CENTER FOR CAMPAIGN INNOVATION

SURVEY / THE 2026 POLITICAL CAREERS SURVEY

Politics Professionalized. Campaigns Can't.

Political work became a career. On the campaign side, the employment structure never followed.

CENTER FOR CAMPAIGN INNOVATION | REPUBLICAN JOBS · AUGUST 2026

Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, working in politics became a career. The respondents in this survey are not merely doing one cycle before moving on to something else. Three quarters of them (77%) have four or more years in the industry, and 42% have eight or more. They have mortgages, spouses, children, and an expectation of doing this until they retire with 81% saying they plan to stay in the field long term.

The institutional side of the industry – party committees, PACs, advocacy organizations, and consulting firms – built employment infrastructure to match. Eighty four percent (84%) of professionals in those roles report having employer-sponsored health insurance and 80% have paid time off. Forty one percent (41%) report earning $100,000 per year or more, with a median salary in the $80,000–$99,999 range.

But the campaign side lacks the permanent organizational structures to support employees with similar benefits. Among campaign staff, 21% have health insurance, 25% have paid time off, and 8% receive retirement contributions. Sixty two percent (62%) receive no benefits whatsoever. The median earning is a full band lower at $60,000–$79,999 and 57% earn under $80,000.

Unlike the campaigns they support, these staff aren’t transients. Seventy nine percent (79%) have four or more years of experience (comparable with their peers on the institutional side). These are the same people at the same career stage. In other words, the work is permanent for the employee but not the employer.

They serve the same candidates, perform the same work, and have the same career experience, but the difference is whether an institution stands between the worker and the candidate. This has profound impacts on the efficiency of campaign spending in a hard dollar context and the types of campaigns that can attract quality professionals.

Key Findings

> **One in three political professionals lack benefits.**
>
> Thirty percent (30%) of respondents surveyed report receiving no benefits at all. Among those employed directly by campaigns, that number surges to 64%.

Fifty three percent (53%) of political professionals are satisfied with their compensation.

Among professionals dissatisfied with their pay, 67% named money as what would keep them in the field long term. For those who are satisfied, 42% say more money but career advancement becomes more important.

A gender compensation gap emerges at mid career.

In aggregate, the difference in earnings between men and women is small, but at 8–15 years of experience the difference is stark. Fifty one percent (51%) of men make $100,000 per year or more compared to just 26% of women, and the median band for men is a full step higher. Before and after that stage, the gap closes.

AI is welcomed as capacity relief, not a threat.

Forty two percent (42%) of respondents say AI significantly changed or transformed their work, but only 12% view it as a career threat. In an industry where most people are already doing more than one job, automation gets experienced as a backlog finally clearing.

The job function least likely to be automated is also the worst paid.

Sixty percent (60%) of respondents working in field organizing and GOTV say AI has had no change on their role. Seventy four percent (74%) of respondents in these roles earn under $80,000 and only 11% clear $100,000 making it the weakest pay distribution of any role.

The Permanence Problem

Campaign staff and institutional staff arrive at their jobs with roughly the same tenure – 79% with four or more years in the industry. The workforce is the same. What differs is whether anything durable stands behind it.

The cleanest way to see this is to set role titles aside and look only at the 271 respondents who told us they serve candidate campaigns. Same clients, same cycle, same work. Then sort them by who signs the check.

BENEFITS BY EMPLOYER, AMONG RESPONDENTS SERVING CANDIDATE CAMPAIGNS

Serving candidate campaigns, employed by…	Respondents	Health insurance	Retirement	Paid time off	Zero benefits
A durable organization firm, party committee, vendor, advocacy group	70	77%	61%	71%	**16%**
Consultants mixed and solo	45	49%	38%	56%	36%
The campaign itself	77	21%	6%	23%	**64%**

The zero benefit rate quadruples depending on nothing but the employer. Seventy four percent (74%) of agency and firm staff work on candidate campaigns and they report the best benefits in the entire survey at 3% with none. Political consultants split on the same axis under a single job title. Those employed by a firm report a 24% zero-benefit rate. Those working for themselves report 67%.

Among respondents who describe themselves as full-time employees, 51% of campaign staff still report zero benefits against 6% of full-time staff everywhere else in the industry. Narrow further to full-time campaign staff with four or more years of experience, the people who have unambiguously made this a career, and 46% still have nothing. Calling yourself a full-time employee does not help when your employer has an expiration date.

