26characters

RESEARCH REPORT

Democrats Now Fear AI More Than Republicans, and the Switch Came With the New Administration

Five Years of Data on Politics and AI Sentiment, 2021 to 2026

We read all 12,414 mentions of AI and data centers in the Congressional Record since October 2021 and set them against five years of polling, search and news data. Our verdict: the theory partly holds. Politicians did not start America's AI anxiety, and the US soured no faster than its peers. But politics split the worry by party, aimed it at data centers and power bills, and rode a second wave of unease in 2025 and 2026.

A NOTE FROM OUR CEO

My theory about the AI backlash was half right, and the half I missed matters more for marketers

A word up front: we normally stay out of politics. 26 Characters is a B2B content studio, and our research is about messaging and how audiences perceive ideas. This study is part of a new research approach for us, built to understand what drives positive and negative sentiment about AI. Politics turned out to be one of the loudest drivers, so we followed the data there and applied the same rules to both parties.

I have used AI tools since before ChatGPT launched, and I talk with marketing leaders about them every week. This year the mood in those conversations changed. AI stopped sounding like a productivity story and started sounding like a political one.

I had a theory about why. Heading into the 2026 midterms, politicians needed issues to be for or against, and AI was a convenient one. I suspected that 18 months of campaign rhetoric had made Americans feel worse about AI than they otherwise would.

So we tested it. We read every mention of AI in the Congressional Record for five years, coded the tone of each speech, and lined it up month by month against polls, Google searches, news coverage and campaign ads. We built two indexes so others can repeat the work, and we compared the US with countries that had no election this year.

The data said I was half right, and we are publishing all of it. American unease about AI first arrived with ChatGPT in 2023, long before the campaign, and other countries felt it too. A second wave came in 2025 and 2026, alongside the political fight. Politics did not invent that worry, but it decided who feels it most and what they blame: data centers and power bills.

If your brand talks about AI, that is the landscape you are selling into now. The verdict and brand pages near the end translate it into decisions you can make this quarter.



Steve Goldhaber

CEO, 26 Characters

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two waves of AI unease, and politics only rode the second

Why a content studio studied this: we normally stay out of politics, but we study messaging and public perception. This report is part of new 26 Characters research into what drives positive and negative sentiment about AI.

Verdict: the hypothesis partly holds. Politicians did not start America's unease about AI. It arrived with ChatGPT in 2023, before AI was a campaign issue, and through mid 2026 the US soured no faster than countries with no election. But a second wave of unease in 2025 and 2026 rose alongside the political fight, and politics shaped it: it split the worry by party and pointed it at data centers and power bills.

35 → 95	Our Public Sentiment Index rose in two waves: to 35 after ChatGPT launched in 2023, then from 38 to 95 between January 2025 and October 2026, as political heat climbed alongside it.
7 of 8	repeated national polls turned more negative between 2025 and 2026, after a lull in 2024.
+25 / −10	points: the change in Democrats' concern about AI since 2021, and in Republicans' since 2023, per Pew. Democratic and Republican voters traded places in 2025.
$173M	spent on general election ads about data centers, nearly all of them negative, with no overtly positive candidate ad found.
−5 pts	drop in American excitement about AI from 2025 to 2026 (Ipsos). Canada fell 5 too; Great Britain and Germany fell 8. The US was no outlier.

The takeaway for marketers: the AI backlash will not end with the midterms, because it did not start with them. What changed is that AI is now a partisan and local issue. Brands that talk about AI need to speak to two different worries, and to have a straight answer about energy and community impact.

The full verdict, page 24 · What it means for brands, page 25

THE HYPOTHESIS

Did the 2026 midterms make Americans sour on AI? We ran three tests to find out

The hypothesis: AI became divisive in the US mainly because politicians, heading into the 2026 midterm elections, were looking for topics to be for or against. The public rhetoric of roughly the last 18 months created more negative sentiment toward AI than would otherwise exist.

Why it matters to marketers: if the backlash is a campaign effect, it should cool now that the election is over, and brands can wait it out. If it runs deeper, the way you talk about AI needs to change for good. We committed before we looked at the data to publish whichever answer we found.

1 The timing test

If politics drove sentiment, political heat should rise first and public unease should follow a few months later.

Supports it: Heat leads sentiment

Weakens it: Sentiment moves first, or both move together

2 The party test

If politics drove sentiment, each party's voters should move in the direction their own leaders talk.

Supports it: Voters follow their party's rhetoric

Weakens it: Voters move regardless of party

3 The control test

If the 2026 campaign drove sentiment, the US should sour on AI faster than countries with no national election this year.

Supports it: The US moves more than its peers

Weakens it: Peers move just as much

Window: October 2021 to November 26, 2026, so the baseline starts a year before ChatGPT launched on November 30, 2022. Geography: the United States, with other countries used only as a comparison group.

THE HEADLINE CHART

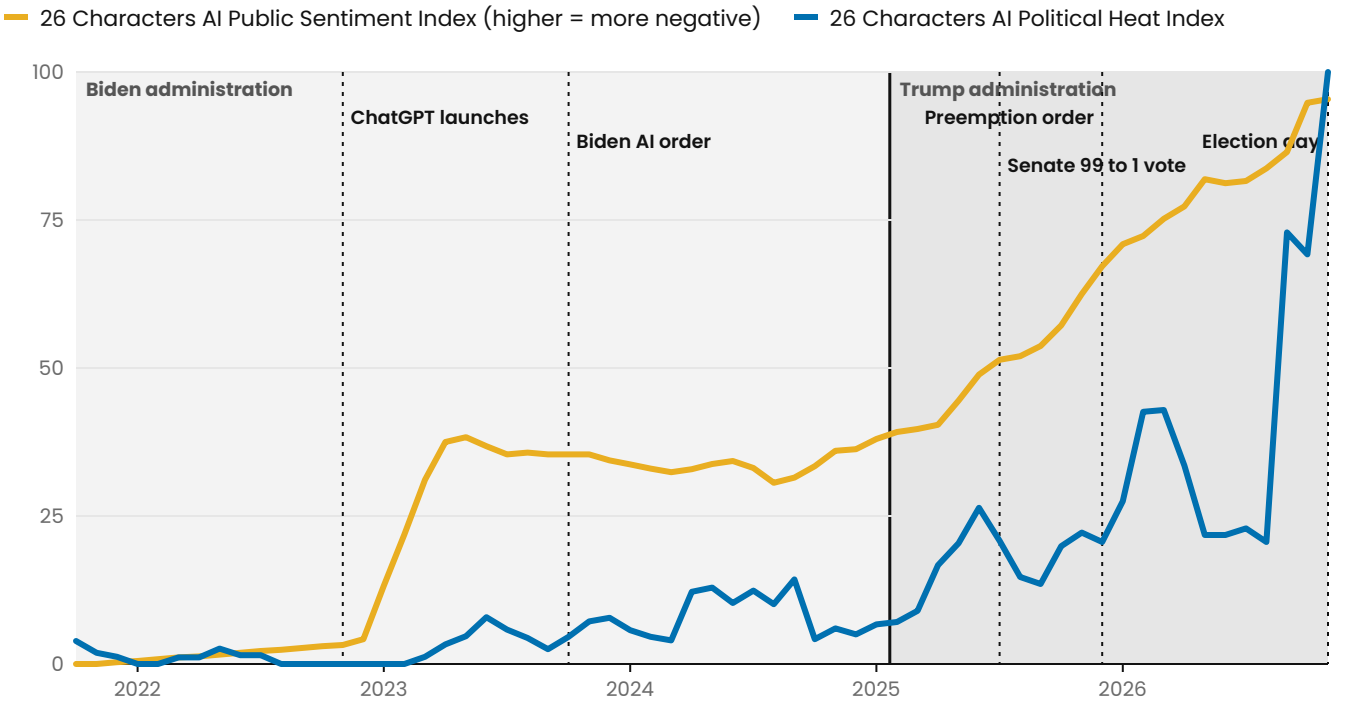
The first wave of AI unease had no politics behind it. The second rose with the political fight.

Our two indexes, side by side. The 26 Characters AI Public Sentiment Index jumped to 35 after ChatGPT launched, drifted lower through 2024, then climbed to 95 by October 2026. The 26 Characters AI Political Heat Index barely registered during the first wave and surged during the second.

EXHIBIT 1

Two waves of public unease, one wave of political heat

Both indexes run 0 to 100, monthly, three-month averages. Sentiment: higher means more negative toward AI. Heat: negative AI speeches in Congress per 1,000 floor items, scaled so its peak equals 100.



