WHITE PAPER · DATA CENTER SURVEY

Beyond the backlash

A deeper look at public opinion on data centers

CinqDI · Survey fielded August 7–21, 2026

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Methodology / About the Data

CinqDI fielded a six-question national survey on public attitudes toward data center development from August 7–21, 2026. The survey appeared within content across Advance Local sites.

During backend analysis, respondents were segmented into two groups: a General Audience (n = 26,612), defined as respondents who had not recently read data center content, and Informed Readers (n = 5,599), defined as respondents who had recently consumed data center content. All percentages are calculated using the base for the individual question rather than the full survey sample. Results are pooled and reported without weighting or estimation.

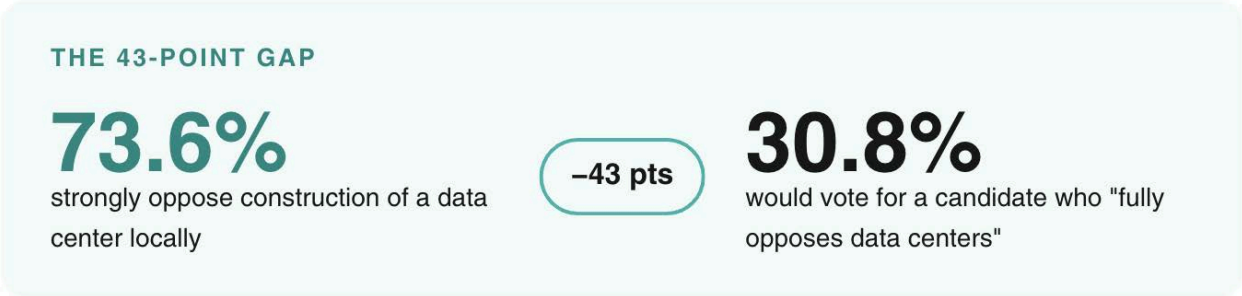
Questions explored views on local data center development, self-reported knowledge and interest, the role of data centers in voting decisions, perceived benefits of AI, and trust in potential messengers. Question-level bases are provided with each figure throughout the report.

Executive Summary

Public opinion on data centers is more complex than the current debate suggests.

Although strong personal opposition is evident in our research, it does not translate directly into political opposition. There's a **43-point gap** between respondents' strong personal opposition to data centers and their willingness to vote for a candidate who shares that opposition. This illustrates an important distinction between personal sentiment and political behavior.

Rather than viewing opinion solely through the lens of support or opposition, the research points to the importance of understanding the concerns and considerations that exist between those positions.



Key Findings

Across the research, three patterns say more about public opinion than the topline opposition number alone.

Opposition isn't a single, fixed position. People can feel strongly about development in their own community without wanting leaders to respond with an equally absolute stance. Only 30.8% of respondents want a candidate who fully opposes data centers — meaningfully fewer than the share who oppose construction outright. The real divide isn't support versus opposition, it's between stopping development and evaluating its impact first.

A majority remain willing to learn, regardless of what they already know. 54% of respondents say they're interested in learning more about data centers — even among people who already feel informed. That interest isn't evenly distributed: 34% already feel they understand the topic but have no interest in learning more, more than 3x the share who don't understand and want to. Still, the larger pattern holds — existing knowledge doesn't determine whether someone stays open to learning more, and there's real room for education to shift the conversation.

Exposure changes the nature of engagement, not necessarily the outcome. Informed Readers — those already exposed to data center coverage — are less likely to land on an absolute position and more likely to stay engaged and keep learning (62% vs. 51.9% interested in learning further). Information doesn't appear to manufacture support. It produces more considered positions.

Together, these patterns suggest public opinion here is still taking shape — not a debate that's already settled.

