New Rainey Center Poll: Cost of Living Tops Voters' Concerns as Data Center Policies Take Shape

Most voters oppose data centers, 71% support requiring community benefits agreements before construction, and 64% prefer a conditional approach to development

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, September 23, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The cost of living dominates voters' policy concerns, while new polling from the Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy finds support for conditions on data center development, including community benefits agreements and requirements for developers to bring their own power.

The Rainey Center's September Policy Survey surveyed 1,004 registered voters online from September 10–14, 2026. Results were weighted on age, gender, race, education, 2024 vote recall, and region.

KEY FINDINGS
- 80% say inflation is critical to their daily lives. Groceries, gas, and utilities are named among the top three issues by 57% of voters.

- 71% support requiring community benefits agreements before data center construction, while 38% name requiring data center companies to pay their own electricity costs as a top AI priority for lawmakers.

- 64% prefer a conditional approach to data center development that recruits investment while requiring developers to bring their own power, hold public meetings, sign community benefit agreements, and accept curtailment before homes when necessary.

- Electricity costs and water use are leading concerns. Among voters who view data centers unfavorably, 28% cite electricity costs for residents and 18% cite water use. Only 2% cite noise or appearance.

- AI use is widespread, but voter sentiment is mixed. 52% use AI tools at least monthly and 42% report using chatbots, while 70% say they are annoyed when they learn content was generated by AI.

Cost of Living Remains the Top Issue

The survey finds that traditional economic concerns substantially outweigh AI and data centers in overall issue salience.

Groceries, gas, and utilities lead at 57%, followed by jobs and the economy at 30%, healthcare costs at 29%, Social Security and Medicare at 26%, and housing at 20%.

Eighty percent say inflation is a critical issue in their daily lives.

AI ranks among the top three issues for 12% of voters, while data centers rank among the top three for 7%.

Voters Favor Conditions on Data Center Development
Ninety-two percent of voters are aware of data centers, with 57% viewing them unfavorably. Twenty-nine percent believe a data center is operating or proposed near them. The survey finds 71% support requiring community benefits agreements before data center construction.

Thirty-eight percent also identify requiring data center companies to pay their own electricity costs as a top priority for lawmakers addressing AI.

In a paired comparison of approaches to data center policy, 64% prefer an approach that recruits investment while requiring developers to bring their own power, hold public meetings, sign community benefit agreements, and accept curtailment before homes when necessary.

An approach focused on defending existing tax breaks received 35% preference in the paired exercise.

The survey also finds that data center attitudes are associated with candidate preference. Forty percent say a candidate's opposition to data centers would make them more likely to vote for that candidate, while 15% say it would make them less likely.

In a forced-choice county-office scenario, 44% selected the candidate opposing data center development, compared with 20% who selected the candidate supporting it.

AI Use Is Widespread, but Voter Sentiment Is Mixed
While AI ranks among the top three issues for 12% of voters, 52% say they use AI tools at least monthly, and 42% report using chatbots.

Forty-one percent say nothing about AI excites them, while 70% say they are annoyed when they learn content was generated by AI.

The survey finds broad support for watermarking AI-generated content. Seventy-eight percent support the requirement, including 82% of Democrats, 77% of Republicans, and 75% of independents.

Voters also favor federal uniformity in AI regulation. Sixty-one percent prefer AI to be regulated mostly at the federal level, compared with 20% who prefer state-level variation.

Water Use Perceptions and Information Sources
Nearly half of voters, 48%, believe a data center uses far more water than almost any other facility.

Among those voters, the most commonly cited sources for that belief are local television and newspapers (45%), followed by national newspapers (32%) and cable television (27%).

Methodology
The Joseph Rainey Center for Public Policy surveyed 1,004 registered voters through an online panel from September 10–14, 2026. Results were weighted on age, gender, race, education, 2024 vote recall, and region. The margin of error is ±4.9 percentage points. Subgroup margins of error are larger.

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