Utah & AI: Doom or Boom?

Written by Derek Monson | March 2026

Report Highlights

- Utah voters hold complex views about AI that recognize its benefits to science, health, and the economy, while expressing concerns about its impact in spheres of public authority and child development
- Voters prioritize the responsibility of parents, tech companies, and schools over government for child AI safety, while also supporting AI regulation broadly
- Survey results support an empowered-parent policy framework for AI: (1) trust parents with their responsibilities, (2) propose general guidelines that preserve autonomy for parents, tech companies, and schools, and (3) preserve the ways that AI is promoting human flourishing for both current and future generations

Executive Summary

State legislatures across the country have introduced hundreds of newly proposed laws seeking to govern AI development and deployment, including in Utah. The narrative driving public debates about AI legislation often portrays child safety interests and AI development interests as being in conflict.

But do these debates reflect the views of Utah voters?

A new Sutherland Institute/Y2 Analytics poll helps answer this question and offers insights for policymakers, news media, and advocates engaged in debate over AI policy. By understanding how voters view the issue and applying those insights to policymaking, lawmakers and advocates increase the chance of enacting sustainable, consensus policy solutions that represent the will of the people and fulfill the American vision of self-government.

Utah voters' perspectives on AI are nuanced and complex. They see AI broadly in neutral terms – as a useful technological tool, like a computer – not as a form of life often portrayed in sci-fi films (although they see the possibility of sentient AI in the future).

Voters recognize both the benefits and risks of AI. They see positive impacts of AI in areas like science and business, and negative impacts in government and family life. They believe strongly that parents are responsible for child safety with AI, with tech companies and schools playing supporting roles. They do not think the government should be responsible for protecting children in AI. Yet, in the same breath, voters broadly support AI regulation in many areas of modern life.

Applying the survey to ongoing debates over AI legislation suggests an empowered parent framework for AI policy: (1) trust parents with their children, don't overrule their responsibilities and rights with laws that make decisions for them, (2) propose general AI guidelines in the law that give parents, tech companies, and schools autonomy in protecting children, and (3) recognize in policymaking the ways that AI is promoting human flourishing, and do not inhibit those possibilities for future generations.

What is artificial intelligence?

This word cloud depicts the themes in open-ended responses from Utah voters to the question of what comes to mind when someone says 'artificial intelligence'. There are three takeaways from analyzing these answers:

- Neutrality is the dominant view of AI – voters view AI functionally, not emotionally
- Negative sentiment is stronger than positive sentiment
- Positive sentiment is pragmatic rather than enthusiastic

Many Utahns think of AI in neutral (represented in gray and black in the word cloud) terms, as a tool on par with a computer. Fewer voters view AI negatively (red), associating it with risks such as job loss, fake content, and privacy fears. Even fewer voters view AI in positive terms (navy), and that positivity focuses on the ability of AI to benefit things like efficiency and productivity.

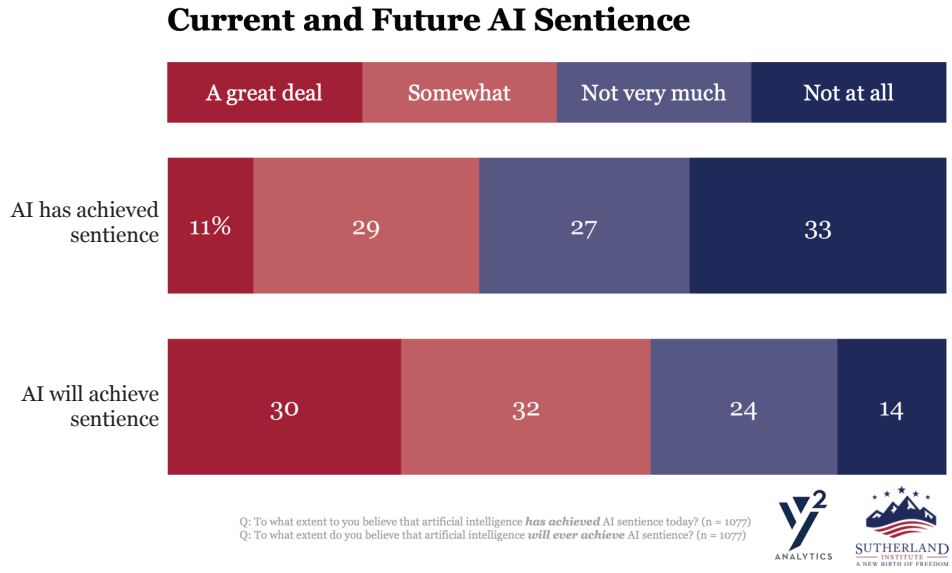
In short, Utah voters broadly view AI as a neutral tool that carries with it benefits and risks. It is something to be embraced and carefully managed. This suggests a more nuanced view of AI among the public than is often portrayed in policy debates, which tend to present more purely negative or purely positive viewpoints.

