

Highlights of public opinion research on energy issues for NRDC

October 2008

Introduction

During the rise in gas prices over the summer, the Natural Resources Defense Council asked Belden Russonello & Stewart to conduct research into public attitudes on energy issues. The first phase of this research consisted of six focus groups, conducted by BRS between August 26 and September 3, 2008. The second phase of the project is a national telephone survey among 800 Americans age 18 and older. The interviewing took place from September 29 to October 8, 2008. The margin of sampling error for the survey is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Overview

The 2008 NRDC energy research finds an American public focused on the country's economic troubles and concerned about energy problems. Americans' concerns about energy are multifaceted, and in the focus groups we heard:

- Frustration because of increasing and rapidly fluctuating costs;
- Feelings of manipulation by the oil companies who are profiting from high gas prices;
- Vulnerability to foreign countries; and
- Concerns about environmental harm. Even if unsure of the exact environmental impacts, voters in the focus groups have a belief that the nation's wasteful energy use creates environmental problems.

During the survey gas prices were beginning to fall but still over \$3.50 a gallon. When asked about how the country should move forward on energy issues, the public sees hope in measures such as conservation, increasing energy efficiency and new energy technologies, as well as creating livable communities. And a large majority of the public believes that new alternative technologies are ready and available and just need to be put in place to help solve the country's energy problems.

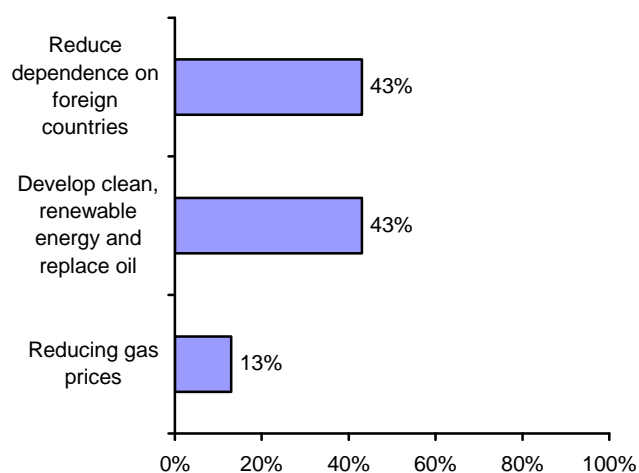
Highlights

1. Gas prices are not the driving concern on energy

Consistent with what we heard in the focus groups while gas prices were still high, Americans see lowering gas prices as a much lower priority than reducing dependence on foreign oil and increasing investment in alternatives. In fact, a majority sees higher gas prices as a sign that we need to move away from dependence on oil.

- When asked to choose among three goals for energy, Americans place much more importance on reducing our dependence on foreign countries (43%) and developing clean, renewable energy to replace oil (43%) than on lowering gas prices (13%).
- Americans believe high gas prices should be an impetus for changing the way we deal with energy. A large majority of Americans agrees that “higher gas prices are a sign that we should be moving away from dependence on oil and investing in renewable energy and energy efficient technology” (84% agree; 61% strongly).

Most Important Goal for Energy Issues



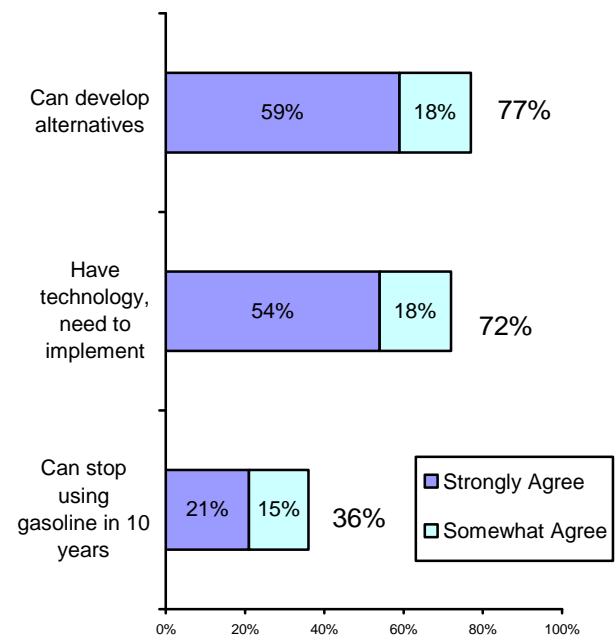
Q7. Which is the most important goal for government action on energy issues: reducing gas prices, reducing our dependence on foreign countries, or developing clean and renewable sources of energy to replace oil? BRS survey for NRDC, n=800 adults, conducted September-October 2008

2. Optimism, within limits, about ability to reduce dependence on oil

Americans believe that we can make changes so that the economy does not rely so heavily on oil and gasoline, and that the technology is ready to start reducing dependence. This optimism has limits, however. Completely moving off oil to fuel our cars is viewed as a longer-term endeavor.

