

Americans Warming to Nuclear Power - MIT Survey

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Stephen Ansolabehere in MIT's Power Plant Facility Photo / Donna Coveney

Americans' icy attitudes toward nuclear power are beginning to thaw, according to a new survey from MIT. The report also found a U.S. public increasingly unhappy with oil and more willing to develop alternative energy sources like wind and solar.

Moreover, the national survey of 1,200 Americans' opinions on different types of energy indicated growing concern about global warming -- but an apparent reluctance to pay to fight it.

Professor Stephen Ansolabehere, the MIT political scientist who conducted the survey through Knowledge Networks, a consumer information company, said he hopes that tracking Americans' attitudes toward energy will help policy-makers decide how to chart the United States' energy future.

"We're trying to understand what public policy in the U.S. should do to encourage new kinds of energy development or different patterns of energy consumption," Ansolabehere said.

The report, "Public Attitudes Toward America's Energy Options: Insights for Nuclear Energy," was recently published by MIT's Center for Advanced Nuclear Energy Systems. Ansolabehere conducted a similar survey in 2002 as part of the MIT study, "The Future of Nuclear Power."

In the five years since the last survey, public preferences have remained fairly stable, but the percentage of people who want to increase nuclear power use has grown from 28 percent to 35 percent. That increase in popularity is likely due to concern over global warming caused by carbon emissions from fossil fuels, Ansolabehere said.

The Bush administration has been pushing to expand nuclear power, which doesn't produce carbon dioxide, but Americans are still concerned about storing nuclear waste. Nearly 40 percent oppose the proposed storage site at Yucca Mountain, Nev., and only 28 percent agree that "nuclear waste could be stored safely for long periods of time."

Because of those concerns, "getting the public behind a serious expansion of nuclear power in the U.S. is going to be difficult," Ansolabehere said.

While Americans have some doubts about nuclear power, they are more

opposed to oil, which has dipped below nuclear as the least popular fuel source. In the 2007 survey, 74 percent wanted to decrease oil use, compared to 56 percent in 2002.

"People have really turned on oil in a big way," said Ansolabehere, a trend he attributes to rising prices and growing concern over the United States' oil dependency.

"People say, if not for our oil dependency, we wouldn't be in Iraq," Ansolabehere. Also, rising prices at the gas pump provide a daily reminder of the high cost of oil.

Not surprisingly, cost is one of the primary factors that people consider when making their energy choices, along with perceived environmental harm. Coal, which is seen as cheap but harmful, is unpopular.

The survey shows that people have an accurate idea of how much oil, gas, coal and nuclear power cost, but they tend to underestimate the costs of alternative sources like wind and solar.

Ansolabehere found that people strongly favor using more wind and solar power, until they are told that they are more expensive than traditional energy sources.

"People have a sense that wind and solar are a solution for now, as opposed to a solution for the future," he said.

The survey also found that even though concern over global warming has been rising in the past five years, that doesn't translate to a willingness to pay to combat the problem.

When people are asked how much more they would pay for their electricity to counteract global warming, the average answer is \$10 more

on their monthly electric bill. The amount needed would likely be closer to \$25, Ansolabehere said.

That shortfall can be partly explained by the difficulty of visualizing the impacts of global warming, he said.

"It's something that will affect not this generation, and not the next generation, but the generation after that," he said. "Willingness to pay is going to be a big obstacle."

Ansolabehere said he also suspects that many people don't associate electricity generation with burning of fossil fuels, because the generation process is so removed from the home.

As people learn more about different types of energy and the costs and benefits of each one, it will be informative to see how their views change, said Ansolabehere, who plans to re-do the energy survey every few years.

The report was funded by MIT's Center for Advanced Nuclear Energy Systems.

Source: MIT

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