

THE SILENT MAJORITY

Voter optimism about artificial intelligence
and the opportunity it creates for
policymakers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AI optimists outnumber pessimists two to one. In a national survey of 1,000 voters conducted by Build American AI with JL Partners from Aug. 27 to 31, 2026, 61% described themselves as optimistic, either “very” or “cautiously,” about artificial intelligence and 31% described themselves as pessimistic. Conservatives were the most optimistic about AI with Republicans at 73%, independents at 59% and Democrats at 51%. Among voters who have actually used AI, optimism reached 75%.¹

This landmark finding seemingly contradicts the narrative many Americans have been hearing about AI over the past year, which has been dominated by local opposition to data center construction and fear about the potential of massive job loss. These two differing perceptions about AI demonstrate a wide gap between narratives around AI and data centers on social and earned media and the lived experience of voters across the country.

Voters, for example, distinguish sharply between what AI does and how it is being built. Asked about seven practical applications, majorities supported every single one, and opposition never exceeded 30%. Asked about data centers, 62% favored allowing construction when that development was contextualized by the community benefits and protections that would come with it, while only 25% favored prohibiting construction under all circumstances. This majority crossed party lines at 71% of Republicans, 61% of independents and 53% of Democrats.²

AI OPTIMISM BY GROUP

% Optimistic



When the narrative around data center development and the use of AI is grounded by tangible, localized impact instead of discussion of AI in the abstract, voters are more open to it. Simply put, voters are not withholding permission for the AI buildout. They are asking for terms, and no one has offered them a credible set.

The opposition that dominates coverage is real, but is less substantial than its volume suggests. Only 16% of Americans tell CBS News and YouGov that they know a lot about data centers, and 27% say they know nothing.³ A quarter of respondents in one knowledge test could not correctly identify what a data center is.⁴ When Echelon Insights specified real benefits, support for banning new data centers fell from 52% to 33% and opinion flipped to a 54% to 34% majority for allowing them.⁵

Voters recognize that the physical infrastructure that AI requires has the potential to bring change to their hometowns. Indeed, data center construction reached a \$75.2 billion annual rate in July, up 57.2% year over year, one of the fastest-growing major categories of nonresidential construction and still growing.⁶ Order backlogs for the transformers, switchgear and cooling systems the buildout requires are at record levels, and new factories to fill them are under construction in Virginia, Ohio, North Carolina and Texas.^{7,8,9} Federal labor statisticians now attribute projected growth in power-line work explicitly to grid upgrades supporting AI and data centers.¹⁰

What voters want in exchange is specific and consistent. They want a national set of rules, by 76% in one national survey.⁹ Voters want commitments that they know will benefit them.

¹ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

² Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

³ CBS News and YouGov, "Americans on data centers in their area," survey of 2,023 adults, June 2 to 4, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-data-centers-in-their-area-opinion-poll/>

⁴ Public First for Politico E&E News, "What do people know about data centers? We explain in 5 charts," February 13, 2026. <https://www.eenews.net/articles/what-do-people-know-about-data-centers-we-explain-in-5-charts/>

⁵ Echelon Insights, "August 2026 Verified Voter Omnibus," survey of 1,002 voters in the likely electorate, Aug. 13 to 17, 2026. <https://echeloninsights.com/insights/august-2026-verified-voter-omnibus>

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Value of Construction Put in Place," July 2026 data released September 1, 2026. <https://www.census.gov/construction/c30/current/index.html>

⁷ Hitachi Energy, "Hitachi Energy breaks ground on the nation's largest facility for the production of large power transformers in South Boston, Virginia," June 29, 2026, <https://www.hitachienergy.com/us/en/news-and-events/press-releases/2026/06/hitachi-energy-breaks-ground-on-the-nation-s-largest-facility-for-the-production-of-large-power-transformers-in-south-boston-virginia>

⁸ Schneider Electric, "Schneider Electric plans to invest over \$700 million in the U.S., supporting energy, AI sectors and job growth," March 25, 2025, <https://www.se.com/us/en/about-us/newsroom/news/press-releases/Schneider-Electric-Plans-to-Invest-Over-700-million-in-the-U-S-Supporting-Energy-AI-Sectors-and-Job-Growth-67bdeb3ee4475a5955011b6a;>

⁹ Vertiv, "Vertiv to Expand Ohio Manufacturing to Boost U.S. Production of Critical Thermal Management Technologies for AI Data Centers," March 30, 2026, <https://investors.vertiv.com/news/news-details/2026/Vertiv-to-Expand-Ohio-Manufacturing-to-Boost-U-S--Production-of-Critical-Thermal-Management-Technologies-for-AI-Data-Centers/default.aspx>

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Line Installers and Repairers," Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2025 to 2035 projections. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/installation-maintenance-and-repair/line-installers-and-repairers.htm>

¹¹ Morning Consult for TechNet, "New Poll: 76% of Voters Prefer a Single National AI Development Policy," survey of 2,056 registered voters, June 3 and 4, 2025. <https://www.technet.org/media/new-poll-76-of-voters-prefer-a-single-national-ai-development-policy/>

KEY TAKEAWAYS

OPTIMISM RUNS TWO TO ONE AND CROSSES PARTY LINES.

Voters are optimistic about AI over pessimistic by 61% to 31%, with majorities in every partisan group. Most of that optimism is measured rather than enthusiastic, at 41% cautiously optimistic against 20% very optimistic, which makes it more durable rather than less.¹²

SUPPORT FOR DATA CENTERS IS CONDITIONAL, NOT ABSENT.

