

PublicOpinion

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Think Others Don't Support Nuclear Energy? Think Again

Clear majorities support nuclear energy, yet believe the general public opposes it. What drives this "perception gap"?

by Ann S. Bisconti, Ph.D.

You say you favor nuclear energy but you believe the majority of Americans don't. Why do you think your views are different?

For several years, polls of opinion leaders, policymakers and the public have shown a common "perception gap": Majorities express personal

support for nuclear energy but believe that others hold an opposing view. We arranged the focus groups in the Washington, D.C., area to understand why.

The focus participants were demographically diverse. Among them were schoolteachers, a musician, an engineer, a nurse, a full-time mom. They

were African Americans, Asians, Latinos and Caucasians. But all had one thing in common: Based on a previous interview, we knew they personally favored nuclear energy, but they believed the majority of Americans did not share their view.

They did not know how typical they were.

The Perception Gap at a Glance

In two recent national surveys of college graduates who are registered to vote, almost two-thirds said they personally favor the use of nuclear energy, but only one-fifth perceived majority public opinion to be favorable.

A comparison survey of the general public found 61 percent in favor of nuclear energy.

FAVORABLE ATTITUDES TOWARD NUCLEAR ENERGY

“Do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the use of nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide electricity for the United States?”

	College-Grad Voters		Public
	January 1998	July 1998	June 1998
	%	%	%
Favor	65	62	61
Oppose	33	36	34
Strongly favor	23	21	25
Somewhat favor	42	41	36
Somewhat oppose	20	22	15
Strongly oppose	13	14	19
Don't know, no answer	2	2	5

PERCEPTION GAP

“Do you think that more people in your community are in favor of or opposed to nuclear energy?”

(Asked of college graduate voters.)

	January 1998	June 1998
	%	%
In favor	21	20
Opposed	61	62
Don't know, no answer	18	18

Source: Three surveys with nationally representative samples of 1,000 each, margin of error ± 3 percentage points. Bisconti Research, Inc.

Focus Groups Tell Why We Think Others Oppose Nuclear Energy

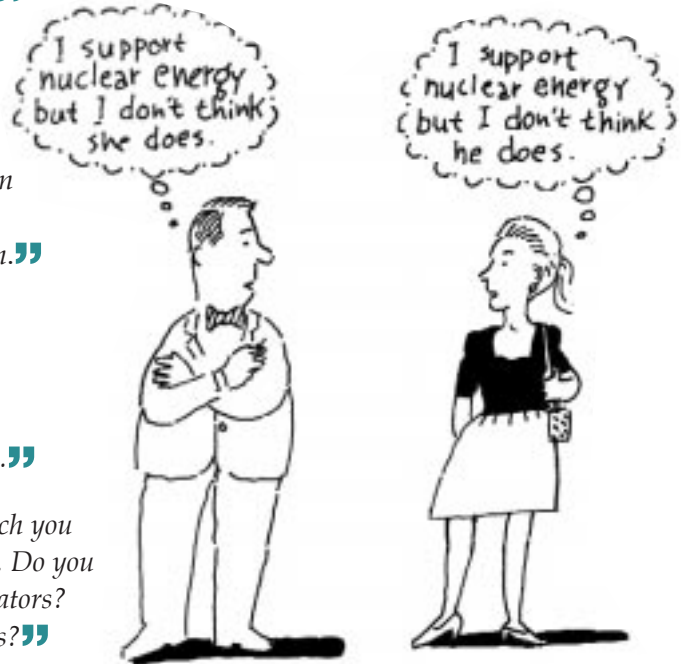
OTHERS SEE ONLY THE DANGER

Focus group participants perceived the public at large as fearful of nuclear energy. They spoke of the lingering images from Hiroshima and Chernobyl. They talked about the potential dangers of nuclear energy.

Why then, did they personally favor the use of nuclear energy? Because, they said, they saw both sides of the risk/benefit equation. They personally saw more than dangers. They also saw benefits.

▶ **“My whole impression is that when you mention nuclear power, red flags go up in people’s minds....I daresay everything people have heard is bad...Chernobyl, bombs, etc.”**

▶ **“I look at it differently. I know it can be destructive, but I know it can be used in a positive vein. I think we can learn from experiences and can make it a safe mechanism.”**



“WE’RE CYNICAL IN AMERICA”

Group participants also tied perceived public opposition to rampant cynicism in general and a loss of trust in institutions. Some saw themselves as dealing with cynicism differently from the average person.

“We’re cynical in America.”

▶ **“It has to do with how much you trust institutions in general. Do you trust the industry, the regulators? Are they building safe plants?”**

“I think I’m less skeptical because I’ve always worked through institutions rather than outside of them and have some success with that approach.”

“WE ARE MORE AWARE”

In seeking to explain why their views were different from those of the public at large, participants in both groups focused first on awareness.

The groups viewed the general public as uninterested, distracted and complacent.

As Washington, D.C., area residents, some attributed their (perceived) greater awareness to the location, feeling that—“our area is different.” Ironically, in discussions with people around the country, we find that the idea that “our area is different” is not limited to the nation’s capital.

▶ **“The public doesn’t know what nuclear energy can do for you.... a more educated consumer will accept nuclear power.”**

“My perception is the majority are opposed because of the lack of knowledge about the things that are aiding our life.”

