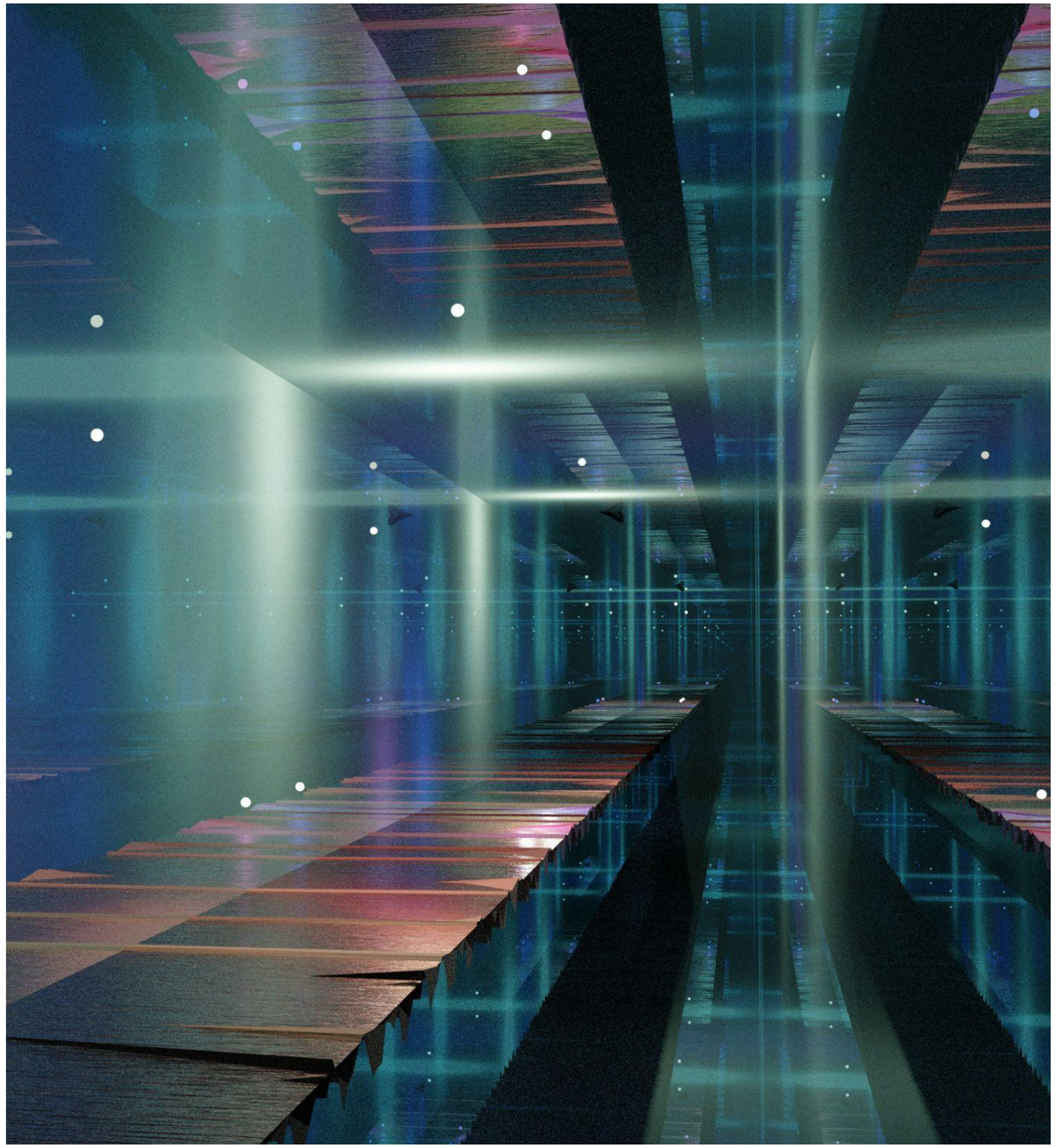
MILLTOWN PARTNERS

BEHIND THE BACKLASH

UNDERSTANDING OPPOSITION TO DATA CENTERS



JUNE 2026

The technology sector is wrestling with how best to respond to opposition to the AI buildout

$156bn worth of US data center projects blocked or stalled in 2025

188 active opposition groups have formed across the United States

238 state legislative proposals sought to restrict data centers in 2025

50% of Americans concerned about AI, up from 38% in 2022

Local Opposition Is Slowing A.I. Data Centers. Wall Street Has Noticed.

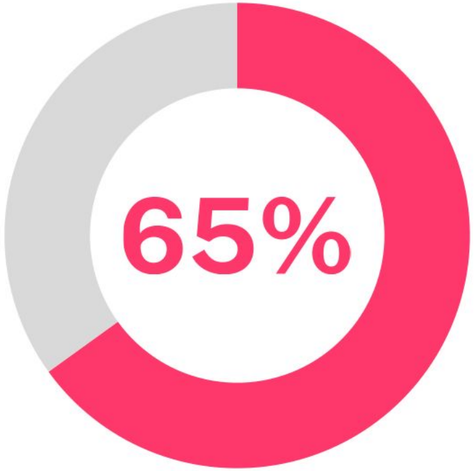
Tech companies are running into resistance from neighbors and may not be able to build at the pace they promised investors.

The great American data centre divide

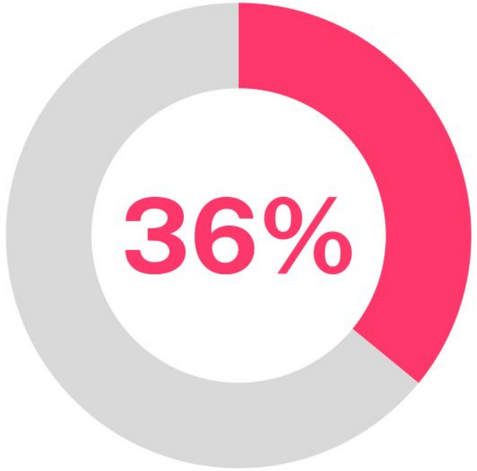
Many rural communities are viscerally opposed to AI infrastructure, putting them at odds with the White House

Data Center Watch; Pew Research Center

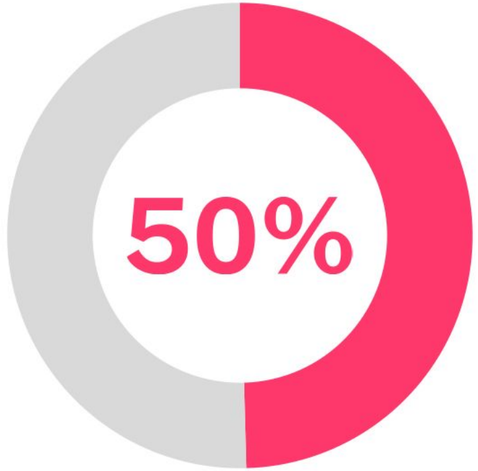
This isn’t happening in a vacuum. The AI transformation is arriving at a time when Americans already feel angry, insecure, and pessimistic



*think the political system is **rigged** in favor of the wealthy and powerful*



*say they are **barely getting by** each month*



*think life for their children’s generation will probably be **worse** than for ours*

What we did

Our objectives

To understand who opposes data centers, what is driving that opposition, and which messages are most effective to build support.