This is entirely a consequence of the broader campaign finance system. A campaign committee is a legal entity built to dissolve. It raises money for one race, spends it, and terminates. It cannot vest a retirement plan, carry someone from October to February, or offer a career, because it will not exist. The unit of employment in this industry is the campaign. The unit of a career is the person crossing many campaigns. The industry has organized itself so that starting a family and staying in campaigns are close to incompatible.

Compensation

The median respondent falls in the $80,000–$99,999 band. Forty six percent (46%) earn under $80,000 and 32% clear $100,000. Among full-time employees, pay climbs steadily with experience, from a median band of $40,000–$59,999 in the first year to $125,000–$149,999 past fifteen years. Communications and press is the best-paid function while field organizing is the worst.

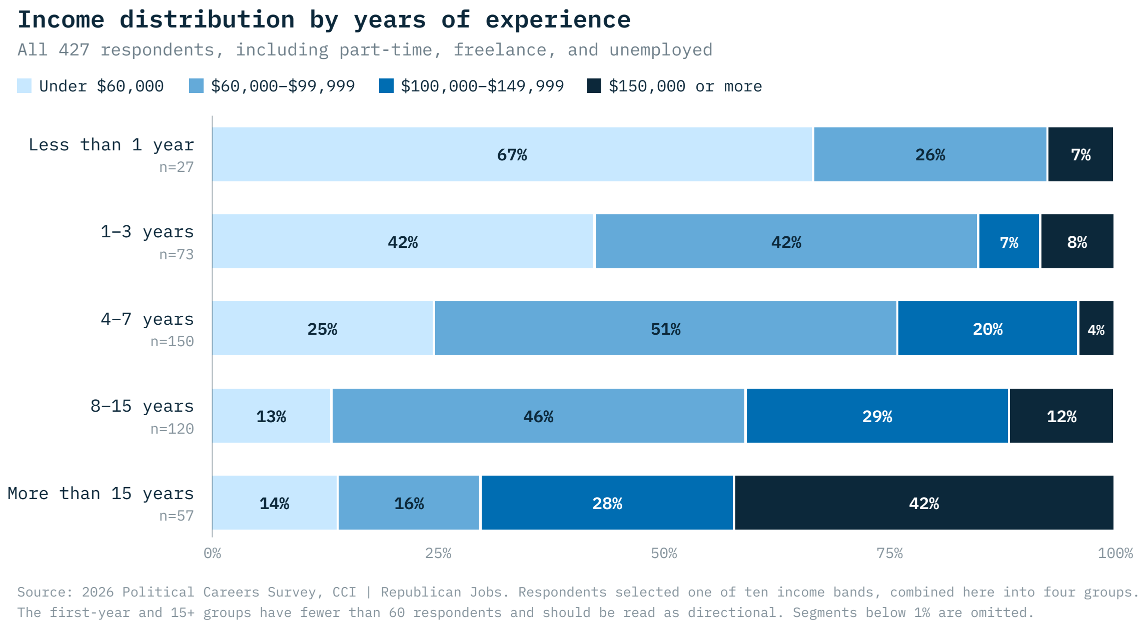


FIGURE 1 / INCOME DISTRIBUTION BY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Compensation satisfaction tracks pay closely, but only up to a point. Seventeen percent (17%) of those earning under $40,000 are satisfied. That climbs steadily to 74% in the $125,000–$149,999 band, and then stops. Above roughly $125,000, additional money stops buying additional satisfaction.

What replaces it is trajectory. Among respondents dissatisfied with their compensation, 67% named pay as what would keep them in the field and only 11% named career advancement. Among the satisfied, pay falls to 42% and advancement doubles. Solve compensation and the conversation turns to whether there is anywhere to go.

Asked whether their pay is competitive for their role and experience, respondents split 41% yes, 40% no, and 19% unsure. That uncertainty is not spread evenly. Among those neutral about their compensation, 45% are unsure whether it is competitive, compared with 7% of the very satisfied and 12% of the very dissatisfied.