▶ **“[P]eople in general cannot focus on nuclear energy because they’re focused on how to pay their rent. People’s focus is on the almighty dollar and how to pay the bills...not scientific issues.”**

▶ **“We don’t think beyond the fact that we have electricity...it all works, we’re fine. But maybe we’re a smaller group who looks beyond now.”**

“The majority of people are playing golf and doing other things. We’re news junkies in this area.”

NEGATIVE MEDIA MEANS NEGATIVE PUBLIC

We asked participants what they had seen or heard that convinced them that the public opposes nuclear energy. None remembered seeing any public opinion polls on the subject. Most pointed to images in the media.

They also pointed to the media when asked what would convince them that the public did indeed support nuclear energy.

Some suggested that they would need to see manifestations of public acceptance the way they see solar panels on people's houses—to see some sign that nuclear energy is part of everyday life.

▶ *“The news media doesn't say anything good about it. The plants are frightening. It's the fear of it and all the negativity around it.”*

▶ *“The media likes the sensational stories, likes to talk about disasters, but not the quiet successes.”*

▶ *“If the news media would start sensationalizing the positives of nuclear energy. Start talking about it.”*

▶ *“If everything goes right, that's not news. So, if the public says, in its desire to cut fossil fuels, we should consider nuclear energy as an alternative, like solar is discussed, we'd need to hear it emanating from the public.”*

▶ *“If a power company said we're looking into building one (nuclear power plant)...and see if people are protesting or not. I'd like to see that a utility is going to look into it.”*

Participants seemed to be more aware that nuclear energy is a part of life in other countries—France, Japan, India—than here in the United States. Few knew there were nuclear power plants in the local area. Their guesses of the number of U.S. nuclear power plants ranged from four to 50, and most guessed fewer than 10. The United States has more than 100 nuclear power plants.

Participants Explain: Why We Misperceived the Majority's Views

“WHAT'S GOING ON, MERCY, MERCY ME.” WE'RE NOT SO DIFFERENT AFTER ALL

After they were shown public opinion survey results that reveal the perception gap, the general amazement was captured by a participant who said, “Reminds me of the Marvin Gaye song, ‘What's going on...mercy, mercy me.’” Seeing that they had misperceived public opinion and that their own opinions were not different from those of the majority, they formulated several explanations.

Explanation 1: Things Have Changed

Perhaps we were wrong, because our perceptions have not changed with the times. Perhaps the negative images have faded, because nuclear energy has not been an issue for a long time.

▶ *“We've been talking about hearing negative things. We have a tendency to forget things after a period of time. So, there has not been the same sort of uproar about the plants that there once was.”*

Explanation 2: My Own Ambivalence

People may project the negative side of their own ambivalence onto the public. They know that they and the average member of the public have a common vision of the negative side, but they don't think they share the vision of the positive side.

▶ *“I think people are reflecting their own reservations. I say I'm in favor, but I still have my reservations. One way to make the point is not to erase all the fears but to show that nuclear energy is better than some other things.”*

Explanation 3: Passion

Opponents may be more outspoken and passionate than supporters of nuclear energy. Perhaps, one respondent suggested, it is a fundamental part of human nature to become a more vocal activist when one opposes something than when one is in favor. Supporters, another suggested, tend to be complacent.

▶ *“Passion has something to do with it, too.”*

▶ *“People are much more likely to protest, call, send telegrams for something they oppose. The ones in favor aren't going to say anything. We see the people who are opposed...or at least we hear of them.”*

▶ *“And complacency is part of it. They (the pro-nuclear people) are not charged up enough to sell their story.”*

How To Bridge the Perception Gap

The focus groups suggested that people form impressions of public opinion based on what they see and hear (negative news images) and what they don't see and hear (a large nuclear energy presence). Given that everyday excellent performance of the nation's nuclear power plants will never be front page

INFORMATION, PLEASE

Said one focus group participant after reading additional information about nuclear energy's clean air benefits:

“I said
I supported
nuclear energy.
Now I know
why.”

news, bridging the perception gap will depend on the nuclear energy presence.

Participants highlighted what research studies have shown for years—that support for nuclear energy is driven primarily by perceptions of the need

for nuclear energy and its benefits. Most of the respondents harbored reservations about the safety of nuclear energy, but concluded that nuclear energy is needed and beneficial. They viewed themselves as atypical in their awareness of the benefits. If they saw information in the media about benefits, they would be more inclined to believe that average Americans are also aware of the benefits and able to draw the same conclusions they have drawn.

For safety reassurance, just making America's current nuclear power plants more visible would go a long way, the interviews indicate. Learning that there are more than 100 nuclear energy plants, including plants in the local area, leads to the conclusion that the plants must have been doing their job quietly and safely. This information about the present contribution also removes some of the mythical imagery.

More communications about the benefits would also help to solidify support among those who are inclined to favor nuclear energy.

Greater visibility of existing plants, participants said, would help to demonstrate public acceptance. So would knowledge that some companies consider nuclear energy to be an attractive option for the future, even if they are not ordering new plants now.

Above all, the interviews suggest that

an essential element for bridging the perception gap is passion. Participants' observation that people who are opposed to something usually speak louder than those who are in favor is significant because of the phenomenon some sociologists call the "spiral of silence."¹ The theory states that, in a controversy, the side that views itself as unpopular or in the minority becomes increasingly silent. Thus, to bridge the perception gap, supporters of nuclear energy need to overcome any reticence about expressing an opinion that they perceive—incorrectly—to be a minority view.

¹Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980.

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