Who we surveyed

6,872 registered US voters nationwide, with boosts in five states where the buildout is taking place and which have important elections this year: Texas, Georgia, Michigan, California, and North Carolina.

What we asked

We asked voters' views on data centers, AI, and the economy, as well as their demographics, media habits, and financial situation. We also tested five different pro-data-center messages and a range of proof-points and rebuttals.

Key findings

01

Opposition to data centers is more than a local phenomenon…

Only 8% of opponents report living near a data center, compared to 30% of supporters.

02

…it's driven by anti-tech sentiment more than NIMBYism or environmentalism…

63% of opponents have a negative view of AI, compared to 8% of supporters.

03

…and underpinned by populism on both sides of the political divide.

Both Democratic and Republican data center opponents see the system as 'rigged' (79% and 68% respectively).

04

Democratic voters reward opposition to data centers 4x as much as Republicans.

In an experiment, Democrats were 6 points more likely to vote for data center opponents, vs. 1.4 points among Republicans.

Implications

01

The argument needs to be won nationally, not just locally.

Data center proponents need to engage in the national debate that is fueling opposition. Local campaigns won't be enough on their own.

02

Tech needs an affordability agenda.

The most persuasive pro-data-center messaging links investment to affordability, showing how the buildout keeps local residents' costs down long term.

03

Act on water concerns, don't just contextualize usage.

Addressing concerns by trying to contextualize data centers' water use doesn't work. Pledging to use recycled wastewater is more effective.

04

Make the benefits of AI feel immediate and concrete.

To be persuaded of the value of data centers, voters need a stronger case for why AI will benefit them. They need immediate, tangible use cases — for example, on healthcare.

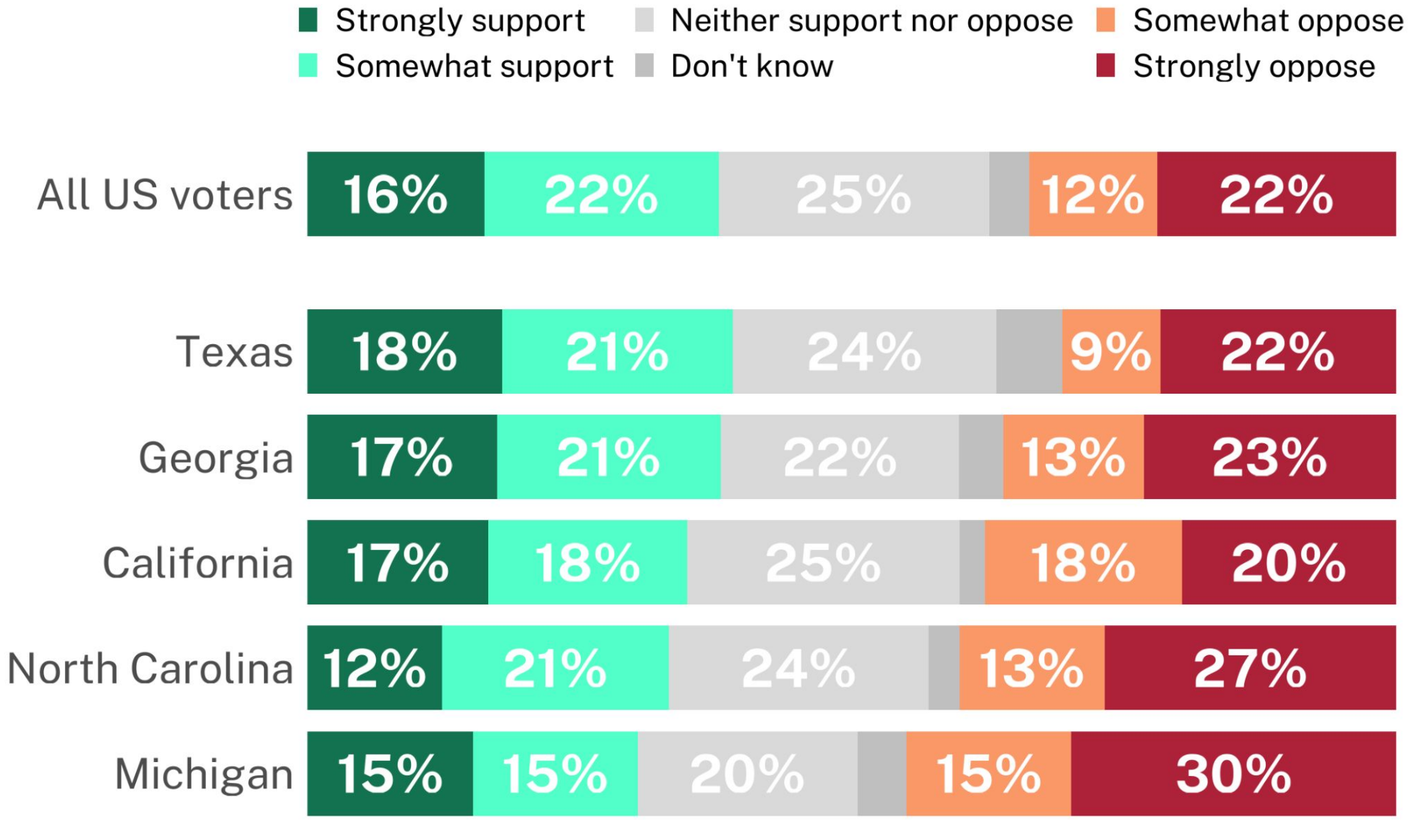
BEHIND THE BACKLASH

Opposition to data centers is not yet as widespread as coverage might have you believe

Voters divide into three groups, roughly equally sized:

- Opponents - **34%**
- Neutrals - **28%**
- Supporters - **38%**

Support or oppose a data center being built near your home — national and state breakdown



Nationally representative, nationally weighted, n = 1,107. Boost states, state-weighted (TX n=481, GA n=511, CA n=645, NC n=474, MI n=551). Boost states ordered most to least supportive.

Michigan’s economic context and experience of the Flint water crisis makes it fertile ground for data center opposition

RUST BELT VULNERABILITY

Economic insecurity runs deep as Michigan faces a challenging economic context.

