

RAINEY CENTER OCTOBER 2026 POLL

AI, Data Centers, Energy and Kids Online

Data centers turn a corner, driven by AI use, if hyperscalers to bring their own power.

Voters widely support age verification, but keeping parents in control of what content kids see online.

October 2026



Rainey
Center



Why it matters: AI went mainstream this fall, and voters' views are moving with it. A quarter of voters now use AI every day, and the more they use it, the more open they are to data centers. They still want firm rules for AI companies and strong protections for kids online.

THE BIG PICTURE

- **AI use jumped.** 25% of voters use AI daily, up from 17% in September. Meta's Muse, launched Sept. 8, passed 10 million U.S. downloads in its first 40 days.
- **Data centers turned a corner.** Net support for a data center in voters' own community rose to -20, from -35 in September. A majority (56%) still opposes one.
- **Bills are the fight.** 55% say data centers are driving up their electricity costs, up from 48% in July.
- **Voters want AI companies held responsible.** 77% back treating AI like any other consumer product under liability law, and 87% want the most powerful systems safety tested before release.
- **Parents first online.** 88% back requiring app stores to verify age, and voters prefer company-built teen versions with parental controls over government bans, 69% to 25%.

About the survey

Who and when: 1,279 registered voters, surveyed by online panel Oct. 14 to 20, 2026, by the Rainey Center Polling Team.

Weighting: Results are weighted by age, gender, race, education, region, income and 2024 vote recall to match the electorate.

Margin of error: ± 3.6 points at the 95% confidence level for the full sample.

In their own words: Nine questions were open-ended. Voters answered out loud into their microphone, or typed if theirs didn't work, for 10,632 answers in all. Those answers add the why behind the numbers and help us confirm we are hearing from real people, not bots. Shares from the open-ended answers are unweighted.

Trends: Comparisons use Rainey surveys of registered voters from March, May, July and September 2026, and a December 2025 survey of likely voters.

How we poll: real voters, not bots

Most polls hand voters a list of answers. Our poll also asks a few questions with no list at all. Voters tap a microphone and answer out loud, and speech-to-text turns each answer into a transcript. The quotes in this memo come from those answers, tagged with each voter's party, age, race, gender, and how often they use AI.

Why it matters for quality: Online polling has a bot problem. A 2025 Dartmouth study in PNAS built an AI agent that posed as a survey respondent and evaded standard quality checks 99.8% of the time. By the author's estimate, 10 to 52 fake respondents would have been enough to flip which candidate led in national polls in the final week of 2024. His fix is proof that respondents are real people.

HOW VOICE HELPS

- **It raises the bar.** A bot can click boxes and type plausible sentences. Speaking a coherent, on-topic answer into a microphone, question after question, is much harder to fake.
- **We read every answer.** All 1,279 respondents gave at least one usable answer, and 82% gave usable answers to every question they were asked. Only 3 gave mostly unusable answers.
- **No copy and paste.** Of nearly 8,000 answers of 10 words or more, the only exact repeats across respondents were two stock phrases, such as "I don't think there is anything good about data centers."
- **Answers match the boxes people checked.** Of opponents of a local data center who gave a usable answer, 99% gave a reason to oppose it; of supporters, 95% gave a reason to support it.

Real people bring real detail: an electric bill that tripled, the name of the local utility, grandchildren, predators on Roblox.

AI: voters are using it more, and they want rules

Driving the news: AI use jumped this fall. 25% of voters now use it daily and 51% use it at least a few times a week. The share who never use it fell from 29% in September to 17%.

THE MOOD

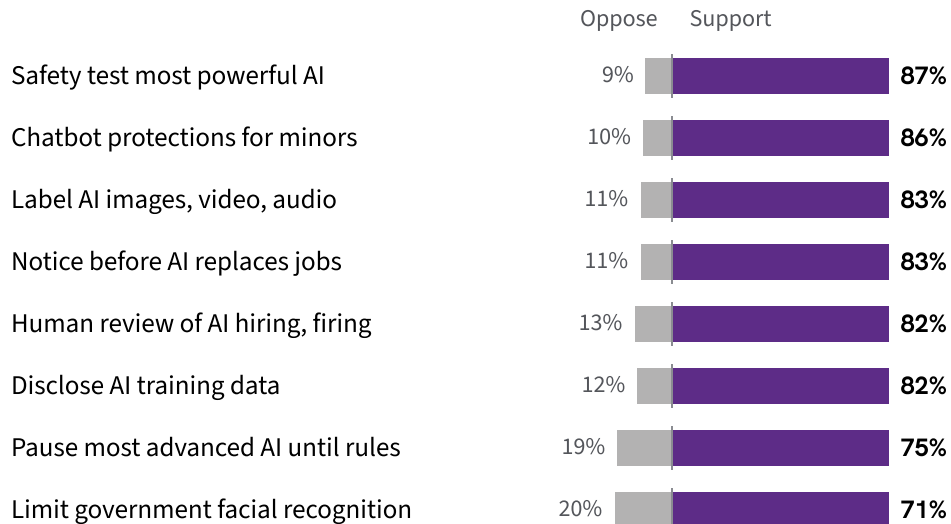
- 52% are more concerned about AI's risks, and 36% are more excited about the opportunity.
- Their top worries are job losses (25%) and the destruction of humanity (22%), followed by cybersecurity (14%) and deepfakes (13%).
- Their top hopes are curing diseases (19%) and faster innovation (16%). 28% say nothing about AI excites them.
- 42% of voters who have worked fear AI could replace or reduce the need for the kind of work they do.

