

A.I. Is Now a Major Election Issue

As Abdul El-Sayed, Michigan's newly elected Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate, put it, "People really effing hate data centers."

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#) August 9, 2026

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

This summer, as the ideologically fractious Democratic primaries begin to recede and the politically pivotal midterm elections edge nearer, candidates and voters alike have had their attention drawn by vast, humming edifices newly constructed on the outskirts of towns. Abdul El-Sayed, an epidemiologist and former public-health official who finished a deft insurgent campaign by becoming Michigan's Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate, sounded a theme that helped decide primaries in his state and in Kansas last week. "People really effing hate data centers," he said.

That kind of consensus is rare in politics right now. About seventy per cent of Americans, including sixty-three per cent of Republicans, oppose building the hyper-scale centers that power the A.I. boom in their area, according to Gallup, but more than four thousand centers have been built across the country, and about four thousand more are planned. Politicians, first from the left and then from the center and the right, have spent the past few months hastily distancing themselves from them. Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez proposed a federal moratorium on new data centers in March, and the pragmatic governor Kathy Hochul enacted the first statewide one in New York in July. The rallying cries against A.I. can themselves sound a bit as if ChatGPT wrote them. "It's time to press control-alt-delete to put a stop to this A.I.-data-center crisis," a closing ad for Francesca Hong, a democratic socialist who is the front-runner in this Tuesday's primary for Wisconsin governor, announced. Still, when something is this unpopular, blunt talk can work.

Florida's Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, always on high alert for political opportunity, set conditions on new data centers in his state in May. But the surprise in recent weeks has been a reversal on the issue by business

conservatives who not long ago were touting A.I. projects as the cornerstone of a new prosperous age. Just eight months ago, Governor Greg Abbott, at a news conference with the Google C.E.O., Sundar Pichai, bragged, “Texas will be the centerpiece for A.I. data centers for Google in the entire world.” Then, last week, Abbott abruptly announced that all such projects would be suspended, pending an “audit” of their costs and potential benefits. Even the brashest, most pro-tech Republicans are sounding defensive. Vivek Ramaswamy, the former Presidential candidate and *DOGE* co-chair, who is now the Republican nominee for governor of Ohio, insisted that “despite my opponent’s claims, I’m not ‘pro-data center.’ ”

Part of the issue is simply that the facilities are so huge and tend not to provide many jobs once construction is complete. Microsoft’s announcement of a new site in Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin, enumerated “46.6 miles of deep foundation piles, 26.5 million pounds of structural steel, 120 miles of medium-voltage underground cable and 72.6 miles of mechanical piping.” The tech journalist Jasmine Sun noted, about a center being built for OpenAI and Oracle in the same state, “Opponents time how long it takes to drive past one at highway speed (1 minute 42 seconds for the Port Washington site).” The resources required for such facilities—electricity for power and water for cooling—have sometimes stressed local systems: after two recent data-center-related electrical surges in northern Virginia, an expert from the Union of Concerned Scientists said that utility companies had fielded “complaints about flickering lights and strange noises coming from refrigerators.” Protests spread, and, according to Data Center Watch, at least seventy-five data-center projects, whose costs totalled roughly a hundred and thirty billion dollars, were stopped in the first three months of 2026 alone.

But this summer some politicians have detected a deeper unease, and have begun asking more basic questions about whether A.I. infrastructure will benefit ordinary people, or just the billionaires behind the technology, and why it has taken mass protest to force public consideration of these issues. As El-Sayed put it during a campaign stop at a data center in Saline, Michigan, “Unless and until we protect local communities from the power of corrupting money and politics, we’re going to continue to see projects like this get pushed onto local communities despite themselves.”

What makes data centers interesting not just as a local issue but as a national one is that they might allow Democrats to highlight the duplicity of Donald Trump’s politics of populism and his embrace of futuristic tech billionaires. Whereas the President’s 2016 run focussed on Rust Belt themes of economic decline, his 2024 campaign featured the presence of Elon Musk, who brought

with him a roster of Silicon Valley allies—one of whom, David Sacks, became the President’s A.I. and crypto czar—and the promise of a transformed future. But, as the A.I. boom and the data-center build-out have accumulated momentum, the statements from the tech industry about widespread job displacement have grown increasingly dystopian. In May, Microsoft’s A.I. C.E.O., Mustafa Suleyman, said that the technology would be able to automate most white-collar tasks within twelve to eighteen months. Even if that’s an overstatement, or corporate hype—there’s little evidence of job loss so far, and Suleyman later walked back his remarks—it should have been obvious that the public might need some reassurance that the economy would still require human beings.

But Musk and Sacks have become less visible in Washington, and although A.I. has been the major business and social topic of the past year and a half, the President has barely addressed it. The White House’s most memorable foray into the A.I. debate is still the very weird press conference that Melania Trump held in March where she walked onstage side by side with a white-plated, faintly Stormtrooper-looking robot called Figure 03, which said in a mechanical female voice that it was grateful to play a part in revolutionizing education. For the Trump Administration, the A.I. backlash is at once a source of political trouble and an expression of its second-term rudderlessness, in that the President has helped unleash a future that he does not seem to understand.

The moratoriums themselves may not be particularly consequential to the advance of artificial intelligence—many data centers have already been built, and others can be constructed in friendlier jurisdictions, or even overseas. In May, the Anthropic C.E.O., Dario Amodei, waved away the political challenges. He said, “We’re going to find that ideology will not survive the nature of this technology. It won’t survive reality.” The things he was talking about, he added, “are gonna become bipartisan and universal because everyone will recognize the necessity of it.” On the campaign trail, in Michigan and elsewhere, something like the opposite is happening. ♦