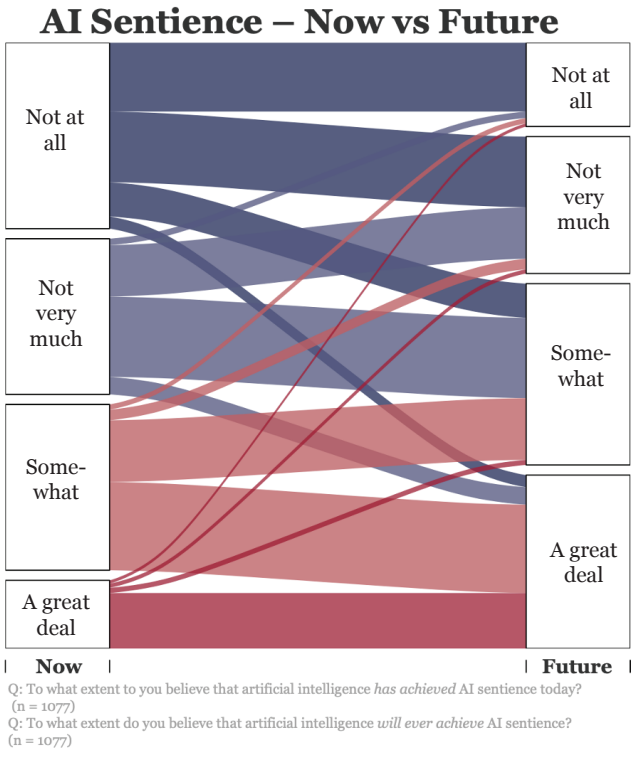
Is artificial intelligence alive?

When asked about whether AI is sentient/alive, voters say two things: (1) AI is not alive today, and (2) AI will most likely be sentient in the future. This mirrors a similar pattern found in surveys of AI researchers and the American public broadly.

While 60% of Utah voters believe that AI is not sentient today, 62% believe it is at least somewhat likely to become sentient in the future. The following chart shows the flow of Utah voters' opinions from believing that AI is not alive today to believing that it will likely be alive in the future.

The thickest bars – showing the greatest movement in views – depict Utah voters moving from lower levels of belief in AI's sentience today to higher levels of belief in its future sentience. Only very thin lines – small groups of voters – shift from higher to lower levels of belief today to lower levels in the future.



