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Look At the Polls People, Rejecting Keystone XL Is a Political Winner for President Obama

By: Daniel Kessler – January 28, 2013

Opponents of the Keystone XL pipeline have made a bombproof environmental case against project. There is a lot of conjecture about KXL, but facts are facts. Keystone XL is an export pipeline; it will increase global warming emissions; and it will benefit giant oil and gas companies that already have a vice-like grip on our political system.

But thus far opponents of KXL--of which I'm one--have yet to make a political argument against KXL that sticks. After all, KXL has become a political hot potato, with politicians and prognosticators trying to guess just what his decision would mean for Obama and his party.

To me, the answer is clear: a rejection of KXL is a political winner for the president. Why wouldn't it be? Huge majorities of the coalition that came together to re-elect the president in November--youth voters, African Americans, Latinos, and women--all support strong action on climate change. Saying no to the KXL carbon bomb is the very definition of strong action.

Inside the numbers

When you really look at it, it's the president's political opponents that are for the pipeline. George Will wants it built, so does ExxonMobil and the Cato Institute. To say yes to KXL is to give a political gift to them. Meanwhile his base is saying no thanks.

There are a ton of polls out there on climate change, but the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication usually has some of the best. In 2010--before the hottest year on record (2012), a horrible nation-wide drought, and Sandy--a Yale study showed that large majorities of all racial and ethnic groups already supported climate action.

Just look at the question of whether we should regulate carbon pollution. Support among Obama's base in the Yale poll is overwhelming with 65% of Latinos; 86% of African Americans and 70% of whites supporting government regulation. On this question and countless others on clean energy, Independents closely mirror Democrats, with big majorities supporting efforts to address global warming. And make no mistake, people do vote on climate: a majority of registered voters (58%) said last year they will consider candidates' position on global warming when deciding how to vote.

There haven't been too many recent polls on climate change and the youth vote that I've seen, but if you walk down to your area college campus you will find huge support for climate action. Want proof? 350.org's divestment campaign--just three months old--has already spread to over 200 campuses and it's growing.

Flipping conventional wisdom on its head

Two years ago the pundit class said KXL was a done deal and that with the election fast approaching the president would be a fool to reject it. Well, he did reject it, and he was re-elected. KXL proved to be a non-issue, and although the candidates certainly failed to address climate change in the campaign, the president's commitment to working on climate change didn't really come up despite the tens of millions that poured into the election from oil, coal and gas companies.

What we have learned from the president over these past 4 years is that he needs a mobilized base behind him if we expect him to move on an issue. Polls show people want climate action, and the largest climate rally in US history is planned for Feb. 17 outside the president's house. He'll hear from us that we will support him if he rejects KXL again, and if he does the president will achieve another political victory. Don't just listen to me, look at the polls.