

# what the public really wants

by ruy teixeira on energy and the environment

March 2, 2007

Energy issues are increasingly environmental issues and vice-versa. Global warming is most obviously an environmental problem, yet it is rooted in energy consumption patterns and can only be addressed through new energy policies. Achieving independence from Middle East oil controlled by unsavory regimes is perhaps our foremost energy issue, but that can only be accomplished by ramping up domestic energy production, which raises a host of difficult environmental issues. In short, it's going to be difficult to make progress in one area without dealing seriously with the other.

That might sound daunting, but fortunately public opinion polls show that Americans are aware of this close linkage and favor a package of steps that might lead to real progress on both fronts. In the next several years, we shall see if policymakers have the courage to go down the road the public clearly wishes them to take.

## Public Opinion on Energy Policy

By and large, the American public is unenthusiastic about expanding production from conventional energy sources in the U.S., tending to favor conservation and protecting the environment over such expansion. In a February, 2006 Pew Research Center poll, for example, 52 percent favored “more energy conservation and regulation on energy use and prices” as the more important priority for U.S. energy policy over “expanding exploration, mining and drilling, and the construction of new power plants,” which found support among 41 percent of those polled by Pew. That same question has elicited a comparable response in Pew surveys going back to 2001.

Similarly, in a March, 2006 Gallup question, 49 percent thought “protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of limiting the amount of energy supplies such as oil, gas and coal which the United States produces.” Forty-two percent thought that the “development of U.S. energy supplies such as oil, gas and coal should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.” Gallup has asked that question since 2001, with a similar (in fact, usually stronger) pro-environment response.

---

*Ruy Teixeira is a joint fellow at The Center for American Progress and The Century Foundation. This feature is published monthly at [www.tcf.org](http://www.tcf.org) and [www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org).*

But attitudes are more positive toward proposals that would actively promote energy conservation and the development of alternative energy sources. In the February, 2006 Pew poll where 85 percent agreed that America was “addicted” to oil, the public strongly supported the following proposals to address America’s energy supply: requiring better auto fuel efficiency (86 percent for/12 percent against); increasing federal funding for research on wind, solar and hydrogen technology (82/14); tax cuts for companies to develop these alternative energy sources (78/18); spending more on subway, rail and bus systems (68/27); and increasing federal funding for research on ethanol (67/22).

In contrast, in that same poll the public leaned negative on promoting the increased use of nuclear power, by a 44 percent for to 49 percent against margin and disapproved of tax cuts to encourage energy companies to do more exploration for oil, by a margin of 44 percent to 52 percent.

### **Which Way for Energy Policy?**

**52 percent** favor more energy conservation and regulation on energy use and prices as the more important priority for US policy.

**41 percent** favor expanding exploration, mining and drilling, and the construction of new power plants.

---

*February 2006/ Pew Research Center*

The March, 2006 Gallup survey also documented these positive attitudes toward energy conservation and alternative energy sources. In that poll, the public overwhelmingly supported spending government money to develop alternative sources of fuel for automobiles (85 percent favor/14 percent oppose) and spending more government money on developing solar and wind power (77/21).

The Gallup poll also mirrored the findings of the Pew poll, finding that the public was markedly less enthusiastic about proposals such as expanding use of nuclear energy (55 percent for/40 percent against) and opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil exploration (49 percent for

/47 percent against).

The public’s especially strong interest in developing alternative energy sources is well-illustrated by a finding in a July, 2006 *Los Angeles Times* poll. The LAT poll asked respondents to choose the best way among a number of options for reducing U.S. reliance on foreign oil. More than half the respondents (52 percent) chose government investment in alternative energy sources, way ahead of the next most popular option, relaxing environmental standards for oil and gas drilling (20 percent), which was followed by requiring stricter mileage standards for cars (eight percent) and more nuclear power plants (six percent).

