

# BISCONTI RESEARCH, INC.

2610 WOODLEY PLACE NW ♦ WASHINGTON, DC 20008

TEL: 202.347.8820 ♦ FAX: 202.347.8825

<http://www.bisconti.com>

## Recent National Public Opinion Surveys About New Nuclear Power Plants: October 2006

Various polls in 2006 show high support for new nuclear power plants. News media polling organizations' interest in asking about new nuclear power plants reflects growing focus on energy, nuclear energy benefits, and the nuclear renaissance. <sup>1</sup>

### Agreement on New Nuclear Power Plants

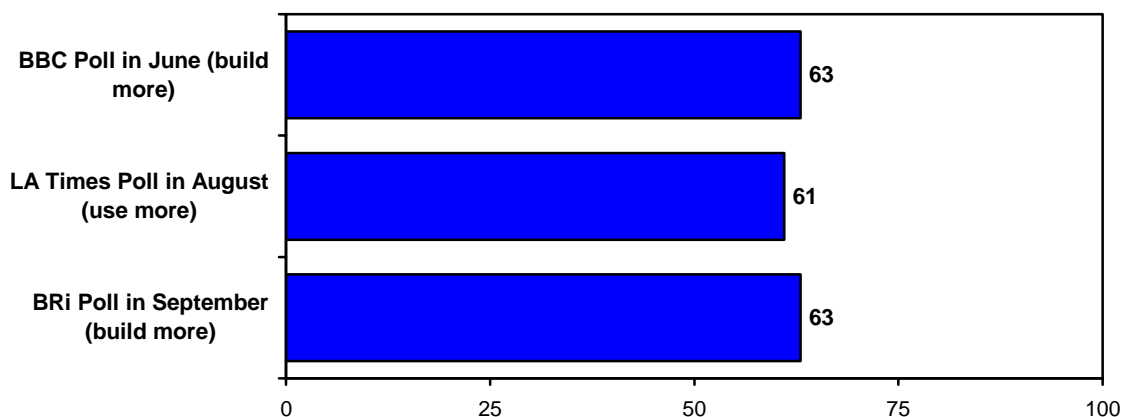
Three national surveys in 2006 found 61-63 percent approval for increasing nuclear energy/building more plants.

**BBC/Globescan Poll June 2006:** *Please tell me if you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose building new nuclear power plants to reduce reliance on oil and coal.*

**Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll July-August 2006:** *One suggestion for reducing the problem of global warming is to increase the use of nuclear power and to decrease the use of fossil fuels. Would you, personally, support or oppose the increased use of nuclear power as a source of energy in order to prevent global warming?*

**Bisconti Research (BRi) for NEI September 2006:** *Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that we should definitely build more nuclear power plants in the future?*

### Percent Favor Building More Nuclear Power Plants/Using More Nuclear Energy: U.S. Public 2006



<sup>1</sup> All surveys cited in this memo are with national samples of about 1,000 and margins of error of plus or minus three percentage points

The two news media survey questions included a rationale for increasing nuclear energy. Bisconti Research surveys for NEI, on principle, do not introduce any ideas, positive or negative, about nuclear energy before key attitude questions.

### **Context Matters**

A March 2006 Gallup Poll asked whether people favored or opposed expanding nuclear energy as one proposal in a list of several “environmental proposals,” most of which are historically popular: *“Next, I am going to read some specific environmental proposals. For each one, please say whether you generally favor or oppose it...”*

*Spending government money to develop alternate sources of fuel for automobiles, more strongly enforcing federal environmental regulations, spending more government money on developing solar and wind power, imposing higher emissions and pollution standards for business and industry, imposing mandatory controls on carbon dioxide emissions/other greenhouse gases, setting higher auto emissions standards for automobiles, expanding the use of nuclear energy, opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil exploration.”*

- 55 percent favored “expanding nuclear energy,” as an “environmental proposal.” This number is surprisingly high, given that nuclear energy historically has been viewed in the context of energy, not as an environmental proposal without any explanation. The surprisingly high number reflects recent news media focus on nuclear energy as an environmental solution.
- After that question: 55 percent (the same number) said they “favor the use of nuclear energy.” In NEI’s March and October polls, 68 percent said they “favor the use of nuclear energy.” Gallup used the wording of NEI’s long-term tracking question; in this case, however, Gallup established a frame of reference (environmental proposal, in comparison with alternatives) that is different from NEI’s frame of reference (energy).

Another question in 2006 asked about government actions: four “ways for the federal government to try to reduce future global warming:”

- As a way to reduce future global warming, 41 percent favored “giving companies tax breaks to build nuclear power plants.” Most (87 percent) said they favored “giving companies tax breaks to produce more electricity from water, wind and solar power.” Fewer favored increasing taxes on gasoline (31 percent) or electricity (19 percent). (ABC News/TIME/Stanford survey, March 2006)

The level of support for tax breaks to companies to build nuclear power plants is quite high considering historical preference for renewables and resistance to tax breaks for “big energy/big companies.”

