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The Data Center Backlash

Voters in both blue and red states are rallying against AI infrastructure projects—and winning

Source: TheWeek.com, July 17, 2026

Who opposes data centers?

Most Americans. A recent Gallup poll found that 71% of voters, including 75% of Democrats and 63% of Republicans, don't want a data center built in their area. Hostility to these artificial intelligence facilities is "the most bipartisan issue since beer," Milwaukee-based comedian Charlie Berens said at a recent rally against a 700,000-square-foot Meta facility in Port Washington, Wis. Opponents of these warehouse-like complexes, which are filled with energy-hungry computer servers, are racking wins. At least 75 projects worth about \$130 billion were blocked or canceled in the first three months of 2026. After a 247,000-square-foot data center was proposed in Monterey Park, Calif., voters there last month overwhelmingly passed a ballot measure permanently banning such projects. Theirs is the first U.S. city with such a prohibition, but at least 67 other towns have temporary bans. Politicians who support data centers are paying the price at the polls: Stuart Adams, president of Utah's state senate, and two local commissioners lost their GOP primaries last week after helping to approve a 62-square-mile facility in northwestern Utah. "Everybody who touched the data center went down," said Brenna Williams, an anti-data-center campaigner. "People just wanted to send a message."

Why do people want to block these projects?

For some, it's the vast amount of water and energy they use. Water is used to cool servers, which can get dangerously hot, and a large facility can guzzle up to 5 million gallons a day—about as much as a town of 50,000 people. In areas already struggling with drought, such as Utah, many residents fear the needs of data centers will be put before their own. Data centers also strain power grids. The nation's more than 4,000 data centers now consume 6% of all U.S. electricity, up from 4% two years ago, and a single large-scale facility can use about 1 gigawatt of electricity, enough to power 750,000 homes. With data centers being built faster than new power sources are coming online, utility bills are rising fast. In states with a high concentration of data centers, such as Virginia, electricity prices have spiked 267% in five years. There are other concerns: the pollution pumped out by on-site generators, the constant hum of cooling systems, and the sheer size and ugliness of the buildings. Opposition to data centers is "rooted in the one thing that has always united Americans," said Megan Mullin, a professor of public policy at UCLA: "Our deep affinity for where we live."

What do AI firms say?

They argue that fears around water and energy use are overblown, and that data centers are a net gain for communities. The build-out of 3,000 planned facilities is expected to create 4.7 million temporary construction-related jobs, according to a Meta-backed policy group. It also projects that some 700,000 permanent jobs will be created to operate and manage those facilities. To reduce the environmental impact of their centers, firms including Microsoft and OpenAI have pledged to slash water use, and microchip makers such as Nvidia are designing more energy-efficient processors. But opposition to data centers is likely to remain intense

Why is that?

Because that opposition is motivated in part by hostility to artificial intelligence. A June survey by consultancy Milltown Partners found only 8% of data center opponents actually live near a facility, and that 63% have a negative view of AI. That suggests data centers are a stand-in for anger at Big Tech and AI, which some industry leaders have warned could result in mass unemployment and—in a worst-case scenario—humanity’s extinction. The opposition “isn’t happening in a vacuum,” said Milltown’s Tom Brookes. “The AI transformation is arriving at a time when Americans already feel angry, insecure, and pessimistic.” In some cases, that anger is turning into violence. In April, an unknown attacker fired 13 shots into the home of an Indianapolis councilman who’d voted in favor of an AI facility, and left a note that read “No Data Centers.”

How are lawmakers responding to the backlash?

Some want a pause in construction. New York’s Democratic-led state legislature in May passed a one-year moratorium on new data centers; it has yet to be signed by Gov. Kathy Hochul. In April, Maine’s Democratic Gov. Janet Mills vetoed similar legislation. The populist right is also pushing back on data centers, despite President Trump issuing an executive order last year to speed their construction. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill in May barring utilities from shifting data center costs to ordinary ratepayers. And red-tape averse Texas Gov. Greg Abbott last month issued sweeping data center regulation recommendations for the state legislature to pass in its next session, including mandating “closed loop” cooling systems that reuse water and requiring new facilities to contribute to the state’s electricity supply.

Is a halt on construction likely?

No, because too many officials want a slice of the money being poured into the buildout; six Big Tech companies will spend an estimated \$1 trillion on data centers in 2027. Few politicians on either the Left or Right have backed calls for a pause or a ban; more are pushing measures they claim will reduce the impact of data center development. Democratic Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger is set to sign a tax on data center energy usage, capped at \$600 million a year, while Republican Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine recently paused tax breaks for AI facilities after a government report found they cost the state nearly \$1.6 billion in lost revenue last year. But those measures won’t stop protests by anti-data-center campaigners, who are demanding a meaningful crackdown on the industry. “I’m frustrated,” said Annette Singh of Hilliard, Ohio, who says a huge new Amazon data center has ruined her once peaceful neighborhood. “I want better politicians.”

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the backlash on data centers? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.