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Tech Realism: An Optimistic, Clear-Eyed Path Forward



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The choices Washington makes over the next few years will determine not just how quickly new technologies develop, but whether they make Americans more prosperous, more secure, and more in control of their lives. Unfortunately, the debate over how to

navigate this moment has collapsed into two extremes—neither of which is up to the challenge.

On one side are the **Reckless Optimists**, who say *government should stay out of the way*. They want companies to build and deploy technology with little oversight, policing themselves and assuming the benefits outweigh the costs. On the other side are the **Reactionary Pessimists**, who reach for one simple solution whenever new risks emerge: *ban it*. Indefinitely pause data center construction, ban superintelligence, and block people from using products that carry potential risks.

Both approaches miss the mark. Polling shows that voters overwhelmingly believe the federal government is not doing enough to regulate AI.[1] Most voters like the technology they use every day, but they're worried about the risks it poses.[2] They worry about how their data is collected and misused, being defrauded or scammed online, and most of all, the impact of technology on their kids.[3]

The Reckless Optimists too often ignore the risks and dismiss calls for the government to do more. Their approach would let the industry off the hook, allowing powerful corporations to further consolidate their power and leaving average people defenseless in a technological Wild West. The Reactionary Pessimists only see the risks. Their heavy-handed approach would strangle innovation, eliminate the benefits of technology that people like, and cut off opportunities to revitalize public services, strengthen our economy, and defend our country.

There is a better path forward: Tech Realism. Tech Realists are optimistic enough to believe that technology can make America richer, safer, healthier, and more effective. But they're also clear-eyed about the fact that those benefits won't happen automatically. Technological progress carries real risks, from privacy and cybersecurity to kids' safety and job security. Tech Realists know we can demand effective guardrails that protect people from harm without blocking innovation—and ensure the benefits of technology reach as many people as possible.

An ambitious agenda for Tech Realists must be built around three core policy promises:

1. Safety guardrails
2. Consumer protection

3. Shared prosperity

Policy Promise #1: Safety Guardrails

First and foremost, we need guardrails that protect people from the risks of advanced technology. Americans shouldn't have to accept a digital world where technology makes it easier than ever to defraud, deceive, and exploit people. We shouldn't have to ignore the risks that advanced AI models pose to our national security in order to dominate the global economy. And we shouldn't have to accept a mental health crisis in children as the unavoidable price of technological progress.

Government doesn't have to—and can't—eliminate every risk. **But it must establish basic rules of the road that raise the standard for tech products before they reach the public**.

When it comes to **kids' safety**, that means requiring tech companies to build safety into their products from the start. If products are made available to kids, they should have stronger protections built in and make it easier for parents to get involved. Companies should also be held accountable when their products put kids at risk. The same principle applies when it comes to **frontier AI safety**. Developers should not be allowed to unleash catastrophic risks on the public. They should be required to have their models tested and verified as safe before they can be released. We should also strengthen enforcement against **scams, frauds, and deepfakes**. We can't let bad actors slip through the cracks because they use technology too advanced for law enforcement to keep up. And we have to make it harder for people to use technology to harm others in the first place.

Voters understand that balance. Given the choice, voters overwhelmingly favored **guardrails** to keep them safe over eliminating regulations or imposing outright bans.[4]

Policy Promise #2: Consumer Protection

Amid all the miracles of innovation, too often technology works against us. Our data is sucked up and sold to the highest bidder. Algorithms make decisions we can't see. And when we need a human touch, all we can find is an automated voice. Communities can

feel like technological change is simply happening to them, rather than working for them.

The answer isn't to reject technology. **The answer is to reset the power balance and make sure technology works for us, not against us**.

When it comes to **data privacy**, that means creating a universal set of rules governing how our data is treated. Consumers should have the right to decide what data is shared, who gets access to it, and how it's used. They should also be assured that anyone entrusted with their information will keep it safe. We also need **transparency** when AI and algorithms are used to make consequential decisions about people's lives—from credit and lending, to insurance coverage, to housing. And whenever AI is used for decisions that matter, we need updated **consumer rights** to talk to a human when we need to. Automation can't be an excuse for trapping people into systems they can't appeal or escape.

That same principle should apply to **data centers**. America needs the infrastructure to power the next generation of technology, but communities shouldn't feel like it is being forced upon them. Polling shows that voters are looking for long-term plans to address data center buildouts, not just short-term bans.[5] Residents should have a real voice in how projects move forward, families shouldn't be stuck with higher utility bills, and communities should share in the benefits when data centers come to town.

Policy Promise #3: Shared Prosperity

America is on the cusp of enormous technological and economic gains. But a booming stock market and increases in GDP don't mean much to a worker wondering whether AI will take their job. The best technology can't just be accessible to those at the top. Neither can the economic gains it generates.

Technological progress must translate into economic progress for everyone. The goal shouldn't just be to build the world's most powerful technology. It should be to create greater opportunity, higher living standards, and more economic security for all Americans. Voters don't just want protection from risk—they also want policymakers to put technology to work to improve their lives.[6]

We should make sure the benefits of AI reach beyond the companies building it. Researchers, non-profits, small businesses, and entrepreneurs should have **access** to powerful new tools. Over 80% of voters believe AI will speed up scientific research and lead to more medical breakthroughs.[7] We should encourage the use of technology to advance these and other public benefits. Government should also prioritize **adoption** of technological solutions that make public benefits simpler, faster, and more effective.

We also have to prepare workers for disruption. That means **modernizing training** to get people into the new jobs being created and **building a safety net** that can carry us through periods of technological upheaval.

Finally, the enormous wealth created by this boom should be broadly shared. Our tax code should not favor wealth generated by capital over wealth earned through work. And the corporations and individuals who benefit most from AI development should pay their fair share to support the country that made this prosperity possible.

Conclusion

The choice isn't between racing blindly into the future and trying to stop it from arriving. **Tech Realism offers a better path: embrace technological progress, govern its risks, and make sure it improves people's lives**.

Washington's slow response so far should be a call to action, not a reason to give up. Policymakers can put enforceable protections in place, give people more control, and prepare workers and communities for the changes ahead. They can also build a government that uses technology to serve people better and adapts as new risks and opportunities emerge.

The next Congress doesn't need to predict every breakthrough to make good on these three promises. It needs to act on the risks we already understand and build the capacity to respond to what comes next. We should be optimistic about America's ability to innovate—and equally confident in our ability to govern that innovation so it makes people's lives better.

ENDNOTES

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