### **Best Way to Reduce Reliance on Foreign Oil**

**52 percent** chose government investment in alternative energy sources.

**20 percent** chose relaxing environmental standards for oil and gas drilling.

**8 percent** chose requiring stricter mileage standards for cars.

**6 percent** chose nuclear power plants.

---

*July, 2006/ Los Angeles Times (LAT) poll*

Of course, much of the energy-related polling in the last couple of years has been on the issue of rising gas prices. When gas prices were peaking in 2005, 60 percent to 70 percent of Americans in Gallup polling reported that the rise in gas prices had caused some financial hardship for their families; three-quarters said the rise in gas prices was making them angry. The primary focus of blame for the increases was the big oil companies, followed by the Bush administration.

In April of 2006, a Gallup poll found the public willing to entertain a number of strong steps to deal with rising gas prices, including setting price controls on gasoline (70 percent in favor), temporarily suspending all federal gasoline taxes (64 percent), imposing an additional profits tax on oil companies (64 percent) and even breaking up the big oil companies (56 percent). Indeed, so strong was sentiment about gas prices that concern

about energy costs was near the top of the public's most important problems in many polls in late 2005 and spring and summer of 2006.

Naturally, concern has abated since then, due to the decline in gas prices that began last August. But the public remains worried about possible future increases and clearly dissatisfied with the way government has handled the issue. Past polling indicates that concern about gas prices will spike sharply when prices climb again.

### **Public Opinion on Environmental Policy**

Most Americans consider themselves environmentalists on some level. In the March, 2006 Gallup poll, 62 percent described themselves as either an active participant in the environmentalist movement (14 percent) or sympathetic to the movement but not active (48 percent). In a 2000 Gallup poll, even more (83 percent) told Gallup they agreed with the goals of the environmental movement. And in an August, 2005 Harris poll, an impressive 74 percent agreed with the very strong statement that "protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing environmental improvements must be made regardless of cost."

### **Most Americans Are Environmentalists**

**14 percent** described themselves as active participants in the environmentalist movement.

Another **48 percent** say they are sympathetic to the movement, but not active.

---

*March 2006/ Gallup poll*

The public does not see their environmentalist commitments reflected in the current environmental situation. In the March, 2006 Gallup poll, 62 percent thought the government was doing too little to protect the environment, 60 percent deemed current environmental quality only fair or poor and 67 percent believed environmental quality was getting worse.

The public feels strongly enough about the environment that it tends to favor protecting the environment over economic growth when such a tradeoff is posited. In the same March 2006 Gallup poll, for example, 52 percent thought “protection of the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of curbing economic growth,” compared with 37 percent who believed “economic growth should be given priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.” The July, 2006 LAT poll had an even stronger result, with 57 percent prioritizing protecting the environment, compared

with 35 percent who preferred economic growth.

Most Americans, however, are unconvinced such a trade-off needs to be negotiated. In the same LAT poll, 70 percent endorsed the idea that improving the environment need not conflict with economic growth and only 25 percent thought that improving the environment conflicts with economic growth.

Reflecting these sentiments, the March, 2006 Gallup poll found very high support levels for more strongly enforcing federal environmental regulations (79 percent for/20 percent against), setting higher emissions and pollution standards for business and industry (77/22), and setting higher auto emissions standards for automobiles (73/25).

Of course, the big issue these days in the environmental arena is global warming. Recent polling indicates increasing awareness of the problem, a belief the problem is serious, and considerable support for government action to address it. Starting with awareness, there is now little doubt among the public that the problem is real. In a January, 2007 Fox News poll, 82 percent said they believe global warming exists, in a January, 2007 Pew poll, 77 percent thought the earth is

### **Views on the Current Environmental Situation**

**62 percent** thought the government was doing too little to protect the environment.

**60 percent** deemed current environmental quality only fair or poor.

**67 percent** believed environmental quality was getting worse.

---

*March 2006/ Gallup poll*

getting warmer, and in a March, 2006 ABC News/Time/Stanford University poll, 85 percent agreed the earth's temperature is probably warming.

