



2025 REPORT

The Ashby Workshops

Presented by Fathom

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In January 2025, Fathom.org convened 180 leaders from government, business, academia, and civil society in Middleburg, Virginia for The Ashby Workshops.

Fathom challenged its guests to share their expertise and diverse perspectives on AI, and through discussion and debate, begin to arrive at actionable insights for its governance. Over several, high-energy days, guests engaged on topics ranging from the use of community-based groups to build public trust in AI, to the operationalization of HPC cybersecurity standards with special compute zones. Through this process, a constellation of ideas, values, and recommendations began to emerge with broad support, with two achieving particularly strong consensus: the United States must lead the world in AI, and both literacy and education programs are critical foundational needs for society.

The following section, “Toward a Wide Middle Way,” dives into and unpacks these and other top-of-mind ideas from Ashby. Fathom hopes that by drawing out areas of consensus, it will highlight opportunities for continued conversation and collaboration, and empower the Ashby community and broader ecosystem to seize those opportunities. This report will also act as a foundation and source of inspiration for Fathom moving forward, as it continues to engage an ever broader range of stakeholders in the national conversation about AI, through to Ashby 2026 and beyond. Fathom encourages those interested to get in touch with further ideas, suggestions, and asks by reaching out to Julie Crabill at julie@fathom.org.

Toward a Wide Middle Way

Despite varied backgrounds and perspectives, there was plenty that Ashby guests agreed on with respect to AI. This section summarizes the ideas, values, and recommendations that emerged with broad support over two days of on-stage programming and interactive workshops.

Strong Consensus for U.S. Leadership on AI

There is a **clear desire for the U.S. to lead the world** in AI. That said, guests stressed the need to balance pushing the frontier with **controls to ensure safety, security, and** the protection or enhancement of **shared values**.

Leadership Requires Excellence in All Domains

Guests offered a broader conception of U.S. leadership, arguing that the U.S. **should seek to lead** the world not only in **capabilities, energy, data, and talent**, but also in **governance, societal adoption, and societal adaptation**. The prevailing sense was that the U.S. **needs to be pushing harder** along each of these fronts. Less explicitly stated but repeatedly implied was the notion that the U.S. should also seek to lead through national culture and attitudes toward AI.

Energy Permitting Reform is a Must

There was strong consensus on the **need for greater access to power** to meet the growing energy demands of AI, as well as the need for grid-enhancing technologies, and a recognition that this **will require permitting reform**. There was uncertainty around how easy it would be to get political buy-in, and how to weigh up reform at the state versus federal level.

Data is Critically Under-Leveraged

The vast quantities of classified and unclassified **data sat with government agencies**, national labs, and universities, and private sector companies should be harnessed to **supercharge scientific discovery**. To achieve this, **invest in public-private partnerships at scale**. (Of all the potential use cases discussed at Ashby, guests seemed most excited and driven by the prospect of accelerating scientific discovery).

The Department of Energy Has a Key Role to Play

Existing Department of Energy (DOE) infrastructure should be leveraged to accelerate scientific discovery - as with AlphaFold - and the **DOE should lead** on scaling infrastructure and personnel to drive AI innovation.

Talent is a Bottleneck

There was agreement on the **importance of bolstering national talent pipelines** but disagreement over whether the short-term priority should be immigration reform to attract highly-skilled immigrants or investing in developing domestic talent. Guests seemed to agree that the **government and private sector share responsibility** for investing in the national talent pipeline.

We Need an All-Hands-On-Deck Approach to Innovation

Guests indicated that more should be done to leverage the ingenuity of the American people - involving more voices drives innovation. Guests called for a **government-run campaign like the Apollo Program** to engage public, private, academic, and civil society actors in advancing AI. China - whose national culture is strongly tuned into advancing science and technology - **has an advantage over the U.S.** in this respect.

Invest More in Security

Frontier labs and the government need to **strengthen** cyber, physical, and personnel **security measures to protect frontier models** and critical infrastructure from infiltration.

Invest More In Safety

There is also a core need to **invest more in the safety, transparency, and reliability of frontier models**. Central to these efforts is a need to develop methods and secure test beds for **third-party evaluations**. To achieve this, the government will need to acquire greater scientific and technical talent, and so must develop mechanisms for attracting and retaining top talent (e.g., higher salaries). Some also suggested a need for mechanisms to identify and encourage intrinsic motivation in people.