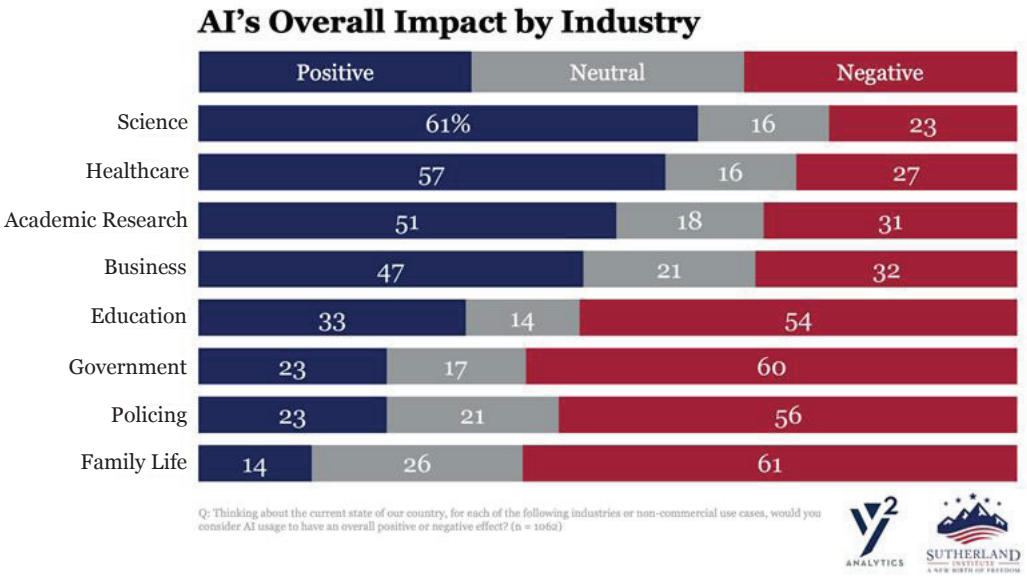


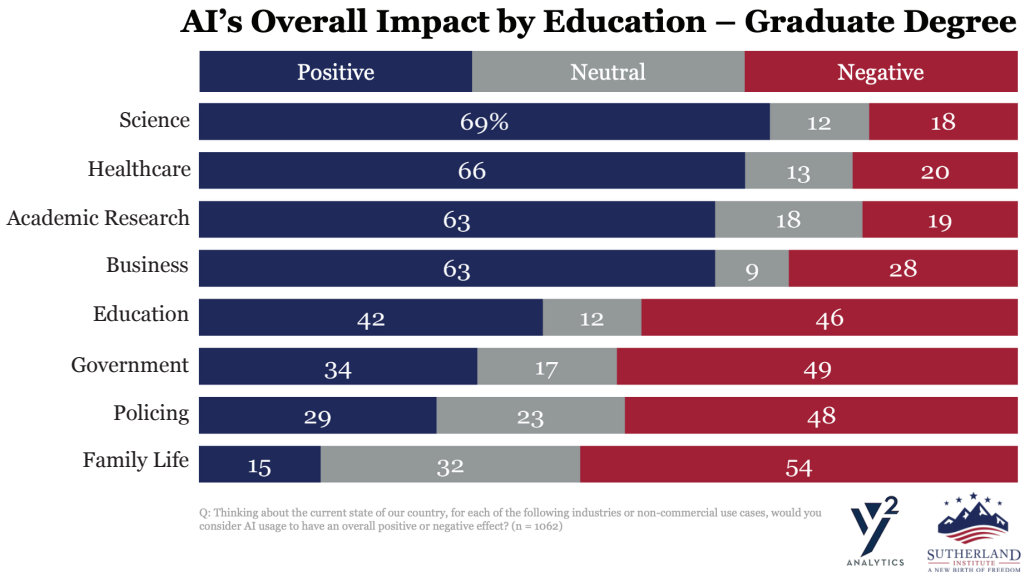
Is the impact of AI positive or negative?

Utah voters' views on the impact of AI vary across areas of life and society. Generally, they believe that AI has a positive impact in areas of life where it serves as a technical tool to expand knowledge and expertise, and a negative impact in areas of life that involve authority and child development. These results generally align with their open-ended responses about what AI means to them.

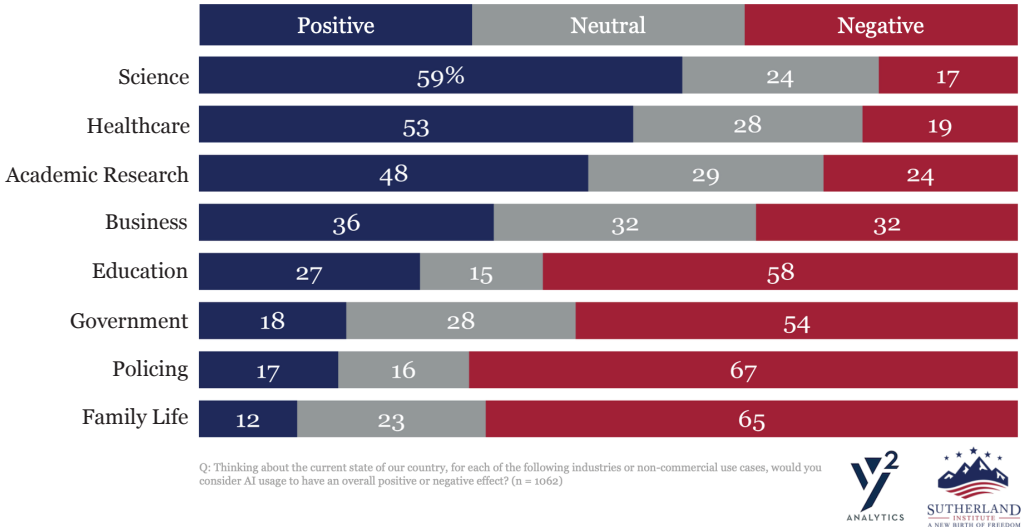
Voters have a net-positive view of AI in science, healthcare, academic research, and business. Voters have a net-negative view of AI's impact on education, government, policing, and family life. The extent to which AI's impact is viewed as a net-positive or net-negative seemed to be influenced and amplified by levels of education.

Those with graduate degrees tend to view the impact of AI more positively than those with a high school diploma or less, or who have not completed college. This may suggest that higher education fosters greater confidence in AI's positive technical impact, while lower levels of educational attainment may see greater personal risk from AI in society.





