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McCain and Obama Supporters Largely Agree on Approaches to Energy, Climate Change

Favor More Emphasis on Wind and Solar, Efficiency

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College Park, MD—A new WorldPublicOpinion.org poll finds the majority of supporters of John McCain and Barack Obama largely agree on how to deal with both the country's energy needs and the problem of climate change.

Asked whether the government should require utilities to use more alternative energy sources, such as wind and solar, even if this increases costs in the short-run, three-quarters (75%) of Obama voters and three-fifths of McCain voters (60%) say that it should.

Presented two competing arguments, both Obama and McCain supporters reject the argument that making a major shift to alternative energy sources “would cost so much money that it would hurt the economy.” Very large majorities in both the Obama (83%) and McCain (73%) camps instead support the argument that “with the rising cost of energy, it would save money in the long run.”

Supporters in both camps strongly favor a greater emphasis on increasing energy efficiency. Asked if the government should require businesses to use energy more efficiently, even if it might make some products more expensive, 71 percent of Obama supporters support this action, as do 55 percent of McCain supporters. Overall, 61 percent of Americans would favor the government requiring businesses to do this.

However, when it comes to levying “an extra charge for the purchase of models of appliances and cars that are not energy efficient,” a bare majority of Obama supporters (52%) are in favor while 58 percent of McCain supporters are opposed.

Only small minorities in both camps favor greater emphasis on “building coal or oil-fired power plants,” although more McCain supporters favor this approach (34%) than those for Obama (19%). More Obama supporters favor reducing emphasis on oil and coal (57%) than do McCain supporters (41%). Twenty-two percent of McCain supporters and 18 percent of Obama supporters say there should be the same emphasis as now.

The one area on which Obama and McCain supporters differ considerably is nuclear energy. Fifty-four percent of McCain supporters favor increased emphasis on nuclear energy, compared to only one-third of Obama supporters (33%).

These findings are part of a larger international poll conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org, an international research project managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. The poll of 1,174 Americans was fielded from August 9 – 20, 2008 by Knowledge Networks. The margin of error ranges from +/-2.9 to 3.4 percent, depending on the sample size. Because this was an international poll questions about offshore drilling were not included.

Both Obama and McCain supporters favor the United States departing from its current position regarding the Kyoto Treaty and participating in a new international treaty that would require limits on US greenhouse gas emissions.

Told that, “the US and other countries from around the world will be meeting next year to develop a new treaty to address climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions such as those caused by using oil and coal,” 94 percent of Obama supporters and 63 percent of McCain supporters said that the United States should “be willing to commit to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions as part of such a treaty.”

Concern about climate change appears to be a key factor driving support for alternative energy sources and greater efficiency; those who favor the United States committing to limits on greenhouse gas emissions are far more likely to favor requiring companies to adopt such changes.

A key controversy surrounding the existing international agreement, the Kyoto Treaty, is whether developing countries should be required to limit their greenhouse gas emissions. The Bush administration and the US Senate have taken the position that the United States should not sign a treaty without such requirements.

Only small minorities of the public take the government’s current position that the United States should not commit to limit emissions unless the less-developed countries do so (McCain supporters 10%, Obama supporters 4%). However a slight majority of McCain supporters (51%) favor pressure on less-developed countries to reduce their emissions, rather than simply accepting their position (34%). Obama supporters are more divided: 46 percent say that the United States should accept the position of less-developed countries, while 44 percent favor applying pressure.

Most developing countries have refused to accept such limits on the basis that their per capita emissions are so much lower than those of developed countries and they need to first develop their economies before taking strides to limit emissions. Thus Americans opinion on this question is a key factor in assessing the depth of their support for making a commitment to limiting emissions as part of an international climate change treaty.

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