40th

state for average income per person

45th

for attracting high-tech jobs

60-year low

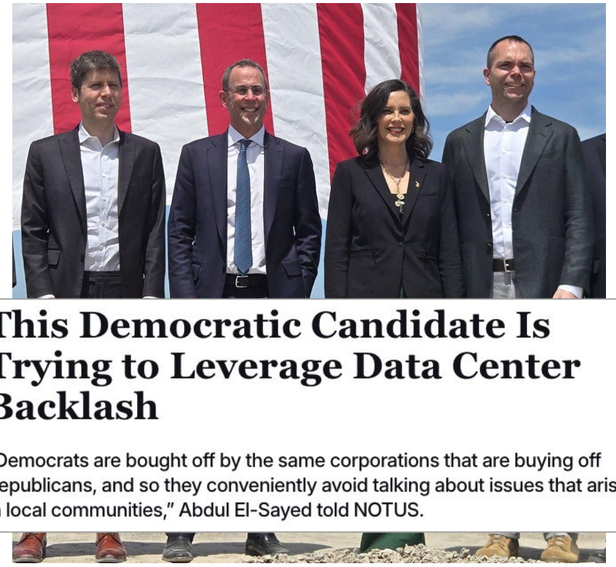
in consumer sentiment

WARY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

High levels of mistrust resulting from the Flint water crisis.

ELECTORAL FLASHPOINT

Already a live issue for Gov. Whitmer, and in the Democratic Senate Primary.



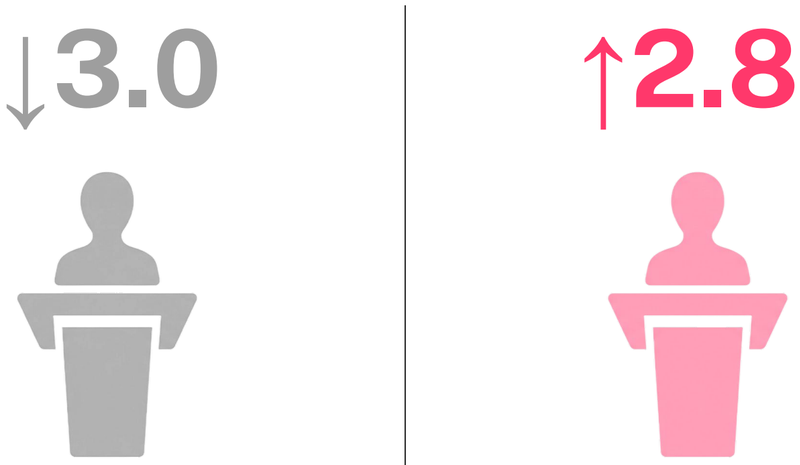
This Democratic Candidate Is Trying to Leverage Data Center Backlash

“Democrats are bought off by the same corporations that are buying off Republicans, and so they conveniently avoid talking about issues that arise in local communities,” Abdul El-Sayed told NOTUS.

Detroit Regional Chamber, State of the Region 2026

Opponents are highly motivated, while supporters are apathetic

In an experiment between hypothetical election candidates, those who oppose data centers get a 2.8-point boost, and supporters get a 3-point penalty.

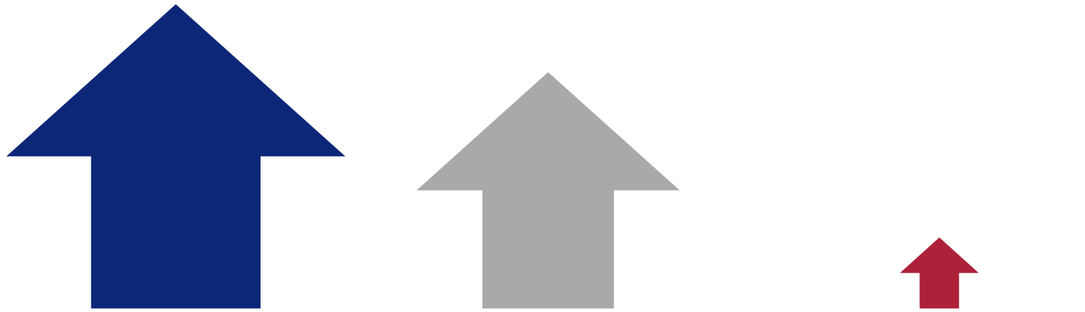


Supports data centers

Opposes data centers

Opposing data centers gives candidates a boost with voters from across the political spectrum; but this boost is four times bigger among Democrats than Republicans.