AI's Overall Impact by Education – High School or Less



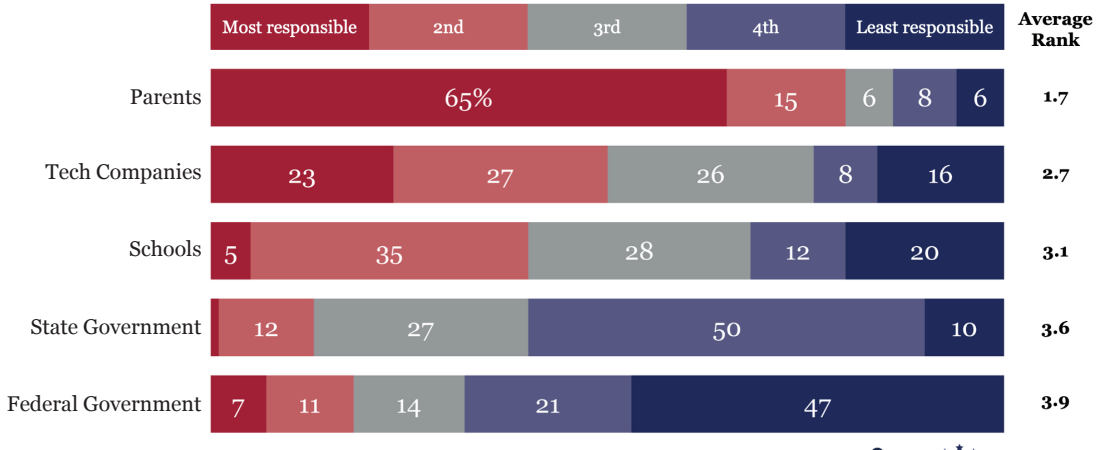
Q: Thinking about the current state of our country, for each of the following industries or non-commercial use cases, would you consider AI usage to have an overall positive or negative effect? (n = 1062)

Who should be responsible for the safety of children when it comes to AI?

When asked two distinct questions about who should be responsible for child AI safety, Utah voters offer a clear guide for public policy: (1) parents are responsible for protecting their kids and should be expected to lead, (2) tech companies should engineer safe AI products, (3) schools should educate kids about AI, and (4) government is trusted the least to protect kids.

When asked who should be most and least responsible for child AI safety, Utah voters overwhelmingly said parents should be most responsible, followed by tech companies and schools. Voters give the least responsibility for AI child safety to state and federal governments.

Parties Responsible for Child AI Safety, Ranked

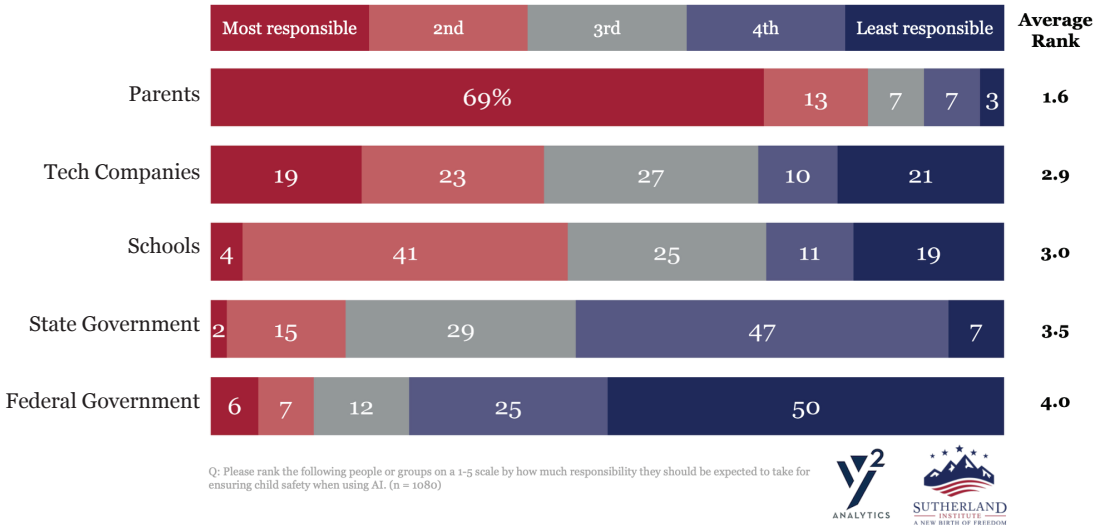


Q: Please rank the following people or groups on a 1-5 scale by how much responsibility they should be expected to take for ensuring child safety when using AI. (n = 1080)

Expectations of responsibility for child AI safety vary by partisan identity. Democrats have a higher expectation than Republicans that the federal government and tech companies should be responsible for child AI safety. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to expect parents and schools to be responsible for child AI safety.