35

Sentiment Index level in October 2023, when the Heat Index stood at 5. Wave one had no politics behind it.

38 to 95

Sentiment Index, January 2025 to October 2026. Over the same months the Heat Index rose from 7 to 69.

80%

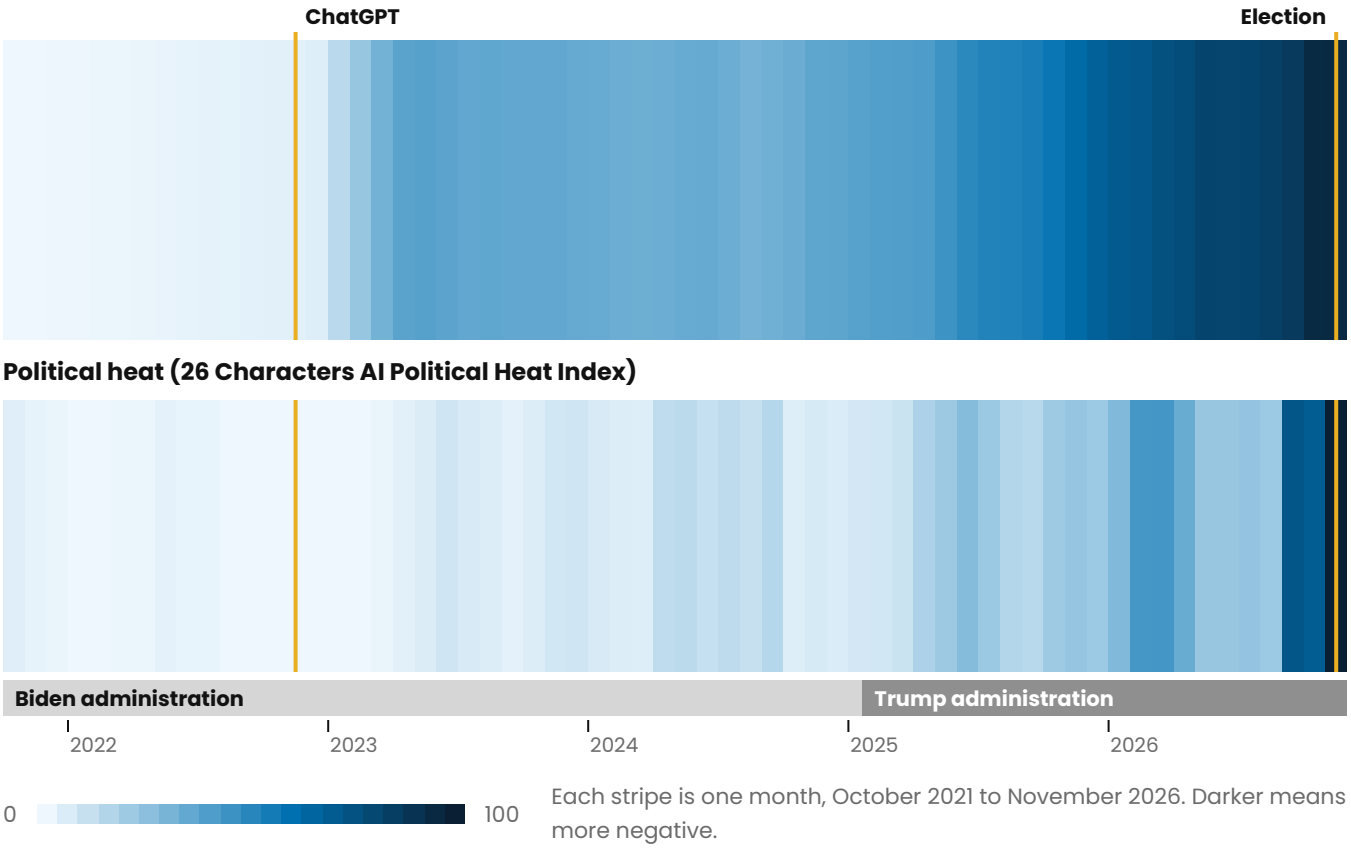
Share of five years of negative AI talk on the floor of Congress that came in 2025 and 2026.

The timing test, page 18 How the indexes are built, page 26

BY THE NUMBERS, 1 OF 6

Five years in two stripes: the public darkened in 2023, Washington only in 2025

Each stripe is a month. The top row is how negative the public felt about AI. The bottom row is how negative Congress sounded. The public row turns blue right after ChatGPT. The political row stays almost white until 2025.



Each stripe is one month, October 2021 to November 2026. Darker means more negative.

2023

The public stripe darkens in the months after ChatGPT launches.

2025

The political stripe finally darkens, after the White House changes hands.

Fall 2026

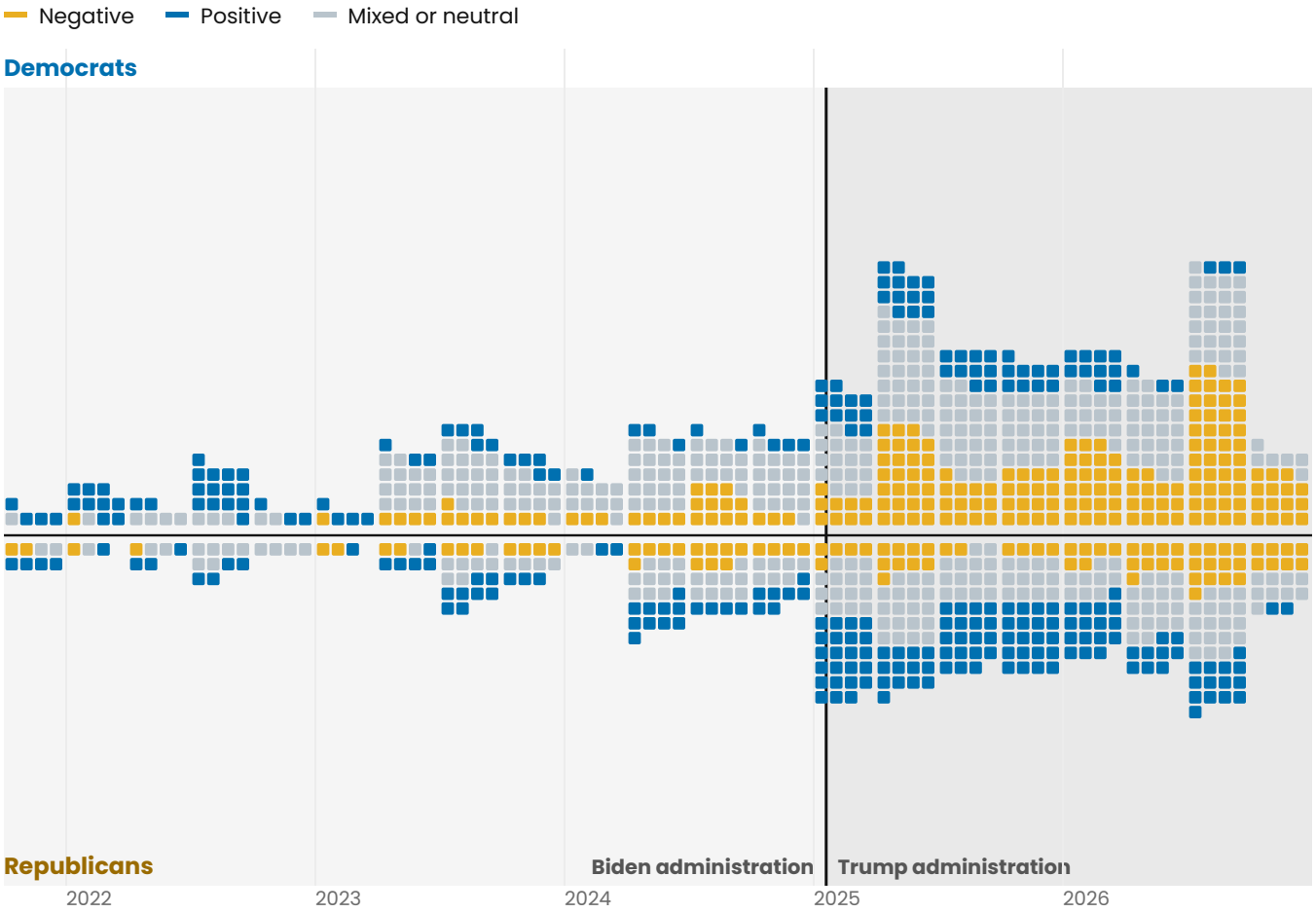
Both rows reach their darkest months together during the campaign.