As to whether the problem is serious, 77 percent thought it was very or somewhat serious in the Pew poll, 73 percent thought the same in the July, 2006 LAT poll, as did 83 percent in the ABC News poll just mentioned. And in the March, 2006 Gallup poll, 66 percent thought that the seriousness of the global warming problem, as portrayed in the media was either correct (28 percent) or underestimated (38 percent). Sixty-three percent thought the effects of this warming are already being seen (58 percent) or would be within a few years (five percent).

But this does not mean that global warming is necessarily seen as a threat that requires drastic, high priority action. In the March 2006 Gallup poll, for example, just 35 percent agreed that "global warming will pose a serious threat to you or your way of life in your lifetime." And in the January, 2007 Pew poll, only 38 percent rated dealing with global warming as a top policy priority, far below priorities such as fighting terrorism, improving the educational system, reducing health care costs and even protecting the environment in general.

Indeed, global warming ranked No. 20 out of 23 policy priorities offered to respondents. Similarly, in a June, 2005 Program on International Policy Attitudes, or PIPA poll, only 34 percent endorsed the idea that global warming was such a pressing problem that it should be addressed by "taking steps now even if this involves significant costs."

### **Does Economic Growth Conflict with the Environment?**

**70 percent** endorsed the idea that improving the environment need not conflict with economic growth.

**25 percent** thought that improving the environment conflicts with economic growth.

---

*July, 2006/ Los Angeles Times*

Yet even if the public does not support drastic, high-priority action, Americans nevertheless want action. A March 2006 ABC poll, for instance, found that 68 percent believe the government should be doing more to address the problem. The June 2005 PIPA poll got down to specifics, discovering that the public endorsed U.S. participation in the international Kyoto agreement to combat global warming by a very wide 73 percent to 16 percent margin. The U.S. has not signed the Kyoto accord.

Americans also endorse a wide range of specific measures that could be adopted domestically to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In the same PIPA poll, 81 percent favored tax incentives to utility companies to encourage them to sell environmentally clean energy (solar, wind) to consumers; 81 percent also favored cash incentives like tax credits and rebates to consumers to encourage upgrading to energy efficient appliances;

77 percent favored continuing the tax credit for purchasing a hybrid-electric car; 77 percent also favored requiring car manufacturers to meet higher fuel efficiency standards even if it

meant that it would cost more to buy a car; and 70 percent favored mandating that by 2010 half of all new cars would be hybrid-electric or some other highly fuel-efficient make.

In addition, the PIPA poll found that 83 percent favor legislation requiring large companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010 and to 1990 levels by 2020. A solid 68-percent majority still favor this even if it costs the average household an extra \$15 a month.

Other polls report similar findings. The March, 2006 Gallup poll found 75 percent favoring the imposition of mandatory controls on carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions. And in the ABC News poll, 87 percent favored tax breaks for companies to produce more electricity from water, wind and solar power, and 83-87 percent felt that we should either require or encourage with tax breaks that cars be built to use less gasoline, that appliances be built to use less electricity, that new homes and offices be built to use less heating/cooling energy and that power plants lower their greenhouse gas emissions.

Note, however, that the public remains resistant to raising taxes on energy for environmental causes. In the ABC poll, 68 percent rejected increased taxes on gasoline to encourage less driving and the purchase of more fuel-efficient vehicles. Eighty-one percent rejected increased taxes on electricity to promote less electricity use.

The upshot: Americans see conservation and the promotion of alternative energy sources as the keys to combating global warming, which also happen to be the keys to solving America's long-range energy problems and reducing our dependence on Middle East oil. The public seems ready to move down this path even if policymakers appear reluctant to move very far in this direction.

Perhaps the Bush administration and Congress hold back from taking concrete action despite the public's preferences because energy, the environment and global warming are currently not as salient with voters as Iraq, the economy and health care. But sometimes leadership is about more than waiting for the public to start yelling. Considering the potentially dire consequences of inaction on problems like energy independence and global warming, this could be one of those times.