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Governing with AI

Four Actions to Build a Transformative and Resilient Public Administration

Catherine Régis, Florian Martin-Bariteau, Rachel Adams, Brunessen Bertrand, Jake Okechukwu Effoduh, Peter Parycek, Carlos Affonso Pereira de Souza, Hyesun (Melissa) Yoon

The Rise of AI for Government Action

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly shaping how governments operate, influencing not only administrative productivity but also the quality and responsiveness of public action. Today, around 70% of countries report using AI to improve internal governmental processes, while a third use it to support policy design and implementation.[1] For example, Canada's federal government used an AI platform to translate and summarize the 11,000 submissions collected during its recent public consultation on the update to its AI strategy;[2] Singapore has developed and deployed AI-powered chatbot platforms used across multiple public services to enhance service delivery efficiency;[3] and Peru's water regulator uses AI to estimate investment needs in the country's water sector.[4] Some governments are so enthusiastic about AI that they have begun exploring the possibility of treating it not merely as a support tool, but as a substitute for core governmental functions.[5]

Ambition must be tempered by realism: the benefits expected from AI will only materialize if governments set pragmatic goals and plan each step of AI implementation carefully, as statistics show that "more than 80% of AI projects fail, which is double the failure rate of non-AI projects."[6] For instance, in Michigan, nearly 40,000 people were *falsely* accused by AI of fraudulently claiming unemployment benefits,[7] while in South Korea, a learning program was rolled back when AI-powered textbooks were found to contain factual inaccuracies and pose data-privacy risks.[8]

Key Takeaways

- → AI is not a shortcut to reforming government. Without prior institutional redesign, sufficient capacity, and clear governance, its adoption is more likely to entrench bureaucratic dysfunctions, bias, and opacity than to improve performance or fairness.
- → The success of AI in government is ultimately a governance challenge, not a technical one. Outcomes depend less on the technology's sophistication than on institutional capacity, accountability mechanisms, vendor power relations, and resilience planning.
- → We recommend four actions: redesign public services around real problems before deploying AI; invest in institutional capacity through training and cross-functional teams; rebalance power with vendors through collective procurement and collaboration; and anchor public-sector AI in a "Trust Stack" built on transparency, accountability and oversight, as well as resilience.

This does not mean governments should refrain from experimenting with or deploying AI. Waiting until every AI-related risk has been eliminated would be a mistake, and carries risk: if public-sector leaders do not start using AI to transform government for the better now, the gap between technology adoption in the private and public sectors will widen, further undermining the already fragile public confidence in the effectiveness and relevance of government institutions.

Governments must act now by initiating their AI journey and tackling head-on the institutional and capacity gaps hindering the technology's effective and responsible adoption.

> ***"The public's experience of democratic politics [. . .] is not simply at the ballot box; it's also their interaction with public services. If that interaction is responsive, respectful, appropriate, transparent and empowering, then that will go some way towards improving the public's view of and trust in institutions."***[9]

Challenge 1
AI can amplify government dysfunctions

Today's problems are not new; they stem from long-standing weaknesses identified right after the rise of modern bureaucracy.

Originally designed as a rational system to ensure fairness, predictability, and equal treatment under the law, bureaucracy often produces dysfunctions that contribute to the erosion of trust in public institutions. Impersonal rules and rationalized procedures tend to overshadow purpose, while slow and fragmented processes undermine administrative effectiveness.

In theory, AI could help governments address these dysfunctions by supporting the redesign of existing strategies and processes. Yet there is a serious risk that governments will miss this opportunity if AI is used mainly to speed up existing approaches rather than to improve them. By encoding legacy rules, fragmented workflows, and outdated administrative logic into new AI systems, governments will simply automate and intensify current dysfunctions. Without the appropriate changes and precautions, these systems will make decisions even more opaque or produce inequities rather than eliminating them.