Sources: 26 Characters AI Public Sentiment Index and AI Political Heat Index. Method on page 26 and page 27.

BY THE NUMBERS, 2 OF 6

Every one of 1,012 AI speeches in Congress, and the year gold took over the Democratic side

Each square is one speech by a Democrat (above the line) or a Republican (below), placed in the quarter it was given and colored by its stance. Procedural mentions are left out. Watch the Democratic towers turn gold in 2025 and 2026 while Republican speeches show far less gold until 2026.



1,012

speeches by Democrats and Republicans that took a stance or discussed AI.

58%

of Democratic speeches in 2026 were negative, up from 24% in 2024.

50%

of Republican speeches in 2025 were positive, their most upbeat year.

Source: Congressional Record via GovInfo, October 2021 to November 26, 2026, coded by 26 Characters. Method on page 26.

BY THE NUMBERS, 3 OF 6

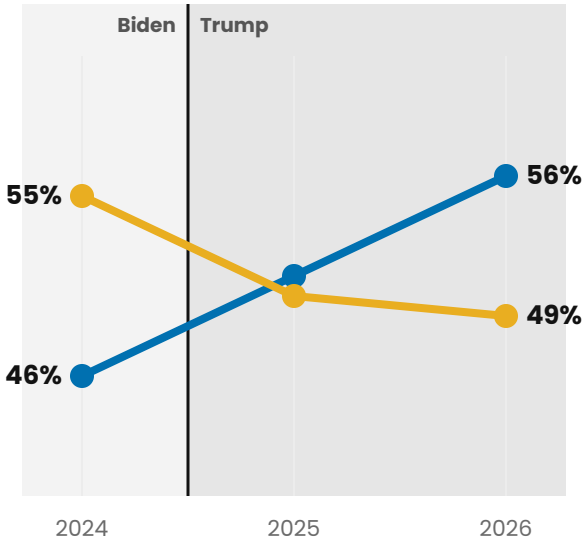
The party flip came when the White House changed hands

Under the Biden administration, Republican voters were the more worried about AI. In the first year of the Trump administration, the lines crossed. In Congress, Democrats were already a little more negative in 2024 and then pulled far ahead. Republican lawmakers grew sunnier in 2025 and warier in 2026, while Republican voters kept easing. The out party soured on AI as the party in power embraced it.

Democrats Republicans

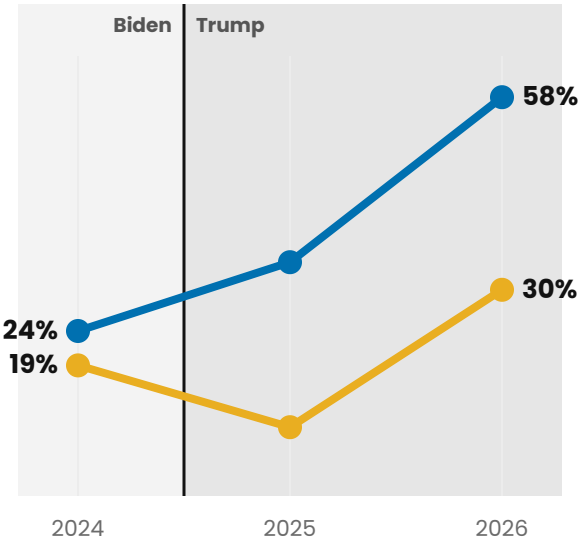
Voters

More concerned than excited about AI, Pew



Lawmakers

Share of their party's AI speeches in Congress that were negative



+10

points: Democratic voter concern, 2024 to 2026.

−6

points: Republican voter concern over the same years.

+34

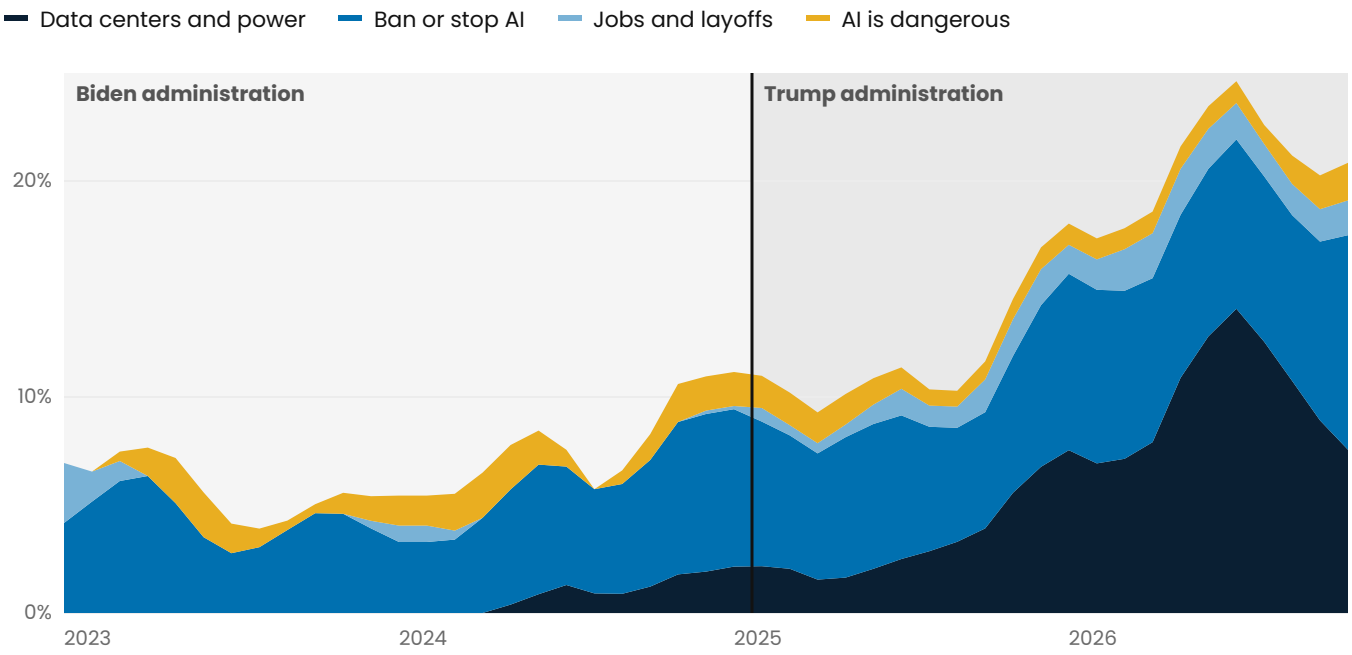
points: the negative share of Democratic AI speeches, 2024 to 2026.

Sources: Pew Research Center, September 16, 2026; Congressional Record coded by 26 Characters, excluding China framing and procedural mentions.

BY THE NUMBERS, 4 OF 6

Data centers went from zero to more than half of negative AI searches in two years

Negative AI searches in the US, split by theme, as a share of all the AI searches we tracked. In 2023 the worry was abstract: ban it, stop it, is it dangerous. By 2026 it had a physical address. Searches about data centers and power bills now make up the largest part of the negative share.



0%

of negative AI searches were about data centers before mid 2024.

52%

were about data centers in July 2026.

65%

of voters opposed a data center in their community by April 2026 (Change Research).

Source: Google Trends, US, monthly, three-month average. Each term is anchored to "artificial intelligence" so batches compare; "AI bubble" is excluded.

BY THE NUMBERS, 5 OF 6

Energy and data centers came from nowhere to top both parties' AI complaints in 2026

Negative AI speeches in Congress by main topic, party and year. Darker cells mean more speeches. Before 2025, nobody in Congress complained about AI's energy use. In 2026 it was the leading complaint on both sides of the aisle.

	Democrats				Republicans			
	Biden		Trump		Biden		Trump	
	2023	2024	2025	2026	2023	2024	2025	2026
Energy and data centers			13	36				13
Regulation in general			8	13			3	
Kids and online safety	2	6	5	3	1	3	5	6
Deepfakes and elections	3	8	2	4	1	6	2	3
Privacy and civil rights	1	3	3	8	1	1	1	3
Existential safety	2		1	12		1		
Government use of AI		1	8	1			1	
Healthcare		1	3	5				
Jobs	1		4	3				

36

negative Democratic speeches about energy and data centers in 2026, the most of any cell.

13

negative Republican speeches on the same topic in 2026, their top complaint.

