ENERGY & THE US ELECTORATE

Evolving Views, Growing Education, Lingering Confusion

Introduction

by Peter Gardett

Americans have been able for decades to mostly ignore the sources of their energy as well as the impacts of the choices they make. In the US, energy has traditionally been cheap, widely available and extremely reliable.

In the late 1970s an OPEC oil embargo sparked handwringing in the US about energy choices and marked the first government-sponsored clean-tech boom. Widespread power outages and the collapse of Enron at the start of the last decade prompted another short-lived period of public interest in energy. Otherwise, the most Americans have seemed to know about energy is how to complain about prices at the gas pump.

Something's changed. A mix of economic, technology, operational and political factors have brought energy issues to the forefront of political debate in the US over the past six months, and the conversation is set to intensify as the Presidential Debates and the November elections loom. Americans are becoming aware of their energy use, and its consequences.

The next energy race is to educate a new generation of consumers. Companies, regulators and public interest groups are all joining in. This AOL Energy white paper, based on a series that ran on our site, discusses where we are today, and examines some of the proposals intended to raise American awareness about energy issues.

What Voters Don't Know About Energy

By Elisa Wood

There is a funny thing about Americans. We've got strong opinions about what's wrong with energy, especially when gasoline prices rise, but our passion tends to exceed our understanding.

Polling indicates we hold strong sentiments about energy independence and renewables. Yet key details elude us.

More than half of Americans cannot name one type of renewable energy and nearly 40 percent can't identify a fossil fuel, according to New York-based research organization Public Agenda. Many wrongly think the US gets most of its oil from the Middle East, and few realize that it will be years before green energy makes up a large portion of our resource mix.

Even when there is money on the table, we are often oblivious. An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found that less than 20 percent of Americans know important details about energy efficiency rebates, tax credits, and other incentives available to them.

Big, controversial energy news passes us by. Half of the population is unaware of TransCanada's Keystone XL project, according to a Yale University and George Mason University study, despite the uproar over President Obama's decision to deny the project a presidential permit in January.

What Are We Talking About?

Bring up global warming at a party and watch the opinions fly. (More than two-thirds of Americans say the US should make either a large-scale or medium-scale effort to reduce global warming, according to a Yale/George Mason study.)

"We are having all of these big political debates over fossil fuels and a good portion of the population doesn't even know what they are talking about," said Jean Johnson, a senior fellow at Public Agenda and author of the book, "Who Turned Out the Lights?"

It's not surprising really; voters are distracted and few have the time or interest to delve into energy complexities. The ailing economy looms as a larger preoccupation.

"They have busy lives. They are not sitting over EIA [US Energy Information Administration] books looking at statistics," said Rayola Dougher, senior economic advisor for the American Petroleum Institute, which has a Vote4Energy media campaign underway.

As energy becomes politicized this lack of understanding makes the electorate increasingly malleable to the sound bite and easily swayed on issues that have significant economic and environmental ramifications, according to Public Agenda, which recently published a citizens energy guide.

This tendency to waffle comes at a particularly bad time. The energy industry is undergoing vast changes that will affect the country for decades; it wants consistent policy and direction before making large investments – and for good reason.

"With energy decisions, it takes a long, long, long time to see a result. A power plant lasts 40 to 50 years. They are huge and expensive. You don't build them every day. Even in terms of oil exploration – you don't just find it in Alaska, and we have it in our car tomorrow," Johnson said.

The problem is further exasperated by the tendency of political parties and special interest groups to reduce energy to simple black and white arguments that draw passion. Those who propose complex solutions find it difficult to be heard above the din.

Forget Nuance

Former Colorado Governor Bill Ritter discovered this firsthand when his administration embraced both renewable energy and natural gas. During Ritter's campaign for Governor, he appeared in a commercial with a wind farm, so therefore was perceived as anti-fossil fuel – even though he wasn't.

"What we were trying to do was promote a variety of resources. Wind was probably the biggest beneficiary, but our agenda was about clean energy broadly, including natural gas," said Ritter, who served as governor from 2007 to 2011 and is now director of the Center for the New Energy Economy at Colorado State University.

His image as anti-fossil fuel grew as he pushed for stiffer extraction rules for the natural gas industry. But later, when Ritter signed a bill that expanded the market for natural gas by shutting down coal-fired plants, people did not know how to peg him.

