



Who Is Governing AI Companies?

For Nearly Half of AI Startups in
California, the Answer Is Only Men

By the California Partners Project, Crunchbase, and illumyn Impact



Jennifer Siebel Newsom
California First Partner

The rapid advance of artificial intelligence (AI) is a once-in-a-generation economic opportunity, and the unquestioned global center of AI development is right here in California.

From Anthropic, to Meta, Google, and OpenAI, the world's most well-funded, fastest-growing AI companies all call the Golden State home. In fact, California is [home to 32 of the world's 50 leading AI companies](#). The AI technologies being developed here will not only have tectonic impacts on our economy and labor markets for decades, they will have profound implications for the future of society. We're already seeing this range of impact—from the positives like drug discovery, climate mitigation, and democratized coding, to the risks of job displacement, AI deepfakes, and beyond.

Yet, the extraordinarily powerful companies creating these technologies are primarily led by one segment of the population: men. A new report developed by Crunchbase, social impact organization [illumyn Impact](#), and the [California Partners Project](#), analyzed the board composition of more than 140 of the most well-funded AI companies headquartered in California. The data reveals a significant opportunity to increase the representation of women in a sector that will redefine our world, economy, and culture at scale, including that:

- **Women comprise only 15 percent of the boards of private AI companies in California.**
- **More than 40 percent of these private AI company boards don't have any women directors.**

This lack of representation matters—because the decisions made in boardrooms today will shape the policies, products, and cultural norms that will shape our world tomorrow. A similar lack of gender diversity within earlier generations of tech and

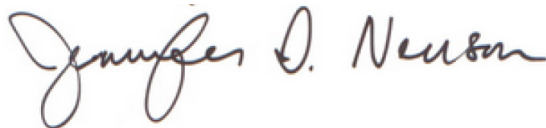
social media company boards arguably shaped social media into what it is today: a digital ecosystem plagued by bias, harassment, and design choices that prioritize engagement and profit over user well-being—issues that could be magnified exponentially as AI scales.

With AI, we're already starting to see the impacts of a lack of representation play out with AI diagnostic tools trained primarily on data from white male patients and large language models advising women to ask for lower salaries than men. With generative AI now powering everything from virtual assistants to mental health support, the stakes are only getting higher. While we can't turn back the clock on social media, we can still shape AI's future.

Given the information asymmetries between these fast-moving technology companies and governments, oversight disproportionately falls on the boards. Better board representation helps build companies that serve a wider range of consumers and consider long-term community impact. Additionally, at the leadership level, increased representation is good for business: research shows that women-owned startups can generate significantly more revenue per dollar invested.

California has an opportunity to lead—not just in developing these technologies, but in shaping them for long-term economic growth and social benefit. We know change is possible—California tripled the number of women on public company boards between 2020 and 2023—and with AI's extraordinary potential, the time to bring more women into independent board seats is now. My hope is that this report inspires companies, investors, and policymakers to imagine—and build—a thriving future for AI that works for everyone.

In partnership always,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Jennifer D. Newsom". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

California First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom

Co-founder, California Partners Project



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If social media has taught us anything, it's that new technologies can have widespread and often unanticipated effects. They can change not only how we work but also how we think and how we relate to each other.

Artificial intelligence has an unprecedented potential to shape our future in exciting and unforeseeable ways. As business leaders and government agencies around the world grapple with the responsibility of managing the risks that accompany the promised rewards of AI, one immediate and [evidence-based](#) place to start is building a diverse board of directors. Yet our research indicates that, on that front, AI company boards fall woefully short.

Boards that fail to reflect a wide range of experiences and viewpoints are not well-positioned to oversee companies whose products may determine how bank loan applications are evaluated, how healthcare issues are diagnosed, or how educational

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resources are allocated. Although no single measure can ensure responsible AI development, diverse board leadership is vital for companies creating technologies that will fundamentally reshape how we live, work and interact.

Within this study, we look at gender diversity, which is reasonably measurable, as a proxy for diversity of perspectives, life experience, areas of expertise and other demographics. To understand the gender mix on AI boards, we analyzed the board composition of more than 140 AI companies headquartered in California, where [venture-backed AI development is concentrated](#). Our study focused on 102 private companies that have raised at least \$50 million in cumulative funding. As we've seen time and again, transformative innovations are as likely to come from today's nascent startups as they are from established industry leaders. Governance of these companies during their high-growth, pre-IPO period is [arguably as important](#) as it is after they go public. We also looked at the boards of 39 publicly traded AI companies for comparative purposes.