Impact on support from opposing data centers by party ID

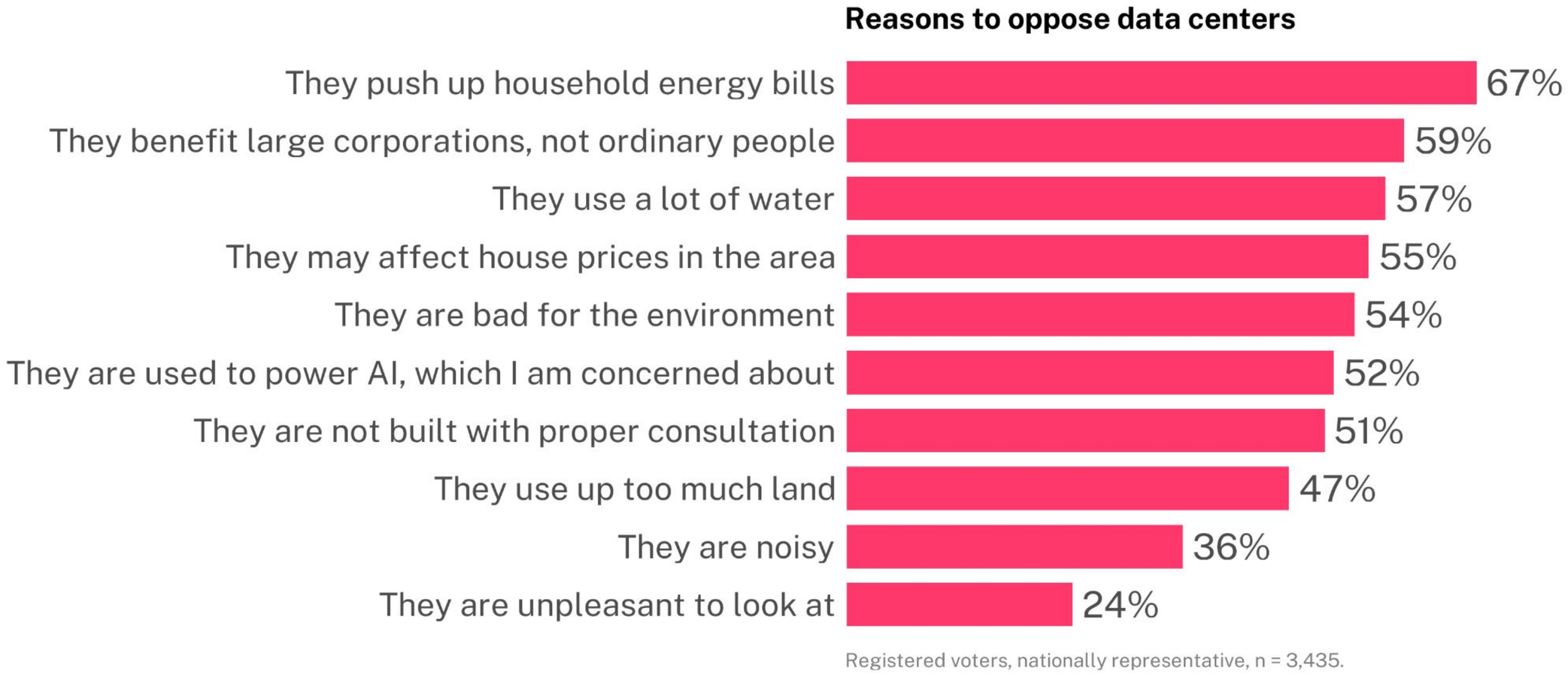


6.0
Democrats

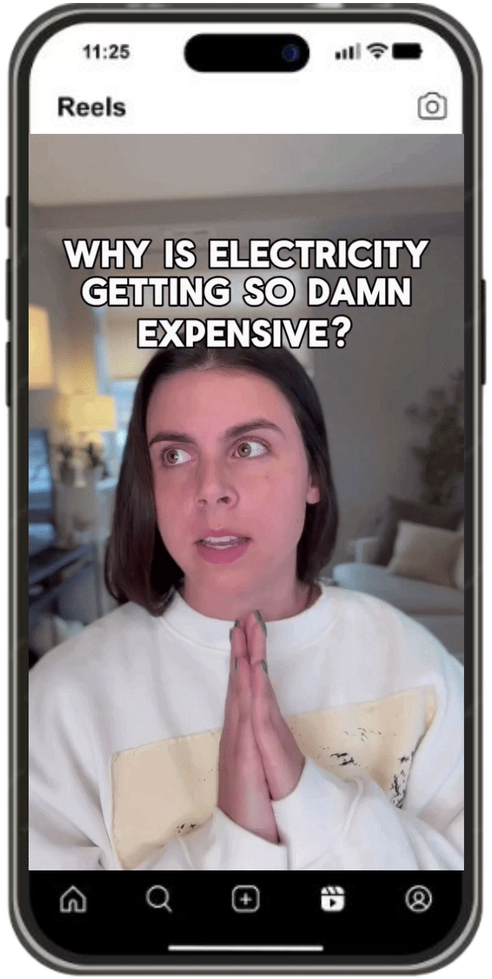
4.6
Independents

1.4
Republicans

Voters are more concerned about the impact of data centers on their cost of living than disruption in their local areas



Underlying it all are strong feelings of unfairness and distrust



Extraction

They take "our" resources

"They use up our resources, taking from the communities they invade."

Democrat, South Carolina

Unfairness

We pay, they benefit

"Because who's going to pay for it? The people, not the companies. They make billions and still would knock our bills up to pay for it instead of them paying it themselves."

Republican, North Carolina

Distrust

They don't keep their promises

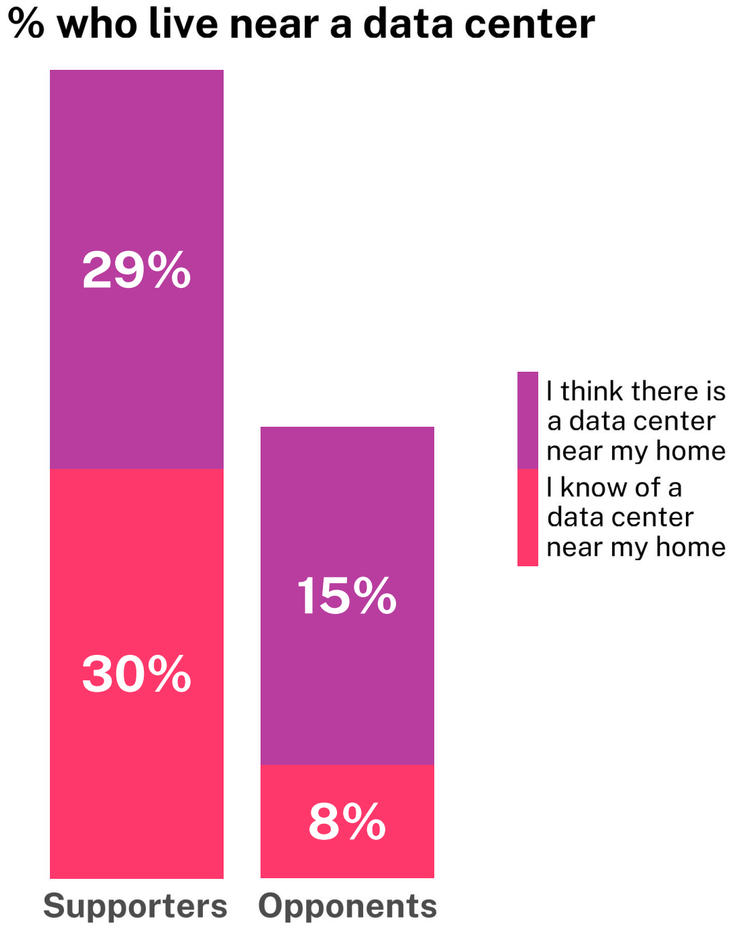
"They make big promises on how much good they will bring to an area and, so far, every time one has been approved, none of those promises are followed up."

Independent, Texas

Most critics of data centers say they don't actually live near one

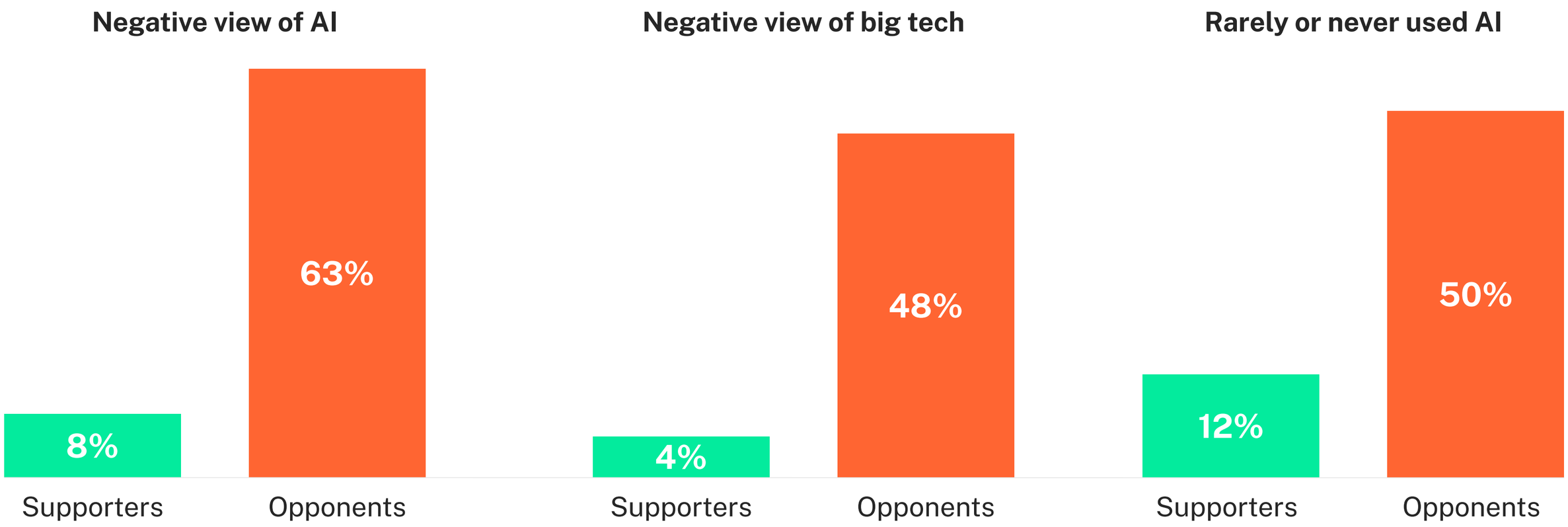
Opposition is more than just NIMBYism. In fact, only 8% of opponents report living near a data center, compared to 30% of supporters.

