

How data centres became one of America's hottest political issues

Growing hatred of facilities reshaping midterm elections



◀ Demonstrators take part in a protest at the Utah State Capitol to oppose the construction of the Stratos data center in Box Elder County, Salt Lake City, the US, on May 23, 2026. The proposed data center would be about 40,000 acres and is speculated to use 9 gigawatts of power.
 ● NATALIE BEHRING/GETTY IMAGES

PERSPECTIVE

A spectre is haunting America — the spectre of data centres. The computer-filled warehouses powering America's boom in artificial intelligence (AI) have become less popular than almost every other kind of infrastructure — even nuclear-power plants. Counties and states are rushing to wrap them in red tape or ban them altogether. In July, the Ratepayer Protection Act, designed to limit their impact on electricity prices, sailed through the committee stage in the House of Representatives. On August 31, Donald Trump weighed into the fractious debate, alarming Republicans facing tight midterm races. Local opponents of data centres would “end up being backwards and poor,” he warned, if they killed the “Golden Goose”. The backlash against data

centres is scrambling traditional political alignments, reshaping the coming elections and unnerving tech firms and investors. It is less clear whether it will slow down the AI juggernaut. For a sense of how quickly the politics of data centres has changed, consider three very different states: Illinois, Texas and Pennsylvania. In 2019, J.B. Pritzker, the governor of Illinois, signed a bipartisan law creating incentives for their construction. “In today's world,” he declared, “data centres are as critical a part of our infrastructure as our roads, trains and schools.” In Texas, Greg Abbott boasted as recently as last year that the state was “the epicentre of AI development” while welcoming new Google data centres. Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania's governor, was similarly enthusiastic: “We are already all in on AI.”

In August, Mr Pritzker had a rather different message. Data centres, he told reporters, risked “higher electric rates, higher water rates or...environmentally unsound practices”. In June, he had unilaterally paused applications for the tax credits introduced in 2019. In Texas, Mr Abbott ordered the state's power utilities to audit all data centres seeking to draw electricity. The facilities “could endanger the reliability and stability of the Texas electric grid,” he warned. Mr Shapiro has also tightened the rules, giving communities more power to veto projects, while tarring his opponent in the gubernatorial race as pro-data centre — increasingly, a political term of abuse. A little over a year ago some polls showed majority support for local data-centre construction. By March, that had flipped: one Gallup poll found 71% op-

posed. Surveys by Annenberg recorded a 19-point swing in net favourability between February and June-July. An Economist/YouGov poll from the end of August put opposition at 63%. Data centres were viewed as bad for the country across every group of voters (see chart 1). Chicago illustrates the shift. Long before the AI boom, the city and its suburbs hosted scores of data centres, thanks to their position at the heart of America's internet infrastructure and relatively cheap electricity. Until recently, few people cared. Now, they are packing public meetings in an effort to stop development across the state. In August, hundreds turned out to oppose plans for a project on Chicago's South Side that, according to its developers, is not even a data centre. In the first eight months of this



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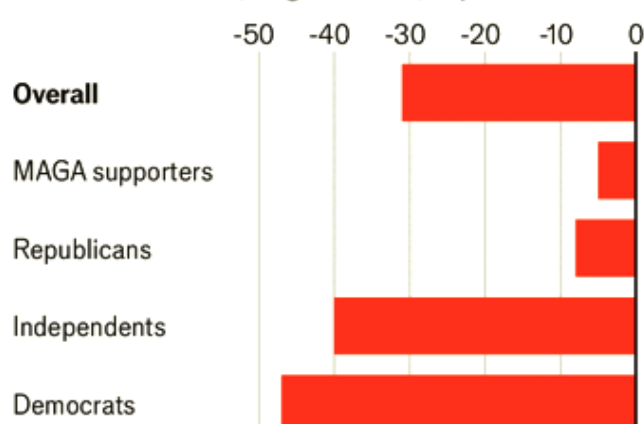
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Too close to home

The real cause of the outrage is simpler. Americans are sceptical of AI, distrust the firms that build it and fear it will lead to job losses. But poll after poll suggests that what worries them most about data centres is their local impact — or, at least, what they imagine that impact to be. A recent Fox News poll found that 75% of respondents cited concerns such as energy use, water bills and traffic as the main reason they opposed a data centre in their area. Just 11% pointed to AI itself. Many of these concerns are overblown. Google, a hyperscaler, says that in 2025, its data centres and offices consumed around 10.9 billion gallons (41 billion litres) of water — roughly equivalent, it noted, to the annual irrigation of 73 golf courses in the south-west. Amazon, another hyperscaler, says its global fleet of data centres used 2.5 billion gallons last year, down by 2% from 2024 despite adding more facilities. In 2023, crop irrigation consumed 74 times more water than data centres, even after accounting for the water used to generate their power. Electricity is a different matter. The Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, a federally funded research centre, estimates that data centres consumed 4.4% of America's electricity in 2023 and could account for between 9.5% and 15.3% by 2030. Their impact on consumers is less clear. Wholesale prices are being pushed up. That could eventually impact households. But the Electric Power Research Institute, a think-tank, estimates that the growth of data centres actually reduced average electricity prices by 6% between 2019 and 2024 by spreading the grid's fixed costs. In recent weeks, three big utilities

A rare point of consensus

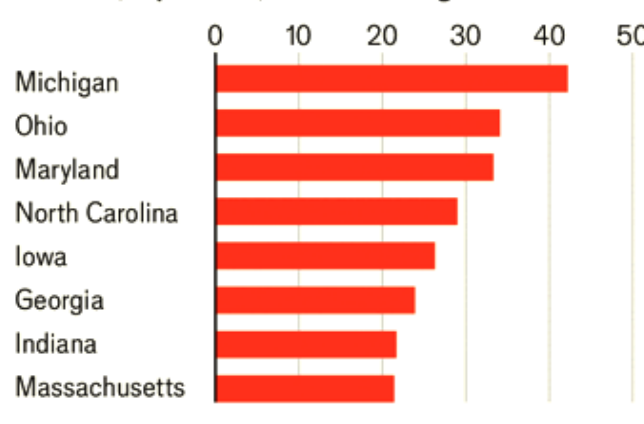
United States, net view of constructing new data centres*, August 2026, % points



*% responding “good” minus % responding “bad” for the country

Drawing the line

US, % of counties with data-centre moratorium actions*, top states, Jan 2023-Aug 2026



*Enacted, proposed and some since-lapsed or repealed halts on new data centres