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

September 23, 2008

Questionnaire/Methodology (PDF)
Press Release (PDF)
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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.

(Photo credit: trochej)

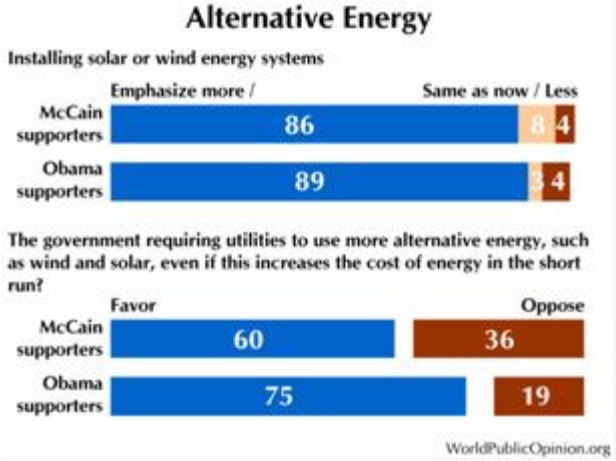
Supporters of both candidates favor a greater emphasis on alternative energy sources such as wind and solar and on modifying buildings to make them more energy-efficient. They also favor requiring businesses to use energy more efficiently, even if this might make some products more expensive. Both groups reject putting more emphasis on building coal or oil-fired power plants. A modest majority of McCain supporters, though, favor more emphasis on nuclear energy, while most Obama supporters do not.

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. Concern about climate change appears to be a key factor driving support for alternative energy sources and greater efficiency as 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.

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.

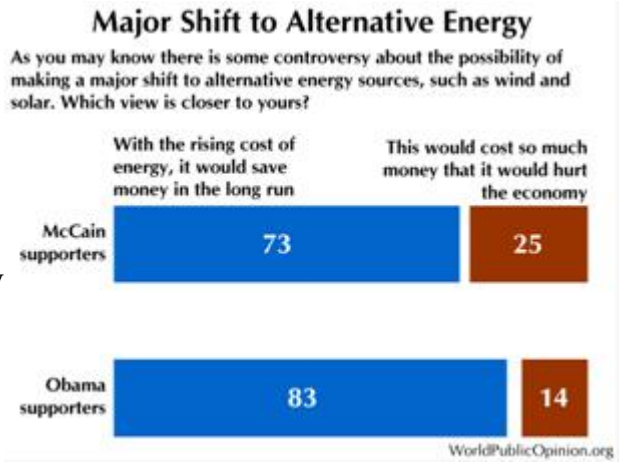
Alternative Energy Sources

Americans widely favor the United States placing greater emphasis on installing wind and solar energy systems, with nearly nine in 10 (87%) favoring this approach to dealing with energy. Support is shared among supporters of Obama (89%) and McCain (86%), as well as those respondents who are undecided (83%).



Nearly two-thirds (66%) would favor the government requiring utilities to use more alternative energy sources, such as wind and solar, even if this increases costs in the short-run. Majorities in both camps agree on this issue: three-quarters (75%) of Obama voters and three-fifths of McCain voters (60%) favor the government doing this (undecided respondents, 59%).

