

# *THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE*

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### **ENERGY: IS THERE A PROBLEM? NUCLEAR: IS IT THE ANSWER?**

**By Ann Stouffer Bisconti**

For most of the past decade, energy issues have languished in the wings. But this past August, the Gulf crisis again thrust energy to center stage. It had already made a tentative entrance in the waning months of the 1980s, but only as second fiddle to America's growing environmental concerns and then largely at leadership levels. The president's call for a national energy strategy and the need to ensure both energy security and environmental protection had posed the question: What about nuclear power? Since the invasion of Kuwait, that question is being asked with greater frequency. Where does the public stand?

Spencer Weart shows in his book, *Nuclear Fear*, that nuclear energy has long evoked mythic images which transcend and which even preceded it — like great white future cities, on the one hand, and dreadful monsters, on the other. In the face of such persistent imagery, support for increasing the use of nuclear energy has been driven to a great extent by views on how much it is needed. Unfortunately, the public's views of the adequacy of America's energy and electricity supply don't always reflect reality.

#### **Complacency in the 1980s**

Nearly a decade ago, when the earlier energy crises went into remission, the strong sense of need for energy development which had characterized the 1970s collapsed. In 1979, almost 7 out of 10 Americans named energy as one of the two most important problems facing the nation. By 1982, though, the proportion had fallen to 5%, and for most of the 1980s it was virtually zero. [The data cited in this article are, unless otherwise noted, from polls conducted by Cambridge Reports either as part of their ongoing polling or specifically for the United States Council for Energy Awareness. Full question texts and response distributions are available from the author.] Three months after the Three Mile Island accident (which occurred in March 1979) the proportion in favor of building more nuclear energy plants was just 4 points below the January 1979 level (46 vs. 50%). But support dropped from the

mid-40% range to around 30% in 1981 and 1982, as energy fell off the public agenda. It stayed around 30% through the 1980s, Cambridge Reports surveys show.

As it happened, public complacency about energy supplies was justified in the early Eighties. In the case of electricity, in particular, supplies were ample. Although electricity use grew 54% between 1973 and 1989 (roughly 3 percent a year), that was less than expected. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, electricity use had increased 7% annually, and electric utilities ordered plants with the expectation they would have to meet that growth rate on a continuing basis. When the rate fell, utilities cancelled orders for 111 nuclear energy plants and 97 fossil fuel plants. Nonetheless, in the 1980s, 48 nuclear energy plants were completed and licensed, bringing the US total to 112.

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**Energy Concerns Rise...Somewhat**

With US troops poised in the Saudi Arabian desert and energy prices threatening the entire economy, it's harder to ignore energy issues today. Polls by Cambridge Reports in August through October 1990 found small but growing percentages again naming energy as one of the two most important problems — 3% during August 1-5, 8% August 6-9, 9% September 1-9 and again October 1-9. Moreover, in the September survey, fully half of all Americans rated our national energy problems very serious, up 18 points from a year earlier.

By December, however, the number of Americans mentioning energy as one of the two most important problems facing the nation dropped again to 5%. Some of today's most critical national challenges are tied to energy, and Americans seem to sense these ties. But they are not particularly concerned about energy *supplies*. Cost has never been the main driving force behind the public's energy concerns. The driving force has been availability—and today, energy is readily available.

**Support for New Energy Development Still Lacking**

It's not clear whether, or when, attention to energy issues will bolster support for building nuclear plants. Right now, the public sees no urgent need for energy

development in general. In September, Cambridge Reports asked: "Do you think the energy problem in this country can best be solved by cutting back on the use of energy, or should the main emphasis be on increasing energy production?" Cutting back beat increasing production by a 22-point margin. Another example of the lack of enthusiasm for development: Only 30% in the same Cambridge Reports September poll thought that significant exploration and development would be needed to reduce substantially our dependence on foreign oil; 60% felt that conservation could do the job.

**Low Awareness of Supply Problems**

Moreover, the focus on energy has not yet extended to electricity. Support for building more nuclear energy plants is unlikely as long as Americans are unaware of any need to increase overall electricity-generating capacity. This past August, Cambridge Reports found that 45% called the *energy* supply problem very serious, but only 17% considered the *electricity* supply problem very serious. And only 22% said they thought any new electricity capacity will be needed in their area in the next 10 years. These perceptions persist despite brownouts and occasional blackouts in many parts of the country, as use has caught up with supply and little baseload generating capacity is being added.

**WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION ON NUCLEAR POWER?**

**Editor's Note:** Countries vary greatly in the extent to which they use nuclear energy to generate electricity. France, for example, generates 70% of its electric power by nuclear plants. This compares to just 20% in the US. Yet, anti-nuclear interest groups have been more active in the US than in France. It follows—doesn't it?—that public opinion in these two countries must be very different: The French less worried about the possibility of nuclear accidents than the Americans, less supportive of the idea that all nuclear plants should be closed, etc.