- 8% of data center opponents know there's a data center in their local area, and 15% more *think* there might be.
- Most supporters of data centers either know they live near one (30%) or think they do (29%).
- Meaning supporters are almost four times more likely to say there's a data center near their home than opponents.



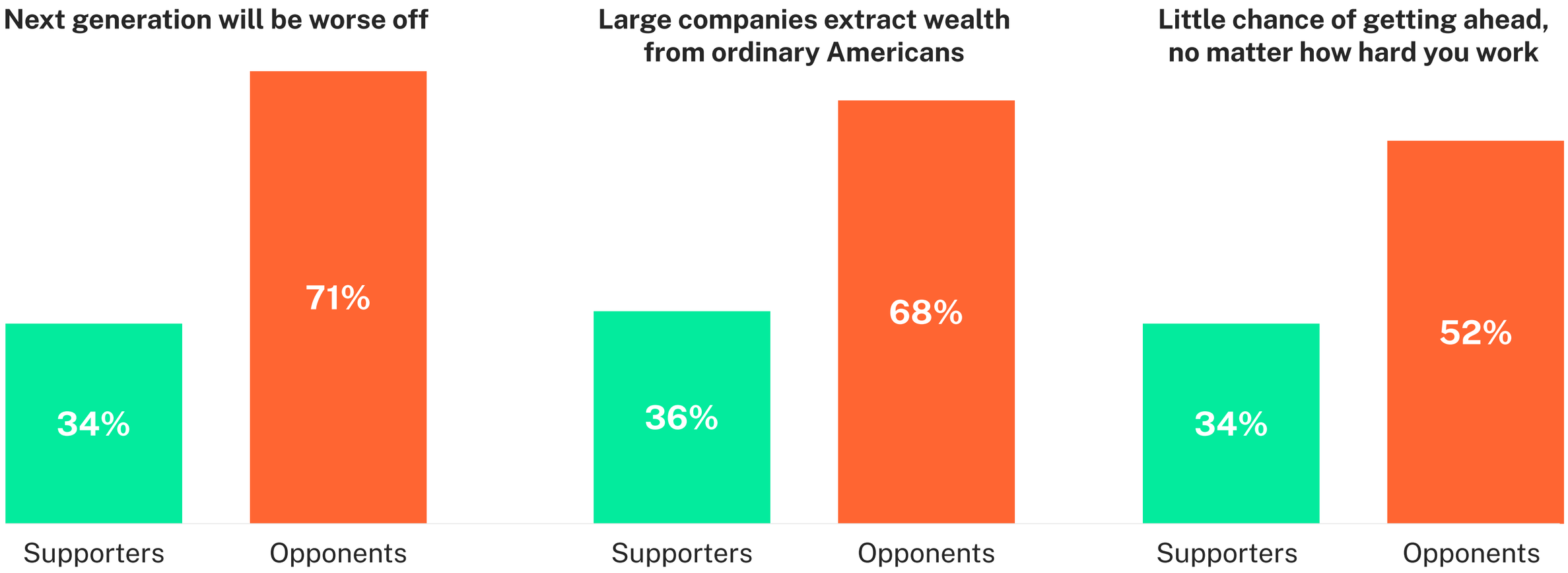
Registered voters, nationally representative. Supporters n=427, Opponents n=391.

Instead, opposition to data centers is driven by antipathy towards AI, and a distrust of tech more widely



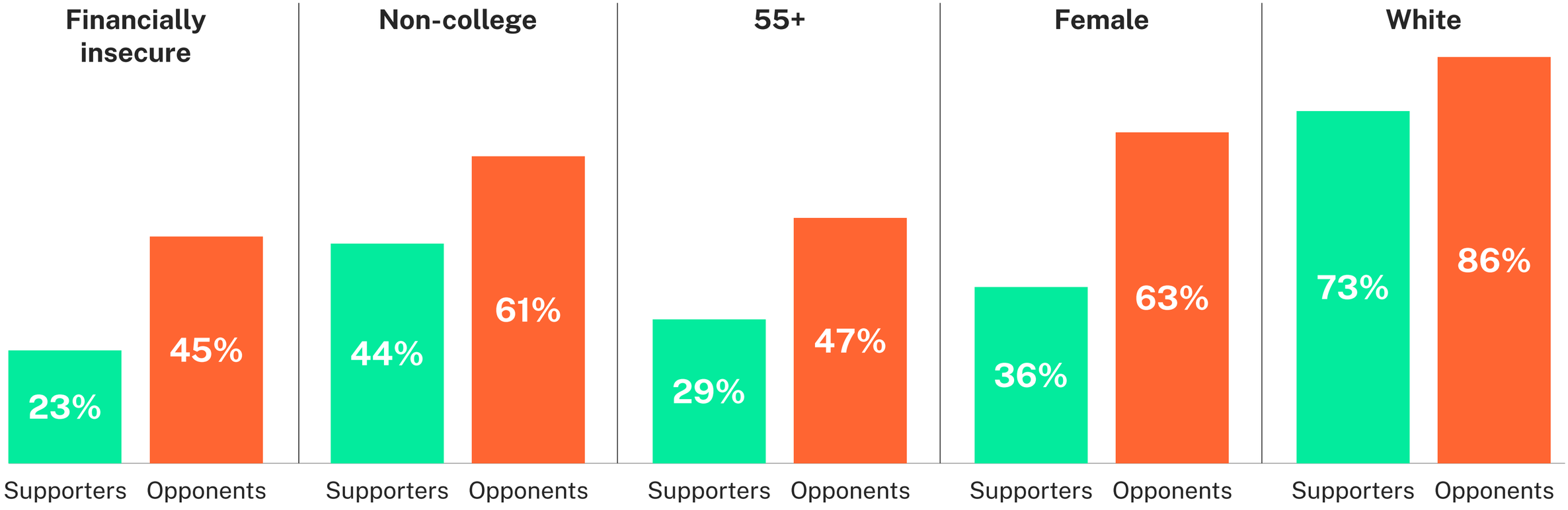
Registered voters, nationally representative. Supporters n=427, Opponents n=391.

Opponents share a deep dissatisfaction with the economic status quo



Registered voters, nationally representative. Supporters n=427, Opponents n=391.

