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Political climate for energy policies cools

Poll: Economy outweighs environment

By JENNIFER ROBISON
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Monday's National Clean Energy Summit 2.0 will bring a parade of celebrated public policy experts to Las Vegas to discuss greening the country's economy.

But as leaders including former President Bill Clinton, former Vice President Al Gore and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger encourage investments in alternative energy, their policy prescriptions could face serious headwinds from changing public opinions.

Recent surveys show Americans cooling to global warming, and they're even less keen on environmental policies they believe might raise power bills or imperil jobs. Those sentiments could mean a tougher road ahead for elected officials looking to fund investments in renewable power or install a carbon cap-and-trade system.

"Right now, Americans are more concerned about the economy than the environment," said Frank Newport, editor-in-chief of the Gallup Poll. "The politician who says, 'I'm going to cripple jobs and shut down factories' would be in trouble in this economy."

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

Here's what Gallup found: The number of Americans who say the media have exaggerated global warming jumped to a record 41 percent in 2009, up from 35 percent a year ago. The most marked increase came among political independents, whose ranks of doubters swelled from 33 percent to 44 percent. Republican doubters grew from 59 percent to 66 percent, while Democratic skeptics stayed at around 20 percent.

What's more, fewer Americans believe the effects of global warming have started to occur: 53 percent see signs of a hotter planet, down from 61 percent in 2008. Global warming placed last among eight environmental concerns Gallup asked respondents to rank, with water pollution landing the top spot.

Another recent Gallup study found that, for the first time in 25 years of polling, more Americans care about economic growth than the environment. Just 42 percent of people surveyed said the environment takes precedence over growth, while 51 percent asserted expansion carries more weight. That reverses results from 2008, when 49 percent of respondents said the environment was paramount and 42 percent said economic growth came first. In 1985, the poll's first year, 61 percent placed a bigger priority on the environment, while 28 percent ranked economic growth highest.

All those results indicate trends that pose big challenges for the environmental movement, Gallup's researchers concluded. More pointedly, the findings signal potential trouble for policies designed to curb global warming.

"It's a conundrum. You can't just say to those interested in global warming that they need to do a better job of PR because they have been trying so hard," Newport said. "Al Gore won a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. He made a widely seen movie, and his book sold many copies. Yet, with all that, it hasn't worked. You would have to say that, somehow, they're not getting the message across."

Ask Daniel Weiss, a senior fellow and director of climate strategy at the left-leaning Center for American Progress, why increasing numbers of Americans dispute global warming and place the economy ahead of the environment, and he'll say those findings are wrong.

"I don't accept their premise. I think the Gallup Poll is mistaken," said Weiss, whose organization will send its chief executive officer, former White House Chief of Staff John Podesta, to Monday's clean energy confab. "I would want to look at their questions to see how they got to this place."

Weiss pointed to surveys that contradict Gallup's results. A Pew Environmental Group poll found that 77 percent of voters want lawmakers to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and 55 percent said efforts to curb global warming will create jobs. Another poll from the National Wildlife Federation found that 55 percent of those polled strongly support a global warming plan that reduces pollution.

But it's not just Gallup that shows flagging concern about global warming. In a July Rasmussen poll, 56 percent said they didn't want to pay higher taxes or utility bills to generate clean energy and fight global warming. A January Pew poll placed global warming last among the top 20 priorities Americans have for 2009. Nos. 1 and 2? The economy and jobs. Even trade policy and lobbyists outranked global warming. And Myron Ebell, director of energy and global warming policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a libertarian think-tank, pointed to a study from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association that showed 58 percent of respondents were unwilling to pay more than they currently pay for electricity to combat climate change.

'A HUGE AMOUNT OF SKEPTICISM'

Most observers say the economy is behind changing attitudes.

When people face immediate concerns such as job security, more-distant problems fade into the background, Newport said.

Studies show a strong historical correlation between economic prospects and support for environmental causes. When the economy surges, public support for green initiatives rises, said Jerry Taylor, a senior fellow with the free-market advocate Cato Institute.

"We're in the midst of one of the deepest recessions since the Great Depression, and people suspect environmental policies have price tags that are not inconsequential," Taylor said.

The public's interest in climate change also rises with extreme weather events, and the nation hasn't seen widespread, catastrophic weather since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Taylor added.

Ebell said he doesn't believe the recession or the weather are eroding public concern about global warming. Rather, he said, publicity over the high cost of green policies in Europe and other regions, as well as indications that those policies haven't yielded results and a 12-year string of stable global temperatures, are changing Americans' minds.