- Three-quarters (77%) believe “we can develop alternatives so that our economy will not need to heavily rely on oil and gas.”
- Seven in ten (72%) believe that “we already have the technology to significantly reduce our dependence on oil but we need to invest in putting the technology in place” whereas only a quarter (26%) believes “we do not have the technology to significantly reduce our dependence on oil and we need to do a lot more research and development before it will be ready.”
- However, when asked whether renewable fuels and electric cars will let us stop using gasoline within the next ten years or if we will still need to use gasoline to fuel our cars, Americans are less sanguine about the prospects. A third (36%) believes in the next ten years we can move completely off gasoline, while over six in ten (63%) believe we will still be using gasoline.

Readiness of Alternatives



Q13. Please tell me which view you agree with more: We will always need a plentiful supply of oil and gas to fuel our economy? Or we can develop alternatives so that our economy will not need to heavily rely on oil and gas? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat? Q12. Please tell me which view you agree with more: Those who say we already have the technology to significantly reduce our dependence on oil but we need to invest in putting the technology in place? Or those who say we do not have the technology to significantly reduce our dependence on oil and we need to do a lot more research and development before it will be ready? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat? Q30. Please tell me which view you agree with more (ROTATE): those who say we will continue to need to use gasoline to fuel our cars for at least the next ten years; OR those who say that electric or plug-in cars and renewable fuels made from plants will enable us to stop using gasoline to fuel our cars within the next ten years? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat? BRS survey for NRDC, n=800 adults, conducted September-October 2008

3. Many clean solutions seen as making a great deal of difference; expanding traditional energy less so

The survey examined Americans' views toward a number of policies to address the country's energy problems. The top-tier policies focus on energy efficiency, renewable energy, and public transportation. A majority of Americans believes each would make a "a great deal of difference" in solving our energy problems:

- Improving fuel efficiency to an average of fifty miles per gallon (68% a great deal of difference)
- Investing in renewable energy such as wind, solar, and geothermal energy (68%)
- Building more wind farms such as those in Texas that produce enough power for 600,000 homes (64%)
- Improving the efficiency of how our homes and offices use electricity and heat (61%)
- Improving public transportation such as buses and trains so that people have more choices for how to get around (57%)
- Eliminating tax breaks for the oil companies and using the money to provide tax incentives for people to buy renewable or efficient technology such as solar panels or hybrid cars (55%)
- Eliminating tax breaks for the oil companies and using the money to provide tax incentives for businesses who develop or manufacture energy efficient technology or renewable energy (52%)

Policies focusing on smart growth, along with some alternatives to gasoline, fall in the next tier of policies for which four in ten or more Americans say each would make a "big difference."

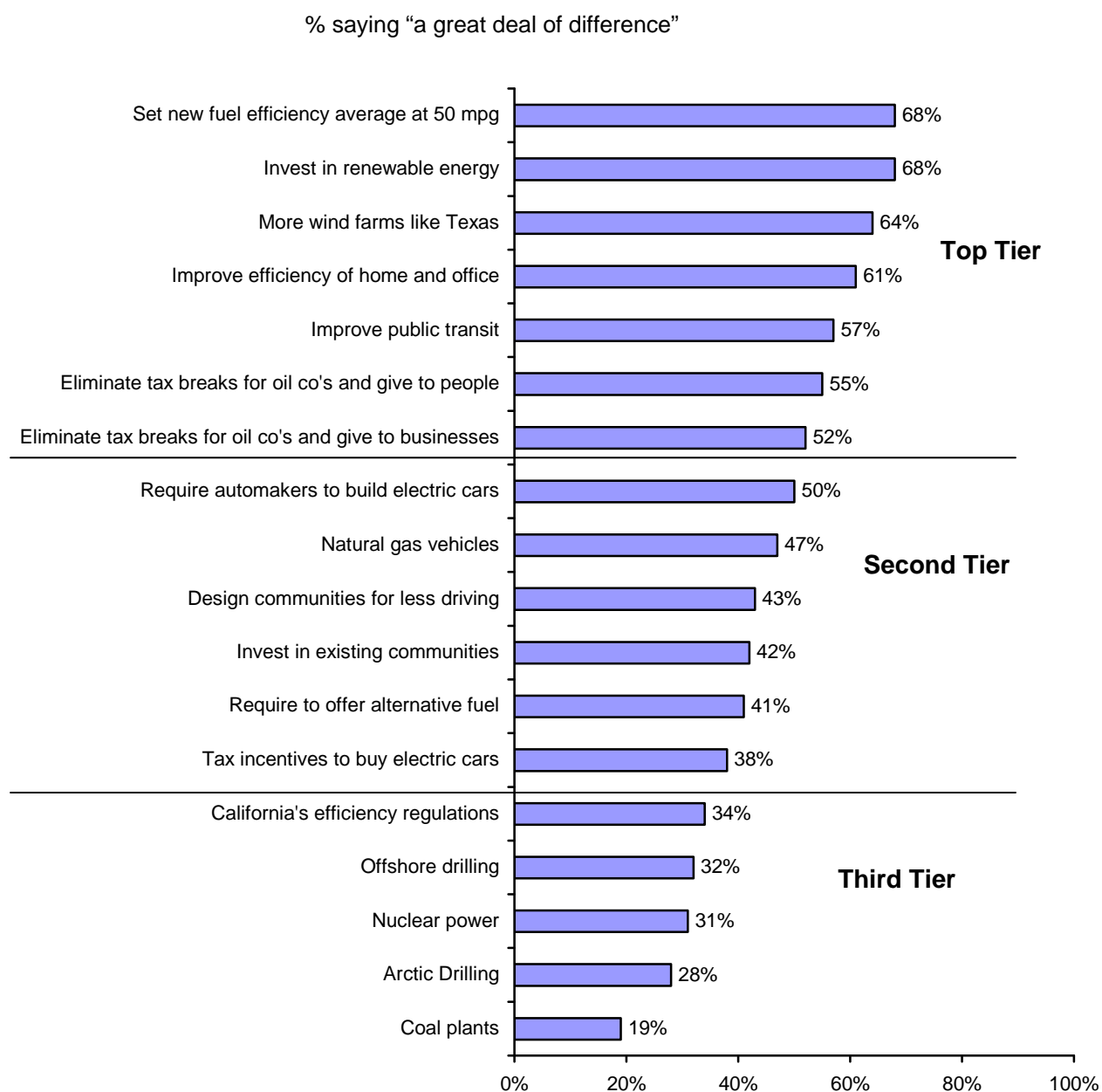
- Requiring automakers to build electric or plug-in cars that can run without gasoline (50%)
- Developing more vehicles that run on natural gas fuel (47%)
- Designing communities in ways that require less driving to get from place to place (43%)