We don't know for sure, because not enough comparable survey work on the issue has been done in the two countries. Still, a comparison of US findings to those from France's highly respected Brulé Ville Associés polling organization suggests strongly that the French public is at least as inclined to anti-nuclear sentiments as are Americans. BVA asked in its April 1990 poll: "Would you be in favor of completely stopping use of nuclear power plants?" Forty-three percent said yes, only 45% no. It's unlikely any comparable question in the US would derive higher anti-nuclear sentiment. Similarly, the French profess to see a serious nuclear accident in their country as a real possibility: 81% say this, compared to only 12% who say that it isn't possible. Polls in the US don't pick up any higher level of foreboding. Ann Bisconti's piece on opinion on nuclear power in the US, and Keiko Tabusa's on opinion in Japan, also suggest that the dynamic of opinion in these two countries may be quite similar in most regards.

There is one area, however, where France and Japan do differ markedly from the US with regard to nuclear power: *need*. Nuclear energy, physicist Edward Teller observed years ago, is the only great scientific discovery to have been first announced to the world through the explosion of a devastatingly destructive bomb. From the beginning, as a result, public opinion has been uneasy about all applications of nuclear power. At the same time, though, many people see nuclear generation as an unavoidably central element in meeting their electricity needs. The more a public sees a need for nuclear power, the more likely it is to resolve its fundamental ambivalence in favor of using this source for its electricity.

Americans seem to place nuclear energy within the broad energy context: In July 1990, for instance, Gallup found 70% agreeing that using nuclear energy reduces US dependence on foreign oil. Yet the continuing complacency about electricity supply suggests that the connection of electricity with foreign oil may not be clearly understood. More electrification is certainly one of the ways to reduce oil imports, but greater electrification cannot occur without the additional electrical capacity that the public feels we do not need.

### High Expectations for Nuclear Energy in the Future

For the future, Americans see a large role for nuclear energy, according to many different polls taken over the past few years. In August 1990, for instance, a Cambridge Reports survey found 70% of Americans believing that nuclear energy already plays an important role in meeting the nation's electricity needs, and 62% expecting that its importance will be greater by the year 2000 than it is today. Coal, which produces 56% of our electricity—and which will be our major source of electricity for at least the next decade — was rated about equal to nuclear energy in its present importance. But only 44% of the public thought that coal's importance will increase. Open-ended questions by Cambridge Reports and others consistently find that Americans name nuclear energy ahead of all other sources as the primary source of electricity 10 years hence. Only about 10% (correctly) name coal.

Another source that is mentioned by the public just behind nuclear energy as the primary source of electricity in the next 10 years is solar. That future-fuel image they both share may be one of the reasons why Americans associate nuclear energy more with solar energy than with the traditional energy sources, oil and coal. In December 1990, when Cambridge Reports asked "which source of energy has the most in common with nuclear energy," 44% said solar, 15% oil, and 15% coal.

### Realistic Acceptance

In examining polling data on nuclear energy, it's important to distinguish between preferences and realistic acceptance. Poll after poll indicates an overwhelming public *preference* for solar energy. But Americans view nuclear energy as a realistic choice. For instance, a Gallup poll in July 1990 found 23% calling nuclear energy a good choice, 45% a realistic choice, and 26% calling it a bad choice—"considering all the options available for large-scale use."

Americans have a strong pragmatic streak. This explains why 65%-70% in the past few years have said that nuclear energy should play an important role in meeting the nation's energy needs. It also explains why a

July 1989 TeleNation-Market Facts poll found that 81% believed nuclear energy should play an important role in the US Department of Energy's national energy strategy.

### Reserving Judgment

Does this pragmatism carry over from the realm of abstract, hypothetical questions to real-life choices about building new nuclear energy plants? Several polls suggest that most of the public is at least open-minded. In August, Cambridge Reports asked: "If a new power plant were needed to supply electricity for your area, would you favor a nuclear power plant, oppose a nuclear power plant, or reserve judgment until you had more information?" Eighteen percent said they would be in favor of a nuclear power plant, 27% that they would be opposed, while 54% would reserve judgment. The number opposed was down 10 points from a high of 37% in May 1987.

### The Greenhouse Question

Environmental concerns, about air pollution particularly, could make nuclear energy a more popular choice. In a July 1990 Gallup poll, three-fourths of Americans (74%) said we should use more nuclear energy if that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. Nuclear energy plants emit no carbon dioxide, no sulfur oxides, and no nitrogen oxides. But only half the public indicated awareness of these facts.

### A Local Decision

Although the energy situation and opinions on energy issues both appear in flux, a favorable climate for energy development in general does not yet exist nationally. Americans continue to envision nuclear energy as a mainstay of our future energy supply, but most see no need for more electricity plants of any kind for years to come. There is broad and apparently increasing acceptance of nuclear energy — although not the uninhibited support that solar energy inspires — and significant potential for greater backing as people become aware of nuclear power's specific benefits.

Ultimately, building more electricity plants of one kind or another is not a national decision in the US, as it is in many other countries. Here these decisions are made at the state and local level. New nuclear power plants will most likely be built where the need for more electricity is greatest and where the local utility has earned confidence and trust through its commitment to its community.

### A Postscript on Polling on the Nuclear Issue

Many people find the polling data about nuclear energy confusing or conflicting. That leads them to throw

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%