The Mid-Career Squeeze

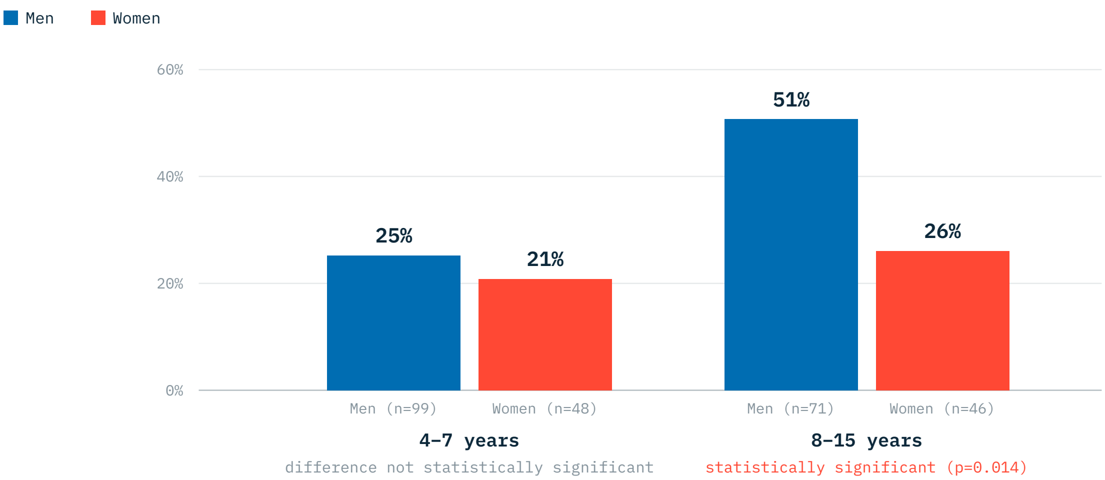
Three separate problems converge on professionals four to fifteen years into the field, which is also the stage where the campaign side's employment model stops fitting.

Career path peaks here. Advancement was the second-largest theme in written responses about what would keep people in the field, and it peaks at 22% among those with four to seven years before falling to 10% past fifteen. What respondents describe is not ambition thwarted but structure absent. One put it directly: “A culture of helping each other find roles after a campaign ends (seen so many talented people burn out because of this— it's not a skill or networking issue).”

The gender gap opens here too. Across the full sample it is small and not statistically significant, 34% of men earning $100,000 or more against 28% of women. At eight to fifteen years it is stark and it is significant: 51% against 26%, with men's median band a full step higher. It is the only experience band where men's median sits above women's.

The pay gap appears at mid-career

Share earning $100,000 or more, by gender and years of experience



Source: 2026 Political Careers Survey, CCI | Republican Jobs. Respondents selected one of ten income bands; this chart shows the share at or above $100,000. Only experience bands with at least 25 respondents of each gender are shown.

FIGURE 2 / THE PAY GAP APPEARS AT MID-CAREER

Women are over-represented in that experience band, making up 35% of women in the survey against 25% of men. What the sample does show is attrition. Women are 31% of respondents overall, 25% of those past fifteen years, and 23% of those managing eight or more people. The women who get through mid-career do well. Fewer get through.

Stagnation is the third pressure, and it behaves more like a pay cut than most employers would expect. Twenty seven percent (27%) of respondents whose pay was flat over the past year say they may leave, statistically indistinguishable from the 24% whose pay was cut significantly. A significant raise nearly eliminates the risk, with 95% planning to stay. In a mission-driven field, people appear to absorb a bad year if they can see it ending.

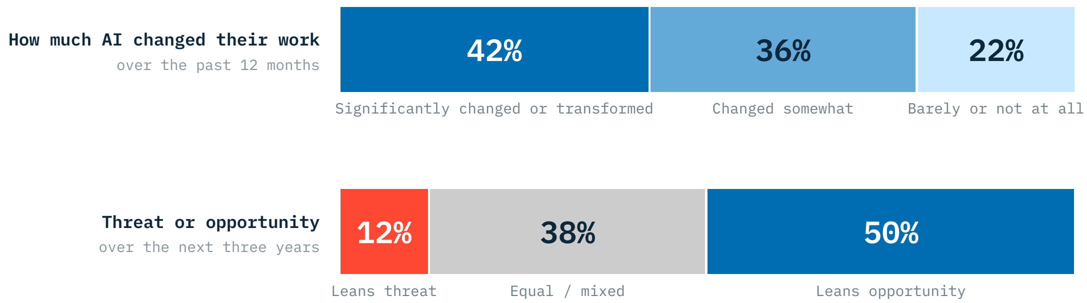
AI Arrived as Relief, Not Threat

Adoption of AI in the industry is high. Forty two percent (42%) of respondents say AI significantly changed or transformed their work, and 61% report at least one concrete change to their role: 30% say learning AI skills is now expected of them, 27% say it has taken over tasks they used to do, and 20% say they are expected to produce more in the same time.