Likewise, AI will not deliver its expected benefits if government decisions are driven by the availability or popularity of specific tools, such as chatbots, rather than by citizens' real needs. AI-driven projects —still a concern in 2026— risk reinforcing existing governmental weaknesses and exposing the limits of administrative capacity.[10]

Action 1
Shift to problem-driven, bottom-up approaches to AI

Before deploying AI, governments should be explicit about the value that AI projects are expected to create. Any initiative must demonstrate real value for individuals, public servants, and the organization.[11] **This implies clearly identifying people's needs that the project aims to address** (e.g., faster decisions, more consistent rulings), assessing whether available organizational resources are aligned with meeting those needs, and defining measurable indicators that make it possible to evaluate actual impacts over time. Processes should only become candidates for automation once they have been redesigned and aligned with public values. This logic is well illustrated by the experience of the United Kingdom: rather than prioritizing rapid technology deployment, services are to be redesigned around clearly identified user needs before any automated solution is introduced.[12]

> ***Governments should start their AI journey by addressing the big challenges that prevent them from using AI in a genuinely transformative manner—that is, in a way that makes public services easier to navigate, reduces administrative burden, improves coordination, strengthens accountability, or leads to fairer outcomes for people.***

To make this vision a reality, governments should move away from top-down technology rollouts and work closely with both end users and public servants to ensure AI is deployed where it provides the most value. **Public servants should be engaged as *co-designers*** (rather than mere users) and involved throughout the process, from defining the problem and success criteria to testing early versions in real service environments and refining both the tools and the underlying processes over time. Their expertise, including the informal workarounds they develop to meet people's needs when official procedures prove ineffective or too slow, should inform AI initiatives at all stages.

Implementation should begin with small, well-scoped projects that address clearly defined goals, with robust monitoring of their impacts on service quality, workloads, equity, etc. Governments should then build on proven successes, i.e., scaling up what works, abandoning what doesn't, and using lessons learned to support broader adoption and deployment across programs and agencies. Denmark provides a concrete example of this incremental approach using regulatory sandboxes and phased approaches to deployment.[13]

Challenge 2
Governments lack the institutional capacity to implement AI

Governments face deep structural and capacity constraints that limit their ability to govern AI effectively. While the challenges they must address are increasingly interconnected, they still operate in silos, rely on fragmented data systems, and work within rigid legal frameworks that make coordination across ministries and agencies difficult. This complexity slows decision making and limits governments' ability to respond in a whole-of-government manner.

At the operational level, access to services requires multiple interactions across institutions, outdated systems cannot exchange data or support proactive service delivery, and decision quality suffers as overburdened staff work with inconsistent rules and limited real-time information.

Governments also face a widening digital skills gap, both among leaders responsible for strategic decisions and among staff charged with operating AI-enabled systems.[14] The intense competition for AI talent heavily favours the private sector, where salaries, flexibility, and career progression are more attractive. As a result, knowledge tends to concentrate in vendors rather than within governments themselves, producing dependencies that weaken public oversight.

Action 2
Develop capacity with training and a cross-functional AI support team

Governments will only succeed in maximizing the positive impacts of AI and minimizing its negative risks if they ensure their leaders, the workforce, and institutions fully develop the capacity to act as efficient and ethical AI navigators.

First, **governments should train public servants to work productively with AI tools.** While training programs often emphasize AI ethics, workers also need the skills and confidence to fully leverage AI in their daily work, such as the ability to understand how it operates in a given context, identify when a system is likely to fail, and implement fallback procedures when issues arise. Targeted and sustained measures should also be implemented to help public servants develop the skills necessary to perform tasks that *only humans can do*, such as interpreting complex individual cases, balancing competing interests, and ensuring that algorithmic decisions are fair.

> ***To take advantage of "machine learning applications, you'll need to upgrade your employees' skills [. . .]. When a machine detects fraud or predicts customer or employee churn with 90% accuracy, people must address the other 10%—and that will be the toughest 10%."***[15]

Second, **each government should consider the creation of a cross-functional AI support team** to help public institutions adopt AI in a safe, effective, and mission-driven way. The mission of this team would be to support ministries and agencies throughout the AI lifecycle, from identifying high-value use cases and redesigning workflows prior to automation, to selecting and integrating appropriate tools while ensuring compliance with legal or security requirements. Its core functions would include: assessing feasibility and risks; setting common standards for data quality, model governance, and documentation; running pilots and sandboxes; and intervening when AI systems need to be recalibrated or withdrawn. Its composition should reflect this mandate by bringing together technical, legal, policy, service-design, and change-management expertise, including skills in public law, human-centred design, facilitation, and frontline service operations.

