

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

The Good-Neighbor Data Center

A Policy Data Science Agenda for Sustainable Growth and Community Trust

Lowi (1964) identified a basic source of political risk: how policy distributes benefits and burdens shapes the politics that follow. Sixty years later, that logic is increasingly visible in the host-community politics surrounding data center development. As projects encounter organized opposition, legal challenges, and political defeats across the country, the main question is no longer simply how to build more data-center capacity. The challenge is how to reconcile sector growth with the interests, perceptions, and legitimate concerns of the communities asked to host critical infrastructure.

The good-neighbor framework offers a useful starting point. As developed by Kleyman (2026), it can be distilled into five practices: engage communities early, provide transparent information about resource and fiscal impacts, design facilities with local impacts in mind, invest in relationships with local institutions, and communicate tradeoffs candidly. Taken together, these practices reflect a broader principle: community concerns are not external obstacles to development; host-community politics is an integral part of development itself.

The industry has already begun to respond. Developers are paying greater attention to host communities and their concerns about affordability and rising utility rates (Walker 2026). Yet opposition continues to intensify as the legal and regulatory environment becomes more contested and less predictable. Community engagement is therefore necessary, but insufficient without a clearer understanding of the politics shaping local opposition.

This is where a **Policy Data Science** approach can contribute. Combining policy analysis, data, computation, and organizational knowledge provides a distinctive basis for understanding and anticipating how political events and coalition dynamics shape the trajectory of the data center industry.

A **Policy Data Science** agenda for sustainable sector growth and community trust should therefore focus on four areas, each defined by a distinct set of questions.

Map the political environment

- Who shapes the policy landscape, using which tactics, and in relation to whom? How do coalitions form, expand, fragment, and change over time?
- How can industry leaders rapidly map the voices, venues, organizations, and relationships shaping a particular policy domain, market, or location, and then use that intelligence to identify emerging risks and prioritize attention and investment?

Understand the structure of support and opposition

- What issues, events, and narratives tend to precede organized opposition? Can changes in public discourse provide useful early-warning signals?
- What causal arguments structure support for and opposition to data center development? To what extent is resistance driven by local concerns about infrastructure, affordability, water, land use, or utility rates, and to what extent does it reflect broader anxieties about AI and technological change?

Translate intelligence into political risk management

- What general principles can help industry leaders identify, assess, and manage political risk amid uncertainty, competing narratives, and deliberate misinformation?
- Who can serve as a credible messenger across jurisdictions, issues, and audiences? Which brokers, institutions, and forms of technical evidence carry the greatest weight in host communities' assessments of risk?

Build the capability to learn continuously

- What computational systems could help industry leaders detect shifts in policy narratives, monitor regulatory developments across jurisdictions, and identify emerging risks before they become acute?
- What information needs to reach decision-makers sooner? What forms of communication circulate effectively across coalitions? What analytical capabilities would enable the industry to continuously update its understanding as political conditions change?

Summary

A **Policy Data Science** agenda for the data center industry is fundamentally about situational awareness: understanding the local political environment clearly enough, and early enough, to respond to legitimate community concerns before they harden into structural constraints.

References

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