

Analytic Studies Brief

Study Shows Trends in Support for Clean Energy and the Environment

“Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.” —Abraham Lincoln

A new report, published by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, documents trends in public opinion on U.S. energy and environmental policy. Expanding on similar studies published in 1979 and 1980, *Trends in Public Perceptions and Preferences on Energy and Environmental Policy* includes the public’s reactions to actual and potential government policies on energy and the environment.

The report provides a framework for evaluating the public’s acceptance of policies that can affect energy prices, environmental regulations and priorities, subsidies and incentives

for different kinds of power generation, and transportation fuels, among other important matters.

To conduct the study, a researcher compiled and analyzed trends in items from a public opinion data base relating to energy, the environment, transportation, buildings, utilities, alternative fuels, and policy alternatives such as energy-efficient mortgages. Data were obtained from nearly 600 surveys taken between 1979 and 1992.

What the study found

Findings are grouped in these categories: energy and the environment,

the 1991 Persian Gulf war, the general energy situation, energy institutions, energy alternatives, the utility sector, efficiency and renewables in buildings and transportation, and transportation preferences.

For example, among many findings in the area of energy and the environment, the study found that an increasing majority of the public favors environmental protection even if that means having an inadequate supply of energy. Most people polled favor a balance between economic growth and environmental protection.

The study also found that the public is willing to pay somewhat more for electricity, gasoline, and other goods and services to protect the environment. And most people support such measures as mandatory recycling and wildlife preserves.

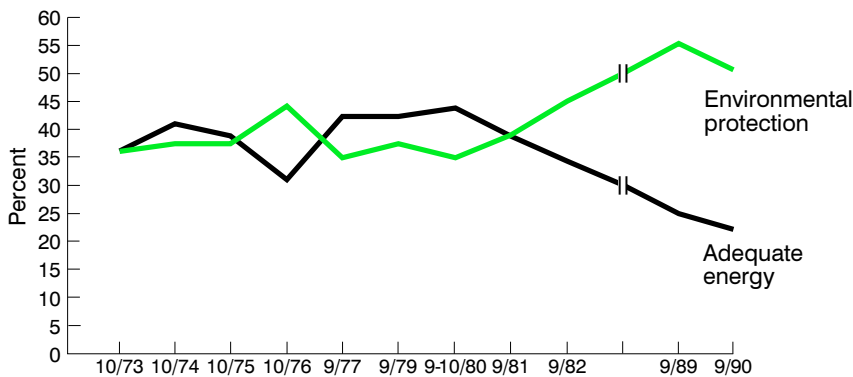
In spite of environmental concerns, however, most people polled are not car pooling or using public transportation to alleviate urban air pollution, in part because gasoline prices have remained low. Fuel-efficient cars continue to be a popular consumer choice, however.

In general, majorities favor a national energy policy that emphasizes energy efficiency and demand reduction over new energy production. And a large majority favors the development of renewable energy sources. In one poll on future fuel supplies, 83% favored the development of renewables and energy efficiency and only 12% preferred more fossil fuel production.

In fact, energy efficiency and renewable energy have consistently been the preferred energy alternatives for the past 15 years.

“Some people say that the progress of this nation depends on an adequate supply of energy and that we have to have it even though it means taking some risks with the environment. Others say the important thing is the environment, and that it is better to risk not having enough energy than to risk spoiling our environment. Are you more on the side of adequate energy or more on the side of protecting the environment?”

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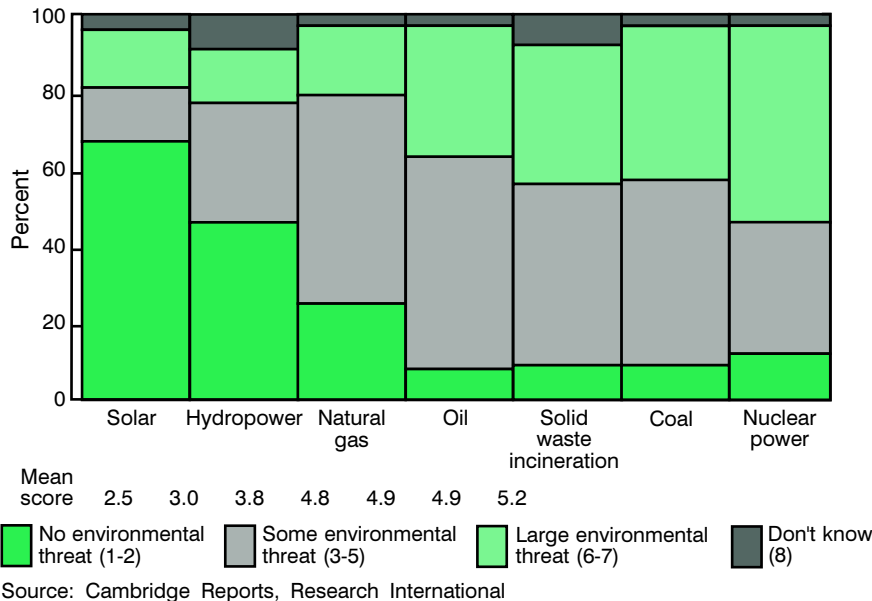
|| = 7-year gap in data collection.

Source: Constructed by the author using data from the Roper Organization.

Trends in preferences for environmental protection versus adequate energy

"Now I am going to read you a list of several energy sources that are used to generate electricity. As I read each one, please use any numbers from 1 to 7, where 1 means "no environmental threat at all and 7 means a large environmental threat" to tell me how much of an environmental threat you think that energy source is when used to generate electricity." (September 1990)

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Electricity supply alternatives by level of perceived environmental threat

The public has consistently preferred energy efficiency and renewable energy over other energy alternatives for the past 15 years.

Finally, energy institutions (such as utilities, oil companies, and government agencies) should be more responsive to the public's desire for change. Improved credibility of energy institutions is essential to formulating and implementing sound energy policy.

Public support is vital to the aims of government and commerce. Policy makers, government officials, public interest specialists, market analysts, economists, and industry leaders will find the information in this report very useful.

The full 400-page report contains summaries and specific study results, numerous graphs and tables, eight appendixes, a bibliography, and a detailed index.

For more information

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What the study means

The study's results point to two important conclusions. First, environmental concerns are clearly beginning to drive energy choices. Second, the public thinks that some major changes in energy policy are needed. Specifically, energy and environmental policies should institutionalize the use of renewables and increased energy efficiency. Information and education programs should be strengthened, and energy institutions should seek to improve their credibility.

Institutionalizing energy and environmental policies means that the government, automakers, home-builders, appliance manufacturers,

utilities, and other institutions need to foster energy efficiency, renewable energy development, and environmental protection in their routine ways of doing business.

For example, the public's strong support for energy efficiency could be reflected in new housing designs and materials, and efficiency "retrofits" of existing homes could be routinely financed through mortgages.

The lack of information about some major renewable energy options, such as alternative fuels, shows a need for more education and public information projects on energy and the environment in our schools and in the media.