Challenge 3
Governments face major power imbalances

The high concentration of AI development has shifted the balance of power between governments and the private sector, challenging sovereignty and democratic control. AI vendors, a small circle of (mostly) American and Chinese companies, control not only access to technology, but also information, contractual terms, and operational conditions, leaving governments dependent on them for key components like computing, cloud infrastructure, large language models, and the expertise needed to deploy AI tools within ministries or agencies.[16]

This dependency is not a mere inconvenience; it has become a political vulnerability. Governments often lack access to documentation, audit trails, or explanations of model behaviour, and must rely on the assessments of vendors to evaluate AI systems that affect rights and entitlements. When a public institution cannot inspect the tools it uses to determine welfare eligibility, or when confidentiality clauses block scrutiny of predictive policing tools, its officials are effectively *governing in the dark*.

Procurement amplifies these power imbalances. Numerous governments lack the leverage to negotiate audit rights, demand transparency, or prevent vendor lock-in, resulting in long-term dependence being the default. These pressures fall most heavily on smaller nations, which have limited regulatory capacity and a minimal presence in international standard-setting forums.

As global companies shape the terms of access to advanced AI systems, governments risk becoming rule-takers in domains central to national governance. Without a deliberate strategy to reclaim oversight, the very tools adopted to strengthen public administration may, over time, undermine their capacity to do so.

Action 3
Reassert public power through collaboration and technology resilience

To regain strategic control over AI for its use in public administration, governments should first shift from isolated purchasing to coordinated action. **Collective procurement alliances,** much like the joint negotiations used for vaccines,[17] would allow participating governments to pool demand and expertise. This collective leverage would enable them to secure what they cannot obtain alone, including meaningful audit rights, transparency into training data, clear documentation of model behaviour, and guarantees of data portability. When several governments negotiate together with a vendor, a clause that once seemed "non-standard" can become a baseline expectation.

Public institutions should also **collaborate, nationally and internationally, in creating and sharing AI tools, models, licensing templates, security guidance, legal and governance expertise, or evaluation reports.** Such an approach (especially South-South and Majority-World partnerships to create joint or regional support teams) would allow them to reuse and adapt trustworthy technologies without defaulting to proprietary systems. Shared, public digital assets can reduce governments' dependence on external providers. For example, X-Road, an Estonia-led interoperability and data-exchange layer, enables public institutions and authorized providers to communicate through standardized, decentralized databases, rather than proprietary platforms, and is now used by 20 countries including Finland, Ukraine, and Japan.[18]

(Re)asserting public authority over AI does not mean building or operating all digital systems in-house. Technological autarky carries its own risks, including slower innovation, limited access to advanced capabilities, and new single points of failure within the government itself. Instead, resilience requires **ensuring that no single technology, vendor, or institutional model becomes indispensable.** What is needed is a deliberate balance of technological solutions, e.g., putting in place a digital public infrastructure with private-sector capabilities, diversifying suppliers, avoiding platform dependence, and ensuring portability across systems. India's approach illustrates this logic, with publicly governed digital infrastructure developed and operated with major technology providers through controlled private-cloud arrangements.

The strategic question for governments is not whether to rely on markets or build everything themselves, but how to govern hybrid arrangements in ways that preserve resilience, accountability, and long-term control.

Challenge 4
Accountability gaps are eroding trust in public institutions

AI deployment is often conducted without putting in place the various mechanisms required to sustain political legitimacy and public trust in government institutions. This can include situations in which AI systems are deployed without public debate or legislative authorization, and affected communities are excluded from their design and unaware that the technology is being used. Clear rules on transparency, accountability, and liability serve to preserve these critical assets.