By 62% to 25%, voters favor allowing data center construction with agreed community benefits and protections over prohibiting it outright. Independent polling produces the same pattern. Specifying benefits moves majorities from opposition to support.¹³

THE REPORTED VERDICT IS THINNER THAN IT LOOKS.

Public knowledge of data centers is low, uncertainty in the polling is high, and opinion has moved at a speed characteristic of attitudes that have not yet hardened. The questions being asked almost never include a trade-off.

VOTERS HAVE ALREADY CHOSEN ONE NATIONAL RULEBOOK.

Large and bipartisan majorities prefer uniform federal AI rules to a state-by-state patchwork, and want voluntary industry commitments written into binding law.¹⁴

¹² Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

¹³ Echelon Insights, "August 2026 Verified Voter Omnibus," survey of 1,002 voters in the likely electorate, Aug. 13 to 17, 2026. <https://echeloninsights.com/insights/august-2026-verified-voter-omnibus>

¹⁴ Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy, "Data Centers: Voters Are Persuadable, But They Want Accountability and Clean Energy," survey of 1,010 registered voters, May 17 and 18, 2026. <https://www.raineycenter.org/polling/data-centers-voters-are-persuadable-but-they-want-accountability-and-clean-energy>

PART ONE

OPTIMISTS OUTNUMBER PESSIMISTS TWO TO ONE

The single most consequential number in Build American AI's national survey is also the one least reflected in the current debate. Asked directly whether they feel optimistic or pessimistic about artificial intelligence, 61% of voters were optimistic and 31% were pessimistic.¹⁵

The character of optimism toward AI matters as much as its size. Only 20% of voters describe themselves as very optimistic. The larger share, 41%, describes itself as cautiously optimistic. This should not be mistaken for voter enthusiasm for AI. It is the considered view of people who expect a powerful technology capable of delivering real benefits.

SUPPORT IS BROAD ACROSS AI'S ACTUAL CAPABILITIES

Voters were polled on seven applications of AI and found majority support for all of them. Translation tools for travelers and refugees drew 61% support against 15% opposition. New breakthroughs in math and science drew 59% against 19%. Helping small businesses grow and do more with less drew 59% against 20%. Developing new drugs and medicines drew 56% against 23%, accessible education for students around the world 55% against 24%, improving the efficiency of business and commerce 54% against 23%, and aiding military and defense 51% against 30%.¹⁶

Support is highest where AI extends human capability in a visible way and lowest where its purpose is abstract or contested. In other words, voters register the value of AI when it is defined for them in ways that can meaningfully improve their lives.

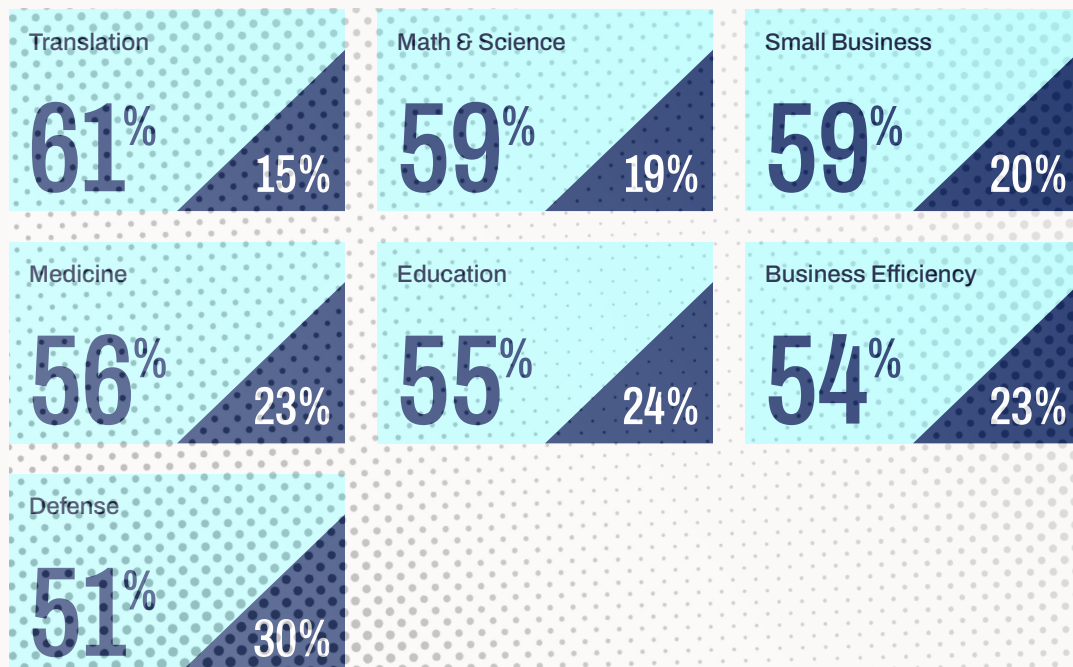
¹⁵ Sivakumar, S., et al., "FDA Approval of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning Devices in Radiology: A Systematic Review," JAMA Network Open, Nov. 7, 2025. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2841066>

