	19%	7%
Sept. 21-Oct. 2, 2020	16%	51%	24%	9%

Note: Skipped \leq 1% for each item.

Q33_A. Automated facial recognition technology is designed to identify someone based on a picture or video that includes their face. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
 [RANDOMIZE ORDER]

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Law enforcement agencies should use facial recognition technology to identify suspected criminals	27%	41%	17%	9%	8%
Law enforcement agencies should use facial recognition technology to monitor public protests	16%	24%	20%	15%	25%

Note: Skipped $\leq 1\%$ for each item.

Demographic Tables

Q33_AA. Law enforcement agencies should use facial recognition technology to identify suspected criminals

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Men	28%	40%	13%	10%	9%
Women	25%	41%	20%	8%	6%
White, non-Hispanic	28%	42%	13%	9%	8%
Black, non-Hispanic	24%	40%	22%	9%	5%
Hispanic	26%	34%	24%	9%	8%
Asian	10%	66%	20%	0%	5%
Ages 18-29	18%	36%	22%	12%	12%
30-44	28%	36%	19%	9%	10%
45-59	28%	44%	14%	8%	5%
60+	31%	46%	12%	6%	4%
High school or less	27%	40%	21%	7%	6%
Some college	28%	39%	17%	7%	10%
College graduate +	25%	43%	11%	12%	8%
Democrat/lean D	23%	38%	17%	12%	9%
Independent/other	19%	39%	22%	9%	11%
Republican/lean R	35%	44%	13%	4%	5%
Never attends services	25%	33%	19%	11%	13%
Several times a year or less	23%	43%	16%	10%	8%
Once a month or more	29%	45%	16%	6%	4%

Q33_AB. Law enforcement agencies should use facial recognition technology to monitor public protests

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Men	20%	25%	17%	14%	25%
Women	13%	22%	24%	17%	25%
White, non-Hispanic	16%	25%	17%	14%	27%
Black, non-Hispanic	9%	27%	32%	15%	17%
Hispanic	20%	22%	26%	16%	17%
Asian	2%	10%	12%	32%	44%
Ages 18-29	15%	15%	18%	19%	32%
30-44	15%	25%	23%	14%	23%
45-59	16%	27%	23%	12%	22%
60+	18%	26%	18%	15%	23%
High school or less	23%	26%	23%	10%	18%
Some college	13%	25%	24%	14%	24%
College graduate +	12%	21%	14%	21%	34%
Democrat/lean D	7%	20%	20%	19%	35%
Independent/other	19%	16%	22%	17%	26%
Republican/lean R	26%	32%	20%	9%	13%
Never attends services	19%	17%	13%	15%	36%
Several times a year or less	13%	26%	23%	16%	22%
Once a month or more	18%	27%	22%	14%	20%



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Department of Communication

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University of Delaware Research Communications

Tracey Bryant

Director for Research Communications

Phone: (302) 831-8185 • tbryant@udel.edu

<https://research.udel.edu/communicating-research/>

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