"We had said all along that we were in favor of this industry [natural gas] surviving and even thriving. But because we were stubborn about the extraction process being environmentally sound, we got slotted into another place," Ritter said. "It became very difficult to communicate a message that people understood. The mindset is that you are either an environmentalist or an industry person."

Raising the Energy IQ - What Will it Take?

Large swaths of voters don't know that oil is a fossil fuel and can't tell the difference between a solar panel and a skylight.

But just setting them straight about the facts isn't enough to produce an electorate that will arrive at the ballot box with a clear grasp of energy issues. If it were, the vast amount of information circulated about energy would sink in, and we'd all be experts.

"What doesn't work is a pedantic lecture," said Will Friedman, president of Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research firm in Manhattan that focuses on educating voters about energy and other public policy issues.

So what does it take to prepare voters for the onslaught of contradictory information and propaganda that comes with an election – especially this year's where the opposing camps are loud, certain and at odds about energy policy.

"What doesn't work here is a pedantic lecture" - Friedman

Public Agenda advocates a 'learning curve' approach, modeled after the work of its co-founder, social scientist Daniel Yankelovich. The theory is that just teaching voters facts about energy isn't enough. It's easy to memorize information; what's tough is overcoming our inclination to engage in wishful thinking or denial. The human tendency is to avoid admitting that "Drill-Baby-Drill" or "Go Green" come with drawbacks.

In short, Public Agenda hopes to do away with the fairy tales; to dissuade people from believing in the silver bullet – but not by advocating any particular energy agenda. Instead the organization tries to present voters with the pros and cons of all sides, so that they can *"wrap their heads around the fact that there are going to be trade-offs, regardless of what path we choose through our most critical and divisive public issues,"* said Allison Rizzolo, a co-author of *"Energy: A Citizens Solution Guide,"* a voter information piece that describes those trade-offs.

Public Agenda uses the term 'learning curve' to make clear that it is hard work, a climb, to reach an honest understanding. Yankelovich has identified three stages of the learning curve: 1) Consciousness-raising where the public becomes aware of the problems; 2) Confronting wishful thinking and facing up to sacrifices; 3) Resolution and support for change

The American public has advanced along the consciousness-raising phase, but is just beginning the far tougher task of confronting wishful thinking, according to another Public Agenda report called Energy Learning Curve.

Crowdsourcing Your Energy Politics

To get beyond wishful thinking, voters need to spend a good amount of time wrestling with the issues. Public Agenda recommends not only reading its citizens guide, but also discussing the points with friends, finding out what neighbors think, and not hesitating to debate with those who hold opposite views. Too often we are *"just reading and interacting with the people who agree with our viewpoint,"* said Rizzolo.

Ultimately, it is not that voters hold a particular energy policy dear. What they seek is a stance that supports their values. *"Ideological arguments tend to be a straw man,"* said Rizzolo. Voters may say they support a policy that encourages fossil fuels, but what they really mean is that they want America to be secure. Or they may call themselves pro-renewable, but their real concern is leaving behind a planet that is liveable and hospitable for their children.

"People need to go into the polls being able to look at where Romney stands, look at where Obama stands, look at where some other third party candidate stands, and say, 'I understand what the trade-offs will be. Is this the platform that I actually endorse?'" she said. *"Hopefully, and it is an ambitious hope, that instead of automatically voting along party lines, they'll be a little more thoughtful and choose a candidate that reflects their values."*

Public Agenda says most of us fall into one of four broad groups when it comes to energy issues: the Anxious (40 percent), the Greens (24 percent), the Disengaged (19 percent) and the Climate Change Doubters (17 percent) – and all four groups face a steep uphill climb to truly understand energy's trade-offs.

Some policy decisions can safely be left to the professionals: experts who spend their lives examining various issues – but energy isn't one of them, according to Yankelovich. So Public Agenda has chosen the topic as one of a handful it is devoting attention to this election year.

But it's one thing to provide accurate and unbiased information to voters; it's another to get them to believe you. Today people are besieged by energy messages, they are suspicious, and it's not easy getting through all the noise, points out Patricia Stanton, senior vice president of policy & advocacy at Massachusetts-based Conservation Services Group, which has been educating homeowners, businesses and policymakers about energy efficiency for almost three decades.