Many of the AI systems used by governments also operate as opaque "black boxes," offering individuals and even public servants limited insight into how decisions or predictions are made. Internally, public servants might increasingly turn to AI-supported decision making without clear usage or liability frameworks, leading to overreliance on machine advice without critical human evaluation and to weaker respect for existing administrative rules and legal safeguards. For example, in 95% of cases, the Spanish police followed the risk score generated by its algorithmic design to combat gender-based violence, rather than treating it as one of several inputs.[19]

This is problematic because individuals rarely have effective means to contest AI-supported decisions that affect them. Indeed, only 35 countries have frameworks providing for redress and remedy mechanisms where individuals are adversely affected by a government-led AI system.[20] Worse, large segments of the global population lack the basic knowledge required to recognize when an AI system is involved in a decision, let alone to understand, question, or contest its outcomes. In countries like South Africa, where two-thirds of people have never heard of AI or have little to no understanding of what it is or how it may affect their lives,[21] meaningful contestation of AI-assisted decisions is unlikely in practice.

According to a UN survey, less than half of the countries responding have adapted legislation or regulations on the ethical/responsible use of AI in public administration.[22]

Action 4
Build a public-sector Trust Stack for AI

Rather than relying on isolated safeguards, governments should establish a public-sector "Trust Stack" for AI to reinforce public oversight of AI systems and hence, the trust individuals and public servants have in them. Crucially, the Trust Stack should not be built outside existing legal frameworks, but anchored in administrative law, agile procurement rules, and emerging AI-specific regulation, which already provide levers for governing AI use in the public sector.

First, **trust requires information to reinforce transparency** by making AI use visible, intelligible, and open to scrutiny. Canada has shown that governments can lead by example by making the creation of AI registers mandatory—public databases listing all government AI systems in use, their purposes, data sources, and known limitations.[23] Public

institutions should also conduct an Algorithmic Impact Assessment before deploying any AI tool, and the results of this evaluation should be publicly disclosed. Clear labelling should further inform the public when a system is used to deliver a public service, as well as explain, plainly, how that system is used.

Trust also relies on conflict resolution mechanisms to allocate responsibilities and liabilities regarding the use of AI and ensure that accountability is meaningful in practice. Following the example of France, governments should establish mechanisms (or improve existing ones), such as an AI ombudsperson or a dedicated helpdesk that allow people to lodge complaints and seek redress.[24] Following the example of the German state of Schleswig-Holstein, they could go further by establishing a formal "AI objection" mechanism that allows an automated decision to be reset and reconsidered by a human decision maker without procedural disadvantages for the objector.[25] Complementing these procedural safeguards, governments must make a clear commitment to accountability for decisions and services involving AI, as South Korea has recently done by clarifying liability frameworks for agencies and public servants.[26]

Finally, **trust is sustained through oversight by multi-stakeholder mechanisms** (bodies with a balanced representation from civil society, academia, industry, and unions) charged with the continuous monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of AI systems and practices. To support the oversight ecosystem they put in place, governments should ensure strong protections for whistleblowers and public-interest security researchers who identify system failures or ethical violations.

A public-sector Trust Stack for AI

Information Layer
Transparency and public awareness
Clear labelling, AI registers, and impact assessments.

Conflict Resolution Layer
Contestability and effective remedies
Recourse mechanisms, right to challenge decisions, and legal accountability.

Oversight Layer
Continuous, collective, and independent oversight
Multistakeholder monitoring of public-sector AI & protections for whistleblowers.

Design for failure: making AI resilience operational

Technological failures can lead to the suspension of key services and disruption of supply chains, triggering cascading effects. In 2024, a faulty update from cybersecurity vendor CrowdStrike crashed 8.5 million Windows systems worldwide, impacting hospitals, emergency services, and government agencies.[27] In 2025, a fire at Korea's National Information Resources Service disabled 647 government systems and left citizens without access to essential services for weeks.[28] Since malfunctions are unavoidable, governments' core challenge really is their own *resilience,* i.e., their capacity to absorb disruptions, and recover quickly when they occur. Yet, short political cycles prioritize visible modernization over preparedness, leaving recovery plans incomplete or untested. In addition, most administrations depend on a small number of cloud providers, data centres, or AI models that a cyberattack or a natural disaster could paralyze. To avoid systemic crises, **governments must treat resilience as a core capability, including through fallback procedures and stress testing.**

Start Small. Scale Up. Be Resilient.

Since AI mostly amplifies what already exists, strong and adequate foundations are needed to support its transformative adoption.