0

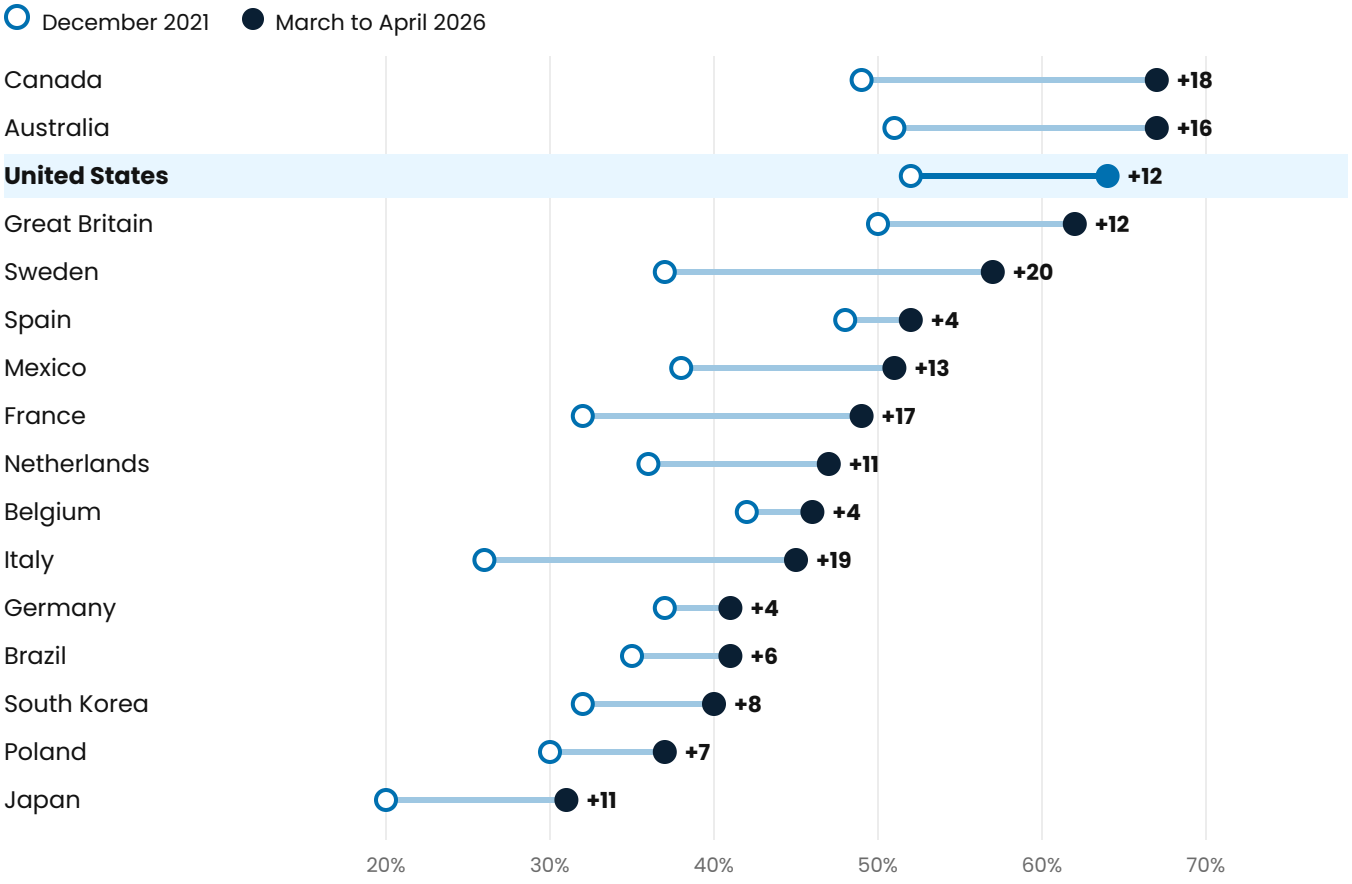
negative Republican speeches about jobs in five years.

Source: Congressional Record coded by 26 Characters. Excludes procedural mentions and speeches about rival nations' use of AI. Method on page 26.

BY THE NUMBERS, 6 OF 6

AI nervousness rose in all 16 countries we tracked, and the US landed in the middle of the pack

"Products and services using AI make me nervous," share agreeing, December 2021 and spring 2026. Countries are sorted by their 2026 level. The US rose 12 points. Six countries rose more, none of them with a US-style midterm campaign at the time of the survey.



+12

points for the US, matched by Great Britain.

+20

points for Sweden, the largest rise, and +18 for Canada.

16 of 16

countries grew more nervous about AI between 2021 and 2026.

Sources: Ipsos and World Economic Forum, fielded November to December 2021 (report); Ipsos AI Monitor 2026, fielded March 20 to April 3, 2026 (report). Sweden and Brazil held national elections later in 2026, after fieldwork.

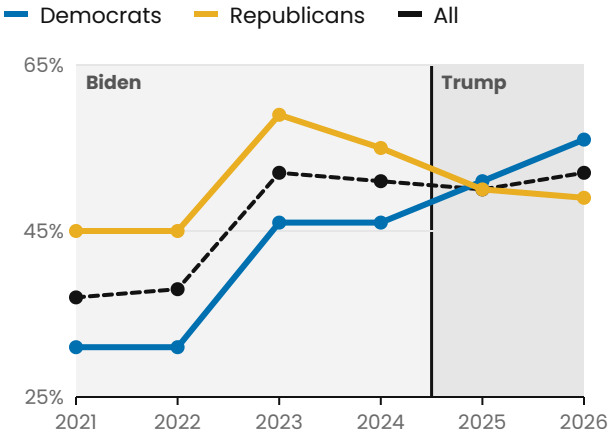
01 Americans grew more negative on AI in seven of eight national polls from 2025 to 2026

Polls show two waves. Concern jumped when ChatGPT arrived: Pew found 38% of Americans more concerned than excited in December 2022 and 52% by August 2023. It eased in 2024, when Gallup saw "more harm than good" fall from 40% to 31%. Then it climbed again in 2025 and 2026.

EXHIBIT 4

Democratic and Republican voters traded places

More concerned than excited about AI in daily life, Pew, by party. Shading shows the administration in office at each survey.



ALSO WORTH KNOWING

26% → 65%

of voters opposed a data center in their community, March 2025 to April 2026 (Change Research).

42% → 75%

opposed a data center near their home, August 2025 to August 2026 (Heatmap Pro).

35% → 42%

called AI's risks very serious in three fall weeks of 2026, driven mostly by Democrats (Economist/YouGov).

EXHIBIT 5

The 2025 to 2026 turn, poll by poll

Share giving the AI-negative answer, first wave since January 2025 and latest wave.

POLLSTER	QUESTION	WAVES	THEN	NOW	CHANGE
Quinnipiac	AI does more harm in daily life	April 2025 to September 2026	44%	53%	+9
Fox News	AI is bad for society (voters)	June 2025 to September 2026	47%	56%	+9
Gallup	AI does more harm than good	May 2025 to May 2026	31%	39%	+8
YouGov	Concerned AI could end humanity	March 2025 to September 2026	37%	50%	+13
Fox News	Unfavorable view of AI (voters)	April 2026 to September 2026	54%	60%	+6
Fox News	Extremely or very concerned (voters)	December 2025 to March 2026	63%	66%	+3
Pew	More concerned than excited	June 2025 to June 2026	50%	52%	+2
Economist/YouGov	AI is advancing too quickly	May 2026 to July 2026	71%	63%	-8

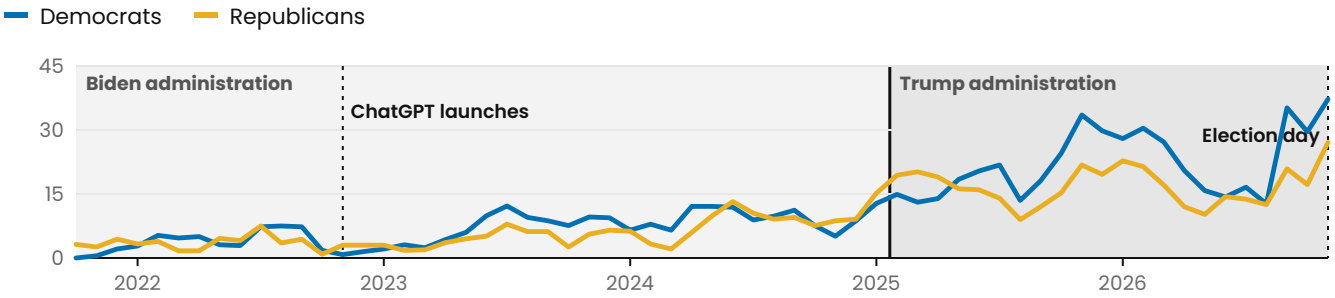
02 Democratic AI speeches in Congress went from 24% negative in 2024 to 58% in 2026

We read all 12,414 AI mentions in the Congressional Record from October 2021 to November 26, 2026 across 1,038 session days, then coded the stance of the 1,496 speeches by named members that held them; the rest were bill text and procedure. AI talk surged in 2025 and 2026 and turned sharply negative on one side of the aisle.

