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Public Views on Climate Policy Options: Spring 2012 NSAPOCC Findings

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Recent surveys indicate that American public opinion on climate change continues to demonstrate a "rebound effect." This is reflected in responses to questions about the existence of climate change that return American opinion approximately to the levels of 2008-09 and has been addressed in recent editions of Issues in Governance Studies. This development raises the related question of public support for various policy options, including some that have been frequently proposed as well as those that have been adopted by the federal government during the Obama Presidency.

This report summarizes key findings on the issue of public support for a range of climate policy options drawn from the Spring 2012 National Survey of American Public Opinion on Climate Change (NSAPOCC). It finds that Americans tend to be opposed to those kinds of policies most commonly endorsed by economists, namely taxes and emission trading mechanisms that utilize market principles in attempting to achieve cost-effective reductions. In contrast, Americans tend to support those kinds of policies least commonly endorsed by economists, including a range of regulatory programs related to energy development, industrial emission controls, and vehicular fuel mandates.

Partisan divides are nearly universal in any public opinion survey focused on climate change and these differences appear to some degree in this analysis. Democrats are generally most supportive of various policies, with Republicans generally most opposed. Independents tend to cluster more closely to Democrats on most policies than Republicans. However, not all policies demonstrate identical levels of partisan divide.

Limited Support for Market-Based Options such as Taxation or Cap-and-Trade

Direct imposition of a carbon price through either some form of taxation or a cap-and-trade program has generally received low-to-moderate levels of public approval in recent years, including all prior versions of the NSAPOCC. In particular, taxation on either fossil fuels or gasoline to reduce greenhouse gases received considerable opposition when posed as options, as reflected in Figures One and Two. A separate question proposing a similar tax for electricity received a response very similar to that for gasoline. Democrats are clearly more evenly divided on this issue than Republicans, but the overall response to these options continues to be negative. However, this version of the NSAPOCC did not include any specifications on possible uses of revenue from such a tax, which appears to have some impact on support levels.

In turn, carbon cap-and-trade remains quite divisive, reflected in overall levels of 42 percent opposition, 35 percent support, and 22 unsure, as noted in Figure Three. Once again, partisan divides are evident, with majorities of Democratic respondents

supportive and strong majorities of Republican respondents opposed. These latest findings reflect continued decline in support in cap-and-trade from 2008 and 2009 levels.

Fig. 1: Increasing taxes on fossil fuels*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	18%	30%	10%	36%	6%
Republican	5%	11%	14%	66%	3%
Independent	14%	24%	13%	44%	6%
Overall	**12%**	**21%**	**13%**	**48%**	**7%**

*Defined as "a policy to reduce greenhouse gases by increasing taxes on all fossil fuels"

Fig. 2: Increasing taxes on gasoline*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	6%	29%	17%	45%	2%
Republican	5%	5%	10%	79%	2%
Independent	8%	16%	17%	58%	1%
Overall	**6%**	**17%**	**15%**	**60%**	**2%**

*Defined as "a policy to reduce greenhouse gases by increasing taxes on gasoline"

Fig. 3: Carbon cap-and-trade*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	17%	34%	7%	21%	21%
Republican	9%	15%	14%	50%	13%
Independent	12%	21%	9%	34%	24%
Overall	**12%**	**23%**	**9%**	**33%**	**22%**

*Defined as a "system where government caps the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by business through the provision of pollution credits and provides those businesses with the right to trade or sell those pollution credits"

Substantial Support for Regulatory Approaches

Public opinion on climate policy options moves in a very different direction when regulatory options are presented. These generally involve some form of regulatory provision that either increases the use of cleaner energy sources or mandates either reduced emissions or use of more fuel-efficient technologies. The use of these approaches has taken on new meaning in the American context, given the expanding use of such provisions in many states and new federal initiative taken through executive action by the Obama Administration.

In some cases, such as portfolio standards that mandate an increase in the amount of electricity that comes from renewable sources, no such federal policy exists.

However, this policy does operate in 29 states and continues to be a focal point of Congressional deliberations on future energy policy. The idea of a federal version of this policy receives overwhelming support from respondents (77 percent in support, 19 percent opposed, and 4 percent not sure), as reflected in Figure Four. In this case, a partisan divide emerges, whereby Democrats are more supportive of the proposed policy than Republicans. However, clear majorities of Republicans are supportive, simply at lower levels than Independents or Democrats.

Fig. 4: National Renewable Portfolio Standard for Electricity*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	70%	23%	1%	4%	2%
Republican	34%	24%	14%	24%	4%
Independent	56%	25%	6%	11%	3%
Overall	**52%**	**25%**	**6%**	**13%**	**4%**

*Defined as a "policy to reduce greenhouse gases by requiring a set portion of all electricity to come from renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, or hydroelectric power"

...[P]artisan divide expanded once the question was posed with more specific language, namely express reference to "the Obama Administration's current policy to use the Clean Air Act" for this approach.

Although much federal debate over climate policy in 2008-2010 focused on the possible adoption of legislation that would establish a cap-and-trade program, subsequent years have seen the federal role shift toward executive branch regulations. Most notably, this has included an Obama Administration decision to interpret the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments to apply to major industrial sources of greenhouse gas emissions. This policy has proven to be quite controversial and likely Republican Presidential nominee Mitt Romney has said he would repeal this decision if elected in November.