Opposition Isn't What It Looks Like

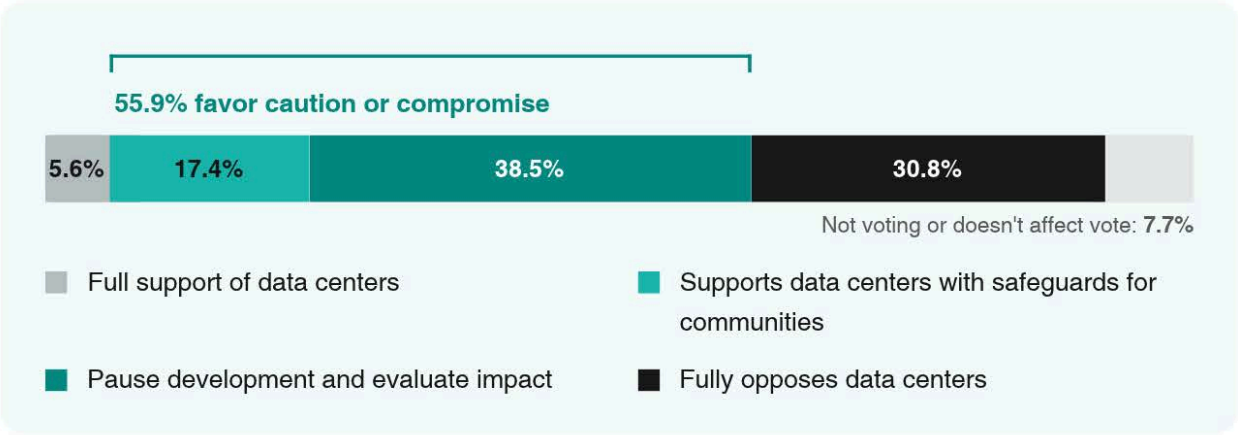
At first glance, public opinion appears settled: most respondents strongly oppose data center development in their communities. But opposition alone does not explain what people want leaders to do about it.

Strong opposition does not produce an equally absolute political response

When respondents considered candidate positions on data centers, most did not gravitate toward either full support or complete rejection. Instead, **more than 55% selected positions centered on pausing to evaluate the impact or allowing development with safeguards**.

That does not mean opposition is weakening. It means opposition contains more than one political response. Many respondents who object to local development still appear to want leaders to assess the tradeoffs, establish conditions, and determine what should happen next.

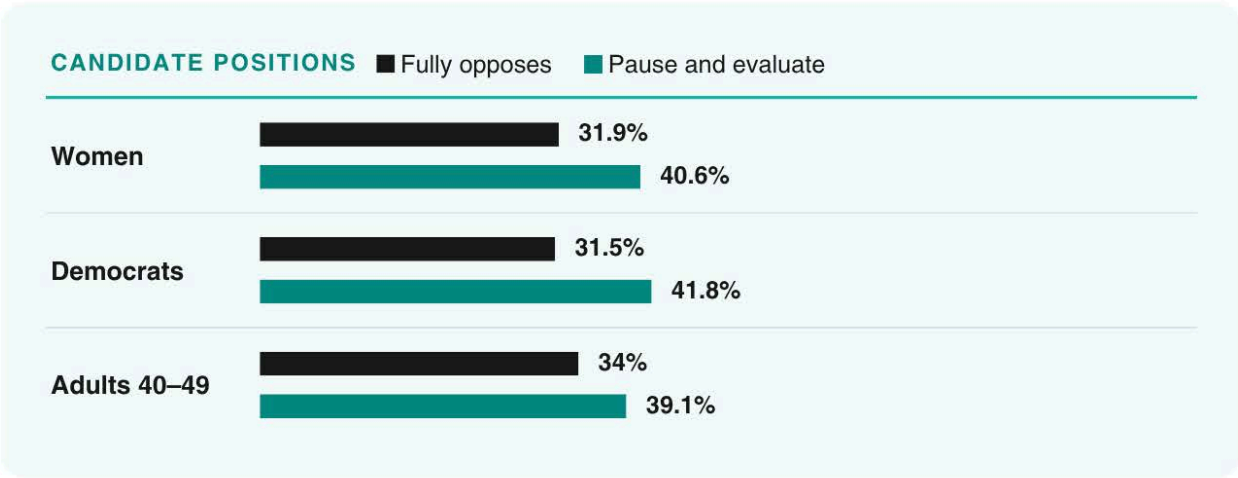
Which candidate position would you vote for?[1]



Caution holds across audiences with higher opposition

Opposition is particularly intense among women, Democrats, and adults ages 40–49 — but even within these groups, a plurality still favor policies that allow data center development under defined conditions, rather than policies that rule it out entirely.