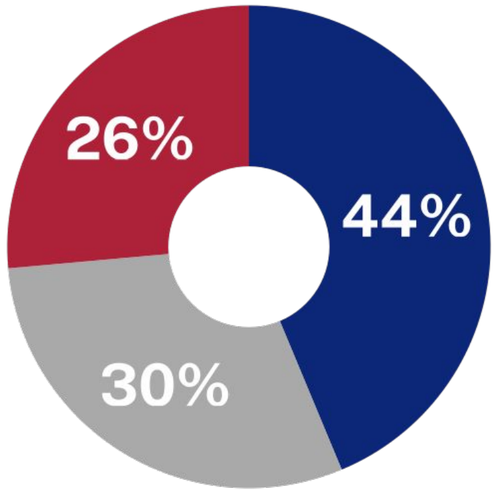
Data centers have most to fear from Michigan Moms — opponents are more likely to be white, non-college-educated women, many of whom feel financially insecure



Registered voters, nationally representative. Supporters n=427, Opponents n=391.

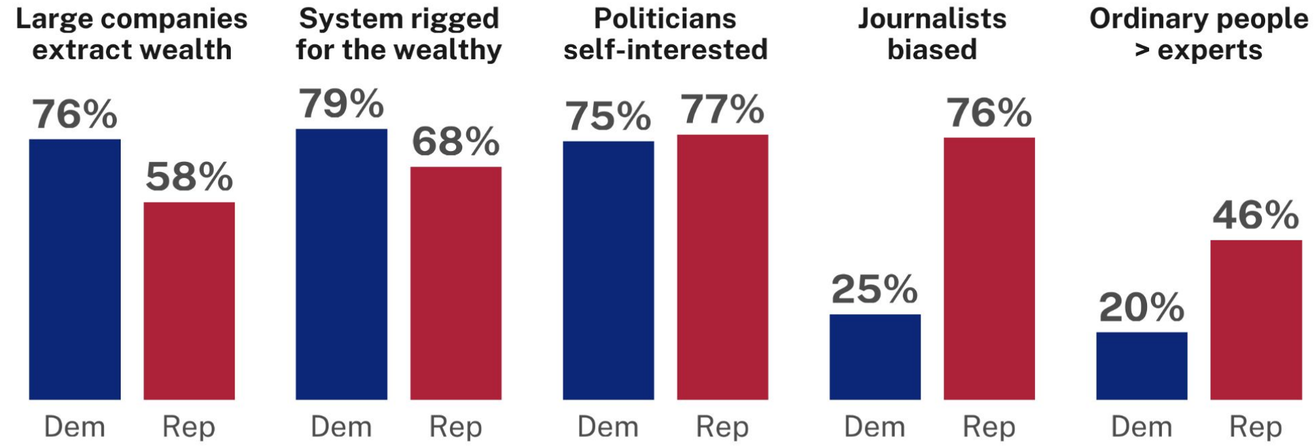
Opposition to data centers unites populists on both the left and the right

Opponents skew Democratic — but there is Republican data center opposition as well.



Democratic and Republican opponents are united by a populist worldview, with Dem opponents more economic-populist, and Rep opponents more anti-institution.

Populist worldview among Democrat vs. Republican data center opponents



Registered voters, nationally representative. DC opponents (Q2 4-5) only. Dem n=165, Rep n=116.

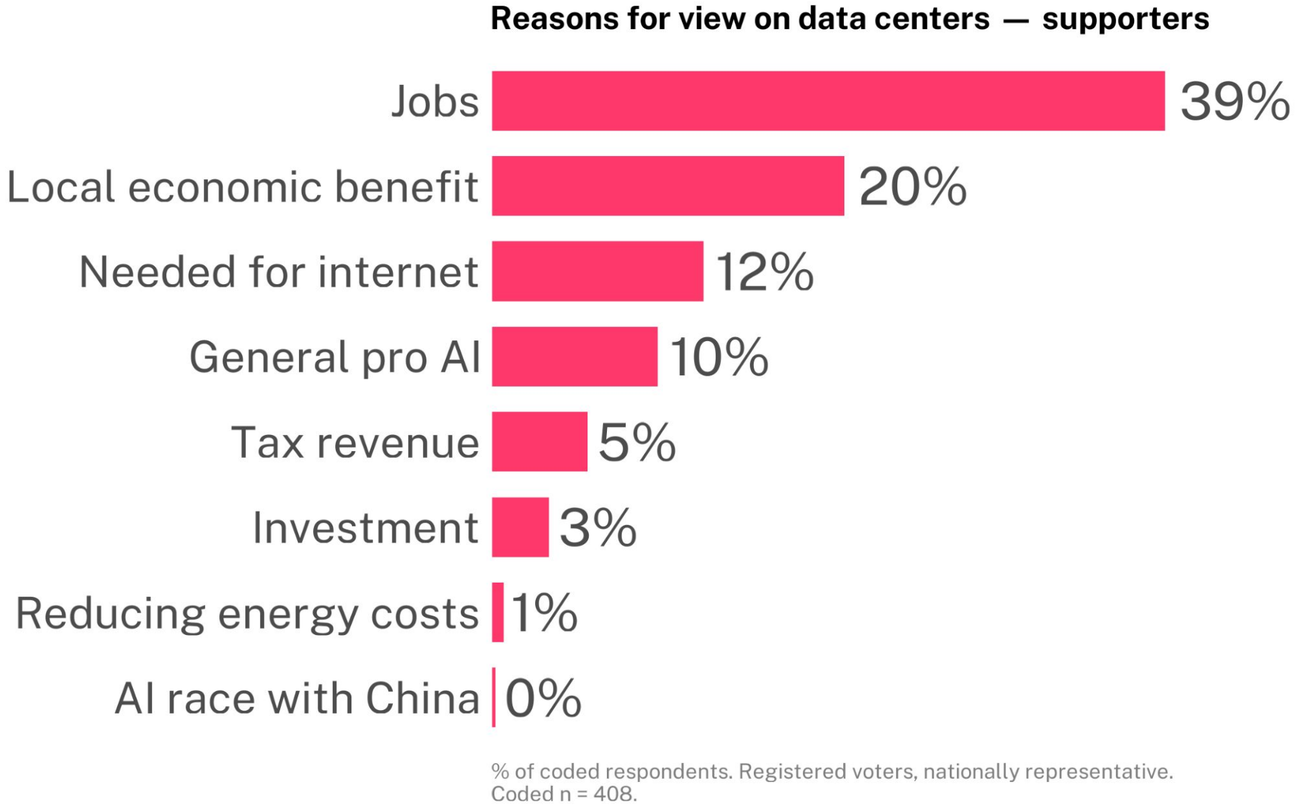
WINNING THE ARGUMENT

The tech sector needs to rediscover a winning message on the economy

Opponents express both economic and environmental concerns about data centers.

While both need to be addressed, only the economic benefit of the buildout is a potential winning territory.

- Economic insecurity is widespread, and is driving much of the backlash.
- The economy should be an advantage for the tech sector — but it currently finds itself on the back foot.
- The question is: how best to make that argument to a skeptical public?