WHAT VOTERS WANT FROM LAWMAKERS

- **Liability tops the list.** 48% name holding AI companies legally responsible for harms as a top-three priority, ahead of protecting workers (35%), making data centers pay for their own electricity (34%) and cybersecurity standards (32%). Keeping ahead of China draws 19%.
- "Pausing or slowing down AI development" rose from 16% in September to 27% as a top-three priority. Democrats pick it more than Republicans, 33% to 23%.
- 77% support treating AI like any other consumer product under liability law, including 77% of Democrats and 77% of Republicans. 71% say liability will push companies to make AI safer; 21% say it will slow American innovation.

Voters back every AI rule we tested

Share who support or oppose each policy, all registered voters



Rainey Center, October 2026 survey (Q39), 1,279 registered voters, weighted. Support and oppose combine strongly and somewhat.

Between the lines: Voters who use AI want rules too. Daily users support pausing the most advanced AI until safety rules are in place at the same rate as voters who never use AI (72% and 73%), and they are just as likely to say liability will make AI safer (72% and 71%).

In their own words: Asked for one thing lawmakers should do about AI, 61% said regulate it and 14% said stop it. Only a third named a specific policy. Asked what they had heard about AI lately, 25% recalled AI acting on its own or warnings that it could end humanity.

“I have heard many CEOs of artificial intelligence makers warn us, and if they are warning us, I have no idea why we would not listen to their warnings.”

Republican · 65+ · White · Woman · Never uses AI

“I would ask that they have a nonpartisan, independent evaluator, much like the FDA has evaluators for our food production and drug systems. And that way, we can ensure that AI stays within its sandbox and is being developed properly and safely.”

Democrat · 35–49 · White · Man · Uses AI daily

“Artificial intelligence is the wave of the future. I use it at my job every day, and I use it at home.”

Republican · 50–64 · White · Man · Uses AI daily

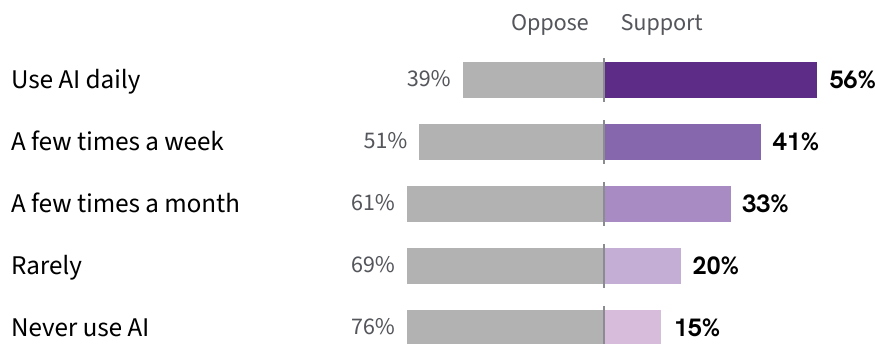
Data centers: opinion turns a corner

Driving the news: October produced the best data center numbers in Rainey’s 2026 polling. Net support for a data center in voters’ own community improved by 15 points to –20, from a –35 low point in September, and net favorability rose ten points to –18.

Why: More voters now use AI, and AI users are the voters most open to data centers. The shift in AI use alone accounts for 8 of the 10 points of favorability gain and 9 of the 15 points on local siting.