-
- Investing in existing communities instead of building homes and businesses in new areas (42%)
 - Requiring oil companies and gas stations to offer alternatives to gasoline such as renewable fuel made from plants (41%)
 - Offering tax incentives to people who buy electric or plug-in cars that run without gasoline (38%)

Traditional polluting industries such as oil, nuclear, and coal are less important actors to address our energy needs than are alternative energy, and transportation innovation. Fewer than four in ten consider each of the following likely to make a great deal of difference:

- Taking energy efficiency regulations that California used to become the nation's most efficient state and putting them in place for the whole country (34%)
- Opening areas [SPLIT SAMPLE: 3 miles/50 miles] off the shoreline to offshore oil and natural gas drilling (32% great deal of difference). Even though Americans believe offshore drilling is safe (69% safe compared to 29% harmful), they place a low priority on drilling compared to other alternatives to America's energy problems.
- Building more nuclear power plants (31%)
- Allowing drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (28%)
- Building more coal-fired power plants (19%)

Ways to Solve Our Energy Problems



For each of the following, please tell me how much difference you believe it will make in solving our energy problems in the U.S. – a great deal of difference, some difference, not very much difference, or none at all. Q15. Requiring new cars and trucks to improve their fuel efficiency to an average of fifty miles per gallon, Q18. Investing in renewable energy such as wind, solar, and geothermal energy, Q22. Building more wind farms such as those in Texas that produce enough power for 600,000 homes, Q24. Improving the efficiency of how our homes and offices use electricity and heat, Q14. Improving public transportation such as buses and trains so that people have more choices for how to get around, Q29A. Eliminating tax breaks for the oil companies and using the money to provide tax incentives for people to buy renewable or efficient technology such as solar panels or hybrid cars, Q29B. Eliminating tax breaks for the oil companies and using the money to provide tax incentives for businesses who develop or manufacture energy efficient technology or renewable energy, Q23B. Requiring automakers to build electric or plug-in cars that can run without gasoline, Q20. Developing more vehicles that run on natural gas fuel, Q16. Designing communities in ways that require less driving to get from place to place, Q17. Investing in existing communities instead of building homes and businesses in new areas, Q19. Requiring oil companies and gas stations to offer alternatives to gasoline such as renewable fuel made from plants, Q23A. Offering tax incentives to people who buy electric or plug-in cars that can run without gasoline, Q21. Taking energy efficiency regulations that California used to become the nation's most efficient state and putting them in place for the whole country, Q26. Open areas 3/50 miles off of the shoreline to offshore oil and natural gas drilling, Q27. Build more nuclear power plants, Q25. Allowing drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Q28. Building more coal-fired power plants. BRS survey for NRDC, n=800 adults, conducted September-October 2008

4. Support for transit has grown

As is evident from the policy series, public transportation is seen as having great potential. Two other questions we asked about transportation priorities reveal Americans' increased openness to greater investment in public transit:

- Two-thirds of the public (67%) believe that increasing investments in public transportation such as trains, buses, and light rail should be a higher priority for government spending than building new roads and highways (31%). BRS first asked a version of this question in 1999 and since that time support for public transportation has increased from 42%.
- When the question is asked specifically about traffic, nearly half the public (49%) say improving public transportation is the best long-term solution, followed by developing communities where people do not have to drive long distances (26%) and building new roads (24%). This is a survey question that BRS has asked since 2000. These numbers have remained fairly consistent on public transportation since the question was asked in 2004 (50% improve public transportation, 31% communities where people do not have to drive, and 18% build new roads).