¹⁶ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

SUPPORT FOR SPECIFIC AI APPLICATIONS

% Voters

Support
Opposition



VOTERS ALREADY CREDIT AI WITH CONCRETE RESULTS

Optimism about AI is not purely prospective. Fifty-eight percent of voters say AI is already helping deliver breakthroughs in medicine and other scientific research. Asked which achievements improve their view of AI, with up to three selections permitted, voters put new medicines first (37%), assistance for people with disabilities second (30%) and earlier disease detection third (29%). Asked where they expect the most progress, medicine again ranked first at 24%, followed by scientific research at 14%.¹⁷

Voters' desire to see AI used to advance progress in medicine has already been met with concrete results. A Build American AI report released earlier this year found that radiology accounts for 723 of the 950 AI and machine learning medical devices authorized by the Food and Drug Administration through 2024,¹⁸ and in the MASAI randomized trial published in *The Lancet*, AI-supported breast screening reduced radiologist reading workload by 44% while achieving higher sensitivity at the same specificity.¹⁹ The radiologist workforce in Medicare-affiliated practices meanwhile grew 17.3% between 2014 and 2023, according to the Harvey L. Neiman Health Policy Institute,²⁰ over the decade in which the technology was predicted to eliminate the profession. Voters who say AI is helping deliver medical breakthroughs are describing something that has already happened.

¹⁷ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

¹⁸ Joshi, G., et al., "Regulatory Landscape of FDA-Authorized Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning Medical Devices," *JAMA Network Open*, 2025. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2841066>

¹⁹ Build American AI, "AI, Radiology, and the Future of Jobs," July 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org/reports/ai-radiology-and-the-future-of-jobs>

²⁰ Harvey L. Neiman Health Policy Institute, "Consolidation Patterns of Practices with Radiologists through 2023." <https://www.neimanhpi.org/press-releases/consolidation-patterns-of-practices-with-radiologists-through-2023/>

OPTIMISM IS GROUNDED IN USE

69% of voters have reported using AI, including 71% of Republicans, 67% of Democrats and 68% of independents. 47% use it at least weekly and 30% daily. 60% say it has helped them find information faster and 53% say it has helped them learn or understand a topic better.²¹ The 14-point gap between optimism among AI users at 75% and optimism overall at 61% is the clearest signal in the survey about which direction sentiment moves as familiarity grows.

Independent data on adoption points the same way. The Census Bureau's Business Trends and Outlook Survey, which draws from an annual sampling frame of roughly 1.2 million businesses surveyed across six rotating panels, found AI use between 17% and 20% of firms in its December 2025 through May 2026 collection window, rising with firm size to 37% among businesses with 250 or more employees.²² The JPMorganChase Institute, analyzing de-identified transaction records from 4.6 million small businesses rather than relying on self-report, found adoption rising from 1.7% in January 2019 to 17.7% in December 2025.²³ The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas found in May 2026 that 66.7% of surveyed Texas firms use AI, that 76.4% report no change in their need for workers and that 71.4% report productivity gains.²⁴

THERE IS A GAP BETWEEN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND NATIONAL PERCEPTION

Americans consistently report better outcomes for themselves when using AI than they predict for the country. Economist and YouGov polling conducted from May 29 to June 1, 2026 found respondents split 37% positive to 35% negative on what AI will do in their own lives while running considerably more negative on what it will do to the economy.²⁵ Similarly, Fox News, in a survey of 1,001 registered voters conducted March 20 to 23, 2026 by Beacon Research and Shaw and Company Research with a margin of error of 3 points, found that 69% of employed voters were not concerned about losing their own job to AI within five years.²⁶

In other words, while individuals are readily adopting AI and reporting positive experiences on a personal level, they simultaneously are expressing concern about potential harm the technology could inflict on society. Their optimism, therefore, is informed by personal experience and their fears are developed elsewhere.

²¹ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

²² U.S. Census Bureau, "Large Firms With at Least 20 Employees Biggest AI Users," Business Trends and Outlook Survey, May 2026. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2026/05/ai-use-businesses.html>

²³ JPMorganChase Institute, "Understanding the use of AI among small businesses," April 14, 2026. <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/institute/all-topics/business-growth-and-entrepreneurship/understanding-ai-use-by-small-businesses>

²⁴ Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, "Texas Business Outlook Surveys special questions," May 12 to 20, 2026. <https://www.dallasfed.org/research/surveys/tbos/2026/2605q>

²⁵ The Economist and YouGov, national survey, May 29 to June 1, 2026. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/economy/trackers>

²⁶ Fox News Poll, conducted by Beacon Research and Shaw and Company Research, survey of 1,001 registered voters, March 20 to 23, 2026. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-broad-anxiety-about-ai-doesnt-extend-jobs>

DATA CENTERS POLL FAVORABLY WHEN COMMUNITIES CAN SEE THEIR BENEFIT

The underlying assumption running through most current coverage is that whatever voters think of AI in the abstract, they have rendered a settled negative judgment on the physical infrastructure it requires. Build American AI's survey finds something more nuanced. By 62% to 25%, voters favor allowing data centers to be built when they are paired community benefits and common-sense guardrails. Within that 62%, the great majority, 51 points of it, comes from voters who favor construction when the input of the communities hosting data centers is included, against 11 points from voters who think construction should generally be allowed, regardless of that input.²⁷

Simply put, a large majority of American voters, including a majority of Democratic ones, are supportive of data center development when conditions that benefit their host communities are attached. Currently, there is no universal framework that ensures those conditions are put in place.