The same groups still prefer caution to rejection[2]



Across all three groups, strong opposition runs above the **73.6%** overall (**75.3%** to **77.6%**), yet only **31.5%** to **34.0%** would back a candidate who fully opposes data centers. In every group, a candidate who pauses to evaluate impact draws more support (**39.1%** to **41.8%**), leading by **5 to 10 points**. Even the most opposed want to understand the impacts of data centers and elect leaders who reflect that position.

[1]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Base: 17,124 respondents (candidate positions question).

[2]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Base: Women 4,419; Democrats 3,447; Adults 40–49 932.

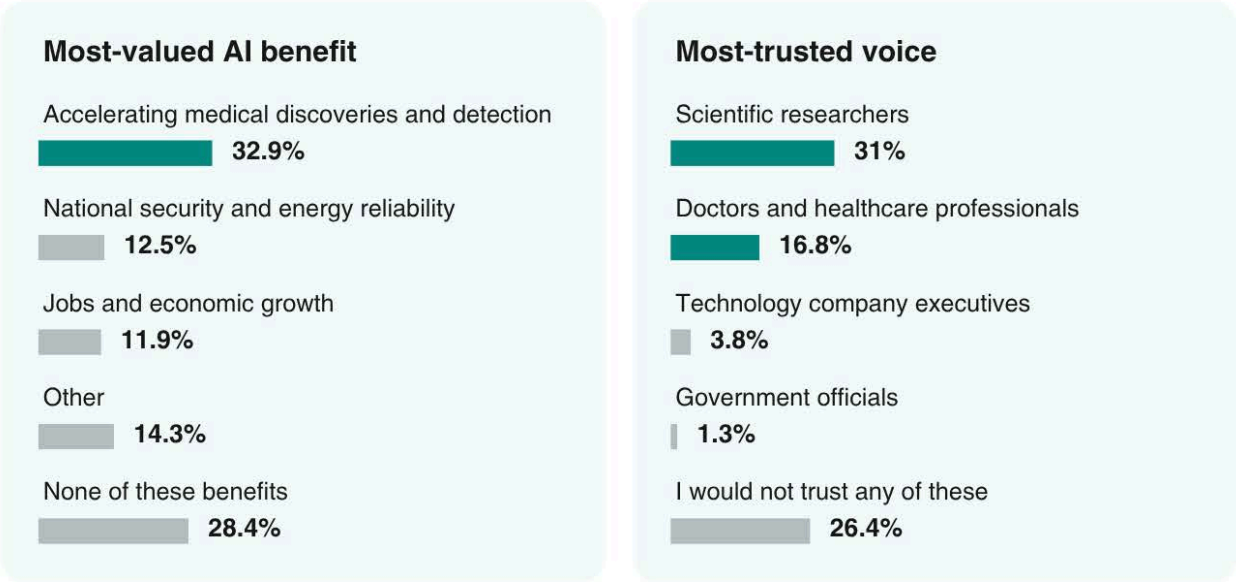
Opposition to Data Centers Isn't Opposition to AI

People can strongly oppose data center development in their own communities while still recognizing the positive impacts AI can have more broadly. **71.6%** of respondents found a potential benefit to AI that mattered to them — even as **73.6%** said they were "strongly opposed" to the data centers built to support this technology. That gap suggests opposition to data center construction and skepticism toward AI itself aren't the same thing.

Respondents were also asked which potential AI benefits mattered most to them. Accelerating medical discoveries and detection was the single most-valued potential AI benefit, chosen by **32.9%** of respondents — well ahead of national security and energy reliability (**12.5%**) or jobs and economic growth (**11.9%**).

The messenger matters just as much. Scientific researchers (**31%**) and doctors and healthcare professionals (**16.8%**) were the two most-trusted voices by a wide margin, far ahead of technology company executives (**3.8%**) or government officials (**1.3%**). Still, **26.4%** of trust selections went to "I would not trust any of these" — the next largest response overall.

Questions about AI[3]



These are two separate findings, not a single cross-tabbed result — but both point toward the same subject: **medicine and science**, rather than government or industry.

[3]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Bases: AI benefit 19,267; most-trusted voice 24,715.

