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POLICY BRIEF

Dispelling Myths of AI and Efficiency

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At the heart of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which is quickly administering its “AI-first” strategy to cut government operations, is the myth that AI will deliver efficiency by slashing wasteful programs, identifying fraud, and automating the jobs of redundant federal employees.

This myth reveals a profound misunderstanding of what AI can actually do and what the government is meant to deliver for the American people. A hasty rush to roll out untested AI will not result in high-quality government services. Instead, the unchecked use of AI will accelerate large-scale harms to the public, gutting critical services while offering no avenues for accountability and recourse.

This policy resource provides empirical counterpoints to the technosolutionist myths surrounding DOGE.

THE MYTH SAYS:

#1: AI can automate the jobs of many federal workers.

#2: AI makes objective decisions about which workers to fire and which programs to cut.

#3: AI can identify waste and fraud in government spending.

#4: Efficiency should be the top priority of government agencies.

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THE EVIDENCE SHOWS:

#1: AI can be a helpful tool, but it requires human expertise and judgment to realize its innovations.

#2: AI's decisions reflect flawed assumptions and specific policy prerogatives.

#3: AI wrongly cuts people off from services, exacerbating the unequal distribution of social benefits.

#4: A narrow focus on “efficiency” sidelines political solutions that address Americans’ material needs.

Myth #1: AI can automate the jobs of many federal workers.

What the evidence tells us: AI is error-laden, biased, inaccurate, and dysfunctional.¹ Its failures are well-documented: AI has advised people to break the law,² generated false positives for unemployment insurance fraud,³ and performed worse than judges at predicting criminal reoffenders.⁴ Even from a purely technical perspective, there is little evidence on the effectiveness and impact of AI tools.⁵ Unproven AI systems are not a replacement for government employees.

Even if AI improves and makes fewer technical errors, it's a mistake to assume it can simply replace government workers. That belief reflects a common tech fallacy: the idea that new tools alone can fix complex social problems. In reality, lasting improvements come from people and technology working together – not from technology alone.⁶ Contrary to the view that AI and robots will inevitably replace workers, evidence shows that successful uses of new technology require human labor (usually undervalued and invisible⁷) to integrate them into existing infrastructures.⁸

The innovations of powerful new technologies are produced alongside workers and through careful integration with institutional experience. For example, research on a machine learning system used to identify sepsis and improve clinical care found that the system, on its own, introduced procedural breakdowns that interrupted clinicians' ability to treat patients. The technology could succeed only when designers recognized and incorporated the supporting labor into the system design, thereby repairing the technical disruptions.⁹

Why DOGE is wrong: The premise of DOGE's use of AI – advanced deep learning machines are better than wasteful government employees – is wrong. If AI is going to prove useful in government services, it will have to be carefully integrated, leveraging the institutional expertise of federal workers. Otherwise, the government is going to be left with costly AI systems that don't work.

¹ See, e.g., Inioluwa Deborah Raji, et al., *The Fallacy of AI Functionality*, FAccT '22 (June 20, 2022), <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3531146.3533158>.

² Colin Lecher, *NYC's AI Chatbot Tells Businesses to Break the Law*, The Markup (Mar. 29, 2024), <https://themarkup.org/news/2024/03/29/nycs-ai-chatbot-tells-businesses-to-break-the-law>.

³ Robert N. Charette, *Michigan's MIDAS Unemployment System: Algorithm Alchemy Created Lead, Not Gold*, IEEE Spectrum (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://spectrum.ieee.org/michigans-midas-unemployment-system-algorithm-alchemy-that-created-lead-not-gold>.

⁴ Nikki Rojas, *Does AI help human make better decisions?*, The Harvard Gazette (June 14, 2024), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2024/06/does-ai-help-humans-make-better-decisions-artificial-intelligence-law/>.

⁵ Imogen Parker, Anna Studman, Elliot Jones, *Learn fast and build things*, Ada Lovelace Institute (Mar. 14, 2025), <https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/policy-briefing/public-sector-ai/>.

⁶ Brian J. Chen and Jacob Metcalf, *Explainer: A Sociotechnical Approach to AI Policy*, Data & Society Research Institute (May 28, 2024), <https://datasociety.net/library/a-sociotechnical-approach-to-ai-policy/>.

⁷ Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass* (May 2019).

⁸ Alexandra Mateescu and Madeleine Clare Elish, *AI in Context: The Labor of Integrating New Technologies*, Data & Society Research Institute (Jan. 30, 2019), <https://datasociety.net/library/ai-in-context/>.