Support for a local data center rises with AI use

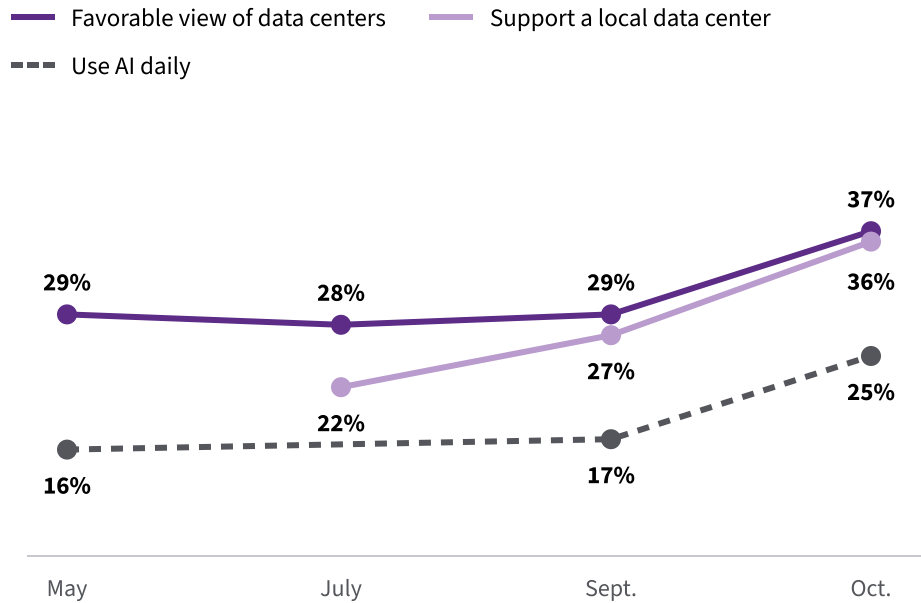
Would you support or oppose a data center being built in your community? By how often voters use AI



Rainey Center, October 2026 survey (Q11 by Q31), 1,279 registered voters, weighted. Excludes the 2% not sure what AI tools are.

Data center support broke out in October as daily AI use jumped

Share of voters, Rainey Center surveys, 2026



Rainey Center surveys of registered voters, May, July, September and October 2026, weighted.

WHO MOVED

- Republican support for a local data center rose from 32% to 45%, and independent support from 20% to 38%.
- Democrats held at 27%, even as their own AI use rose.
- Men moved and women mostly did not. Men went from 33% to 46% support, women from 22% to 28%.

WHAT HELPS

- What the data center is for matters. One built for everyday services like email, streaming and banking wins 47% to 40%. One built mainly for AI loses 36% to 54%. The gap holds in every party.
- Voters want data centers to bring their own power (see Energy below).

YES, BUT

- 56% still oppose a data center in their community, 36% strongly. Democrats oppose one 65% to 27%.
- Voters with a data center operating or proposed nearby say it has made things worse rather than better, 35% to 21%.
- Across all voters, the biggest concern is electricity prices (30%), then water (16%) and AI taking jobs (13%).

In their own words: Asked what is bad about data centers, voters named water (36%) and higher electric bills (30%) first. Opponents in both parties gave the same two reasons. Supporters pointed to jobs.

“My electric has tripled.”

Republican · 65+ · White · Woman · Never uses AI

“It’s taking away from our resources. The community is bearing the brunt of the cost. I don’t know of any other business that opens up that isn’t metered for their own utilities. Why this cost is being passed to the communities is beyond me.”

Independent, leans Democratic · 65+ · White · Woman · Rarely uses AI

“I live in southern Colorado and we do not have enough water for ourselves, much less an AI or data center.”

Democrat · 50–64 · White · Woman · Colorado · Never uses AI

“I live in a very small town with very few job opportunities except seasonally. It would give full-time work year-round.”

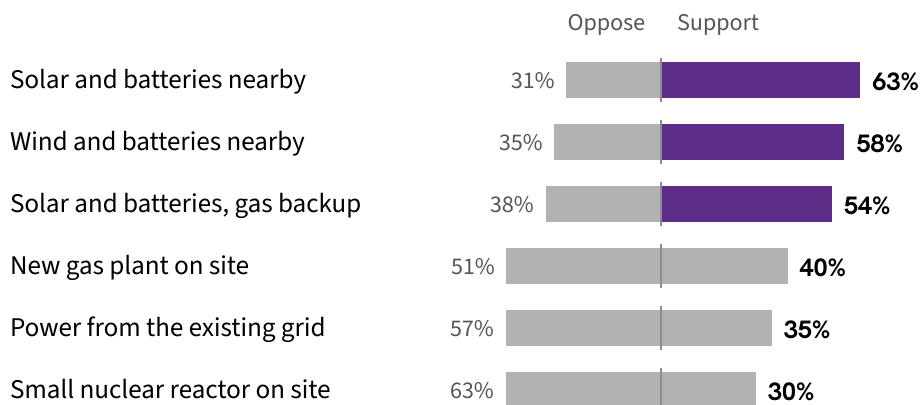
Democrat · 65+ · White · Woman · Uses AI daily

Energy and electricity prices: bring your own power

The big picture: Voters will accept a data center more readily if it brings its own clean power. Plain grid power, a new gas plant and an on-site reactor all lose.