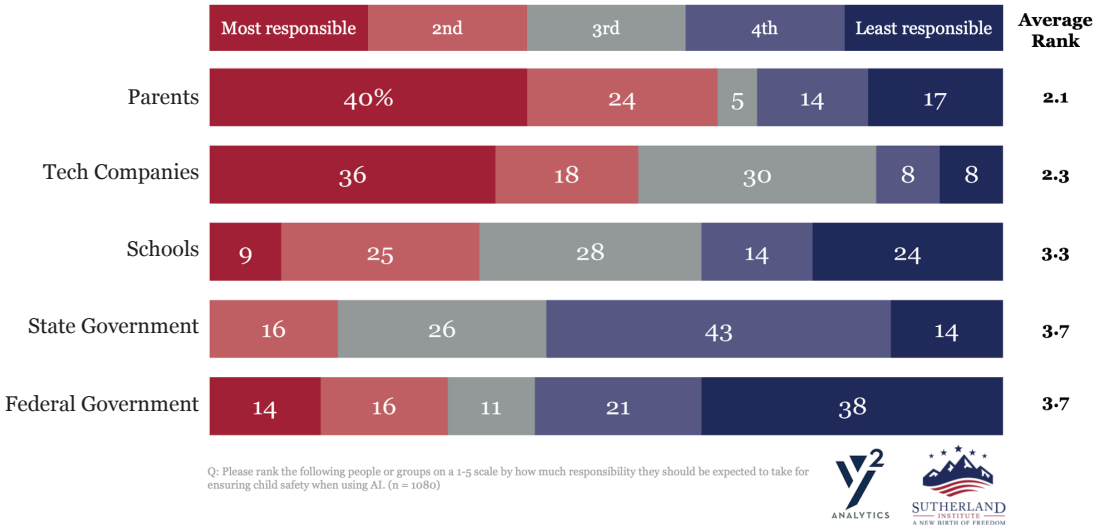
When asked who should have primary responsibility for specific AI safety duties related to children, the general theme of "parents first" continues, with more nuanced views down the line. Specific child safety duties included: (1) monitoring AI usage, (2) teaching children to safely use AI, (3) educating kids on the risks and limits of AI, (4) preventing children from accessing harmful AI content, and (5) protecting kids' data and privacy.

Parties Responsible for Child AI Safety - Ranked by Republicans



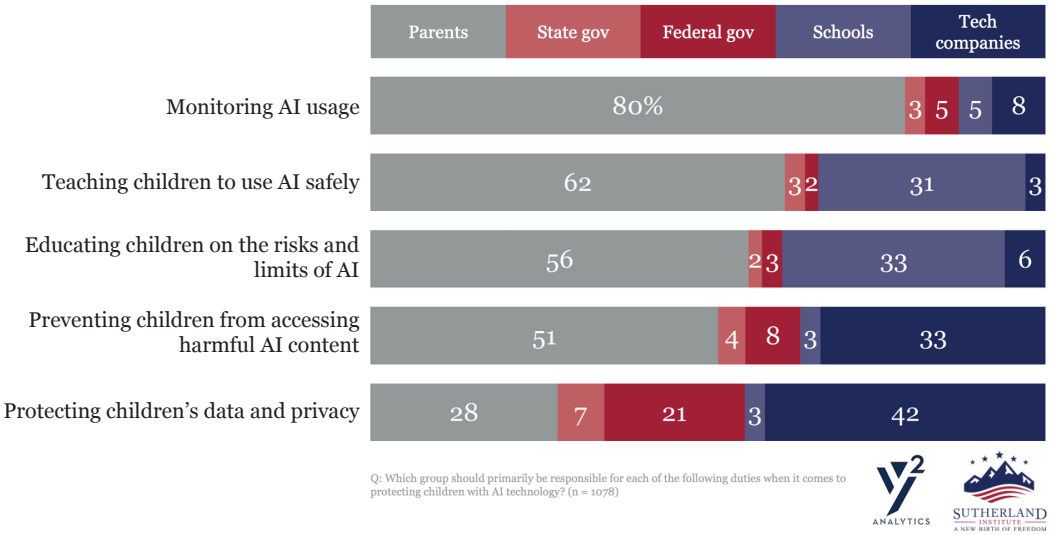
Q: Please rank the following people or groups on a 1-5 scale by how much responsibility they should be expected to take for ensuring child safety when using AI. (n = 1080)