Only 12% see AI as more threat than opportunity against 50% who see the reverse, and just 26% report meaningful concern about displacement. Of 306 written responses describing how AI changed their work, we coded 60% as clearly positive and 5% as skeptical or negative.

High adoption, low alarm

Two questions asked of the same 427 respondents. Each bar totals 100%.



Source: 2026 Political Careers Survey, CCI | Republican Jobs. Base: all 427 respondents.
"Leans threat" combines "mostly a threat" and "more threat than opportunity"; "leans opportunity" combines the two opposite responses.

FIGURE 3 / HIGH ADOPTION, LOW ALARM

Respondents describe AI absorbing work that was never getting done rather than replacing anyone. One captured it exactly: “I get more done... all the stuff I never had time to do that I WISH I had time to do or gave to an intern it can do [for] me.” Another: “Made it possible to wear even more hats.” Twenty eight respondents described this kind of capacity expansion; nine described displacement of any kind. People already doing the work of three do not experience automation as a threat but as the fourth job finally getting done. Even among the 115 respondents who say AI took over tasks they used to do, there is no appreciable difference in concern.

Pollsters and researchers are the only substantial role group where concern exceeds perceived opportunity, at 48% against 24%, roughly double the industry average. Quantitative work is the most automatable thing this industry does and the people doing it appear to know it.