PART TWO

THE OPPOSITION IS REAL, BUT NOT CONCRETE

Any honest account of public opinion in 2026 has to begin by conceding the obvious. Multiple independent surveys have found majority opposition to building a data center. Gallup, interviewing 1,000 adults by telephone from March 2 to 18, 2026 with a margin of error of 4 points, found 27% in favor and 71% opposed.²⁸

These opinions are by no means load bearing. Upon closer inspection, these sentiments have not yet calcified, leaving elected leaders the opportunity to change the narrative.

²⁷ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

²⁸ Gallup, "Americans Oppose AI Data Centers in Their Area," survey of 1,000 adults, March 2 to 18, 2026, published May 13, 2026. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/709772/americans-oppose-data-centers-area.aspx>

THERE IS ROOM FOR AI EDUCATION

CBS News and YouGov, surveying 2,023 adults from June 2 to 4, 2026 with a margin of error of 2.8 points, asked Americans how much they felt they knew about data centers. 16% percent said a lot, 57% said a little and 27% said nothing. On the central question of whether they favored or opposed local construction, 30% of the same sample answered that they were not sure, which is an unusually large undecided share for an issue described as dominating an election cycle.²⁹

Pew Research Center, surveying 8,512 adults on its American Trends Panel from Jan. 20 to 26, 2026, found 25% had heard a lot about data centers and 25% had heard nothing at all, with the share answering that they were not sure ranging from 17% to 27% across five questions about local conditions.³⁰ Public First, testing knowledge directly rather than asking people to assess it, found for Politico in February 2026 that only 21% of more than 2,000 respondents were very confident they understood what a data center is, that roughly a quarter either did not know or answered inaccurately, and that 36% neither supported nor opposed one within three miles of their home.³¹

Regardless of how informed voters are on data centers, their concerns are legitimate and have the capacity to shape elections, public policy and how the AI build out unfolds. Their concerns, while not settled conclusions, need to be addressed by public officials who wish to build data centers in their communities.



²⁹ CBS News and YouGov, "Americans on data centers in their area," survey of 2,023 adults, June 2 to 4, 2026. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/americans-data-centers-in-their-area-opinion-poll/>

³⁰ Pew Research Center, "How Americans View Data Centers' Role in Key Areas, From the Environment to Jobs," American Trends Panel survey of 8,512 adults, Jan. 20 to 26, 2026. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/03/12/how-americans-view-data-centers-impact-in-key-areas-from-the-environment-to-jobs/>

³¹ Public First for Politico E&E News, "What do people know about data centers? We explain in 5 charts," February 13, 2026. <https://www.eenews.net/articles/what-do-people-know-about-data-centers-we-explain-in-5-charts/>

POLLING ON AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD DATA CENTER CONSTRUCTION LACKS THE CONTEXT OF REAL IMPACT

Nearly all published polling on data centers asks a single unconditional question: would you favor or oppose one being built in your area. No cost is specified, no benefit is specified, no alternative use of the land or the electricity is offered for comparison. The result is a measure of unpriced preference, and unpriced preference on any development question tends toward no.

Echelon Insights, surveying 1,002 voters in the likely electorate from Aug. 13 to 17, 2026 with a margin of error of 3.4 points, asked the question both ways. Asked without conditions whether state and local officials should ban new data centers or allow them, respondents chose a ban by 52% to 33%. Asked whether they should be allowed if the companies pay their own infrastructure costs so that local electricity bills do not rise, the same electorate flipped to 54% for allowing against 34% for banning. Three further versions, attaching property tax reductions, school funding and reduced water usage, produced 53% or 54% for allowing and 34% for banning in every case.³¹

The consistency of that 34% across four unrelated benefits is itself informative. What moves voters is the presence of terms rather than any particular concession, which is precisely what Build American AI found at the national level and what 66% support for requiring community benefit agreements, recorded in the Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy's survey of 1,010 registered voters conducted May 17 and 18, 2026, found from a different direction.³²

THE AMPLIFICATION OF AI CONCERNS, RATHER THAN THE CONCERNS THEMSELVES, SHAPES PUBLIC OPINION

The information environment in which these attitudes formed can be measured, and it has been. An analysis using Meltwater sentiment tools, reported by Forbes in August 2026, examined 804,426 news articles and 1,511,077 posts on X published between Jan. 1 and Aug. 17, 2026 across 10 states with significant data center activity. News coverage sentiment registered net positive in all 10 states. Social media sentiment registered net negative in all 10. Social volume ran between two and six times news volume.³³

That distribution is what the research literature on public risk perception would predict. Agenda-setting theory, established by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in Public Opinion Quarterly in 1972, holds that heavy coverage of an issue raises its salience even where it does not determine the direction

³² Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy, "Data Centers: Voters Are Persuadable, But They Want Accountability and Clean Energy," survey of 1,010 registered voters, May 17 and 18, 2026. <https://www.raineycenter.org/polling/data-centers-voters-are-persuadable-but-they-want-accountability-and-clean-energy>

³³ Ahrens, F., "Social Media vs. The News: What Data Center Executives Need To Know," Forbes, August 19, 2026. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/frankahrens/2026/08/19/social-media-vs-the-news-what-data-center-executives-need-to-know/>