Parties Responsible for Child AI Safety - Ranked by Democrats



Q: Please rank the following people or groups on a 1-5 scale by how much responsibility they should be expected to take for ensuring child safety when using AI. (n = 1080)

Child AI Safety Responsible Groups



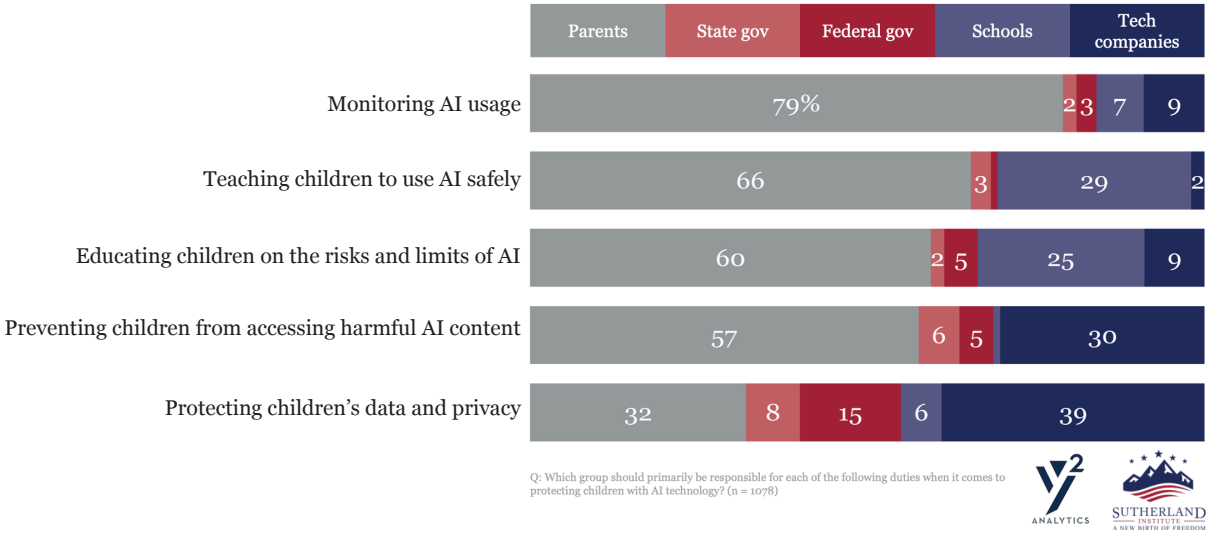
Parents are again most responsible for child AI safety – being viewed as primarily responsible by a majority of voters in four out of five child AI safety duties. Parents are also viewed as secondarily responsible for the remaining duty: Protecting children's data and privacy.

Tech companies are viewed as primarily responsible for protecting children's data and privacy, and secondarily responsible for preventing children from accessing harmful AI content. Schools are seen as secondarily responsible for educational duties: Teaching children about AI safety and educating them on AI's risks/limits.

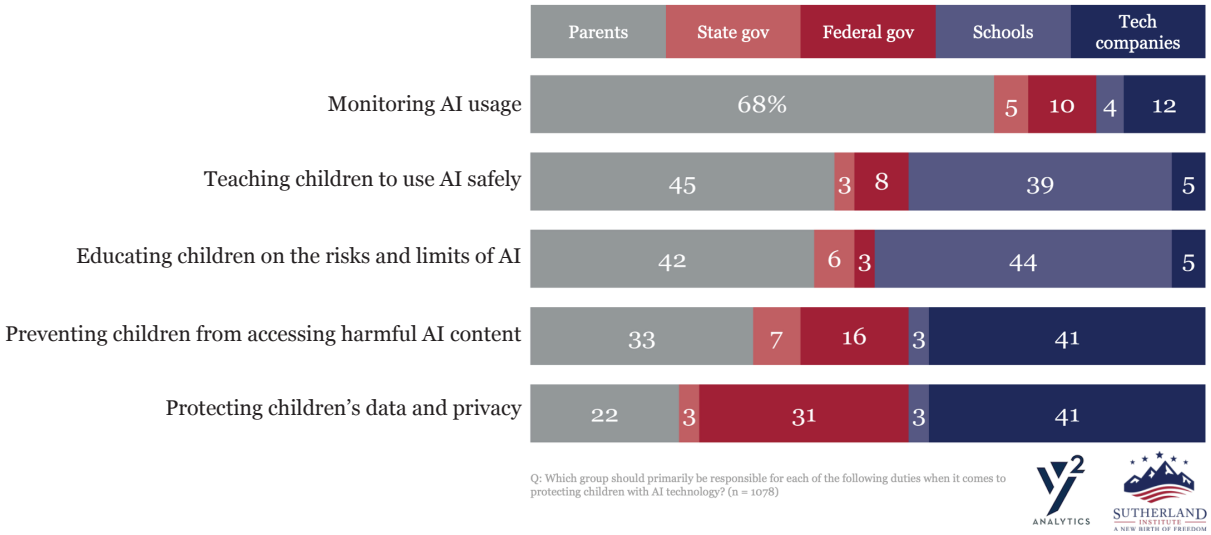
State and federal governments are not seen as having meaningful responsibility for most aspects of child AI safety, except that the federal government is viewed as having the third-most responsibility for protecting kids' data and privacy.