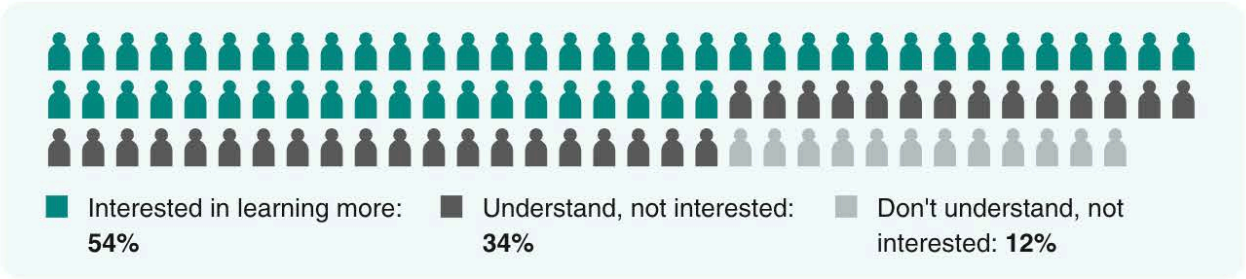
A Majority Is Still Willing to Learn

Understanding and opposition tell only part of the story. When it comes to willingness to keep learning about data centers, the numbers point to an audience that's more open than closed.

Interest holds across understanding and opposition

A majority of respondents (**54%**) said they were interested in learning more about how data centers are built and run — proof that opposition and closed-mindedness aren't the same reaction. Engagement with the subject runs wider than support for it, reaching well beyond the smaller share who already favor development. For anyone trying to reach people on this topic, that's the more useful number to focus on: not who's already on your side, but who's still willing to listen.

Interest in learning more about how data centers are built and run[4]



Uninterested, but not necessarily informed

The **34%** who say they understand data centers but don't want to learn more skew toward people who already think they understand the basics — not toward people who've never encountered the topic — and they're not alone. Another **12%** lack understanding and aren't interested either. Combined, **nearly 80%** of respondents report having at least some understanding of data centers.

Feeling informed and being informed aren't necessarily the same thing. Self-reported understanding reflects how confident someone is in what they already know — it doesn't measure how much they've actually been exposed to the subject. Whether that confidence holds up against real exposure to data center-specific information is a question the data can speak to directly.

[4]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Base: 22,946 respondents (knowledge and interest question).

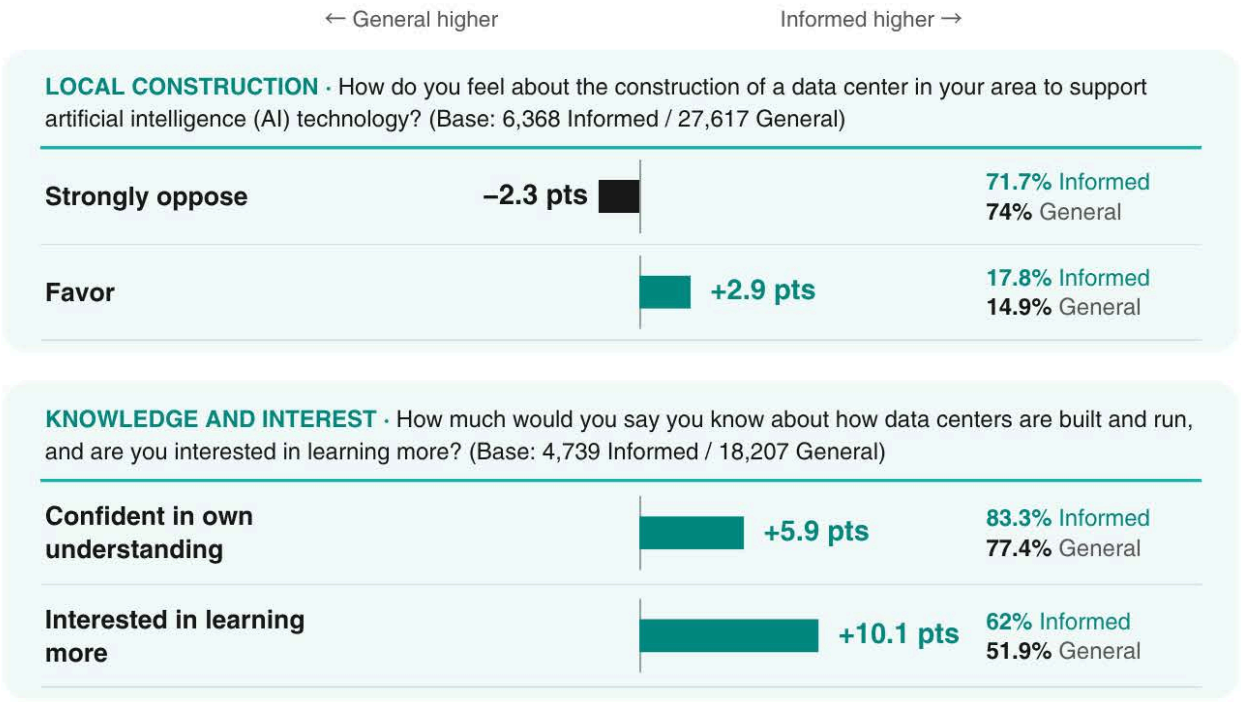
What Happens When You Close the Gap: The Informed Reader Effect