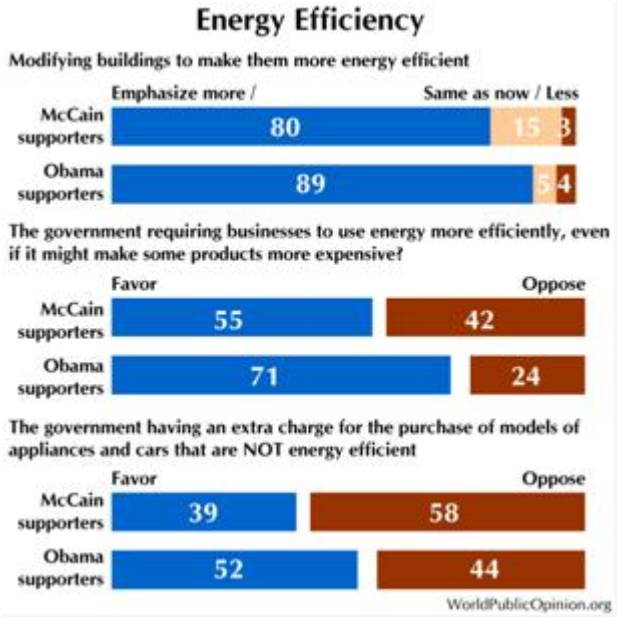
Obama and McCain supporters are also quite optimistic that a transition to alternative energy sources would not be economically prohibitive and would save money in the long run. Presented two competing arguments, both Obama and McCain supporters reject the view that making a major shift to alternative 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 view that "with the rising cost of energy, it would save money in the long run" (undecided respondents, 82%). Only 25 percent of McCain supporters, 15 percent of undecided respondents, and 14 percent of Obama supporters say it would be too costly to the economy. Nearly eight in 10 (79%) Americans overall say this shift to alternative energy sources would save money in the long run.



Both Barack Obama and John McCain have said they favor alternative energy sources as components of their long-term energy strategies. Barack Obama has proposed a $150 billion, 10-year clean energy development plan for alternative energy sources including biofuels, wind, solar, and clean-coal technology. Obama also favors requiring all utilities to produce at least 10 percent of their electricity from renewable energy sources such as wind or solar. John McCain supports a $2 billion dollar program to develop carbon capture and other clean-coal research and also favors using tax credits to promote energy research and extending existing credits for renewable energy resources such as hydroelectric dams, wind, and solar.[1]

Increasing Efficiency

Supporters in both camps strongly favor a greater emphasis on increasing energy efficiency. Asked to consider approaching the energy problem by modifying buildings to make them more energy efficient, overwhelming majorities of Obama supporters (89%), McCain supporters (80%) and undecided respondents (77%) favor putting greater emphasis on this approach. Overall, 83 percent of Americans favor such an approach.



Obama and McCain supporters agree on the need for the government to impose efficiency requirements on businesses, though agreement is less widespread among McCain supporters. 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 (undecided respondents, 51%). Only 24 percent of Obama supporters oppose this approach, compared to 42 percent of McCain supporters and 36 percent of undecided respondents. Overall, 61 percent of Americans would favor the government requiring businesses to do this, while 34 percent are opposed.

Another proposal for having "an extra charge for the purchase of models of appliances and cars that are NOT energy efficient" reveals a more significant division between Obama and McCain supporters. Obama supporters are slightly in favor of such a measure (52% favor, 44% oppose), while a majority of McCain supporters would oppose it (58% oppose, 39% favor). The position of the undecided respondents is closer to that of McCain supporters on this topic: only 31 percent would favor the measure, while 57 percent are opposed. Overall, a slight majority (52%) of Americans oppose this policy, while 43 percent would favor it.

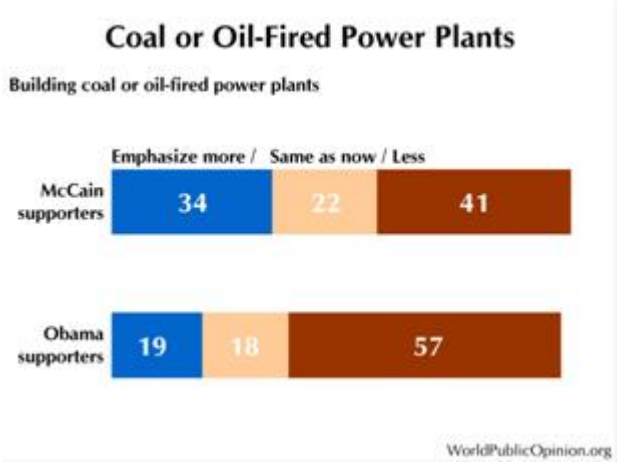
On the issue of energy efficiency, both candidates support developing "smart grid" power lines to increase savings in electricity. Obama also favors overhauling appliance and efficiency standards to significantly reduce energy use in buildings as well as weatherizing one million energy-inefficient homes.[2]

