

PUBLIC OPINION ON CLIMATE CHANGE, JUNE 2009

Whatever stock you do (or don't) put in public opinion polling, it can serve as a good gauge of progress on certain issues or ideas over time. The good news is that the American public's concern about climate change and desire for action is strong. Polling data can also serve as a gauge of the public's open-mindedness to policies and ideas and insight into the ways people understand policy choices – helping us communicate in terms that most effectively resonate with their thinking.

Following are trends in polling from the last few months and some of the most powerful messaging implications we can draw from them. As always, it's most important to express these policy options and ideas in terms that are authentic, that express **our shared values, and that offer concrete, commonsense solutions.**

I. The science debate is long over. In fact, it's counterproductive to dwell on it. Far more effective are messages that reinforce the idea that the time to act is now – that we stand at a crossroads and policy solutions are in reach.

- A survey by the Mellman Group completed in March for Pew¹ reveals that nearly eight in 10 voters believe global warming is either happening now or will happen in the future, with 53 percent seeing evidence that it is happening right now.
- Gallup² uncovered similar attitudes, as 53 percent told them global warming has already begun, while only 16 percent are deniers, expecting it will never happen.

II. Similarly, the “partisan divide” is often exaggerated and needn't be an obstacle. While Democrats and Republicans vary in the intensity of their convictions about global warming and energy solutions, majorities across parties agree about the problem, as well as on the need for federal action. *Effective messages reflect this momentum and focus on the positive benefits of federal energy solutions for our families and our communities.* The following numbers are from the Mellman Group³.

- 84 percent of Democrats, 70 percent of independents and 56 percent of Republicans think global warming is harmful to people.
- 86 percent of Democrats, 80 percent of independents and 62 percent of Republicans favor action to reduce the carbon pollution that causes global warming.

III. American voters are hungry for action. Despite the fact that global warming often ranks low in surveys of Americans' top concerns or priorities (with economy, jobs, and terrorism

¹ A national survey of likely 2010 general election voters conducted from March 25-29, 2009 by The Mellman Group (Commissioned by the Pew Environment Group):

http://www.pewglobalwarming.org/newsroom/release_14may2009.html

² A national Gallup survey of 1,012 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted March 5-8, 2009.

³ See *Voters: Act on Global Warming* by Mark Mellman, TheHill.com, 12 May 2009. (<http://thehill.com/mark-mellman/voters-act-on-global-warming-2009-05-12.html>)

consistently topping the list⁴), polling consistently shows that Americans “get it” when it comes to the need for climate action. Indeed, voters are demanding action to reduce the carbon pollution that causes global warming. *Communications should reflect this agreement about action while connecting the dots between jobs, energy, economic stability, and security.*

- In a Yale/George Mason poll⁵, two-thirds urge Congress to do more on the issue.
- In the Mellman survey, 77 percent favor action to reduce carbon emissions.
- In an April ABC/Washington Post poll⁶, 75 percent supported federal regulations on the release of greenhouse gases.

IV. Economic opportunity messages go a long way. With economic concerns top of mind for most Americans and opponents consistently beating the drums about climate policy as a “job killer” and “energy tax,” *it’s more important than ever to stress the economic opportunities that climate policies represent: jobs, global competition in clean energy industries, a stronger, independent economy unshackled from the fossil fuel roller coaster.* The following data are from Public Opinion Strategies (commissioned by Pew)⁷, a leading Republican pollster.

- 74 percent of Republicans, 70 percent Independents and 74 percent Democrats believe jobs that reduce our dependence on foreign oil are “very important” for helping the economy over the next five to ten years.
- 63 percent of Republicans, 70 percent of Independents and 73 percent of Democrats believe jobs that are improving energy efficiency are “very important” to helping the economy over the next five to ten years.
- 59 percent of voters believe efforts to tackle global warming will create new American jobs.
- 61 percent of voters believe the US economy will be stronger if we become less dependent on oil and coal, and more dependent on alternative energy sources such as solar, wind and biofuels. Only 11 percent believe it will be weaker.
- According to the Mellman survey, even after being presented with arguments frequently used by opponents of climate change legislation including the so-called “energy tax”

⁴ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey conducted Jan. 7-11, among 1,503 adults on cell phones and landlines (<http://people-press.org/report/485/economy-top-policy-priority>).

⁵ A study conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication. In September and October of 2008, a nationally representative survey of 2,164 American adults was conducted using the nationally representative online panel operated by Knowledge Networks. Respondents completed two separate questionnaires, two weeks apart. The within-panel completion rate was 54 percent.

(http://usclimatenetwork.org/resource-database/pollingdata6Americas2009.pdf/at_download/file).

⁶ This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone, April 21-24, 2009, among a random national sample of 1,072 adults, including landline and cell-phone-only respondents and an oversample of African-Americans (weighted to their correct share of the national population).