EXHIBIT 2

Both parties talk about AI far more than before. Democrats talk about it most.

Speeches mentioning AI or data centers per 1,000 items each party's members spoke in, three-month average. Excludes bill text and procedure.



SHARE OF AI SPEECHES THAT WERE NEGATIVE

Year, administration	Democrats	Republicans
2023 Biden	17%	17%
2024 Biden	24%	19%
2025 Trump	34%	10%
2026 Trump	58%	30%

MOST ACTIVE VOICES, 2021 TO 2026

By number of AI speeches. Democrats: Chuck Schumer, Ed Markey, Maria Cantwell, Frank Pallone. Republicans: David Schweikert, John Thune, John Cornyn, Marsha Blackburn. Most negative speeches in 2025 and 2026, leaving out China framing: Ron Wyden and Ed Markey for Democrats, Marsha Blackburn for Republicans.

ALSO WORTH KNOWING

191

Democratic speeches in 2025 and 2026 used AI to attack the other party or the administration. Republicans: 30.

50%

of Republican AI speeches in 2025 were positive, the high point of Republican enthusiasm.

0.82

agreement score (Cohen's kappa) between our coding and a blind second coder on a 150-speech recheck.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Expect Democrats in Washington to frame AI mainly as a risk, and Republicans mainly as a race to win, through 2027. If your brand sells to both audiences, test your AI language with each before you scale it.

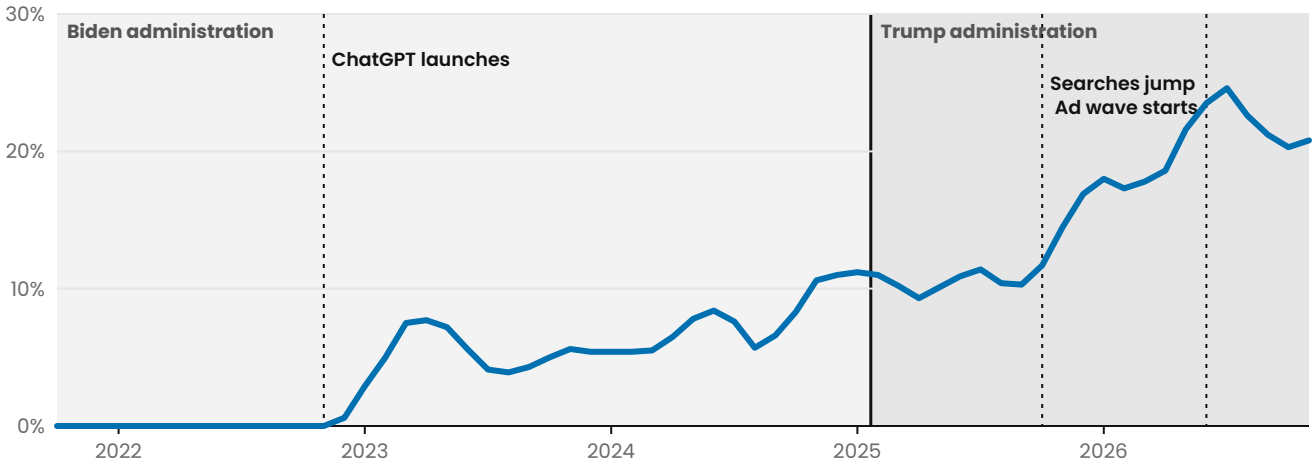
03 Negative AI searches doubled from about 10% to about 21% of AI searches between mid 2025 and late 2026

Search interest is not sentiment, so we tracked a basket of negative searches (ban AI, stop AI, AI layoffs, AI data center, data center electricity and others) as a share of negative plus neutral AI searches in the US, using Google Trends. This is the one public signal that moved inside the 18-month campaign window.

EXHIBIT 3

The negative share rose in late 2025, months before the campaign ad wave.

Negative searches as a percentage of negative plus neutral AI searches, US, monthly, three-month average. "AI bubble" is excluded because it tracks stock market worry, not feelings about AI.



ALSO WORTH KNOWING

52%

of negative AI searches in July 2026 were for "AI data center," up from zero before mid 2024.

Oct 2025

is when the negative share broke out for good, after brief spikes in January and May 2025, eight months before data center ads ramped up.

5%

was the negative share through 2023, the year overall concern jumped in the polls.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

The search data says the public's AI worry has a physical address: the data center down the road and the power bill that comes with it. If your company builds, leases or relies on large computing capacity, have a plain answer ready about energy and community impact.

04 AI coverage went from clearly positive in 2021 to negative in 2026

We used the GDELT Project, which monitors news sites worldwide, to measure how much US coverage mentioned AI and how positive or negative that coverage was. Coverage more than doubled as a share of all news. Its tone slid from clearly positive in 2021 to below zero in 2026.

EXHIBIT 10

AI's share of the news

AI stories per 1,000 US articles monitored, three-month average.

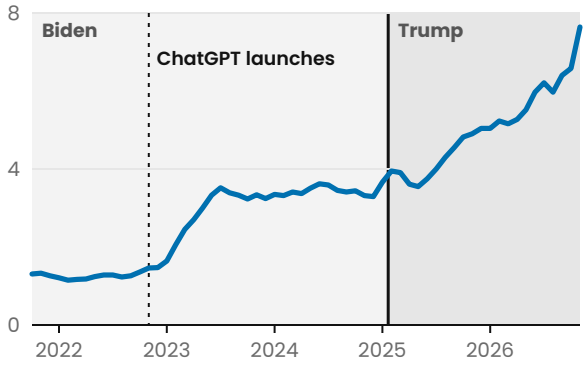
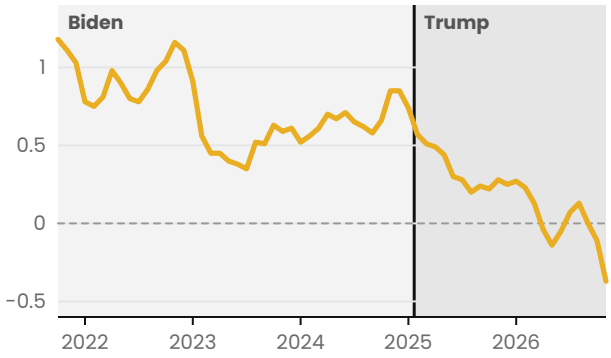


EXHIBIT 11

The tone of that coverage

Average GDELT tone score, three-month average. Above zero is positive.



+1.03
Average tone of AI news in 2021.

+0.49
In 2023, as ChatGPT made AI front page news.

+0.33
In 2025.

−0.06
In 2026 through November 26, the first negative year.

Who led whom: rises in congressional heat predicted more negative AI news two to three months later. Congress and the press reinforced each other. But neither the volume nor the tone of news predicted what the public searched for. The media amplified the political fight; it did not drive the public's worry.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Earned media about AI now starts from a skeptical baseline. Pitches that lean on AI hype will meet reporters primed for the downside. Pitches with independent proof, named customers and clear guardrails will travel further.

05 Both parties attacked data centers on TV, with Democrats outspending Republicans five to one in the general election

Ads arrived late. AdImpact data reported by NPR shows ads mentioning data centers went from a handful in January 2026 to about 164 in August. By October 31, the general election tally had reached $173 million, according to Axios, and the ad tracker could not identify a single commercial that argued for data centers.

EXHIBIT 6

Data center ads ramped up in summer 2026

Ads mentioning data centers per month, all parties, AdImpact via NPR. February to May not reported.