Oil, Coal and Nuclear Energy

Both Obama and McCain supporters reject placing greater emphasis on "building coal or oil-fired power plants," with the most common view in both camps being that they should be emphasized less. Three-quarters (75%) of Obama supporters reject a greater emphasis

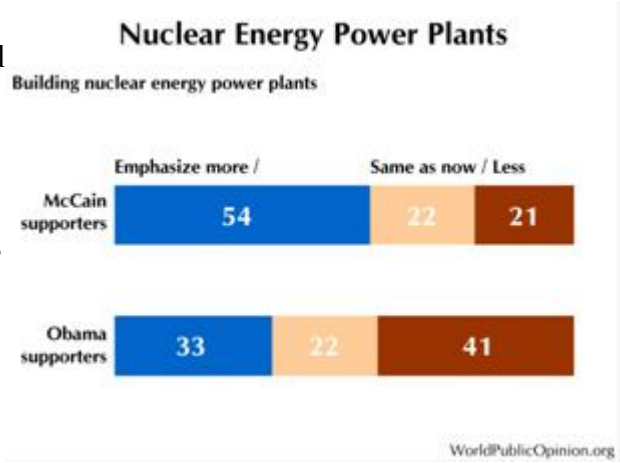
on coal and oil, including a majority (57%) saying coal and oil-fired plants should be emphasized less and 18% saying the emphasis should remain the same. More than six in 10 (63%) McCain voters agree, with 41 percent saying coal and oil energy sources should be given less emphasis and 22 percent saying they should receive the same emphasis they currently do. Similarly, most undecided respondents also reject more emphasis on coal or oil-fired power, saying it should be less (46%) or the same (29%). Overall, 71 percent of Americans reject more emphasis on coal or oil.

Fairly small minorities in both camps favor greater emphasis on coal and oil, although more McCain supporters favor this approach (34%) than those for Obama (19%) or are undecided (21%). Barack Obama and John McCain have both said they favor developing "clean-coal" technologies as part of their energy strategies.[3] The candidates differ on the issue of off-shore drilling, however this question is more closely related to the source of supply than it is to what type of energy is used.



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

Most Obama supporters (63%) oppose more emphasis on nuclear energy, instead saying it should be less (41%) or the same as now (22%). Undecided respondents answer similarly, with 35 percent saying the emphasis should remain the same and 29 percent believing it should be less. Overall, a majority of Americans (55%) reject putting more emphasis on building nuclear energy power plants.

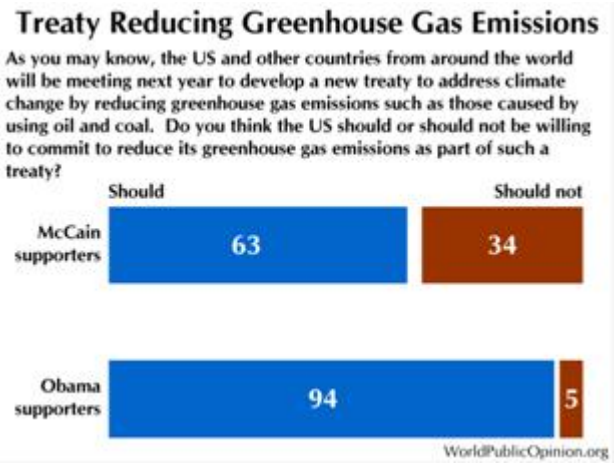


John McCain favors building 45 new nuclear power plants by 2030, while Barack Obama only supports construction of new nuclear reactors with guarantees for safety and a clean overall environmental impact.[4]

Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Americans express widespread support for entering into a new international agreement to limit greenhouse gas emissions, with support shared by those favoring both Obama and McCain. Respondents were presented the following question:

"As you may know, 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. Do you think the US should or should not be willing to commit to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions as part of such a treaty?"