Public Trust in AI is Crucial for AI Adoption

The predominant **public sentiments** around AI are **concern and uncertainty**, driven by mistrust in the systems and in Big Tech. There was strong agreement that **public trust is critical for adoption and adaptation** as well as for driving innovation, economic growth, societal benefits, and U.S. leadership. Though necessary, increasing model safety and transparency will not be sufficient to secure public trust.

Build Literacy to Build Trust

Increasing the **accessibility and familiarity of AI will foster trust**, as will the knowledge that one is not being left behind in the transition, but rather empowered by it. Guests were strongly in favor of **introducing literacy programs in schools** and across the private sector.

Education, Education, Education

The **public needs to understand the impact AI will have** on their lives, their communities, and society more broadly. This is key for the future health of our democracy, as well as the vibrancy of our economy. Education is viewed as a shared responsibility between government, businesses, and communities, and guests stressed the **importance of raising not just awareness, but also critical thinking and consumption of AI**.

Make Partners of the Public

Guests agreed that *more* people - and a **more diverse range of people - should be involved in shaping the direction of AI** as a matter of urgency to ensure equitable outcomes and increase public trust. This reiterates the importance of education, and highlights the need to develop mechanisms to facilitate broad and meaningful participation (e.g., hosting thousands of community forums) in the governance process.

AI Presents Wicked Problems

There was broad agreement on the need for governance to **implement specific solutions to carefully scoped, specific problems**. If we're not precise about the problem we're trying to solve, we'll end up spinning our wheels. The challenge is that **AI presents** a host of **complex challenges** where stakeholders have different worldviews and frameworks for understanding the problem, and the nature of the problem is constantly evolving, **limiting good uptake**.

Reshaping Market and Structural Incentives

Some highlighted a need for interventions to **reshape structural incentives to motivate stakeholders to pursue locally optimal solutions** that chip away at AI's wicked problems. Others suggested exploring **new market incentives** to have developers compete along the safety front, and proactively align future development with the creation of public goods.

Allocating Liability

Determining liability is a key piece of the incentives puzzle, with several workshop groups favoring **strong liability for systems that don't work** as intended and cause harm as a result.

Lack of Imagination is Holding Us Back

Equally, if we're not precise about the outcomes we're trying to achieve, we'll lose our way - we need to **agree on a shared vision of what we want to achieve with AI**.

Don't Reinvent the Wheel

Leverage **existing institutions, mechanisms, and solutions** to address the challenges we're facing with AI. Examples include leveraging public-private partnerships to facilitate data sharing and bolster state capacity; community-based groups for trust-building; and government contracts to drive improved security at frontier labs.

Build Governance Models that Iterate Over Time

Many expressed fears of overregulation stifling innovation. There was also a recurring concern that conversations about governance remain grounded in current model capabilities, with insufficient consideration for how these capabilities may evolve over time, and any near-term regulation could overindex on the present day. The consensus was that we should strive for **flexible and iterative governance**.

Siloes Are a Problem

Guests highlighted **poor information flow** between government agencies, between the public and private sectors, and, to a lesser extent, within the private sector. Institutions, mechanisms, solutions, and data can't be leveraged if key actors don't know about or have access to them.

Establish Mechanisms for Learning

Develop **feedback loops**, mechanisms for **cross-pollination**, and mechanisms for **interagency communication** to facilitate **institutional learning**, and through this flexible, iterative, and innovative governance.

Pursue AI like it's Sputnik?

The government has repeatedly shown a capacity to **leverage the private sector** in support of its agencies during national crises. There was disagreement between guests as to whether this institutional muscle should be toned and leveraged - with some noting that China's ability to plan and coordinate puts it at an advantage.

Set Congress up For Success

Guests agreed on the need to increase understanding and literacy among members and staffers in order for Congress to provide effective oversight, with many suggesting **constituent modeling and wargames**.

Lean Into The Process

Some posited that good governance emerges over time through a process of friction between key stakeholders. Others spoke to the positive working relationship banks have cultivated with the federal government over time, and noted that the tech industry is only just embarking on that journey. The need for patience, and a **willingness to get things wrong in the short-term** came through as a key insight.

Start that Process Now

Guests nevertheless felt strongly about the **need to start governing now** - with many if not most favoring up-front guardrails and testing requirements to get ahead of the most extreme risks.