³⁴ McCombs, M. E., and Shaw, D. L., "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36(2), 1972. <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article-abstract/36/2/176/1853310>

of opinion.³⁴ The social amplification of risk framework, set out by Roger Kasperson and colleagues in *Risk Analysis* in 1988, describes how a hazard's signal is magnified as it passes through social and communication channels, producing public response disproportionate to the underlying risk assessment.³⁵ Timur Kuran and Cass Sunstein, writing in the *Stanford Law Review* in 1999, described the availability cascade, in which a belief becomes more plausible the more often it is expressed, generating regulatory pressure that outruns the evidence.³⁶ Stuart Soroka, Patrick Fournier and Lilach Nir, testing 1,156 participants across 17 countries for the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2019, found people on average more physiologically activated by negative news than by positive news, which supplies the demand that sustains the supply.³⁷

None of this says the public is wrong to have concerns. Rather, those concerns are being forged in a rapid, high-volume, platform-amplified information cycle that incentivizes fear-mongering and attention-grabbing headlines. In this setting, legitimate concerns that need to be addressed snowball into abstract doomsday scenarios that shape public opinion about AI.

³⁴ Kasperson, R. E., et al., "The Social Amplification of Risk: A Conceptual Framework," *Risk Analysis* 8(2), 1988. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1539-6924.1988.tb01168.x>

³⁵ Kuran, T., and Sunstein, C. R., "Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation," *Stanford Law Review* 51(4), 1999. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=138144

³⁶ Soroka, S., Fournier, P., and Nir, L., "Cross-national evidence of a negativity bias in psychophysiological reactions to news," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116(38), 2019. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1908369116>



PART THREE

DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT CAN PROVE THE BENEFITS AI BRINGS TO COMMUNITIES

Data centers are spurring a wave of construction across the United States. In fact, the development of data centers accounts for the largest form of nonresidential development in the country. The Census Bureau's construction spending release of Sept. 1, 2026 put private data center construction at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of \$75.2 billion in July, up 57.2% from \$47.8 billion a year earlier.

THE MANUFACTURING THE BUILDOUT REQUIRES IS EXPANDING NOW

The clearer measure of whether AI is generating industrial demand is what is happening to the companies that make the equipment. Federal Reserve industrial production data released Aug. 18, 2026 show output in electrical equipment, appliances and components up 6.2% year over year.³⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics employment data show the same sector adding 14,900 jobs over the year to reach 443,400 in August 2026, a gain of 3.5% in a year when total manufacturing employment was roughly flat.³⁹ Census Bureau data on manufacturers' orders show unfilled orders in the sector at \$55.2 billion in July, the highest level in the recent series, after two years of little movement.⁴⁰

³⁸ Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, "Industrial Production and Capacity Utilization G.17," released August 18, 2026. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g17/current/default.htm>

³⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Electrical Equipment, Appliance, and Component Manufacturing," Current Employment Statistics, August 2026. <https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag335.htm>

⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "Manufacturers' Shipments, Inventories and Orders," July 2026. <https://www.census.gov/manufacturing/m3>

Company disclosures show where that demand is concentrated. GE Vernova reported in July 2026 that its electrification backlog had risen 69% year over year to \$40.6 billion, within a total backlog of \$176 billion.⁴¹ Siemens Energy reported in August 2026 that its grid technologies backlog had reached a record 51 billion euros, driven principally by large power transformers, with United States data centers named as a steady source of demand.⁴² Eaton reported electrical backlogs up 33% in the Americas and 103% globally as of the end of June 2026.⁴³

New American plants are being built to fill those orders. Hitachi Energy broke ground in June 2026 on a \$457 million expansion in South Boston, Virginia, that the company describes as the nation's largest facility for producing large power transformers, adding roughly 825 jobs to a site that currently employs about 850.⁴⁴ Schneider Electric committed more than \$700 million through 2027 across eight United States sites including plants in Tennessee, Missouri, Ohio, Texas and North Carolina, with more than 1,000 associated jobs, the largest single capital commitment in its 135-year American history.⁴⁵ Vertiv announced a \$50 million expansion of its Ironton and Westerville, Ohio, operations in March 2026, adding up to 730 positions through 2029.⁴⁶

The development of AI is currently limited by the rate by which data centers can be constructed. Because of how quickly the technology developed, America was not ready for it. Market analysis published in May 2026 drawing on Wood Mackenzie data put lead times for generator step-up transformers at as long as four years, with demand for those units up 274% between 2019 and 2025 and prices up roughly 80% over the same period.⁴⁷ Siemens Energy has stated that its planned 50% increase in transformer and switchgear capacity will not arrive until 2030.⁴⁸ Hitachi Energy's Virginia plant comes online in 2028 and Vertiv's Ohio expansion is adding positions through 2029. The industrial capacity to build the AI economy is being ordered now and delivered later, which means the policy decisions that shape where it lands and who benefits are being made now as well.