(<http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1089a6HotButtonIssues.pdf>)

⁷ Public Opinion Strategies’ research (commissioned by the Pew Environment Group) probed voter opinions on dealing with global warming pollution and the impact this may have on the U.S. economy in two separate surveys, one conducted over the telephone among 800 registered voters and the other conducted online among 1,200 adults from April 5-8. (http://www.pewglobalwarming.org/newsroom/release_14may2009.html)

argument – a strong majority still supports a plan to curb global warming – 62 percent support a plan, 39 percent strongly, with only 26 percent opposing, 17 percent strongly (This represents majorities across the political spectrum: 73 percent of Democrats, 59 percent of Independents and 52 percent of Republicans).

- Finally, according to a National Wildlife Fund poll⁸, a significant 67 percent of respondents said Congress should take action on climate change now even after hearing statements in support of action alongside statements *against* action (which included messages about policy “killing jobs” and causing higher energy prices for consumers.)

V. What about specific policy measures and consumer costs? Polls show that even while Americans may not understand what cap and trade is⁹, they favor the *idea* of carbon pricing. Perhaps most significantly, even in dire economic times, voters seem to be willing to pay more for energy in order to curb climate-warming pollution. *The message that works: Families and businesses in our communities will suffer from high prices and financial insecurity unless we aggressively reduce our dependence on dirty and volatile fossil fuels. By capping dangerous fossil fuel pollution we can invest in clean, domestic alternatives and cost-cutting efficiency measures.*

- According to the NWF survey, the American electorate is overwhelmingly supportive of a number of different reforms to America's energy policy, including a proposal to cap carbon pollution through a new global warming plan.
- A NBC/Wall Street Journal poll¹⁰ found that by a 58-to-35 margin, voters favor charging a fee to companies that emit greenhouse gases -- *even if that will result in higher utility bills* -- and using that money to provide tax cuts for middle-class Americans.
- A question from the same NBC/Wall Street Journal poll: “Would you approve or disapprove of a proposal that would require companies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming, *even if it would mean higher utility bills for consumers to pay for the changes?*” Approve-Disapprove = 53-40.
- Also from NWF: A solid majority is supportive of every element of a cap and trade proposal, saying it is the right amount of change to America's energy policies, and perhaps most significantly saying they are *willing to pay higher energy prices in order to increase the amount of the nation's energy needs being met by renewable energy.*

VI. Why gloom and doom messages can backfire. Talking about impacts is okay (in other words, we don't recommend avoiding all talk of climate impacts), but that shouldn't be our only message – and we shouldn't lead with it. *Message recommendation: start with solutions; talk about impacts after you talk about solutions and their benefits. Local impacts seem more relevant especially when connected to pocketbook or health concerns (conversely, polar bears*

⁸ The NWF survey was conducted by Public Opinion Strategies with 800 voters throughout the country, April 7-9-2009. They were distributed proportionally throughout the country and are demographically representative of the electorate. (<http://www.sightline.org/images/NWFSurvey2009>)

⁹ See *Americans Want Climate Policy* by Anna Fahey, Sightline Institute. (http://daily.sightline.org/daily_score/archive/2009/05/14/american-public-wants-climate-policy)

¹⁰ From a NBC/Wall Street Journal survey of 1,005 adults, conducted April 23-26, 2009. (http://usclimatenetwork.org/resource-database/4_090428_NBC-WSJ_Full.pdf/at_download/file)

seem distant and removed from our daily lives; melting glaciers seem too far away, too big to do anything about).

- Studies show¹¹ that even American voters who disagree on the science or the urgency of climate change, agree when it comes to solutions.
- But the public is becoming more skeptical. According to a recent Gallup poll¹²: “Although a majority of Americans believe the seriousness of global warming is either correctly portrayed in the news or underestimated, *a record-high 41 percent now say it is exaggerated*. This represents the highest level of public skepticism about mainstream reporting on global warming seen in more than a decade of Gallup polling on the subject.”
- One of the unintended consequences of this line of communication is that it may play into the hands of climate skeptics and further reinforce the partisan divide in climate change perceptions. Observers¹³ believe that this increased skepticism is the result of messages about impacts being perceived as “overblown” and/or cast as “liberal alarmism.” In addition, the public is likely to translate these appeals to fear into a sense of fatalism, especially if this information is not accompanied by specific recommendations about how they can respond to the threats.

¹¹ See *Kicking Emissions to the Curb* by Anna Fahey, Sightline Institute.

(http://daily.sightline.org/daily_score/archive/2007/04/06/kicking-emissions-to-the-curb)

¹² From a survey by Gallup based on telephone interviews with 1,012 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted March 5-8, 2009. (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/116590/Increased-Number-Think-Global-Warming-Exaggerated.aspx>)

¹³ See *Communicating Climate Change: Why Frames Matter for Public Engagement* by Matthew C. Nisbet, Environment Magazine, March-April, 2009. (<http://www.environmentmagazine.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/March-April%202009/Nisbet-full.html>)