Our analysis revealed a striking lack of gender diversity among the people who govern some of the world's most influential AI startups. Women comprise only 15% of the boards of private AI companies. More than 40% of these private boards don't have any women directors.

Two root causes contribute to this gender disparity — one structural and one behavioral. First, investors and founders collectively hold the majority of private company board seats, and women are still underrepresented in those categories. Second, when appointing independent directors, boards often limit their consideration to familiar candidates instead of seeking qualified experts outside their immediate networks.

The good news: There are plenty of executive women and people of color on the cutting edge of AI innovation who are ready to bring their voices and operating expertise to the boardroom.

Companies that prioritize building a diverse board need only to look beyond their existing networks to find a wealth of AI board talent. Consider this precedent: Five years ago, one-third of all [public companies in California](#) had no women board members. With focus and effort, all-male boards are now the rare exception.

Given the rapid pace of AI development, companies need to act now, while the technology and its applications are still emerging. CEOs and board members who bring more women and people of color into their boardrooms will help create a productive and healthy AI-powered future for all of us.

KEY FINDINGS

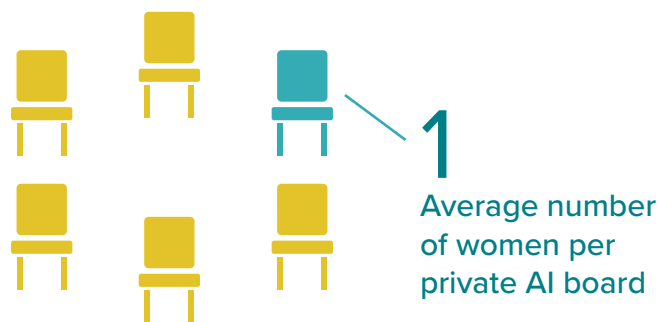
Among the AI companies headquartered in California included in our study:

- 15% of private company board members are women;
- 43% of private company boards don't include any women directors;
- Women who serve on private company boards are most likely to hold an independent director seat;
- 26% of private company boards don't include any independent directors; and
- Publicly traded companies typically have more gender-diverse boards than private companies, but still average only two women per eight-person board.

Women average just one seat in AI boardrooms

Across all of the California-based AI private companies studied, women hold an average of one seat on a six-person board. Among 102 private companies, only five boards (5%) have an equal or greater number of women than men in the boardroom.

Number Of Women Per Board Of Private California-Based AI Companies



More than 40% of private AI companies have all-male boards

Among the over 100 privately held AI companies headquartered in California included in our study, 44 (43%) don't have any women in the boardroom.

Gender diversity is slightly higher on the boards of companies with more capital. Among those with cumulative funding of at least \$50 million but less than \$100 million, 62% have all-male boards. For companies with at least \$100 million in funding, that number drops to 32%. This shift likely stems from the addition of independent directors who bring operational and market expertise.

Among publicly traded companies, women hold an average of two board seats, double the average among private company boards. [Research](#) suggests that, to capture the full economic benefits of diversity, boards should include at least three women directors. Just half of the public companies we studied meet that threshold.

KEY FINDINGS

California-Based AI Companies Proportion Of All-Men Boards

	Cumulative Funding	% of All-Men Boards
Private companies	\$50M-\$99M	62%
	\$100M+	32%
	All private	43%
Public companies		3%
All companies studied		32%

California-Based AI Companies Proportion Of Women Directors

	Cumulative Funding	% Women Directors
Private companies	\$50M-\$99M	9%
	\$100M+	19%
	All private	15%
Public companies		29%
All companies studied		20%



For private company boards, independent director appointments offer the fastest route to diversity

Most private company board seats (72%) are held by company executives (the CEO and co-founders, typically) and early investors. Women hold only 10% of these board seats, a reflection of the underrepresentation of women among venture capital investors and the

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entrepreneurs they fund. Women hold less than [20% of investing partner roles](#) in venture capital firms. Companies with women-only founders [secured just 3% of AI venture funding](#) in 2023, a number stagnant since 2015.

More than half (55%) of the women directors included in our study hold independent board seats. That is, they are neither tied to the company’s founding or management team nor investors in the company. Whereas public companies must have a minimum number of independent directors, private companies have no such requirements. Therefore, independent directors are typically added later in a company’s lifecycle, often as part of preparation for an IPO. The percentage of companies without any independent directors decreases as the level of funding increases — from 36% for those with \$50 million to \$99 million to 21% for those with \$100 million or more.