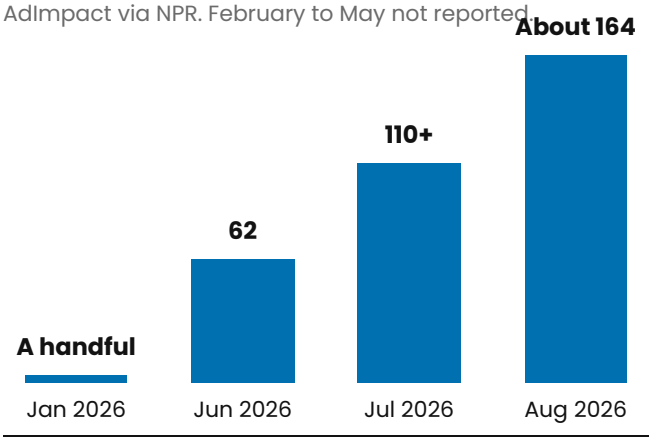
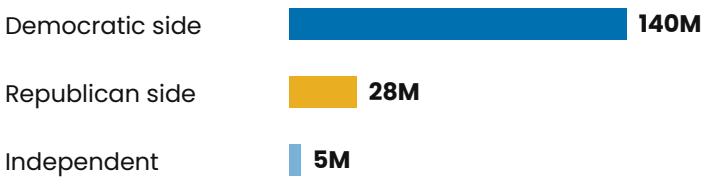


EXHIBIT 7

Democrats paid for most of the general election data center ads

General election spending on data center ads through October 31, 2026, $ millions, AdImpact via Axios.



From January to August 2026 the split was nearly even: over $22M backed Republicans and over $21M backed Democrats (NPR). The positive case came from issue groups instead: Build American AI ran a multimillion-dollar pro-data-center campaign in Ohio, Wisconsin and Kansas (Futurism).

ALSO WORTH KNOWING

$137M

spent on ads made with AI through October 11, 2026, 88% of it Republican. These are ads made by AI, not about it (Wesleyan Media Project via Fortune).

$78.5M

spent on federal candidates by AI industry and AI safety groups combined (CNBC via AI Weekly).

Late

The ad wave started in June 2026, after negative searches and polls had already turned. Ads amplified a mood; they did not create it.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

When both parties spend heavily attacking the same thing, it becomes a cultural reference point. “Data center” is now shorthand for higher bills and corporate indifference. Avoid leaning on infrastructure scale as a brag in consumer-facing AI messaging.

TEST 1: TIMING

The public turned on AI first, and Congress followed a month later

If political talk drove public mood, a rise in congressional heat should come before a rise in public negativity. Granger tests on monthly changes, January 2023 to November 2026, found the reverse: public searches predicted congressional heat a month later. Politicians and the press fed each other, but neither led the public.

Did congressional heat predict next month's negative searches? p = 0.70 at one month, 0.81 at two, 0.79 at three	**No**
Did negative searches predict next month's congressional heat? p = 0.04 at one month, 0.06 at two	**Weakly, yes**
Did news coverage predict congressional heat? p = 0.02 at one month	**Yes, short term**
Did congressional heat predict news coverage? p = 0.03 at one month, 0.02 at two	**Yes, short term**
Did congressional heat predict the tone of AI news? p = 0.01 at two months, 0.004 at three	**Yes, with a lag**
Did news coverage or its tone predict negative searches? volume p = 0.51 at one month; tone p = 0.39	**No**

SIX-MONTH AVERAGES

PERIOD	HEAT	SEARCH	NEWS
2023 H1	0.8	6.5%	2.9
2023 H2	0.9	4.8%	3.3
2024 H1	1.2	7.0%	3.5
2024 H2	1.7	8.8%	3.4
2025 H1	3.1	10.5%	3.8
2025 H2	3.0	13.6%	4.8
2026 H1	5.6	20.6%	5.6
2026 H2	11.6	21.1%	6.9

Lighter rows: Biden administration. Darker rows: Trump administration. Heat: negative AI speeches per 1,000 floor items. Search: negative share of AI searches. News: AI stories per 1,000 US articles.

WHAT THE POLL WAVES ADD

Polls are too sparse for monthly tests, but agree. Our poll composite turned up in the first half of 2025, the same months Democratic floor talk turned negative, a year before the ad wave of June 2026. The fall campaign did coincide with a final jump in several polls, the strongest evidence for the theory in this report.

TEST 2: PARTY

Democratic voters and Democratic lawmakers turned against AI together in 2025

This is the test the hypothesis passes. Until 2024, Republican voters were the more worried. In 2025, the year the White House changed hands and the new administration embraced AI, Democratic voters overtook them. In Congress, Democrats were already somewhat more negative in 2024; in 2025 the gap widened sharply as Democratic members turned negative and Republican members championed AI.

WHAT THEIR MEMBERS OF CONGRESS SAID

MEASURE	DEM	REP
Negative share of AI speeches, 2024 (Biden)	24%	19%
Negative share, 2025 (Trump)	34%	10%
Negative share, 2026 (Trump)	58%	30%
Positive share, 2025 (Trump)	16%	50%
Speeches using AI to attack the other side, 2025 to 2026	191	30

WHAT THEIR VOTERS SAID

MEASURE	DEM	REP
More concerned than excited, 2024 (Biden)	46%	55%
Same, 2025 (Trump)	51%	50%
Same, 2026 (Trump)	56%	49%
AI does more harm in daily life, March 2026	59%	52%
AI risk very serious, September 2026	53%	29%

ALSO WORTH KNOWING

+25

points: Democratic concern since 2021 (31% to 56%). Republican concern is down 10 points since 2023 (59% to 49%).

38% vs 24%

In 2024, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to trust AI companies, per Edelman. Trust and worry can rise together.

30%

of Republican AI speeches in 2026 were negative, up from 10% in 2025, mostly about data center costs and kids.

HOW TO READ THIS

Voters often take cues from their party's leaders, and the out party tends to sour on whatever the governing party champions. That fits the 2025 flip. It is a partisan story more than a campaign story: the flip began in the first half of 2025, more than a year before election day.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Your audience no longer shares one view of AI. Democratic-leaning customers and employees are now the most worried, about jobs, power bills and big tech. Republican-leaning audiences are split between enthusiasm and worry about kids and state control. Segment your AI messaging research by party lean, not just by age.

INSIDE THE RHETORIC

Democrats made AI a power bill story. Republicans made it a kids and family story.

We coded the main topic of every negative AI speech in Congress in 2025 and 2026, leaving out foreign rivals' use of AI. The two parties' complaints barely overlap, except on one thing: data centers.

EXHIBIT 8

Democrats: 141 negative speeches

Main topic, 2025 to 2026

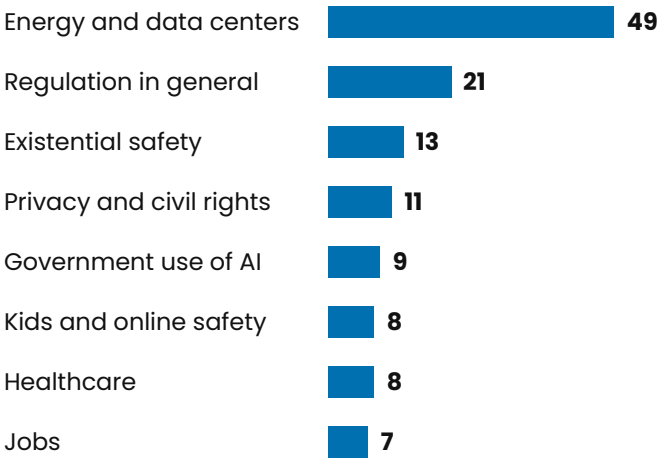
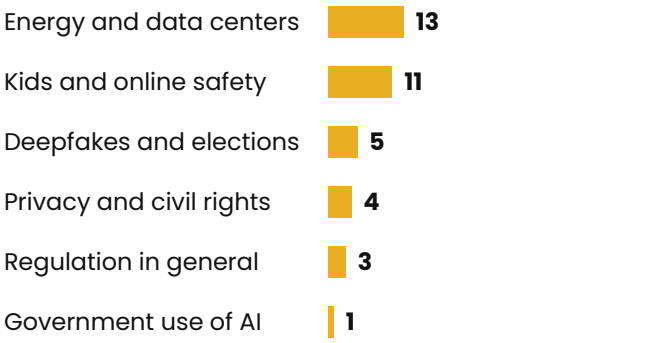


EXHIBIT 9

Republicans: 48 negative speeches

Main topic, 2025 to 2026



THE ONE ISSUE BOTH PARTIES SHARE

Data centers were the top negative topic in both parties. Democrats tied them to utility bills and water. Republicans argued that "data centers should pay their own way." Voters agree across party lines: Quinnipiac found 78% of Democrats and 56% of Republicans opposed an AI data center in their community in March 2026.