Overall, 78 percent of Americans say that the United States should be willing to commit to reduce its emissions as part of such a treaty, while just 19 percent say it should not. An overwhelming 94 percent of Obama supporters say the United States should be willing to do this, compared to a smaller 63 percent of McCain supporters, along with 75 percent of undecided respondents.

This question refers to the conference that will convene in Copenhagen next year to develop a follow-on to the Kyoto Treaty on climate change. The United States refused to sign the original Kyoto treaty and has not agreed to make commitments to limiting or reducing it greenhouse gas emissions.

Attitudes about climate change appear to play a significant role in attitudes about energy. Support for requiring utilities to use more wind and solar energy sources (which do not produce greenhouse gasses that contribute to climate change) is far higher among those favor US participation in a climate treaty (75% favor, 20% oppose) than among those who oppose participation (36% favor, 62% oppose).

Similarly, among those who believe the United States should enter into a new agreement to limit emissions, a very large majority (70%) favors the government requiring businesses to use energy more efficiently even if this increases costs, while 27 percent would oppose this. However, opponents of the United States joining a new agreement are also largely opposed to requirements for businesses to improve their energy efficiency, with 71 percent opposed and just 28 percent in favor.

Opponents of an international agreement to reduce emissions also overwhelmingly oppose having an extra charge for the purchase of models of appliances or cars that are not energy efficient (79%), while those who would favor an agreement are divided (50% favor, 48% oppose).

Among those who say the United States should enter such an agreement, a majority (53%) says there should be less emphasis on building coal or oil-fired power plants, while, among those who oppose an agreement, a plurality (41%) believes there should be greater emphasis on this approach.

Interest in alternative energy sources and efficiency is not, however, only related to climate change. Among those who oppose participating in a climate treaty majorities do favor more emphasis on wind and solar (71%) and greater efficiency (60%), although less so than those who favor participation (91% and 89% respectively). However in the questions where economic costs are introduced, discussed above, these groups diverge. Proponents of an agreement express more optimism that alternative energy sources will save money in the long run (86%) than do opponents (50%).

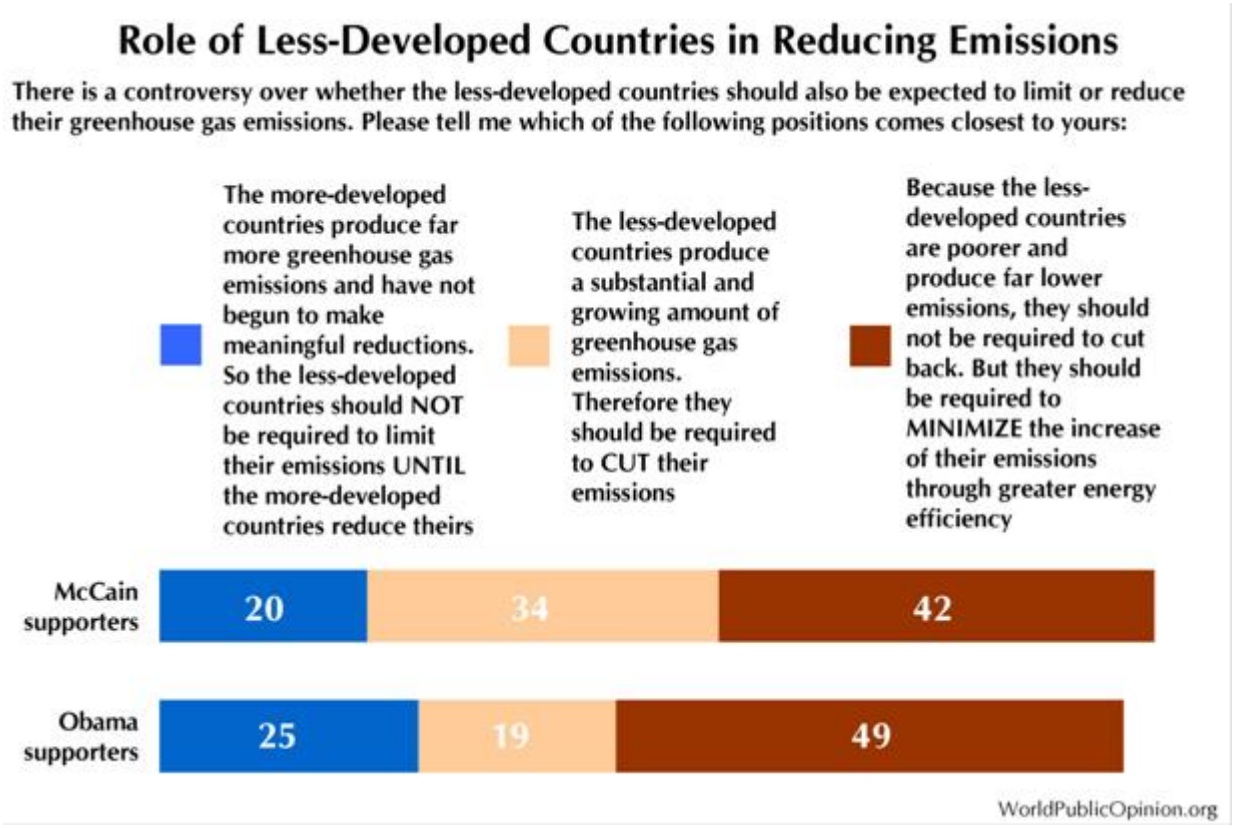
Climate Change Treaty and Developing Countries