These views again vary by partisan identity. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view parents as responsible for every duty related to child safety. Democrats, on the other hand, are more likely than Republicans to say the federal government should bear responsibility, and to view schools and tech companies as responsible for some duties.

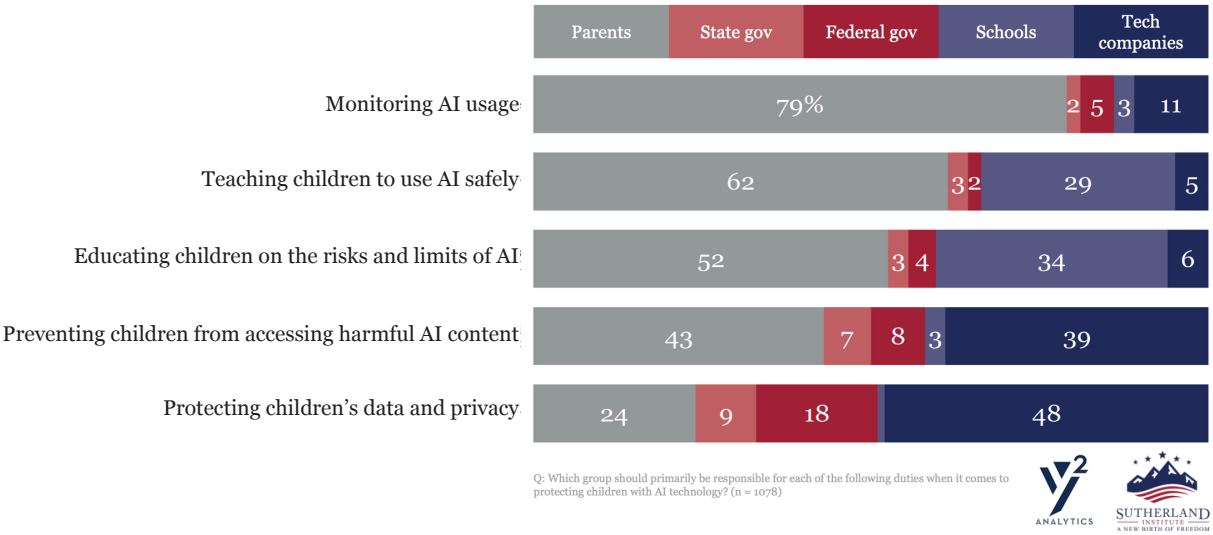
Child AI Safety Responsible Groups - by Republicans



Child AI Safety Responsible Groups - by Democrats



Child AI Safety Responsible Groups, by Parents



Compared to the average Utah voter, parents view tech companies as having more responsibility, and themselves less, in the areas of preventing children from accessing harmful AI content and protecting kids' data and privacy.

Taken together, these results suggest that voters support an approach to child AI safety that first and foremost relies on those closest to children (parents, then schools, and then tech companies) and least on government. As it relates to AI policy and governance, these results suggest that voters see child AI safety not as a problem the government should solve for them, but as something parents themselves should be empowered to address, with schools and tech companies offering support in their areas of expertise.

Should AI be regulated?

While voters believe that parents ought to be primarily responsible for child safety with AI and do not trust the government with that level of responsibility, that does not mean they broadly oppose AI regulation.