⁹ Madeleine Clare Elish and Elizabeth Anne Watkins, *Repairing Innovation: A Study of Integrating AI in Clinical Care*, Data & Society Research Institute (Sept. 2020), <https://datasociety.net/library/repairing-innovation/>.

Myth #2: AI makes objective decisions about which workers to fire and which programs to cut.

What the evidence tells us: Well before the advent of DOGE, government leaders have been turning to digital technologies to make objective, data-driven decisions. Digital technologies purport to prioritize data and programmed rules over flawed human judgment. But data is not neutral, and objectivity is not achievable through the use of machine learning systems.¹⁰

So-called “objective” decisions are usually anything but. For example, many algorithmic tools claim to use neutral decision-making to generate employment decisions but actually rely on junk science.¹¹ Developers often make flawed assumptions about what data means, leading to imperfect guesses at who is performing well and who is not. The data is often incomplete or reflects biases. And in some circumstances, the act of collecting data may itself produce unfair outcomes, as “many kinds of worker data only have meaning within the extractive and punitive contexts under which they are produced.”¹²

Further, the supposed objectivity of digital technologies does not render government actions apolitical. Instead, it should be clear that “algorithmic systems, like human administrators before them, can never implement policy without themselves making policy decisions. Nor can they fully eliminate values or arbitrariness from these policy decisions.”¹³

Why DOGE is wrong: DOGE is not making objective, AI-informed decisions to cut workers and services. Even if mechanisms of transparency, explainability, and contestation were present to provide some degree of accountability – they are not – DOGE is using AI to serve a specific political project that cannot be described as “objective” or “data-driven.” Rather, AI is being used to consolidate control of public services, wind down spending that helps the low- and non-waged, and eliminate levers of accountability.

¹⁰ Amina Abdu and Abigail Jacobs, *Public Administration*, in *Keywords of the Datafied State* 83-84, edited by Jenna Burrell, et al., Data & Society Research Institute (April 24, 2024),

https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Keywords_Public_Administration_Abdu_Jacobs_04242024.pdf.

¹¹ Hilke Schellmann, *The Algorithm: How AI Decides Who Gets Hired, Monitored, Promoted, and Fired and Why We Need to Fight Back Now* (2024).

¹² Alexandra Mateescu, *Challenging Worker Datafication* 8, Data & Society Research Institute (Nov. 8, 2023),

<https://datasociety.net/library/challenging-worker-datafication/>, citing Lilly Irani, *When Managers Rely on Algorithms of Suspicion: Fraud Logics and Their Fallouts*, Centre for International Governance Innovation (July 4, 2022),

<https://www.cigionline.org/articles/when-managers-rely-on-algorithms-of-suspicion-fraud-logics-and-their-fallouts/>.

¹³ Abdu and Jacobs at 84.

Myth #3: AI can identify waste and fraud in government programs.

What the evidence tells us: A recent report by TechTonic Justice found that “the use of [AI in public benefits] over the past two decades demonstrates the capacity for broad, systemic harms with immense suffering at scales and speeds that were impossible with the human-centered methods that precede them.”¹⁴ Indeed, decades of the use of automated decision systems in public benefits suggest that AI will not identify fraud, but instead will erroneously make opportunities more scarce and social insurance programs further inaccessible.¹⁵ A 2009 example is instructive: After entering a \$1 billion contract to modernize its public assistance systems through “remote eligibility” technology, the State of Indiana canceled the contract after more than one million residents had lost or been denied access to food stamps, Medicaid, and cash benefits – a 54 percent increase over three years.¹⁶

Empirically, user fraud in government programs is rare.¹⁷ But that hasn’t stopped policymakers from marshaling new technologies to freeze out low-income people, disabled people, and people of color from government assistance.¹⁸ Short-sighted attempts to target fraud reproduce the stigmatization of poverty, disability, race, and gender. The mistaken assumption that technology can “reduce fraud and increase efficiency only compounds inequality in the way that public benefits are delivered.”¹⁹

The scholar Virginia Eubanks has critiqued how this “digital poorhouse” – the use of automated systems to determine benefits eligibility and fraud – “concentrates administrative power in the hands of a small elite. Its integrated data systems and digital surveillance infrastructure offer a degree of control unrivaled in history. Automated tools for classifying the poor, left on their own, will produce towering inequalities unless we make an explicit commitment to forge another path.”²⁰

Why DOGE is wrong: By deploying AI to target “waste, fraud, and abuse,” DOGE is exacerbating the unequal distribution of public benefits and cutting Americans off from vital public services.