- A survey by Penn, Schoen, and Berland (PSB) for the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition in April 2006 found a lower level of “favorability” than is found in the NEI surveys, but the questions are quite different:
  - 59 percent said that they have a “favorable view” of nuclear energy in a question that asked about favorable-unfavorable views of four energy sources, rotated. (PBS)
  - 68 percent said that they are favorable to “the use of nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide electricity for the United States.” (BRi for NEI)

The PBS question measures feelings about nuclear energy per se, which tend to be ambivalent, especially when other options are presented. The BRi question for NEI measures feelings about using nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide electricity for the nation.

Both questions are useful for understanding public opinion.

### **Location of New Plants Must be Defined and Suitable**

Two surveys in 2006 asked about building a new nuclear power plant “in your area” or “close to your home.” This type of question is not realistic; nuclear power plants will be built in suitable locations where the public supports them--not in the many locations near large population centers where industrial facilities of any kind are not suitable.

- 55 percent (same March 2006 Gallup Poll) said they opposed “the construction of a new nuclear power plant in your area as one of the ways to provide electricity for the U.S.” This negative figure decreased from 63 percent in March 2001, which shows a favorable trend, even on this poorly conceived question.
- 62 percent in May 2006 said they definitely would not “want to have a nuclear power plant reactor constructed next to or otherwise close to your home.” (Opinion Research Corporation)

BRi’s polls for NEI, instead, define the location. They ask: *“If a new power plant were needed to supply electricity, would it be acceptable to you or not acceptable to you to add a new reactor at the site of the nearest nuclear power plant that is already operating?”*

- 68 percent of the general national public in October 2006 answered “acceptable.” (Bisconti Research/GfK for NEI)
- 75 percent of plant neighbors in 2005 answered “acceptable.” (Bisconti Research/Quest Global Research Group 2005 survey of random samples of adults living within 10 miles of the 64 nuclear power plant sites)

## **2005 Non-NEI Surveys**

- 34 percent in June 2005 favored “building more nuclear power plants at this time.” ( TNS/Washington Post/ABC News)
  - ✓ “At this time” requires a real sense of urgency.
  - ✓ No location was specified.
  - ✓ Favorable responses to this question, originally asked by General Electric, dropped off in the early 1980s after the energy crisis faded.
- 44 percent in July 2005 supported building additional nuclear power plants as a “proposal to help solve America’s energy problems.” (NBC News/Wall Street Journal)
  - ✓ No time frame or location was specified.
  - ✓ The sense of urgency appears to have increased since then.
- 64 percent in June 2005 said they would favor “more nuclear power in America” knowing that the U.S. gets less than 20% of its electricity from nuclear power, other developed countries such as France get 80% of their power from nuclear energy and that nuclear power produces no greenhouse gases. This was obviously a “push” question, which inflated the number. (The Winston Group, June 7-8, 2005.)
- 55 percent in August 2005 said that it is “time for the United States to begin building nuclear power plants again.” This figure was up from 44 percent in June 2005, possibly due to heightened attention in August to energy prices and their impact on the economy, as well as energy bill provisions for nuclear energy. (Rasmussen Reports)
  - ✓ No location is specified.

## **September 2006 Public Opinion at a Glance: Bisconti Research/GfK for NEI**

- 81 percent believe nuclear energy will be important for future energy needs.
- 83 percent support license renewal of nuclear power plants that continue to meet federal safety standards.
- 76 percent believe that electric utilities should prepare now so that new nuclear power plants could be built if needed in the next decade.
- 75 percent support keeping the option to build more nuclear power plants in the future.
- 63 percent believe we should definitely build more nuclear power plants in the future.
- 68 percent favor nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide electricity in the United States; 32 percent strongly favor nuclear energy, and only 13 percent strongly oppose.
- 68 percent said that, if a new nuclear power plant were needed, it would be acceptable to add a new reactor at the site of the nearest nuclear power plant that is already operating.

## **Conclusions**

The numbers shown in this summary of recent polls are not conflicting. They are all correct and useful for informing those who wish to understand public opinion and how nuclear energy is viewed in different contexts. Variations in the question context make a large difference in the answers, and that is a function of the complexity of knowledge, perceptions, and feelings about nuclear energy.

The NEI-sponsored surveys are the only source of public opinion data about nuclear energy that includes more than 100 different questions, some with trends going back for more than two decades. The NEI trend data show that there have been large gains in support for using nuclear energy and for building more nuclear power plants. But the data do not indicate that the battle for the hearts and minds of the national public has been won. An ambivalent public can be easily moved from one position to another, as the data in this summary of recent polls makes quite clear. Consistent effective communications and branding are needed to maintain and solidify support.