Private California-Based AI Companies Board Roles By Type

	% Of Companies	% Of Director Seats	% Women
Executive	100%	27%	8%
Investor	93%	45%	11%
Independent	74%	28%	30%



Our findings suggest that women are more likely to be appointed to private company AI boards as the second independent director. On boards with only one independent director, women hold 17% of those independent director seats. Among companies with more than one independent director, 67% had at least one woman in that role.

SUMMARY

Women are underrepresented on the boards of AI companies — especially high-growth, earlier-stage startups. While board diversity is not a panacea, it is one essential element for the companies developing technology with the potential to influence society in profound ways.

To increase the number of women board members, companies should:

- **Accelerate the appointment of independent directors;**
- **Commit to adding directors who expand the diversity** of perspectives, skills and experiences on the board; and
- **Reach outside existing networks** to identify well-qualified candidates.

Companies don't need to trade off technical expertise and governance experience to bring diverse voices into their AI boardrooms. They simply need to look beyond their immediate networks.

Board Study Of California-Based AI Companies

Private companies						Public companies		Total companies	
	\$50M-\$99M		≥\$100M		Total				
Unique companies	39		63		102		39		141
Board seats per company			6.7		6.2		8.2		6.7
Board Seats									
Women	9%	18	19%	79	15%	97	29%	92	20% 189
Men	91%	188	81%	344	85%	532	71%	226	80% 758
Total Board seats	206		423		629		318		947
Seat type									
Executive	30%	62	25%	107	27%	169			
Investor	49%	100	43%	183	45%	283			
Independent	21%	44	31%	133	28%	177			
Women directors by seat									
Executive	3%	2	10%	11	8%	13			
Investor	10%	10	11%	21	11%	31			
Independent	14%	6	35%	47	30%	53			

METHODOLOGY

This study follows the methodology utilized in the annual [Him For Her and Crunchbase studies of diversity on private company boards](#).

Leveraging the Crunchbase database, we identified 409 companies in the AI industry with headquarters in California. Among them were 40 publicly traded companies and 369 privately held companies with at least \$50 million in cumulative funding as of July 1, 2024. To ensure that each company's board profile was current, we included only companies that publish their board of directors on their website.

We then referenced company website data, Crunchbase profiles and other publicly available information to characterize the board members. The study included only board directors; board observers and/or advisers were excluded from the data set. For private company boards, we segmented board members according to type of board seat: executive, investor or independent. In the few cases in which founders and past executives remained on the board despite no longer having an operating role at the company, we classified them as "executive directors" in recognition of their original relationship to the company. We identified gender by referencing professional profiles on Crunchbase and, when not available, other sites.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Co-founded by California First Partner [Jennifer Siebel Newsom](#) and Olivia Morgan in partnership with the people of California, the **[California Partners Project](#)** is dedicated to championing gender equity across the state and ensuring our state's media and technology industries are a force for good in the lives of all children. The California Partners Project tracks and spotlights women's representation on corporate boards and offers an Inclusive Boards Playbook Series developed in partnership with [Stanford's VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab](#) with strategies for board refreshment and culture-building. For more information about the nonprofit organization, visit www.calpartnersproject.org. Connect with the California Partners Project on [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#).

[Crunchbase](#) is a predictive intelligence solution that forecasts private-market movements using the unique combination of live private company data, AI and market activity from more than 80 million users. It helps investors, dealmakers and analysts be the first to find and act on opportunities. To learn more, visit crunchbase.ai and follow Crunchbase on [LinkedIn](#) and [X](#).

[illumyn Impact](#) (formerly Him For Her) is a social impact organization with a mission to diversify the board ecosystem, which is building and shaping the future: from healthcare, to AI, to climate change and beyond. Drawing from its ever-growing referral-based talent network of 8,000+ under-networked executives, a third of whom are women of color, [illumyn Impact](#) makes highly curated introductions that bring fresh expertise into the boardroom. illumyn Impact is proud to partner with 100+ leading private equity and venture capital firms. A 501c3 corporation, illumyn Impact operates through the generosity of its founding partners [GV](#), [IVP](#), [L Catterton](#), [Mayfield Fund](#), [Silver Lake Partners](#), [SoftBank](#), [Starboard Value](#) and [Tiger Global Impact Ventures](#), and supporters like [Brad Feld](#) and [Amy Batchelor](#), [Reid Hoffman](#), [Jeff Weiner](#), [Nasdaq](#) and [many others](#). Its sister organization, [illumyn](#), supports underrepresented executives in some of the world's largest companies through its corporate boardroom excellence fellowship program.

This report was produced through a collaboration between the California Partners Project, Crunchbase, and illumyn Impact, and with support from Kirsten Green.



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