¹⁴ Kevin De Liban, *Inescapable AI: The Ways AI Decides How Low-Income People Work, Live, Learn, and Survive* 7, TechTonic Justice (Nov. 2024), <https://www.techtonicjustice.org/reports/inescapable-ai>.

¹⁵ *Id.*; Michele Gilman, *Poverty Lawgorithms*, Data & Society Research Institute (Sept. 15, 2020) <https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Poverty-Lawgorithms-20200915.pdf>.

¹⁶ Virginia Eubanks, *Want to Cut Welfare? There’s an App for That*, *The Nation* (May 27, 2015), <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/want-cut-welfare-theres-app/>.

¹⁷ Michele Gilman, *AI algorithms intended to root out welfare fraud often end up punishing the poor instead*, *The Conversation* (Feb. 14, 2020), <https://theconversation.com/ai-algorithms-intended-to-root-out-welfare-fraud-often-end-up-punishing-the-poor-instead-131625> (detailing that less than 1% of SNAP benefits go to ineligible households and that the majority of Medicaid fraudulent activity is committed by health care providers, not users).

¹⁸ See *Poverty Lawgorithms* at 38; Alexandra Mateescu, *Electronic Visit Verification: The Weight of Surveillance and the Fracturing of Care*, Data & Society Research Institute (Nov. 16, 2021), <https://datasociety.net/library/electronic-visit-verification-the-weight-of-surveillance-and-the-fracturing-of-care/>.

¹⁹ Serena Odoro, Brittany Smith, and Alexandra Mateescu, *Electronic Visit Verification: A Guide to Intersecting Harms and Policy Consequences* 9, Data & Society Research Institute (Nov. 16, 2021), https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/EVV_PolicyBrief_11162021.pdf.

²⁰ Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (2018).

Myth #4: Efficiency should be the top priority of the government.

What the evidence tells us: Polling on people’s trust in government is clear: the government has not been working as it should.²¹ But it is difficult to square the idea that the federal government has been wasteful and requires “efficiency” with the fact that it has been severely underfunded for decades.²² Underinvestment has meant the government cannot reliably deliver for its constituents.²³ Meanwhile, as “efficient” belt-tightening is ordered for social insurance programs (and the individuals who use them), expenditures elsewhere – tax deductions, deferrals, and other forms of indirect government spending – have proceeded without comparable restraint.²⁴

Over the last half-century, “efficiency” has become the guiding star for government operations, a seemingly neutral way to pursue technocratic reforms.²⁵ Policy decisions get made through cost-benefit analysis, rather than through alternative governing values such as universalism and social equality. While federal agencies can unquestionably benefit from productivity improvements, a top-line mission of “efficiency” has historically conflicted with broader policy agendas, constraining the government’s tools to address structural poverty and inequality.²⁶

Why DOGE is wrong: By any metric, DOGE is hardly delivering efficiency. It has fired skilled workers en masse, jettisoning expertise that will take decades to rebuild. It has cut basic science research, potentially destroying the US’s leadership in science and innovation for generations to come.²⁷

The problem isn’t just DOGE’s maximally disruptive approach. While Elon Musk’s “hacksaw” method is maximizing pain for government workers and public benefits recipients, a tailored “scalpel” approach would exhibit the same flaws. The point of government is not to economically maximize “efficiency” but to deliver services for the public good. That requires a vision of long-term government investments and redistributive uses of public spending, not a simple cost-cutting exercise.

²¹ *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024*, Pew Research Center (June 24, 2024),

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.

²² Mekela Panditharatne, *Rebuilding Federal Agencies Hollowed Out by Trump and Congress*, Brennan Center for Justice (Apr. 5, 2023),

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/rebuilding-federal-agencies-hollowed-out-trump-and-congress>.

²³ Jennifer Pahlka, *Recoding America: Why Government Is Failing in the Digital Age and How We Can Do Better* (2023).

²⁴ Melinda Cooper, *Counterrevolution: Extravagance and Austerity in Public Finance* (2024).

²⁵ Elizabeth Popp Berman, *Thinking Like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy* (2022).

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ David Deming, *DOGE Is Failing on Its Own Terms*, The Atlantic (Feb. 11, 2025),

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/02/nih-nsf-science-doge/681645/>.