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On Energy, Obama Finds Broad Support

Poll Shows Backing for Reform Efforts, But Cap-and-Trade Bill Is Harder Sell

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Most Americans approve of the way President Obama is handling energy issues and support efforts by him and Democrats in Congress to overhaul energy policy -- including the controversial cap-and-trade approach to limiting greenhouse gas emissions, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll.

Even as public support has slipped for Obama's health-care proposals, support for ambitious changes in energy policy has been steady. Although the issue of health care arouses more intense feelings than energy policy does, those who do feel strongly about energy and climate policy tend to tilt toward the administration's position and a broad majority of people echo Democratic lawmakers' views on the benefits of proposed changes.

Nearly six in 10 of those polled support the proposed changes to U.S. energy policy being developed by Congress and the administration. Fifty-five percent of Americans approve of the way Obama is handling the issue, compared with 30 percent who do not. A narrower majority, 52 to 43 percent, back a cap-and-trade system; that margin is unchanged since June. A cap-and-trade system would set a ceiling for the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, and it would allow firms to buy and sell emissions permits.

"Something definitely has to be done," said Marian Eldridge, a former legal secretary from East Windsor, N.J., who participated in the survey. "Anything's worth a try at this point." She said she tries to "ignore the politics; you get discouraged." But she said that higher energy costs were "inevitable" and that "we're too dependent on other countries."

Despite public support for an energy and climate bill, the prospects for legislation remain uncertain. The House narrowly passed a measure in June, but not before inserting a multitude of provisions for consumers, interest groups and corporations. The Senate remains divided over how to move forward, and getting 60 senators to back an end to debate could be difficult. Adding to that challenge is the thin public support for the cap-and-trade approach if it were to raise consumers' costs. Although 58 percent of those polled would support the plan if it reduced greenhouse gas emissions and cost them an extra \$10 a month, support drops to 39 percent if new monthly costs reached \$25.

Moreover, the Senate's calendar is crowded with legislation on a variety of matters, including health care, appropriations, an increase in the debt ceiling and the extension of a nuclear weapons treaty with Russia.

Effect on Jobs

Majorities of those surveyed say changes in energy policy would address global warming and not raise energy costs. Although many proponents of a cap-and-trade bill say it could spur job creation in the renewable-energy sector and foes say it would drive jobs overseas, a plurality of Americans -- more than four out of 10

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-- think that the legislation would have no effect on employment in their states. Fewer than one in five say that the reform efforts would lead to job losses; more than twice as many see added jobs.

GOP criticism of the House energy and climate bill appears to have primarily influenced Republicans themselves. Among Republicans, support for cap-and-trade legislation has dipped from 45 percent to 37 percent since a poll taken in June.

"It will make the cost [of energy] go up too high for people," said Mary Lou Pomeroy, an elementary school teacher's assistant in Renton, Wash., near Seattle. "I think there's a lot of people struggling and seeing their income reduced, and we don't need things that cost more. I'm just not sure that's our biggest issue. . . . I think health care right now is bigger. Or the huge deficit."

Support for the plan among independents has increased slightly, with a narrow majority now in favor. Overall, a slight majority of those polled say changes to energy policy would help address global warming, while a third say they will not. A slim 5 percent volunteered that global warming is not an issue.

Obama's goal of putting 1 million electric cars on the road by 2015 strikes a chord. More than eight in 10 people say they support the development of electric car technology.

Some people see the government's Cash for Clunkers program as a symbol of energy policy, even though it is separate from the comprehensive House legislation. Nearly seven in 10 backed using cash rebates to encourage people to buy more fuel-efficient cars .

Eldridge, the New Jersey resident, said, "I think the clunker thing was a good idea. It helped get some garbage off the roads."

Pomeroy, however, predicted that many people who traded in clunkers would be unable to make payments on their new cars. And she viewed the government's difficulty in getting payments to dealers as symptomatic of government involvement in the economy. "I don't think our government is all that great at efficiency," she said.

Energy Sources

The public's preferences regarding energy sources to meet the nation's needs remain mostly the same as they were at the start of the decade, with a modest uptick in support for new nuclear power plants and a decline in support for building oil-, coal- or natural gas-fueled plants.

Solar and wind power enjoy near-universal support; nine in 10 people support further development. More than eight in 10 favor requirements for greater fuel efficiency. Broad majorities also favor requiring increased energy conservation from businesses and consumers.

Fifty-two percent favor building more nuclear power plants, but that support drops to 35 percent if the new plants were within 50 miles of the respondent's home. Support for building nuclear plants is up about six percentage points since 2001.

But energy issues and the voluminous House bill remain difficult for people to understand. Fifteen percent say they have no opinion on Obama's handling of the energy issue, whereas 5 percent say they have no opinion on health care and 2 percent lack an opinion about the economy.

The poll was conducted Aug. 13-17 among a random national sample of 1,001 adults. The results have a margin of error of three percentage points.

Polling director Jon Cohen contributed to this report.