WHAT DID NOT MAKE THE LIST

Jobs drew only 7 negative Democratic speeches and no Republican ones, even as Pew found 71% of Americans expect AI to mean fewer jobs. The public's biggest worry was the one Congress talked about least.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Match the worry you address to the audience you are speaking to. A message about responsible energy use answers the most common objection in both parties. A message about protecting kids and families lands with Republican-leaning audiences. A message about jobs fills a gap neither party is speaking to.

NAMED POLITICIANS, PART 1

Critics in both parties target data centers. Fans in both parties point to China.

Four quotes from each party, chosen to show the range of what we coded: two critical and two supportive. Every quote links to the day's Congressional Record.

DEMOCRATS

> "How much more will our citizens be forced to pay for power and water?"
>
> **Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH)**, on data centers. Congressional Record, December 3, 2025

> "H.R. 9340 simply does not protect Americans from high utility bills."
>
> **Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM)**, on a data center power bill. Congressional Record, September 30, 2026

> "If we are going to win the battle for technology and, particularly, in AI, that is going to require enormous amounts of additional energy in the United States."
>
> **Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA)**, on energy for AI. Congressional Record, February 26, 2025

> "And it is clear today, the United States must be competing hard to win in the race for emerging technologies like AI and quantum."
>
> **Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA)**, on competitiveness. Congressional Record, April 3, 2025

REPUBLICANS

> "Mr. Speaker, the goal here is very simple: Data centers should pay their own way."
>
> **Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH)**, on data center power costs. Congressional Record, September 15, 2026

> "While there are many good and practical uses for artificial intelligence, this is not one of them."
>
> **Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX)**, on AI and children. Congressional Record, December 16, 2025

> "You can't be afraid of AI, synthetic biology, robots."
>
> **Rep. David Schweikert (R-AZ)**, on innovation. Congressional Record, November 20, 2025

> "We know either we have the scaling data centers here, or China is going to dominate."
>
> **Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY)**, on data centers and China. Congressional Record, September 18, 2025

A pattern worth noticing: the most positive AI language in both parties was about beating China. When American politicians praise AI, they mostly praise it as a national contest, not as something that improves daily life.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Politicians rarely describe what AI does for ordinary people. That leaves room for brands. Concrete, everyday examples of AI helping a real customer are scarce in the public conversation and will stand out.

NAMED POLITICIANS, PART 2

The real AI fights happened inside each party

On the campaign trail and in public statements, neither party spoke with one voice. Democrats split over a data center moratorium. Republicans split over whether Washington should override state AI laws.

DEMOCRATS

> "We need a federal moratorium on AI data centers."
> **Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT, caucuses with Democrats)**. March 25, 2026

> "We can put appropriate guardrails in place without handing the win on AI to China. A moratorium is China First."
> **Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA)**. March 25, 2026

> "You can't overstate the harm these AI companion chatbots pose to our kids."
> **Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT)**. October 28, 2025

> "California has proven that we can establish regulations to protect our communities"
> **Gov. Gavin Newsom (D-CA)**. September 29, 2025

> "Ken Paxton has taken nearly half a million dollars from the data center industry"
> **James Talarico (D), Texas Senate nominee**. August 24, 2026

REPUBLICANS

> "I'm here today to declare that America is going to win"
> **President Donald Trump (R)**. July 23, 2025

> "But it will never come to pass if overregulation deters innovators from taking the risks necessary to advance the ball,"
> **Vice President JD Vance (R)**. February 11, 2025

> "These data centers are massive electricity hogs."
> **Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO)**. October 2025

> "This is basically putting every state in handcuffs and not letting them do anything."
> **Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL), on federal preemption**. December 4, 2025

> "There's no doubt in my mind that the United States will beat the Chinese Communist Party in the AI race,"
> **Ken Paxton (R), Texas Senate nominee**. August 24, 2026

The intraparty fights: in July 2025 the Senate voted 99 to 1 to strip a 10-year moratorium on state AI laws from the budget bill, after Republicans argued on both sides of the debate (PBS). In March 2026, Sen. Fetterman called the Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez data center moratorium "China First."

TEST 3: CONTROL GROUP

Through mid 2026, the US soured on AI no faster than countries with no national election

If the 2026 campaign drove American sentiment, the US should stand out. It does not. The big jump in nervousness came everywhere in 2022 to 2023, and the 2025 to 2026 cooling in excitement was as large or larger in Great Britain, Germany and France as in the US.

EXHIBIT 12

"Products and services using AI make me nervous"

Ipsos, December 2021, 2023 and March to April 2026.

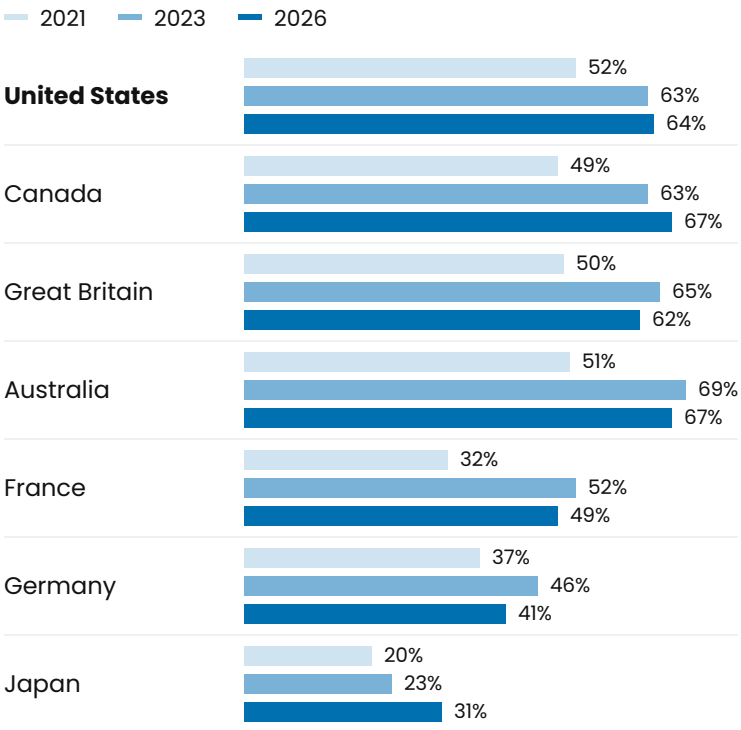
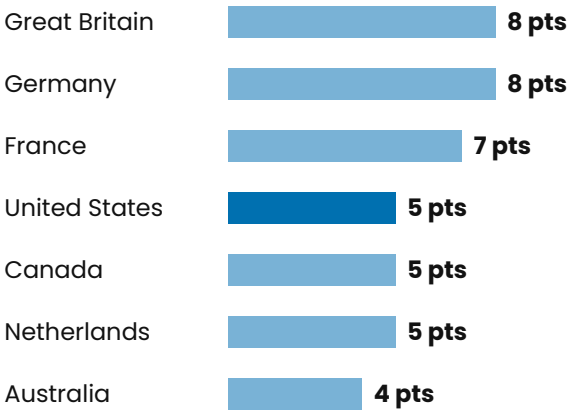


EXHIBIT 13

Drop in AI excitement, 2025 to 2026

"Products and services using AI make me excited," change in points, Ipsos.



PEW, 2025 TO 2026

More concerned than excited: US +2 points, which Pew calls relatively stable. Sweden +9, Poland +8, the Netherlands +7 and Australia +4 rose significantly. Canada rose 5.

THE CAVEAT THAT MATTERS

Ipsos fielded its 2026 survey from March 20 to April 3 and Pew polled Americans June 22 to 28, so neither covers the fall campaign, when several US polls jumped. The 2027 international waves will show whether the US pulled away from its peers after Labor Day. Until then, the control test says this was not a uniquely American, election-driven turn.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Multinational brands should not treat American AI skepticism as a local election hangover. English-speaking markets in particular share it: Canada and Australia are more nervous than the US, and Great Britain nearly as nervous. Plan one skeptical-audience AI narrative and localize it.

THE VERDICT

OUR CONCLUSION: THE HYPOTHESIS PARTLY HOLDS

ChatGPT started it. Politics sorted it.

Politics did not create America's unease about AI, and it did not make the US an outlier. ChatGPT did the first round of persuading, in 2023, with no political heat behind it. But politics is the most plausible accelerant of the second wave in 2025 and 2026, and it decided who worries most and what they blame.