This round of the NSAPOCC represents the first major effort to assess public sentiment on taking such a regulatory approach. Figure Five reflects a more general statement of the policy approach, with mention of only "federal regulations" rather than a specific reference to the Administration or the particular law being utilized. In this case, 59 percent of respondents were supportive of the proposal, whereas 31 percent were opposed, and 11 percent were not sure. Democrats were strongly supportive and Independents were very close to the national average. Republicans were more likely to oppose (52 percent to 42 percent), but at a considerably lower intensity than Democratic support.

That partisan divide expanded once the question was posed with more specific language, namely express reference to "the Obama Administration's current policy to use the Clean Air Act" for this approach. Democrats shifted slightly toward a stronger level of support and Republicans shifted markedly toward greater opposition overall and strong opposition in particular. However, once Independents were also included, the overall national response found 52 percent in support, 33 percent opposed and 16 percent not sure.

Fig. 5: Federal Greenhouse Gas Regulations*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	35%	44%	5%	8%	8%
Republican	25%	17%	15%	37%	6%
Independent	26%	33%	11%	19%	10%
Overall	**27%**	**32%**	**11%**	**20%**	**11%**

*Defined as "a policy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through federal regulations that limit emissions from major industrial sources"

Figure Six: Obama Administration Greenhouse Gas Regulations under Clean Air Act*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	44%	31%	5%	8%	12%
Republican	14%	14%	13%	50%	10%
Independent	27%	23%	8%	23%	19%
Overall	**28%**	**24%**	**9%**	**24%**	**16%**

*Defined as "the Obama Administration's current policy to use the Clean Air Act to enforce greenhouse gas emissions reductions from major industrial sources"

Increased fuel economy of vehicles has long been discussed as a policy that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As with the use of the Clean Air Act for stationary source emissions, the Obama Administration has twice turned to existing legislation to increase standards in the near term and, more recently, through 2025. This version of the NSAPOCC asked a pair of questions, both of which included specifics about the endorsed levels of fuel economy but only one of which included an estimated five per cent increase in new vehicle costs.

In Figure Seven, we see a very supportive response to the former presentation, namely 73 percent in support of the specific fuel economy increases, 18 percent opposed, and 6 percent not sure. In this instance, Democrats and Independents proved most strongly supportive, although considerably more Republicans were supportive than opposed (60 percent to 34 percent). In Figure Eight, we see that support softens somewhat when an anticipated vehicle purchase price increase is attached to the package. However, all three groups continue to demonstrate greater support than opposition despite the provision, including Republicans at a rate of 51 percent support, 41 percent opposition, and 8 percent not sure.

Fig. 7: Increased Vehicle Fuel Economy*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	54%	35%	2%	3%	7%
Republican	39%	21%	18%	16%	5%
Independent	49%	27%	9%	9%	6%
Overall	**44%**	**29%**	**9%**	**9%**	**6%**

*Defined as "a policy to reduce greenhouse gases by increasing the average fuel economy of new vehicles from the current rate of 30.2 miles per gallon to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025.

Fig. 8: Increased Vehicle Fuel Economy Despite Price Increase*

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose	Not Sure
Democrat	34%	43%	12%	7%	5%
Republican	28%	23%	19%	22%	8%
Independent	37%	32%	14%	12%	5%
Overall	**30%**	**33%**	**15%**	**12%**	**7%**

*A policy "increasing the average fuel economy of new vehicles from the current rate of 30.2 miles per gallon to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025, if it raised the price of new cars by about five percent"

Looking Ahead

These findings suggest that the public has very different views of different types of policies that are intended to reduce greenhouse gases. Partisan divides are evident throughout the survey findings, although majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents converge in supporting a subset of policies, such as renewable portfolio standards and increased vehicle fuel economy. In future versions of the NSAPOCC, we will further explore the link between public support levels for various policies and related economic factors. In turn, the Fall 2012 version of the NSAPOCC will coincide with our first national survey of public opinion on the use of hydraulic fracking techniques to expand natural gas and oil supplies. This process has had a clear impact on expanded use of natural gas in the United States and could have considerable ramifications for greenhouse gas emission levels. The survey will pose an array of policy questions, including regulatory and safety standards and issues of severance taxation.

Methodology

The following key findings report summarizes data collected in a telephone survey of residents of the United States between March 28 and April 16, 2012. Individual households and cell phones throughout the United States were selected randomly for inclusion in the study. The sample of phone numbers used in the survey was generated by Genesys Sampling Systems of Ft. Washington, PA. Interviewing was conducted by the staff of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion, with

726 surveys completed. Of the 726 surveys 520 were completed on land lines and 206 were completed on cell phones. The total number of completions results in a margin of error of +/- 4% at the 95% confidence interval. However the margin of errors for sub groups (i.e. women, income groups, age categories) is larger due to smaller sample size. Percentages throughout the survey have been rounded upward at the .5 mark, thus many totals in the results will not equal 100%. The American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) cooperation rate (COOP3) for the survey was 24% and the AAPOR response rate (RR3) was 16% for the survey. The data has been weighted by the following categories: age, gender, educational attainment, race and region. The instrument was designed by Christopher Borick of Muhlenberg College and Barry Rabe of the University of Michigan in consultation with Erick Lachapelle of the University of Montreal.

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