AI will only deliver public value when grounded in solving the clearly defined problems of end users, embedded in redesigned environments, powered by competent workers and teams, supported by collaboration, and governed transparently by public authority. It *will* accelerate failure rather than fix problems if deployed in public administrations

marked by fragmented processes, underinvestment in people and resilience, weak coordination, and limited accountability. Avoiding fiasco means resisting the temptation to substitute AI for institutional capacity and judgment, and instead using that technology to reinforce and improve them.

Going slow and steady while being ambitious from the start should not be seen as timidity or indecision, but rather as a mark of seriousness and responsibility. Carefully designed pilots, phased deployment, and deliberate planning for worst-case scenarios are the only credible way to learn, demonstrate public value, and adjust course before potential harms from AI scale up.

It is still unclear whether AI will fundamentally transform our governments, or will remain a powerful but limited technology whose long-term impacts will ultimately disappoint. One thing is certain, though: **accountability is the price of admission for AI in the public sector.** Without the right planning and execution, administrations will find themselves presiding over a technology they cannot govern adequately and populations that increasingly distrust them.

Notes

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Authors

Catherine Régis is a Professor of Law at Université de Montréal and Director, Social Innovation and International Policy, IVADO. As an expert in AI governance, she co-directs the research program at the Canadian AI Safety Institute at CIFAR, holds the Canada CIFAR Chair in AI and Human Rights (Mila), as well as the Chair on Science Diplomacy and Global Governance of AI (Fonds de recherche du Québec).

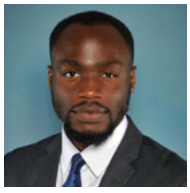
Florian Martin-Bariteau is the University Research Chair in Technology and Society and an Associate Professor of Law at the University of Ottawa, where he leads the AI + Society Initiative and the Centre for Law, Technology and Society. He is a Faculty Associate of the Berkman-Klein Center at Harvard University.

Rachel Adams is the author of *The New Empire of AI: The Future of Global Inequality.* She is a Research Professor and Executive Director of the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence at the University of Cambridge, and the Founding CEO of the Global Center on AI Governance.

Peter Parycek is Vice-Rector for Educational Affairs / Academic Continuing Education and Digital Transformation at the University for Continuing Education Krems and Professor of E-Governance. He leads the Public IT Competence Center at Fraunhofer FOKUS and was appointed to the German Federal Government's Digital Council.

Brunessen Bertrand is a Professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Rennes 1, specializing in the legal and institutional governance of data, AI, and digital technologies. Her research focuses on EU regulatory frameworks, digital sovereignty, and cybersecurity, and she engages closely with public institutions and international partners.

Carlos Affonso Pereira de Souza is a legal expert specializing in digital law and leads the Institute for Technology and Society in Rio de Janeiro. He is a Professor of Law and Technology and has contributed to the development of Brazilian Internet and data protection laws.



Jake Okechukwu Effoduh is an Assistant Professor at the Lincoln Alexander School of Law at Toronto Metropolitan University, specializing in AI law and international human rights. He contributes to the development of AI regulatory frameworks in several countries and leads major Canada-Africa research projects.

Hyesun (Melissa) Yoon is a Professor at Hanyang University School of Law and the Graduate School of Engineering's Department of Artificial Intelligence. She is a recognized expert in AI governance and administrative law, serves on multiple Korean government committees, and has extensive international academic and professional experience.

The Global Policy Briefs on AI

The Global Policy Briefs on AI initiative is a joint endeavour of IVADO, Canada's premier AI research and knowledge mobilization consortium at Université de Montréal, and the AI + Society Initiative at the University of Ottawa. The initiative aims to provide policymakers with rigorous, actionable policy recommendations to address major global challenges related to AI.

Following a first instalment dedicated to the impact of AI on democracy and electoral integrity, the initiative convened a second policy retreat focused on AI in government. As public sector adoption of AI has accelerated worldwide, governments face growing challenges related to procurement, implementation, transparency, accountability, risk management, and bias mitigation. The retreat addressed these issues by developing practical guidance for the responsible procurement and deployment of AI systems in public administration, with the aim of ensuring that these technologies serve the public interest.

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