Timing	**Mixed**	The first wave of unease (2023) came before any political heat. In the second wave (2025 to 2026), public negativity and political heat rose together, and monthly tests show the public moving first.
Party	**Holds**	In 2025 Democratic voters overtook Republicans in concern, as the partisan gap in Congress widened sharply. Democratic voters moved toward their leaders' rhetoric.
Control	**Does not hold**	Through mid 2026 the US cooled on AI no faster than Canada, Great Britain, Germany or France, none of which held a national election in 2026.
Target	**Holds**	Politicians of both parties aimed AI anxiety at data centers. Local opposition rose from 26% to 65% in about a year, and $173 million in ads piled on.

WHAT THE HYPOTHESIS GOT RIGHT

AI did become a partisan issue, and it happened on the timeline the hypothesis describes: the last 18 months. Political heat rose tenfold, Democratic voters followed Democratic rhetoric, and data centers became a bipartisan villain.

WHAT IT GOT WRONG

The unease came first and runs deeper than any campaign. Month by month, politicians followed public sentiment more than they led it, and other countries without elections cooled on AI just as much.

One open question could strengthen the hypothesis: several US polls jumped during the fall 2026 campaign. If the 2027 international surveys show the US pulling away from its peers, the campaign effect was larger than this report can prove today.

FOR CORPORATE MARKETERS

How brands should talk about AI now that it is a partisan issue

The public's unease is real, durable and now partisan. Here is how marketing leaders can work with it instead of against it.

1. **Do not wait for the backlash to pass**

   It did not start with the midterms, so it will not end with them. Plan AI messaging for a skeptical audience as the default for 2027.

2. **Segment by party lean, not only by age**

   Democratic-leaning audiences now worry most, about jobs, power bills and big tech. Republican-leaning audiences split between enthusiasm and concern about kids and state control. Test AI language with both.

3. **Have an energy and community answer ready**

   Data centers are the one AI worry both parties share. If your company builds, leases or depends on large computing capacity, say plainly how you handle power, water and local impact before someone asks.

4. **Show the everyday benefit, specifically**

   Politicians praise AI mostly as a race with China. Almost no one in public life describes what it does for an ordinary customer. Concrete, named examples will stand out.

5. **Lead with proof and human control**

   Only 27% of Americans trust businesses to use AI responsibly (Gallup). Name your safeguards, show who is accountable, and keep a human visibly in charge.

The bottom line: AI is no longer a neutral word in America. Treat it the way you would treat any issue your customers feel strongly about in different directions. Lead with the outcome, back it with proof, and be ready to answer the data center question.

METHODOLOGY, PART 1

How the 26 Characters AI Political Heat Index is built

The Political Heat Index measures how often and how negatively members of Congress talk about AI, month by month and by party. Here is every step, so others can repeat and cite it.

1 Collect every floor mention

We downloaded every daily Congressional Record package from GovInfo, October 1, 2021 to November 26, 2026: 1,883 calendar days, 1,038 with the chamber in session. A program flagged every item mentioning "artificial intelligence," "AI" as a standalone word, "A.I.," ChatGPT, generative AI or data centers.

2 Attribute each mention to a member and party

Each mention is credited to the member speaking at that point, matched to party through the official metadata GovInfo publishes with each record. A speech is one member's remarks in one record item. 8,078 of the 12,414 mentions sit in 1,496 speeches by named members; the rest are bill text, procedure or unattributed.

3 Code the stance of every speech

Six coders, each an AI model working from the same written codebook, labeled every speech negative, positive, mixed, neutral or procedural, plus its main topic and whether it attacked the other party. A seventh coder recoded a random 150 blind. Agreement: 87% (Cohen's kappa 0.82); for negative versus not negative, 95% (kappa 0.88).

4 Normalize for floor time

Monthly negative speeches for each party are divided by the number of record items that party's members spoke in that month, times 1,000. This keeps the party that controls the floor from looking louder simply because it holds the floor.

5 Exclude foreign threat framing

Speeches whose main topic is China or other rivals' use of AI are left out of the negative and positive counts, because coders split on whether "we must beat China" is praise or fear of AI.

6 Smooth and scale

The index is the three-month moving average of negative speeches per 1,000 items for both parties combined, scaled so its highest month equals 100. Party lines use the same method on each party separately.

Formula. Heat(month) = 3-month average of [negative AI speeches by Democrats and Republicans ÷ record items those members spoke in × 1,000], divided by its maximum and multiplied by 100. Independents are excluded from party lines. Planned inputs not yet included: member press releases and social posts, and a monthly AdImpact ad series. Campaign ads are reported separately on page 17.

Cite as: 26 Characters AI Political Heat Index, Democrats Now Fear AI More Than Republicans report, November 2026, 26characters.com.

METHODOLOGY, PART 2

How the 26 Characters AI Public Sentiment Index is built

The Public Sentiment Index measures how negatively the US public feels about AI, month by month, from polls and search behavior.

1 **Poll composite, 70% of the index**

Every national US poll question about overall AI attitudes asked in two or more waves between 2021 and 2026: Pew (more concerned than excited), Gallup (more harm than good), Quinnipiac (more harm in daily life), YouGov (negative effect on society; concern AI could end humanity), Fox News (bad for society; very concerned; unfavorable) and Economist/YouGov (advancing too quickly). Each is filled in between its own waves. The composite starts at Pew's first reading and moves each month by the average change across all active series. Data center, jobs and economy questions are reported separately.

2 **Search signal, 30% of the index**

From Google Trends, US: the monthly share of negative AI searches (ban AI, stop AI, AI layoffs, AI dangerous, AI data center, data center electricity, AI electricity bill, AI taking jobs, AI replacing jobs) in negative plus neutral AI searches (artificial intelligence, AI tools, AI app). All terms are anchored to "artificial intelligence" so batches are comparable. "AI bubble" is excluded. Three-month average.

3 **Scale and combine**

Each component is scaled from 0 (its lowest month) to 100 (its highest). Index = 0.7 × polls + 0.3 × search. Higher means more negative toward AI.

4 **News is kept out on purpose**

News coverage from the GDELT Project is reported as its own series, not folded into either index, so media-driven negativity can be told apart from politician-driven negativity.

5 **The tests**

Timing: Granger causality tests on monthly first differences, one to three month lags, January 2023 to November 2026 (47 months). Party: Pew and other party breakouts against each party's floor stance shares. Control: Ipsos AI Monitor and Pew global surveys for the US against peer countries.

Formula. Sentiment(month) = 0.7 × scaled poll composite + 0.3 × scaled negative search share. Poll composite(month) = 37 + cumulative sum of the average monthly change across active poll series. Window: October 2021 to November 2026. Pew's 2021 wave used slightly different wording.

Cite as: 26 Characters AI Public Sentiment Index, Democrats Now Fear AI More Than Republicans report, November 2026, 26characters.com.

LIMITS AND CAUTIONS

What this study can and cannot tell you

We name politicians and draw a political conclusion, so we owe readers a plain account of where the evidence is thin.

1 Correlation is not cause

Our timing tests show which series moved first, not why. Two series can rise together because a third force, such as rising power prices or layoffs blamed on AI, moved both.

2 Congress is not all of politics

The Political Heat Index covers floor speech only. Governors, state legislators, candidates and social media are covered by quotes and ad data, not by the index. Member press releases and a monthly ad series are planned additions.

3 AI coded the speeches

Stance and topic were coded by AI models against a written codebook, with a blind recheck (kappa 0.82). Coders flagged a handful of speeches, under 1%, credited to the wrong member because of how the Record interleaves speakers.

4 Polls are sparse and differ

Most poll series have two to six waves, and wording differs. The composite fills gaps by straight lines between waves, so it shows direction better than exact timing. Several polls cover registered voters, not all adults.

5 Searches are a proxy

Search behavior reflects curiosity and news as well as feelings. Low-volume terms round to zero in Google Trends, so the search signal is unreliable before 2023.

6 The control stops in mid 2026

The latest international surveys were fielded in spring and early summer 2026. They cannot yet tell us whether the fall campaign pushed the US away from its peers.

SOURCES

Every source behind the numbers

Each statistic in this report links to its source on the page where it appears. Quotes from politicians link to the outlet or record where they were published.

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26characters

ABOUT 26 CHARACTERS

26 Characters is a B2B content studio. We plan and create content for corporate marketing and sales leaders, technology founders and recruiting firms, from executive thought leadership and LinkedIn presence to original research like this report.

This report follows our studies of B2B case studies, of how CEOs use LinkedIn, of the most common phrases in B2B marketing and of B2B thought leadership hubs. If you want to talk about what we found, or about how your brand should talk about AI in 2027, get in touch.

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Democrats Now Fear AI More Than Republicans, and the Switch Came With the New Administration

Five Years of Data on Politics and AI Sentiment, 2021 to 2026

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