

up their hands and say, "it's all a matter of how you ask the question." They are missing the point. The differences they observe from one poll to another are generally not caused by researchers manipulating results through question wording. They are differences which reflect real tensions in public opinion.

This confusion accrues from the tendency to assume there is one single opinion on each issue—what Howard Schuman described, in his 1986 presidential address to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, as "the referendum point of view." Public opinion—or opinions—about nuclear energy are far too complex to be captured by a single question. For instance, polls consistently find that large majorities of Americans think nuclear energy will and should play an important role in supplying electricity, but they also consistently find that only about one-third favor building more nuclear energy plants right now.

Legitimate differences in interpretation may add to the confusion. For instance, social scientists who study risk perceptions naturally tend to look to this factor as an explanation for attitudes toward nuclear energy and cite the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl accidents as turning points. Others who have been studying energy attitudes for many years, notably Gene Pokorny of Cambridge Reports, believe that other factors, particularly perception of need, have been far more influential than perception of risk. That belief is backed by the fact that support for building more nuclear energy plants was about the same a year after the Three Mile Island accident as it was the year before. The proportion fell when energy concerns faded. Moreover, most Americans don't favor eliminating the 112 plants that exist today, and they reserve judgment about new nuclear energy plants in their area. The validity of these data are supported by the 16 defeats of initiatives to close operating nuclear energy plants. The single plant which has been closed by voters was a unique case: It was run by a municipal board that was plagued with internal conflict, and the vote reflected frustration with its mismanagement.

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## **AMERICANS' VIEWS ON NUCLEAR POWER**

**By Margaret Ann Campbell**

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and resulting US involvement in the Persian Gulf have renewed concern over the country's oil supply. With the vulnerability of that supply again underscored, people's thoughts are turning to alternative sources. One of the most controversial of these is nuclear power. The nuclear debate has been going on for a long time, of course, and it's instructive to look at the shape of public opinion on the issue and how, if at all, it has been changing.

### **Opinion on Nuclear Power Amidst the Oil Shocks of the Late 1970s**

In April 1979, a time of sharply rising oil prices and curbs on gasoline sales in some parts of the country, an NBC News poll found "energy" was the second most often cited concern, surpassed only by inflation as the most important problem facing the country. And a majority of respondents (56%) said they were more concerned about availability of energy than its price. Yet, despite this apprehension over the adequacy of the energy supply, domestic nuclear power was not seen by many as the desired answer. When respondents were asked to look forward to the year 2000 and predict which source of energy—coal, oil nuclear, or solar—would be best for the US, 52% picked solar, 21% coal, 16% nuclear power and 4% oil.

The new decade did not find nuclear power gaining support. In NBC News polls of 1981 and 1982, the public by margins of 3 and 4 to 1 opposed expanding nuclear power. About two-thirds (63% in 1981, 67% in 1982) wanted to expand other sources and conserve more, rather than expand the use of nuclear energy.

### **Safety Fears**

While all energy sources have their pros and cons, the low popularity of nuclear power accrues from fears about its safety. Public awareness of nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl was very high. In the April 1979 NBC News poll, conducted shortly after the Three Mile Island accident, 43% said they thought all nuclear power plants should be closed down until questions about safety were answered; only a bare majority (51%) thought such a step unnecessary. It's important to note that this split wasn't only a short-term response to the accident. The same question was asked again in 1981 and 1982, with much the same results. In January 1982, for example, 36% wanted the plants closed for safety reasons, while 53%

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opposed this step. In November 1982, 64% reported that it would worry them to live within ten miles of a nuclear power plant.

The 1986 nuclear accident at Chernobyl may have triggered new fears about nuclear energy. Could something comparable happen here? Fully 70% of Americans polled said they thought it could—30% saying they thought it was very likely, another 40% that it was somewhat likely. Only 29% thought it was not very likely that such an accident could happen in the US.

### **No to New Construction**

While a majority finds closing down existing plants, investments already made, unacceptable, there has been strong opposition to building new plants. Majorities of Americans have opposed new construction of nuclear power plants in every NBC News poll on the issue since 1978 (Table 1). The percentage has fluctuated somewhat,

in response to events. Nuclear accidents in March 1979 and April 1986 produced the highest level of opposition. Price hikes and threatening oil shortages tend to lower opposition. But even though oil prices rose sharply early in the Gulf crisis, Americans still were not eager to expand nuclear power use. In August 1990, 57% of registered voters polled declared themselves against new construction. While still not a very popular option, Americans would rather loosen restrictions on offshore oil drilling (48% in favor) than encourage the construction of more nuclear power plants (37% favor). A majority (55%) would favor providing tax advantages to oil producers to make new exploration more advantageous.

The public's concerns over the safety of nuclear power still remain. The stability of opinion over the past decade is more impressive than the shifts which have occurred in response to prominent events. For a majority of Americans, the case for expanding the country's use of nuclear power has not been made.

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**Table 1**  
**CONSTRUCT MORE NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS**

	<b>Oppose</b>	<b>Favor</b>
September 1978	52%	39%
April 1979	65	29
October 1979	57	36
January 1981	56	32
January 1982	53	37
November 1982	63	29
April 1986	65	27
August 1990	57	37

**Questions:** [9/78-10/79] Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: No more nuclear power plants should be built in this country until questions about safety are resolved, even though some say this will mean energy shortages within 10 years? [1/81-4/86] Do you think that more nuclear power plants should be built in the United States, or do you think they should not be built? [8/90] Let me read you a number of proposals some people have suggested that America should pass in order to avoid an energy shortage. For each, please tell me if you favor or oppose that suggestion...Encourage construction of more nuclear power plants.

**Note:** Surveys by NBC News.