% of coded respondents. Registered voters, nationally representative.
Coded n = 408.

The best way to do this? Make the case for how the data center buildout can help address the affordability crisis

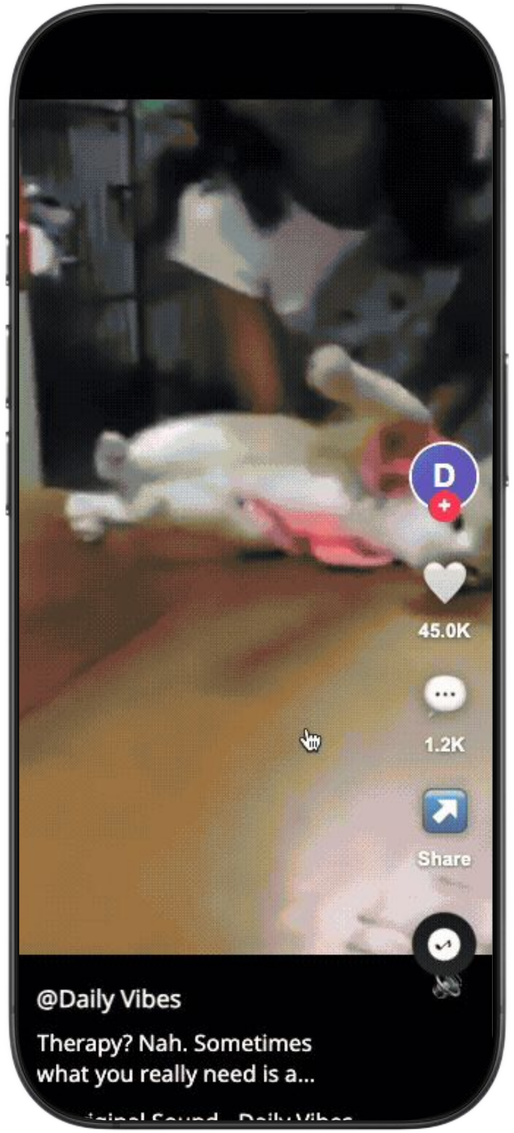
We tested 5 positive messages for their effect on support for data centers:

Message tested	Impact
New data centers can help families save money *When done right, new data center projects can help local families save money — by making local tax contributions, agreeing to keep utility costs down, and investing in the energy infrastructure that local communities need. Taken together, that means data centers can help ease the affordability pressure on local families.*	+11.4
Benefits of AI *We all benefit from new technology every day. It helps connect us with loved ones and makes life and work more convenient. AI is the next step. AI may be controversial for some, but it's already helping doctors catch cancer earlier, scientists develop new medicines, and ordinary people get more done in less time. To take advantage of this, it's crucial that we build the data centers the country needs to make AI an advantage for all.*	+9.8
Local economic benefits *It's important that Americans all over the country, not just in big cities, feel the benefits of investment in technology. New data center projects do exactly that — they benefit the communities in which they're built, by providing high-skilled jobs, apprenticeships, and investment in local areas. Giving back to local people who might otherwise get left behind.*	+8.9
America's tradition of innovation *America became the greatest country on earth by building the railroads, highways, and power lines the country needed. We can't afford to slow down now. To keep ahead in today's technological age, America needs to build the new data centers we need to power up American businesses, and continue leading the world.*	+8.8
Winning the AI race with China *China is racing to build data centers to power the next generation of AI. The US can't afford to fall behind. If we don't keep up, we risk China taking the lead on this powerful technology, capturing the benefits, and leaving us to face the risks. We need to work together to keep America ahead.*	+8.8

An affordability pitch also has the strongest cut-through in a busy social media feed

Attention matters too — and so we also showed each message in the context of simulated social media video feeds.

Message tested	Cut-through score
New data centers can help save money	55.8
Winning the AI race with China	37.9
Benefits of AI	37.6
Local economic benefits	36.6
America's tradition of innovation	34.0



Our winning message focused on affordability at the individual level; with cost resonating more than renewables

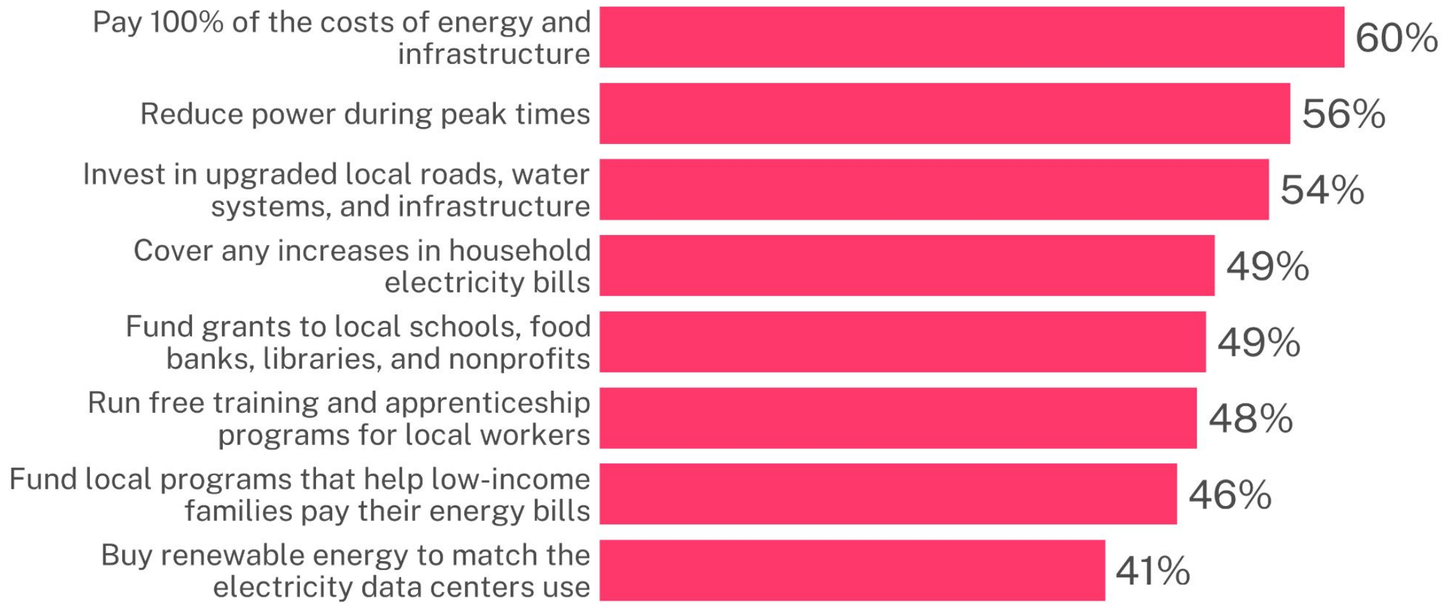
The most persuasive message argued that data center investment helps save you money in the long run.

New data centers can help save money - text tested:

When done right, new data center projects can help local families save money — by making local tax contributions, agreeing to keep utility costs down, and investing in the energy infrastructure that local communities need. Taken together, that means data centers can help ease the affordability pressure on local families.