AI HAS THE POTENTIAL TO REBUILD THE MIDDLE CLASS THROUGH AN EXPANSION OF THE TRADES

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment of electrical power-line installers and repairers to grow 10% between 2025 and 2035, adding 13,600 positions to a base of 131,900 with roughly 10,900

⁴¹ GE Vernova, second quarter 2026 results, July 22, 2026. <https://www.gevernova.com/investors>

⁴² Siemens Energy, third quarter fiscal year 2026 results, August 5, 2026. <https://www.siemens-energy.com/global/en/home/investor-relations.html>

⁴³ Eaton, "Eaton Reports Record Second Quarter 2026 Results," July 2026. <https://www.eaton.com/us/en-us/company/news-insights/news-releases/2026/eaton-reports-record-second-quarter-2026-results.html>

⁴⁴ Hitachi Energy, "Hitachi Energy breaks ground on the nation's largest facility for the production of large power transformers in South Boston, Virginia," June 29, 2026. <https://www.hitachienergy.com/us/en/news-and-events/press-releases/2026/06/hitachi-energy-breaks-ground-on-the-nation-s-largest-facility-for-the-production-of-large-power-transformers-in-south-boston-virginia>

⁴⁵ Schneider Electric, "Schneider Electric plans to invest over \$700 million in the U.S., supporting energy, AI sectors and job growth," March 25, 2025. <https://www.se.com/us/en/about-us/newsroom/news/press-releases/Schneider-Electric-Plans-to-Invest-Over-700-million-in-the-U-S-Supporting-Energy-AI-Sectors-and-Job-Growth-67bdeb3ee4475a5955011b6a>

⁴⁶ Vertiv, "Vertiv to Expand Ohio Manufacturing to Boost U.S. Production of Critical Thermal Management Technologies for AI Data Centers," March 30, 2026. <https://investors.vertiv.com/news/news-details/2026/Vertiv-to-Expand-Ohio-Manufacturing-to-Boost-U-S--Production-of-Critical-Thermal-Management-Technologies-for-AI-Data-Centers/default.aspx>

openings annually, at a median wage of \$95,320.⁴⁹ The Bureau attributes that growth explicitly to rising electricity demand and grid infrastructure upgrades supporting AI technologies and data centers, which is an unusually direct statement of causation from a federal statistical agency. Electricians are projected to grow 9%, adding 75,900 positions with roughly 72,700 annual openings at a median wage of \$63,190.⁵⁰ Plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters are projected to grow 7% with roughly 42,000 annual openings at a median wage of \$63,800.⁵¹

State data show the same pattern. In Ohio, where the median annual wage across all occupations was \$49,380 in May 2025, every trade in demand for this construction pays above it, from welders at \$50,340 and electricians at \$64,700 through ironworkers at \$74,710 to power-line installers at \$93,150.⁵²

In addition to construction labor, data center development is supporting growth in permanent positions.⁵³ PwC, in a study prepared for the Data Center Coalition using an input-output model that includes supplier and induced employment, put the total at 5.5 million jobs supported in 2024 with 1,005,080 of them direct.⁵⁴ Research by Dany Bahar of Brown University and Greg Wright of the University of California, Merced, summarized by the Brookings Institution, found local employment gains on the order of 100 to 200 jobs per county hosting a facility.⁵⁵

Despite this job creation, voters remain skeptical about the extent to which AI is boosting employment. Asked whether building and maintaining data centers creates good-paying blue-collar jobs, 34% of voters agreed and 35% disagreed, one of the only statements in the survey that failed to draw net support.⁵⁶ A lag in voter education and downstream employment explains this finding. We are at the beginning of a decades-long build out wave that has yet to generate highly visible employment gains.

More importantly, these projects require a more robust trades employment pipeline than what currently exists in the majority of communities where data centers are planned. For example, the Stargate campus in Saline Township, Michigan, is being built under the federation's national maintenance agreement with 14 signatory trades and is expected to employ more than 2,500 tradespeople and apprentices.⁵⁷ BlackRock and the AI Infrastructure Partnership signed a workforce collaboration with the same federation in August 2026, and Meta followed days later with a registered apprenticeship partnership alongside an investment in the construction trades academy.⁵⁸

⁴⁷ pv magazine USA, "U.S. transformer market faces severe supply constraints as lead times extend to four years," citing Wood Mackenzie, May 11, 2026. <https://pv-magazine-usa.com/2026/05/11/u-s-transformer-market-faces-severe-supply-constraints-as-lead-times-extend-to-four-years/>

⁴⁸ Siemens Energy, third quarter fiscal year 2026 results, August 5, 2026. <https://www.siemens-energy.com/global/en/home/investor-relations.html>

⁴⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Line Installers and Repairers," Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2025 to 2035 projections. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/installation-maintenance-and-repair/line-installers-and-repairers.htm>

⁵⁰ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Electricians," Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2025 to 2035 projections. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction/electricians.htm>

⁵¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters," Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2025 to 2035 projections. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction/plumbers-pipefitters-and-steamfitters.htm>

⁵² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "May 2025 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: Ohio," Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, released May 2026. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_oh.htm

⁵³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Computing Infrastructure Providers, Data Processing, Web Hosting, and Related Services," Current Employment Statistics, August 2026. <https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag518.htm>

⁵⁴ PwC, "Economic Contributions of Data Centers in the United States," prepared for the Data Center Coalition, May 2026. <https://www.datacentercoalition.org>

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

SMALL BUSINESSES: WHERE THE EFFECTS WILL BE MOST VISIBLE

The use of AI to help small businesses grow and do more with less drew 59% support in Build American AI's survey, one of the highest-rated applications tested.⁵⁹

Here, it's already being deployed. Ipsos, surveying 1,070 adults employed at small businesses with 2 to 499 employees on a probability-based panel for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation from May 8 to 11, 2026, found that approximately 50% use AI at work. Among those users, 64% cited personal productivity as the main application and only 6% reported using AI to automate workflows with minimal human involvement, while 59% said they redirect the time saved into more or better output.⁶⁰

