

To the Editor
No Shortcuts

The main point of David W. Moore's article, "The Myth and Mythology of Trust in Government" in the January/February issue of *Public Perspective* is wrong and misleading. When trust in government is low, in-depth and high-quality public interest polling confirms that people feel their legitimate policy needs and desires are being ignored by elected officials of both parties. Moneyed interests that finance candidate campaigns and their careers after leaving office get paid off with the legislation and regulations they want. In short, democracy is failing.

With stiff competition and low-ball quotes, commercial pollsters have to cut corners. Questions are typically too few, too shallow and off the mark. Tightly budgeted time and space produces inadequately analyzed, misinterpreted findings. Analysts complain privately that their professionalism suffers.

As a first step in good polling, when trust in government is low (or high) ask, "Why"? Ask why questions — both open-ended and with batteries offering a wide range of possible reasons for mistrust. Repeat the process with different samples over a period of time and correlate the results with various versions of the trust issue.

It is sad that well-known organizations cannot seem to figure out how to do high-quality, reliable polling. The country pays a big price for that, and democracy hangs by a slender thread.

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Not So Dark

By Ann Stouffer Bisconti & Mark David Richards

In his article, "More Power to Us" [November/December *Public Perspective*], Eugene Rosa acknowledged recent optimistic signs for public opinion favorable toward nuclear power, but then returned to several outdated themes on the subject. National surveys about nuclear energy that we have directed several times per year every year since 1983 contradict Rosa's assertions, first, that there has been a "longstanding mood of strong opposition to nuclear power;" second, that "The more immediate in space (near me) or in time (now) the posed questions about nuclear power are, the more likely the public will be opposed to the technology;" and, third, that "Nuclear power has been dead in the water" for nearly two decades.

We do agree that there was a dramatic upturn in public support for nuclear energy in 2001. In October, we recorded the highest numbers in all our survey history on the percentage favorable to nuclear energy (65%), those believing nuclear energy should play an important role in providing power (74%), and those finding nuclear power plants safe (66%; see Figure 1). In the previous March, we recorded an all-time high number saying we should definitely build more nuclear power plants in the future (66%). (That number fell to 63% in July and 59% in October due to declining concern about energy shortages.)

Regarding the longstanding mood of the public, however, a better characterization than that of strong opposition cited by Rosa would be unenthusiastic acceptance.

We are not claiming that there has not been controversy or a small core

of dedicated activists strongly opposed to nuclear energy. There has been. We are not claiming that nuclear energy has come close to the popular appeal of solar energy. It has not. We are not claiming that large numbers of the public have not had concerns about nuclear power plant safety. They have.

But very large majorities, in all surveys, have weighed the pros and cons in their minds and concluded that we should keep existing plants, as well as the option to build more plants in the future. That hardly qualifies as strong opposition.

As for proximity, contrary to Rosa's claims, those living closer to operating nuclear power plants are generally more supportive of nuclear energy than others.

The evidence is substantial. Utility surveys of people living near plants find even greater support locally than national surveys show. We found that same pattern when we compared attitudes of those who believed their electric company operated a nuclear power plant with those of respondents to our own national surveys.

For example, we asked nationally representative samples of 1,000 adults, "If a new power plant were needed to supply electricity, would it be acceptable to you or not acceptable to you to add a nuclear power plant next to the nearest nuclear power plants that are already operating?"

In October, 66% nationally said it would be acceptable. Among those who said their electric company already operated a nuclear power plant, the percent who said a new plant would be acceptable at the nearest existing site was slightly higher (69%).

In March, the public who would find a new plant acceptable at the nearest