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. However 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 a climate change treaty.

Perhaps the most fundamental question is how the United States should respond if the less-developed countries stand by their position that they will not limit their emissions until their economies are more developed and the developed countries first reduce their emissions. A very large majority (85%) of Americans agree that the United States should reduce its emissions in any case, although there is a slight preference that the United States should pressure the less-developed countries to limit their emissions while reducing their own emissions with other developed countries (45%) over simply accepting the position of the less-developed countries and proceeding to reduce US emissions (40%). Just 8 percent say that the United States should refuse to reduce its emissions if less-developed countries do not agree to limit their emissions.

There are only moderate differences among Obama and McCain supporters on this issue. Only small minorities take the current US position that the United States should not commit to limit emissions unless the less-developed countries do so (McCain supporters 10%, Obama supporters 4%, undecided respondents 11%). However a majority of McCain supporters (51%) favor pressure on less-developed countries to reduce their emissions rather than 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 believe that the United States should apply pressure for less-developed countries to reduce their emissions. Undecided respondents show similarly mixed feelings (38% accept position, 35% apply pressure).

Consistent with findings from recent years, a large majority also does not expect developing countries to reduce their emissions, but expects them to impose some kind of limits. Respondents were presented three response options (see box). Only 26 percent believe that less-developed countries should be required to cut their emissions (down from 30% in a June 2004 PIPA poll), while 45 percent believe that less-developed countries are poorer and produce fewer emissions, but should make efforts to minimize the growth of their emissions (from 42% in June 2004). Together, this constitutes a majority (71%) that believes less-developed countries should be required to cut or minimize their emissions. Only 20 percent take the position that because developed countries produce more greenhouse gas emissions, less-developed countries should NOT be required to limit their emissions until the developed countries agree to limit theirs (22% in June 2004).



Among supporters of each candidate, preferences are remarkably similar. McCain supporters are somewhat more in favor of requiring less-developed countries to cut emissions (34%) than Obama supporters (19%) or undecided respondents (25%). But in all groups the most common view is that less-developed countries should minimize growth of their emissions, including supporters of Obama (49%), McCain (42%), and undecided respondents (45%). Obama supporters are slightly more likely to say less-developed countries should not have to cut their emissions until developed countries reduce theirs (25%) than McCain supporters (20%) or undecided respondents (10%).

[1] http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/08/09/america/Energy-Next-President-Highlights.php

[2] http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/08/09/america/Energy-Next-President-Highlights.php

[3] http://www.grist.org/candidate_chart_08.html

[4] http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/08/09/america/Energy-Next-President-Highlights.php