Solar and wind built nearby win; on-site nuclear loses

Support or oppose a data center in your community if it were powered this way



Rainey Center, October 2026 survey (Q17), 1,279 registered voters, weighted. Purple marks setups where support beats opposition.

Asked to pick one source for a data center that must make its own power, voters choose solar and batteries (40%), then wind (22%) and a mix (14%). Natural gas and nuclear draw 7% each. Solar and batteries is the first choice in every party: 44% of Democrats, 31% of Republicans and 45% of independents.

Nuclear and gas have lost ground as power sources for data centers. Nuclear went from net -4 in May to -15, and natural gas from +13 to +3. May's reading came after a set of pro-data center messages, so treat the change as directional.

BILLS

- 55% say data centers in their area are driving up their electricity costs, 31% significantly. That share was 45% in March, 43% in May and 48% in July.
- Democrats lead at 60%, but Republicans rose most, from 42% in July to 54%.
- Few name data centers as the main reason prices rose. Voters blame utility profits (21%), fuel prices (19%), grid repair (16%) and government policy (16%) ahead of data centers (15%).

The LBNL test: We showed voters a summary of a July 2026 Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory study finding that states with the fastest growth in electricity use generally saw inflation-adjusted prices fall from 2019 to 2025.

- Blame moved to the grid. Grid repair and storm protection rose to 30% as the biggest reason prices went up, and data centers fell to 12%.
- 67% found the study believable. 24% said it made them more supportive of data centers and 15% less.

In their own words: Asked which power source they would be most comfortable with, voters reached for solar (46%) and wind (29%). One in five said no data center was acceptable however it was powered.

“I live in Texas where the power grid is shaky. We do not have access to power outside of the state of Texas. Therefore, I believe the only acceptable methods of power would be renewable energy, wind and solar.”

Democrat · 50–64 · White · Man · Texas · Uses AI a few times a month

“I would actually be most comfortable with nuclear power for a data center. I grew up with nuclear power plants in my backyard, and it is the safest form of energy you can have. It is the lowest-cost form of energy you can have. And everyone hears nuclear and thinks Chernobyl, but that is the exception that makes the rule.”

Republican · 50–64 · Other race · Woman · Uses AI daily

Kids online and social media: parents first, one national standard

Why it matters: Voters align with the approach in Meta’s August settlement with state attorneys general: parents decide and companies build the controls. Voters also want one national standard to set the floor.

Concern is high and bipartisan: 73% are extremely or very concerned about risks to minors online, including 76% of Democrats and 71% of Republicans. Voters name TikTok (47%) and AI chatbots (40%) as the biggest risks.

WHAT VOTERS WANT

- 89% say parents should control what minors can access online.
- 88% support requiring app stores to verify age, including 91% of Democrats and 87% of Republicans.
- Asked to choose, voters prefer company-built teen versions with parental controls over government bans (69% to 25%), one federal standard over state-by-state rules (67% to 26%) and verifying age once at the app store over uploading ID to every site (63% to 26%).
- 82% support platforms verifying identities to stop fake and duplicate accounts.

Yes, but: How age is checked decides support. 62% back photo-ID checks for limited activities like sports betting, 53% back identity checks for every adult online, and 47% back requiring every adult online to show a government photo ID. 57% would worry about their privacy using a digital ID.

In their own words: Asked for the greatest risk to minors online, voters named predators first (41%), some describing adults posing as kids online. AI came up in about one answer in six, though the AI questions just before this one likely primed some of that.

“The greatest risk kids on the internet is predators, adults pretending to be children on...different game places.”

Republican · 50–64 · White · Woman · Uses AI a few times a month

“I have grandchildren that range in ages from early elementary school to working on their masters in college. And my concern with minors on the internet is so many sites ask one question: Are you over the age of 18? They click yes or no. And they’re going to click yes, and they’re exposed to things that they should not see or be exposed to. That is one of my greatest concerns.”

Independent, leans Republican · 65+ · White · Woman · Rarely uses AI

“I’m afraid that the children under the age of 18 are just going to get too dependent on artificial intelligence, like for a friend, and they’re not going to know how to act with real human beings. They’re not going to have that social interaction with other children and so forth that they need.”

Republican · 50–64 · White · Woman · Uses AI daily

THE BOTTOM LINE

AI use is rising fast, and it is changing how voters see the infrastructure behind it. The more often voters use AI, the more open they are to data centers.

AI users still want rules. Large majorities of users and non-users alike want AI companies held responsible for harms, the most advanced AI paused until safety rules are in place, and protections for kids.

The data center fight runs through the electricity bill. A binding guarantee that data centers pay for their own power, ideally clean and built nearby, is the clearest path to yes.

On kids online, voters have settled on parents first, company-built controls and one national standard.



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