Financial data support this finding. The JPMorganChase Institute found median small-business spending on AI tools at \$28 a month in 2025, after entry costs fell roughly 60% over six years.⁶¹

Research by Erik Brynjolfsson, Danielle Li and Lindsey Raymond, published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in 2025 and based on 5,179 customer support agents at a firm that rolled out an AI assistant in stages, found average productivity gains of 14% and gains of 34% among the least experienced workers.⁶²

These gains have been concentrated among larger small businesses, as the data show that use of AI tends to scale with firm size. Census data show large firms adopting at roughly twice the rate of small ones, and the JPMorganChase transaction records show the gap between employer and nonemployer firms widening rather than narrowing since 2023.⁶³

That gap presents an opportunity for legislative intervention to help boost adoption of AI among the smallest of small businesses.

⁵⁵ Brookings Institution, analysis of data center employment evidence summarizing research by Dany Bahar and Greg C. Wright, May 4, 2026, updated August 10, 2026. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-evidence-on-data-center-employment-effects/>

⁵⁶ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

⁵⁷ North America's Building Trades Unions, "North America's Building Trades Unions Announce Data Center Agreement," April 20, 2026. https://nabtu.org/press_releases/north-americas-building-trades-unions-announce-data-center-agreement/

⁵⁸ North America's Building Trades Unions, Meta skilled trades partnership announcement, August 13, 2026. https://nabtu.org/press_releases/

⁵⁹ Build American AI and JL Partners, "Building on Voter Optimism About AI & Data Centers," national survey of 1,000 voters, Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. <https://www.buildamericanai.org>

⁶⁰ Ipsos for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, "Main Street AI Monitor," survey of 1,070 adults employed at small businesses, May 8 to 11, 2026. <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/workforce/half-of-small-business-workers-use-ai-most-to-boost-productivity-not-automate-jobs>

⁶¹ JPMorganChase Institute, "Understanding the use of AI among small businesses," April 14, 2026. <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/institute/all-topics/business-growth-and-entrepreneurship/understanding-ai-use-by-small-businesses>

⁶² Brynjolfsson, E., Li, D., and Raymond, L., "Generative AI at Work," Quarterly Journal of Economics 140(2), 2025. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31161>

⁶³ JPMorganChase Institute, "Understanding the use of AI among small businesses," April 14, 2026. <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/institute/all-topics/business-growth-and-entrepreneurship/understanding-ai-use-by-small-businesses>

PART FOUR

VOTERS HAVE ALREADY CHOSEN ONE NATIONAL RULEBOOK

VOTERS WANT RATEPAYER PROTECTIONS

Morning Consult, surveying 2,056 registered voters for TechNet, found 76% preferring a single national AI policy over a state-by-state approach.⁶⁴ When polling voters on one such national AI policy, the Rainey Center found that 61% of voters want Congress to turn the White House Ratepayer Protection Pledge into binding federal law so that all data center operators are legally required to protect ratepayers, against 15% who thought the voluntary commitment sufficient.⁶⁵ Sixty-six percent supported requiring data center operators to sign community benefit agreements covering local hiring, infrastructure upgrades and payments to the community before construction begins.⁶⁶

What this study demonstrates is a clear gap in voter education. Despite the fact that seven tech firms signed onto the White House Ratepayer Protection Pledge, only 9% of voters were aware of their doing so.⁶⁷

The fact that an overwhelming majority of voters are unaware of measures that have been put in place nationally to protect them paired with the clear support for stronger protections suggests that voters are looking for global measures that afford them protection in the AI age.

⁶⁴ Morning Consult for TechNet, "New Poll: 76% of Voters Prefer a Single National AI Development Policy," survey of 2,056 registered voters, June 3 and 4, 2025. <https://www.technet.org/media/new-poll-76-of-voters-prefer-a-single-national-ai-development-policy/>

⁶⁵ Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy, "Data Centers: Voters Are Persuadable, But They Want Accountability and Clean Energy," survey of 1,010 registered voters, May 17 and 18, 2026. <https://www.raineycenter.org/polling/data-centers-voters-are-persuadable-but-they-want-accountability-and-clean-energy>

⁶⁶ Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy, "Data Centers: Voters Are Persuadable, But They Want Accountability and Clean Energy," survey of 1,010 registered voters, May 17 and 18, 2026. <https://www.raineycenter.org/polling/data-centers-voters-are-persuadable-but-they-want-accountability-and-clean-energy>

⁶⁷ Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy, "Data Centers: Voters Are Persuadable, But They Want Accountability and Clean Energy," survey of 1,010 registered voters, May 17 and 18, 2026. <https://www.raineycenter.org/polling/data-centers-voters-are-persuadable-but-they-want-accountability-and-clean-energy>

BOTH PARTIES ARE CURRENTLY LEAVING THE SILENT MAJORITY UNCLAIMED

Ahead of the 2026 midterms, both political parties have begun to distance themselves from generically pro-data-center, pro-AI stances. Both Republican and Democratic governors have suspended or rescinded incentives within weeks of each other,⁶⁸ and candidates of both parties are running against the buildout in the states where it is concentrated.

Opposition is strongest among Democratic officials, whose voters are simultaneously the most opposed to local data center development and most supportive of national guardrails for AI. Because of where the voter base lies, there is clear opportunity for Democratic candidates and elected officials to take a measured, common-sense approach to AI policy.

