

Artificial Consensus: AI and Survey Measurement

Author: Dr. Thomas Cauthorn • 2026 • Working paper

RESEARCH QUESTION & POLICY RELEVANCE

Surveys help central banks, governments, companies, and investors understand what people expect from the economy. This paper asks what happens when some survey answers are shaped by artificial intelligence rather than by a person's own view. That matters because surveys are used to guide decisions on inflation, markets, and public policy. If AI makes many answers look more similar than people's real opinions are, decision-makers may think there is more agreement in society than there actually is.

ANALYSIS

Thomas combines an independently fielded online survey of 1,294 people, responses from 15 AI models, and public data from the New York Fed's Survey of Consumer Expectations. His novel detection method distinguishes respondents with no detected AI use from those consulting chatbots like ChatGPT, using in-browser AI assistants, or relying on automated AI agents. AI usage is much more common than people report themselves and many respondents appear to use AI to help answer questions. Fully automated bots are not the problem. He then compares inflation answers with and without detected AI involvement and simulates how replacing human survey answers with model-generated ones changes key statistics.

IMPACT

The paper shows that AI can make survey results look cleaner and more precise while actually removing important information. AI answers often give a reasonable central estimate, but they are much less varied than human answers. This can hide disagreement, reduce the visibility of extreme views, and make a serious situation look milder than it is. The findings are especially relevant for inflation surveys, where the spread of answers can warn policymakers that public expectations are becoming less stable. The study suggests that survey users should not only ask what people answered, but also whether the answer reflects the person's own view or was shaped by AI.

AUTHOR QUOTE

"People are using AI to help answer survey questions. AI makes recorded answers more alike without making them individually implausible. Policymakers could mistake this artificial consensus for genuine convergence in beliefs and miss warning signs of rising inflation expectations."

- Thomas Cauthorn

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