Because Informed Readers have been consuming data center content, their answers diverge from the General Audience who haven't consumed any. When you close that knowledge gap, there's more room for constructive positions and a willingness to learn — more nuance in how people feel about the issue and about AI in general, and in how it shapes their politics.

Informed Readers land in a different place on the fundamentals

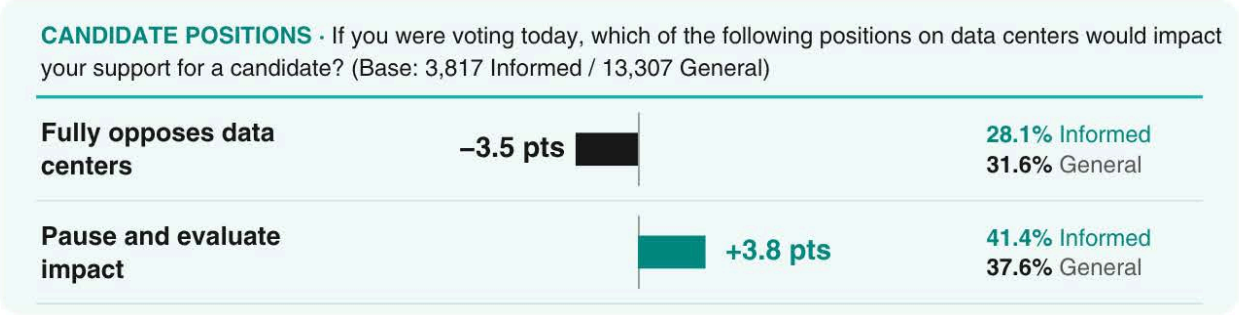
The gap between Informed Readers and the General Audience shows up on the core questions, not just the margins. Informed Readers were less likely to strongly oppose local construction (71.7% vs. 74%) and more likely to support it outright (17.8% vs. 14.9%), while also reporting more confidence in their own understanding (83.3% vs. 77.4%) and more interest in learning further (62% vs. 51.9%). That same pattern carries into the voting booth: Informed Readers were less likely to back a candidate who fully opposes data centers (28.1% vs. 31.6%) and more likely to prefer one who pauses to evaluate impact first (41.4% vs. 37.6%).

Informed vs. General Audience[5]



[5]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Change = Informed minus General, in points. Favor: Informed 10.1% strongly + 7.7% somewhat; General 8.8% + 5.9%.

Fig. 5 continued:

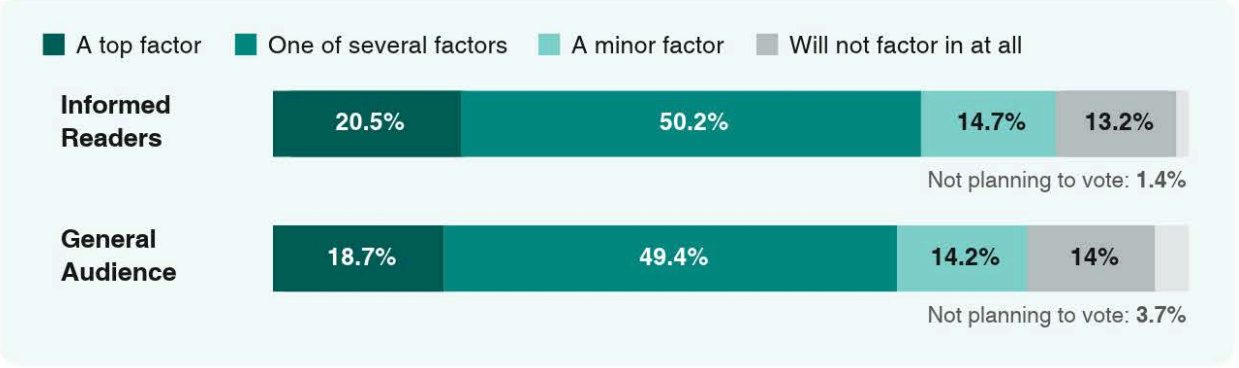


Informed Readers are more engaged, not just more opposed

Informed Readers are more engaged across the board than General Audiences, including on dimensions beyond the opposition-and-support numbers already covered in Key Findings. They're less likely to sit on the fence: just **3%** answer "no opinion," compared to **4.2%** of the General Audience.

That engagement carries into how they vote. Informed Readers have a higher propensity to vote in the primaries — **98.6%** said they were planning to vote, compared to **96.3%** of the General Audience. They're also more likely to consider data centers the single top factor informing their vote (**20.5% vs. 18.7%**). This doesn't imply support or opposition either way — just a higher level of engagement with the subject.

How important will building data centers be in deciding your vote in November?[6]



Informed Readers are more likely to find value in AI

Exposure to data center content also correlates with a more favorable read on AI's potential benefits. **73.5%** of Informed Readers identified an important potential benefit of AI, compared to **71.1%** of the General Audience — a modest but consistent gap. The pattern holds at a deeper level, too: accelerating medical discoveries and detection was the top answer for both groups, but a larger share of Informed Readers landed there (**35.7% vs. 32.1%**). Exposure doesn't

[6]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Bases (Informed / General): 3,920 / 13,809.

change which benefit people value most — it concentrates opinion more tightly around it.

Which potential benefit of AI matters most to you personally?[7]

Closing the knowledge gap doesn't manufacture support — it broadens engagement. Greater understanding doesn't guarantee a particular position; it creates a larger audience informed enough to weigh the tradeoffs and stay open to the conversation. Informed Readers consistently land closer to the middle than either extreme, suggesting their positions are shaped less by a fixed stance and more by genuine understanding of data centers and their impacts — while General Audiences remain more skeptical, both in how they value AI and in who they trust to talk about it. Opposition is still the most common position in both groups. But the real opportunity with Informed Readers isn't changing minds outright — it's turning a polarized issue into a more substantive conversation about the conditions under which development might be acceptable.

Why This Matters

On the surface, the data center debate looks settled. Look closer, and it isn't.

Data centers started as a matter of opinion. But as more broke ground in communities across the country, people began to feel the impact firsthand — and that personal stake carried into the voting booth, turning data centers into a hot-button political issue. We wanted to understand what's actually driving public opinion, so we asked people directly.

Strong local opposition doesn't carry over into support for an equally absolute political response — and that gap may be the most important finding in this research. People can oppose a data center in their own community while still wanting leaders to evaluate impacts, establish safeguards, or find a path forward rather than stop development outright. The debate isn't just "for" or "against." There's real space between those poles, and it stays open: a majority of respondents, even those who already feel informed, still want to learn more. More information doesn't appear to manufacture support — it produces a more engaged audience willing to consider what comes next, in the voting booth too. Candidates who take community concerns seriously, favor evaluation over absolutism, and build in real safeguards are better positioned to

[7]Source: MV Digital Group survey, August 7–21, 2026. Bases (Informed / General): 4,161 / 15,106.

win these voters than those staking out an all-or-nothing stance.

The same tension extends to AI. People are skeptical of the infrastructure built to power it, yet most can still name a benefit they personally value — many just don't connect the two. Closing that gap is less about awareness than about trust: respondents trust scientific and medical voices far more than government or industry, and a sizable group doesn't trust any of the given sources at all. People don't need to be told data centers exist. They want to understand the tradeoffs, know how their communities will be affected, and hear it from someone they trust.

For anyone trying to shape this conversation, that's both the challenge and the opportunity. The public has formed a strong first impression, but many haven't made a final judgment. **The path forward isn't convincing people their concerns are wrong — it's giving them credible reasons to keep considering what the right answer could be.**