Top pledges put money back in voters' pockets — a pledge on energy costs tests better than pledges on local services or renewable energy.

Pledges - % finding each of the following convincing



Pledges assessed pairwise. Registered voters, nationally representative, n = 3,435.

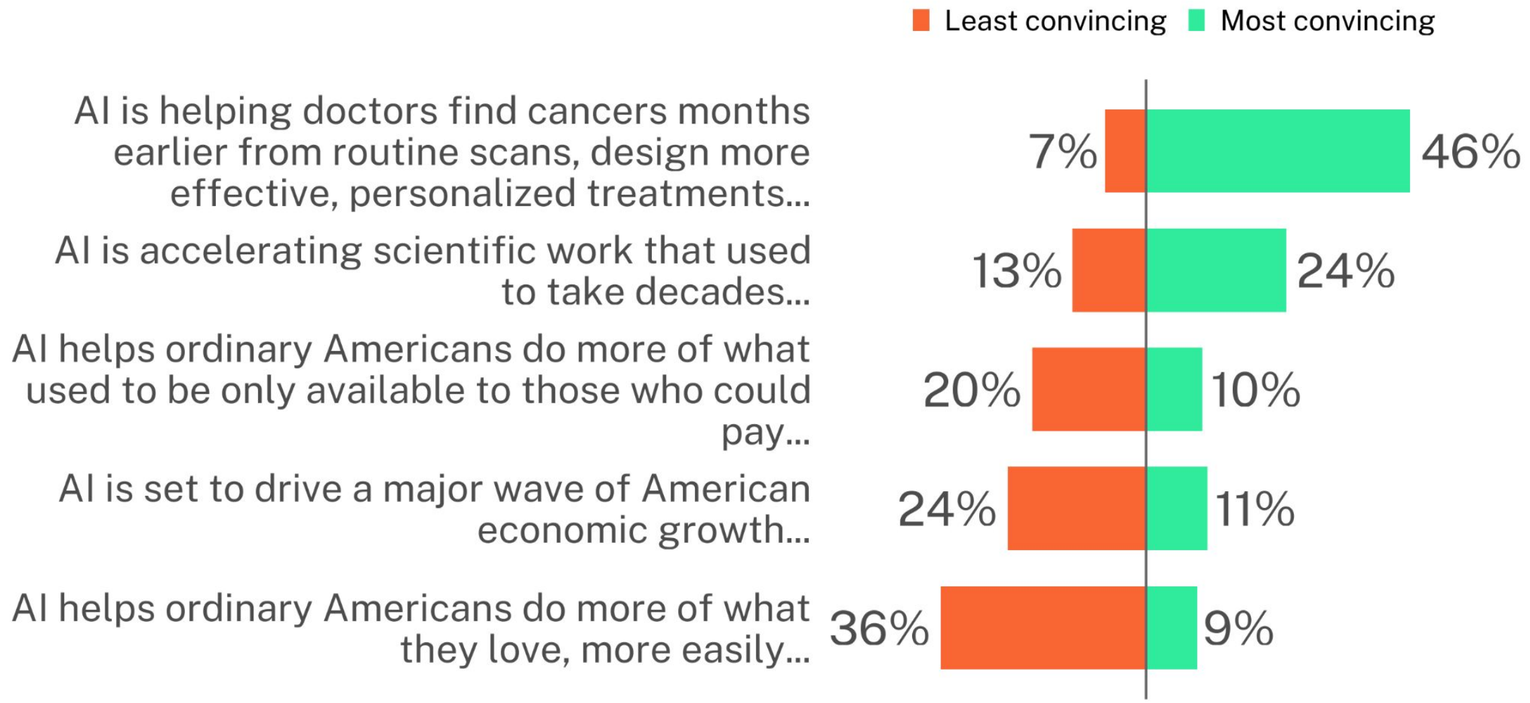
Winning the argument on data centers will also require a stronger case for the benefits of AI — in terms that are concrete and immediate

Our second-most-successful message argued for data centers by promoting the benefits of AI more broadly.

Benefits of AI message - text tested:

We all benefit from new technology every day. It helps connect us with loved ones and makes life and work more convenient. AI is the next step. AI may be controversial for some, but it's already helping doctors catch cancer earlier, scientists develop new medicines, and ordinary people get more done in less time. To take advantage of this, it's crucial that we build the data centers the country needs to make AI an advantage for all.

Effective proof-points emphasize AI's impact on medical diagnosis, healthcare, and science — not just economic growth at the national level.



Registered voters, nationally representative, n = 708.

Convincing rebuttals to water concerns explain closed-loop cooling, rather than contextualize water usage

It's more effective to respond to water concerns by highlighting action taken — particularly closed-loop cooling and reclaimed wastewater — than by contextualizing usage.

- Addressing concerns about data centers' water usage matters — these are widespread among opponents.
- The most effective way to do so by far is explaining how data centers recycle water and wastewater.
- Trying to contextualize water use with comparisons to other industries is much less effective.

Responses to water concerns, ranked by % finding each convincing.
"Data centers..."

...cool their sites using **reclaimed wastewater**	64%
...run on **closed-loop cooling** that recycles the same water	61%
...use less water than 1% of America's irrigated corn	45%
...use less than half the water of a single golf course	44%
...use 0.2% of America's freshwater	43%
...only use a fraction of the water a single farm uses on a hot afternoon	40%
...equal only 3% of the golf industry's water consumption	39%
Playing PlayStation for an hour uses as much water as 200 AI prompts	27%

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Recap: Implications

01

The argument needs to be won nationally, not just locally.

Data center proponents need to engage in the national debate that is fueling opposition. Local campaigns won't be enough on their own.

02

Tech needs an affordability agenda.

The most persuasive pro-data-center messaging links investment to affordability, showing how the buildout keeps local residents' costs down long term.

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Act on water concerns, don't just contextualize usage.

Addressing concerns by trying to contextualize data centers' water use doesn't work. Pledging to use recycled wastewater is more effective.

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Make the benefits of AI feel immediate and concrete.

To be persuaded of the value of data centers, voters need a stronger case for why AI will benefit them. They need immediate, tangible use cases — for example, on healthcare.

A sample of tactical ideas

“Tech Has Always Made Life More Affordable”

Tell a multi-format story linking technology’s past, present, and future around a consistent theme of affordability — how tech has always helped ordinary people save money.

“From the Data Center to the Doctor’s Office”

Run hyper-local ads with live, updating data on the number of AI-enabled scans conducted at their local hospital — made possible by their nearby data center.

“The Data Center Dividend”

Mail nearby households with a frank statement of ‘the deal’, outlining both the likely community impact and the ‘data center dividend’ of savings in energy bills and local tax revenue.

THANK YOU

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss our findings further, please get in touch:

- San Francisco: Rich Appleton and Tom Brookes
- Washington, D.C.: Ben Greenstone
- New York City: Kate Jeffers
- London: Isabelle De Pauw and Joe Alder