How does an education group like Public Agenda convince the electorate that its message is credible in a world where there is so much spin? See Part III of Elisa Wood's series *"Raising the Energy IQ of the Electorate."*

Understanding Energy in a World of Election Spin and Confusion

Voters aren't the only ones frustrated by the swirl of misinformation surrounding energy; so are those in the industry who find themselves in a constant battle against the sound bite and the stereotype.

Rayola Dougher, senior economic advisor for the American Petroleum Institute, says it irks her that a lot of voters assume that anyone in the petroleum industry is anti-renewable.

"The truth is, in terms of just renewables from 2000 to 2010, one out every five dollars invested in non-hydrocarbon technology has been invested by oil and gas suppliers," she said.

Patricia Stanton, senior vice president of policy & advocacy at Massachusetts-based Conservation Services Group, cites another kind of distortion. She finds it frustrating that energy efficiency companies must work so hard to prove they achieve energy savings.

Such information – along with power production data – is required by government forecasters, policymakers and grid operators. But power plants, solar arrays and wind farms face a less rigorous accounting in proving how much energy they produce, according to Stanton.

"There are folks who question the ability to quantify how much you save. We can do that math in a pretty accurate way," she said.

On a different front, former Colorado Governor Bill Ritter sees the cloud of misinformation descend when people say they oppose regulation or mandates for utilities – not realizing utilities are monopolies.

"When you can achieve a monopoly or near-monopoly you are going to be regulated by the state. So to say, 'We are opposed to mandates' is like a parent saying they are opposed to giving their teenager a curfew," said Ritter, who is now director of the Center for the New Energy Economy at Colorado State University.

With an industry overwhelmed by so much spin, misrepresentation and just plain misunderstanding, how can the voter trust information?

Public Agenda says it tries to be an honest broker of information by using a framework called 'choice work' in creating its voter guides. The Manhattan-based research organization does not tell the voter what to think, but lays out the various options and explains the repercussions that will result from making any of the various choices.

For example, in *"Energy: A Citizens' Solutions Guide,"* one of several voters guides by the nonpartisan organization, Public Agenda treads carefully in describing the much-trumpeted 'jobs creation' arguments: *"People talk about 'green jobs' that will come from developing infrastructure for renewable energy, but a lot of jobs (some say more) can also be created from upping our domestic production of oil and natural gas—we'll need people to build the pipelines and do the drilling. But again, these job creation strategies may contribute significantly to the deficit."*

The guide lists each of the major types of energy, how much we have, and notably what's good and what's bad about each.

For example, the guide points out that oil provides most of our transportation fuel, and we are becoming less dependent on foreign imports, but oil will run out someday and it causes environmental degradation.

Even With Awareness, Hard Choices

On natural gas, the guide says that the U.S. has 4.1 percent of the world's proven natural gas reserves and recently has increased production significantly because of fracking, but critics say the practice endangers water supply. Yet if we move away from natural gas, we would need to use either more coal or nuclear because it will be decades before we have enough renewable energy to make up the difference.

Coal is abundant and cheap, but highly polluting. Nuclear is clean, but we only hold four percent of the world's known recoverable uranium, haven't solved the nuclear waste disposal issue and our population is largely against its use.

Renewable energy is clean and abundant, but building the infrastructure can be expensive and it requires back-up generation because of its intermittency, says the guide.

Although it works hard to be even-handed, Public Agenda still faces criticism for its portrayal, particularly by those at various extremes of the spectrum, a sign that the guide probably struck the right middle ground, said Allison Rizzolo, a co-author.

"There is always going to be choice that someone hates. That is the way we know our choice work is successful," she said.

Ritter says the public will continue to be confused until Congress backs clear national energy policy – and it may take some drastic action before that happens.

"This is part of the problem for Americans – they haven't had the kind of guidance the national government should give them: a sound energy policy that is linked to environmental, and I would even add, climate issues," Ritter said. *"Until somebody loses an election for voting a certain way on an energy bill or an EPA bill, the people in DC are not going to pay attention to their voters as much as they will pay attention to the people supporting their campaigns."*

Elisa Wood writes regularly for AOL Energy and is the author of the story series that formed the basis of this whitepaper.

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