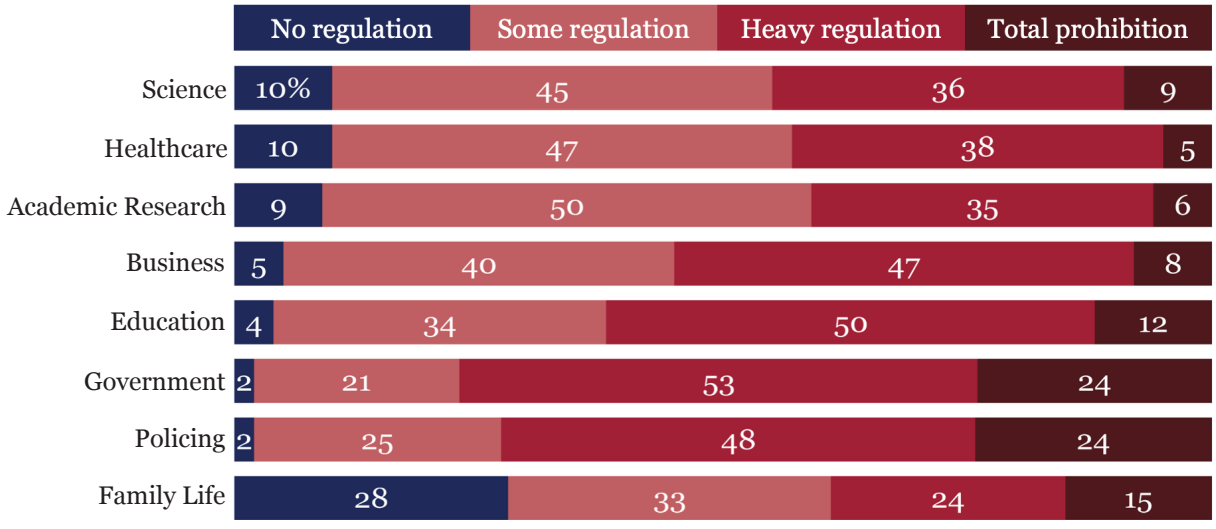
When asked what level of regulation they would support across a variety of areas of life, two themes stand out: (1) neither extreme (no AI regulation or total AI prohibition) gets much support, and (2) between 73% and 87% of voters support some level of AI regulation in every area except family life (the results on regulation of family life indicate possible respondent confusion about the meaning of the question in that context). This suggests that while Utah voters support the concept of AI regulation, they are not anti-technology.

A majority of voters support heavy regulation of AI in government and education, and some regulation in business. A plurality of voters support some regulation in academic research and science, and heavy regulation in healthcare and policing.

The general overlap between perceived positive/negative impacts of AI and support for moderate/heavy regulation offers some insights. In areas where voters perceive higher positive impacts of AI (business, science, academic research), they generally support modest regulation. In areas where they perceive higher negative impacts of AI (policing, government, and education), they support heavy regulation. This suggests that voters may be driven by a risk-assessment framework rather than by any political or ideological commitment to regulating AI.

Critical to understanding the public's view on AI regulation, however, is synchronizing voters' support for AI regulation with their view that parents, tech companies, and schools are primarily responsible for child safety with AI. Combining those two results, voters do not seem to want intrusive, far-reaching laws and rules that invade or replace the responsibility of parents, tech companies, and schools to protect children in their use of technology. Rather, these results suggest that voters would support higher-level, generally applicable AI guidelines that place responsibility for child safety on parents, tech companies, and schools.

AI Regulation by Industry



Q: For each of the following areas of American life, what should be the level of regulation on the use of AI? (n = 1077)

*Family life responses appear randomly distributed, indicating possible confusion about what "AI regulation in family life" means

Conclusion

Utah voters have complex, multi-layered views of AI that are generally not reflected in public debate over AI policy. They generally view AI today in neutral, practical terms, as a useful tool that offers benefits to be cultivated and embraced, as well as risks to be managed.

Voters see a beneficial impact from AI in business and technical areas of life, and a negative impact in areas tasked with managing society and developing children. They see parents as the undisputed leaders in protecting children from AI-related risks and believe that tech companies and schools play supporting roles. Government, on the other hand, should have little responsibility for protecting child AI safety.

AI regulation, however, generally enjoys broad support. But, in voters' eyes, these regulations should only support, not intrude on, the responsibilities of parents, tech companies, and schools.

As Utah policymakers debate AI legislation, they ought to understand and apply the insights of voters' relevant views on the matter. Those views suggest an empowered parent policy framework for building consensus in AI governance: (1) trust parents, don't take their place, (2) give broad guidelines to tech companies and schools, and (3) understand and recognize the beneficial impacts of AI before legislating, and don't enact laws that prevent the benefits of AI in the future from helping people flourish and thrive.

Survey Methodology: Utah voters were randomly sampled from a previously recruited voter opinion panel and the Utah voter file, yielding a sample size of n=1,147. Interviews were conducted using self-administered online interviews with invitations sent via email and text. Interviews were fielded January 27 – February 9, 2026. The margin of error is +/- 2.9 percentage points. The data were weighted to match the demographics of Utah's likely voters.

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