Two Democratic governors have already tested that proposition. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan released a 10-point framework in July 2026 requiring that residents never pay for data center energy demand, that new load bring new generation with it, that hiring favor Michigan workers and that reporting be transparent, describing it explicitly as a pledge rather than a moratorium and saying that Michigan welcomes companies that want to invest, create jobs and strengthen its economy.⁶⁹ Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania signed an executive order in August 2026 requiring local community approval before state environmental permit review begins, developer payment of all new electricity infrastructure costs, annual water reporting and meaningful community benefit agreements, while stating that Pennsylvania remains open for business.⁷⁰

Neither governor stood in the way of potentially beneficial development. Both established the conditions that voters are looking for to guide data center construction. These are existing models for how elected officials can greenlight economically beneficial development while protecting the constituents they serve.

⁶⁸ Office of Governor JB Pritzker, "Gov. Pritzker Pauses New Data Center Tax Incentives," June 5, 2026. <https://gov-pritzker-newsroom.prezly.com/gov-pritzker-pauses-new-data-center-tax-incentives>. Office of Governor Jim Pillen, executive order rescinding data center tax incentives, July 20, 2026. <https://governor.nebraska.gov/gov-pillen-signs-executive-order-data-centers>

⁶⁹ Office of Governor Gretchen Whitmer, "Michigan Affordable and Responsible Growth Action Plan," July 15, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/news/press-releases/2026/07/15/gov-whitmer-data>

⁷⁰ Office of Governor Josh Shapiro, "Governor Shapiro Signs Executive Order on Data Center Development," August 18, 2026. <https://www.pa.gov/governor/newsroom/2026-press-releases/governor-shapiro-signs-executive-order-on-data-center-development>

PART FIVE

A POLICY AGENDA THAT MEETS VOTERS WHERE THEY ARE

Congress should enact one national framework for artificial intelligence, covering baseline safety standards for the most advanced models, broad AI literacy, voluntary training and certification for workers in high-exposure sectors, and national AI infrastructure. This framework should include:

01

Codification of the White House Ratepayer Protection Pledge. Making this a national standard addresses voters' concerns about whether ordinary ratepayers would underwrite the energy used by data centers. Companies wishing to develop data centers would need to bring new generation resources to satisfy power demand and pay for power delivery infrastructure upgrades. In other words, tech companies would need to invest in the communities that host them, preventing high energy costs for everyone else.

02

Incentives for local benefit agreements between municipalities and tech companies. Lancaster's agreement demonstrates what enforceable looks like, with defined dollar commitments, water caps, cooling requirements and clean energy obligations, along with local hiring plans, and it requires those obligations to be formally assigned to and assumed by any new owner before a sale can close. 66% of voters support requiring them. The industry's own experience is that projects with credible community agreements advance and projects without them stall.

03

Investment in a skilled trades pipeline. That means expanded apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship capacity in the electrical, mechanical, ironworking and utility trades, community college and career center certificates in data center operations, industrial controls, cybersecurity and cooling, and coordination between developers, utilities and training providers so that seat capacity supports a long-term build out. The demand signal is unambiguous, from federal projections of 10% growth in power-line work through the industry's own estimate that it needs 20% more tradespeople than currently exist.⁷¹

04

Common-sense AI adoption assistance should be within reach of every small business in the country, delivered through Small Business Development Centers, chambers of commerce, community colleges, workforce boards and libraries. Voters rate helping small businesses among the most valuable things AI can do. The tools now cost less than a phone line. The binding constraint is knowledge, and it is a constraint public institutions are well suited to relieve.

⁷¹ OpenAI, submission to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, October 27, 2025. <https://cdn.openai.com/pdf/21b88bb5-10a3-4566-919d-f9a6b9c3e632/openai-ostp-rfi-oct-27-2025.pdf>

CONCLUSION

AMERICANS ARE OPEN TO THE USE OF AI BY A MARGIN OF ROUGHLY TWO TO ONE, IN EVERY PARTISAN GROUP, AND MORE SO THE MORE THEY USE IT.

That openness has survived a year of intense and largely negative attention to the physical infrastructure AI requires.

Voters have not rendered a final verdict on data centers. They have asked a fair question: what do communities get in return? Ohio's ratepayer tariff, Lancaster's community benefit agreement and Texas' disclosure audit already show what a workable answer looks like, and Governors Whitmer and Shapiro have shown that elected officials can back the buildout while still protecting the people who live near it. What's missing is a framework that turns those state and local templates into the baseline everywhere, so that ratepayer protections, community benefits and basic transparency do not depend on which state, or which company, a voter happens to live near.

The politics here are more forgiving than either party currently assumes. An electorate that, when presented with the necessary context, is optimistic about AI, presents an opportunity for elected officials and candidates to shape AI policy. Policymakers should not shy away from the debate or lean into outright moratoriums and bans. Instead, they should embrace a long-term, scalable framework that facilitates the strong economic potential AI holds for communities across the United States. Leaders who do so will find themselves in the position that voters crave: someone who is enabling job growth, establishing common-sense guardrails, and investing the real gains AI offers into their own communities.

METHODOLOGY NOTE

Build American AI partnered with JL Partners to survey 1,000 voters nationally using a mixed-mode methodology combining telephone, SMS and online interviews from Aug. 27 to 31, 2026. The margin of error is 3.1 percentage points. View the survey at buildamericanai.org.

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