European countries have imposed gasoline taxes of \$3 to \$4 per gallon to curb consumption, Ebell noted, and the TaxPayers' Alliance in Great Britain estimated that the average British family spends more than \$1,200 a year on green charges and levies. Despite such investments, a December report from the United Nations showed that greenhouse gas emissions have grown by almost 10 percent worldwide since 1990, if you control for the emissions-curbing collapse of the Soviet Union and ensuing economic decline in Eastern Europe.

More importantly, said Ebell, the planet's average temperature hasn't risen since 1997, despite a 5 percent gain in the amount of atmospheric carbon dioxide in the same period. Twelve years doesn't make for a long-term trend, Ebell said, but every year that goes by with no increase in average temperatures makes it harder to assert the climate is sensitive to carbon dioxide.

"I think there's a huge amount of skepticism among the public. They've heard all these claims, and now they've been informed that there isn't any recent warming," Ebell said. "The public, without having a lot of information about it, is pretty astute. I think the alarmists are having a hard time making the case for global warming simply because reality is against them and the public has figured it out." (The Competitive Enterprise Institute has taken flak for accepting funding from oil giant ExxonMobil. Ebell said the financing ended several years ago, and the funding source didn't affect the group's policy positions, which were in place before the nonprofit sought the money and have remained intact since the agreement concluded.)

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., responded that the science showing the greenhouse effect on Earth's climate is solid. He pointed to pictures from Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, which reveal the virtual disappearance of a glacier in the past 35 years.

Weiss added that ignoring the environment carries its own costs: The typical household energy bill has risen \$1,100 in the past eight years, even without policies to fight global warming.

"Doing nothing has been very costly," he said.

Worse still, agreed Reid and Weiss, eschewing environmental policies hurts the economy. Prominent venture capitalists and executives from Fortune 500 companies such as General Electric say investing in green energy will boost the economy, creating millions of high-tech jobs. Even a policy as simple as retrofitting existing buildings and constructing new buildings according to green standards would bolster the construction sector, as well as reduce waste and pollution, Reid said.

"The country that makes the clean energy technologies of the future is going to be the one that dominates the world economy," Weiss said. "Right now, China, Germany and other economic competitors are ahead of us because we've had eight years of doing nothing. Americans know we must change the way we generate and use energy. The question isn't whether we're going to buy clean energy technologies. The question is whether we're going to buy clean energy technologies made in the United States and marketed overseas, or whether we'll buy them from China and bring them here."

STILL SOME SELLING TO DO

Bringing alternative power sources online and reining in greenhouse gases pose upfront costs, though, because the country's energy infrastructure was built around fossil fuels. Congress has appropriated more than \$60 billion for clean energy initiatives in the past year, including \$11 billion for a national "smart" electric grid, \$5 billion for making homes more efficient and \$2 billion to invest in advanced batteries.

Also, the federal Energy Information Administration released a report Wednesday that tallied up the costs of the American Clean Energy and Security Act, the carbon cap-and-trade bill that passed the House of Representatives in May and goes to the Senate for a vote in the fall. The agency's analysis found that the bill would increase the cost of energy, pare economic output, curb purchasing power and cut \$432 billion to \$1.9 trillion from the nation's gross domestic product by 2030.

And that's where all those polls showing that Americans aren't certain those costs are worth it might begin to matter. With so many surveys revealing that Americans have little appetite for environmental policies that they think could stall economic growth or pinch consumers' budgets, policymakers still have some selling to do, observers say.

Politicians might just need to work harder at educating the public on why they think green policies are important, Newport said.

Other elected officials could end up changing their stands on those policies because, after all, a politician's biggest goal is to keep his job.

"Some people think politicians vote on the merits of an issue," Taylor said. "There might be one here or there who does that, but they're exceptions to the rule. For the most part, politicians are like businessmen, only they're in the business of earning votes. Virtually everything they do is with an

eye on how many votes it will get them. And these sorts of surveys tell politicians that votes for cap-and-trade programs are extremely hazardous to their electoral health."

Members of Congress who represent blue states and hold leadership positions in their parties will be safer than those who hail from swing states and enjoy less seniority, Taylor predicted.

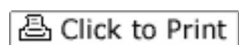
Reid vowed Friday to continue his push for clean energy policies, saying that a sound and healthy environment is critical to any prosperous economy, and the Gallup numbers show most Americans continue to believe that the seriousness of global warming has been correctly portrayed or even understated.

"We have a duty to all of our children to make sure we don't let temporary difficulties get in the way of making good choices for their future," he said.

Contact reporter Jennifer Robison at jrobison @reviewjournal.com or 702-380-4512.

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