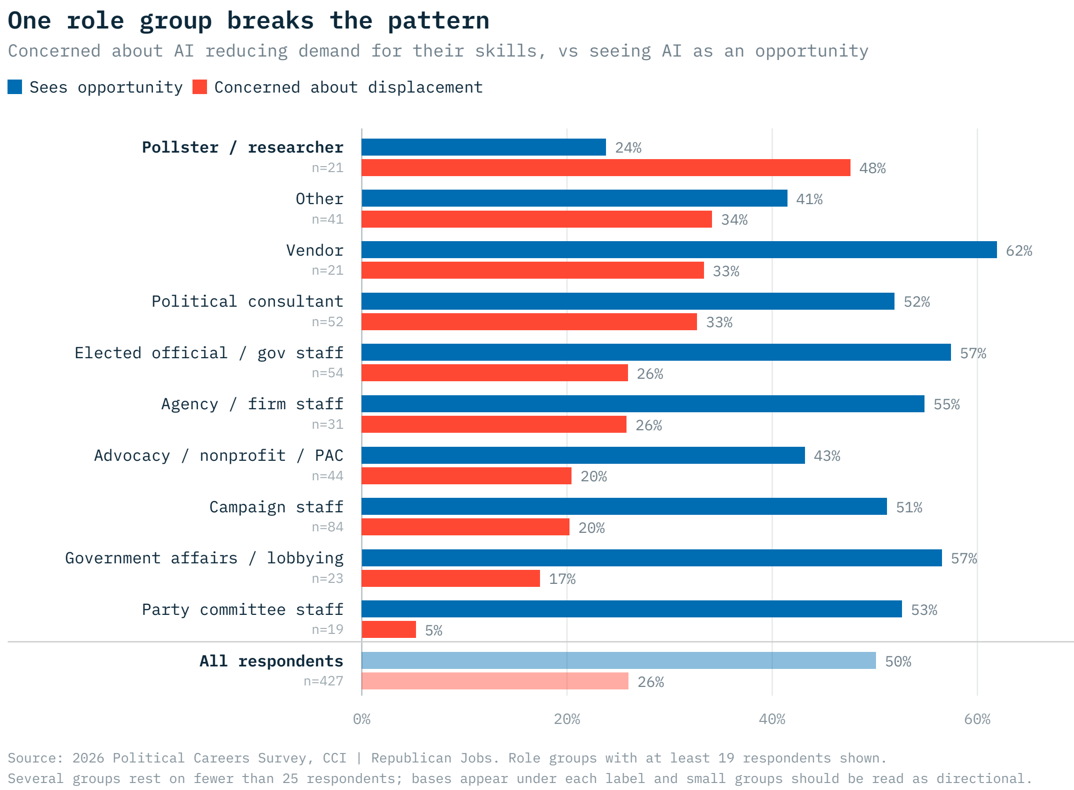


FIGURE 4 / ONE ROLE GROUP BREAKS THE PATTERN

The Challenge of Field Work

Field organizing and GOTV is the largest functional area in the survey and finishes last on nearly every measure of job quality. Seventy four percent (74%) earn under $80,000, 46% earn under $60,000, and only 11% clear $100,000. Half receive no benefits at all.

It is also the work AI has touched least, and respondents explain why: “AI can never compete with in person conversations with voters.” “It can’t run teams in the field.”

The capability least susceptible to automation – in-person voter contact and the human organization required to deliver it at scale – is the capability the industry prices lowest and staffs most precariously. If AI compresses the cost of everything that can be produced at a desk, the relative value of what cannot should rise. The compensation data shows no sign of that repricing.

A Note on Remote Work

Sixty four percent (64%) of respondents work with some remote component, but digging into the data gives a clearer picture. Fully remote work is concentrated among people without a traditional employer, at 43% of freelancers against 27% of full-time employees, for whom the most common arrangement remains fully in-office. And fully remote respondents report the weakest outcomes of the three groups on pay satisfaction, perceived competitiveness, and intent to stay.

Two thirds of the industry now works with some remote component but there is no evidence fully remote arrangements produce better satisfaction or retention than hybrid ones. Remote work in this industry is largely a feature of contractor status rather than a benefit employers are extending.

What These Findings Mean

Private, for-profit enterprises are the durable employers in this industry.

Agency and firm staff report the best benefits in the survey while doing campaign work. Every campaign professional employed year-round and deployed into races is a person who no longer has to solve the continuity problem alone. Candidate campaigns are structurally incapable of addressing this gap.

Campaigns should do more to ensure career stability.

In the absence of access to options for benefits, campaigns should look at ways to offer a softer landing at the end of a campaign. A recurring theme among campaign-side respondents is not wanting out of politics but wanting out of the cycle. If no single employer can carry a person across cycles, a network that hands them off is the next best thing. While this exists informally, it can be daunting for early entrants to the industry.

Build new paths for mid-career professionals.

Once an operative reaches $125,000 or more per year in compensation, job satisfaction plateaus and advancement replaces pay as the dominant retention concern. Unfortunately, many talented individuals are forced reluctantly into becoming freelancers, contractors, or business owners.

Career volatility adversely impacts campaign spending efficiency.

When candidate campaigns have to turn increasingly to for-profit enterprises to staff their campaign, hard dollars are spent on the premium that entails. Full-time, on the ground staff are arguably more productive than those subcontracted to multiple campaigns. The permanence gap is an efficiency problem for donors and the allocation of political funding.

Methodology

The survey was fielded in July 2026 and collected 427 complete responses from professionals who consented to the use of their anonymized data. Partial responses were excluded from all analysis.

This is a self-selected online sample rather than a probability sample. No margin of error applies and none is reported. Findings describe the professionals who responded and should not be read as a projection onto the entire industry.

Compensation is reported exactly as it was collected. Respondents placed themselves in one of ten income bands, so this report gives the band containing the median and the share of a group above or below a band boundary. It does not estimate dollar figures, and where two groups fall in the same band, we say so rather than manufacturing a difference.

Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Maryland account for 29% of respondents, almost certainly an over-representation. The DMV is a somewhat stronger market, with 43% earning $100,000 or more against 28% elsewhere and a 22-point advantage on health insurance coverage, though substantially less remote flexibility.

About This Research

The 2026 Political Careers Survey was conducted by the Center for Campaign Innovation in partnership with Republican Jobs.

The Center for Campaign Innovation is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit that serves as the research and development lab for the conservative movement, running field experiments in active elections, publishing research-backed analysis for campaign professionals, and convening practitioners and academics to share what works.
