

Public Continues To Favor Nuclear Energy Amid National Uncertainty

by Ann Stouffer Bisconti, Ph. D.

Over the past 18 months, public support for nuclear energy reached record high levels. Growing favorable attitudes toward nuclear energy were measured in tracking surveys in March, July and October 2001 and in February 2002. Those favorable attitudes may be attributed to national public concern about energy supply, a changed environment

in which industry and political leaders spoke out about the need to build more nuclear power plants, growing media attention to the nuclear energy “renaissance,” and underlying good performance of the nation’s nuclear power plants.

Between the latest two surveys, in February and June 2002, there has been partial erosion of recent gains in

support.¹ Although a majority still favors nuclear energy—and 82 percent continue to approve of nuclear power plant license renewal—the June survey finds greater public uncertainty about building more nuclear power plants. Recent changes are most evident in the Northeast.

Patriotism, Support for Nuclear Energy Linked

Historically, a sense of national purpose and patriotism corresponds with increased public support for nuclear energy. That sense of purpose and patriotism was very strong immediately after September 11 and may have boosted support for nuclear energy, even while concern about electricity shortages diminished toward the end of 2001. Gallup surveys found that general satisfaction with “the way things are going” dropped from 61 percent in February 2002 to 52 percent in June—similar to the percentage point drop observed on several nuclear energy measures tracked by Bisconti Research over this period.

A mood of anxiety and uncertainty continues. For example, a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll in March found that a substantial portion of the public is less willing to travel overseas or go into skyscrapers. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll of New York residents in June found similar avoidance of places and activities that might be terrorist targets.

The Bisconti Research/RoperASW June survey finds the public less worried about terrorist attacks than immediately after September 11. But 69 percent of the public believes a major terrorist attack on a U.S. target is at least somewhat likely.

In the June Bisconti/RoperASW survey, an extraordinarily large number of the public (75 percent) recalled hearing or reading about the possible threat of a terrorist attack against a nuclear power plant. The influence of this intense news focus may have been both negative and positive. While the focus on nuclear power plants may have caused some uneasiness, it also served to draw attention to the significant contribution of nuclear power plants today to U.S. energy supply. Shifting nuclear energy’s image from a mythical future energy source to a real part of the present national infrastructure increases its acceptability.

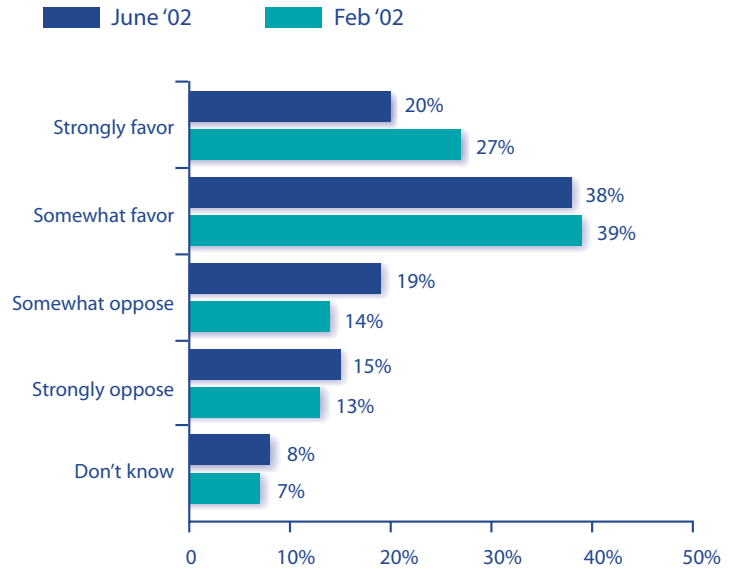
¹Telephone interviews were conducted May 31-June 2, 2002 with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 U.S. adults. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points. The survey was by Bisconti Research, Inc. with RoperASW.

Favorability Toward Nuclear Energy Remains Steady

Favorability to Nuclear Energy as Source for Electricity

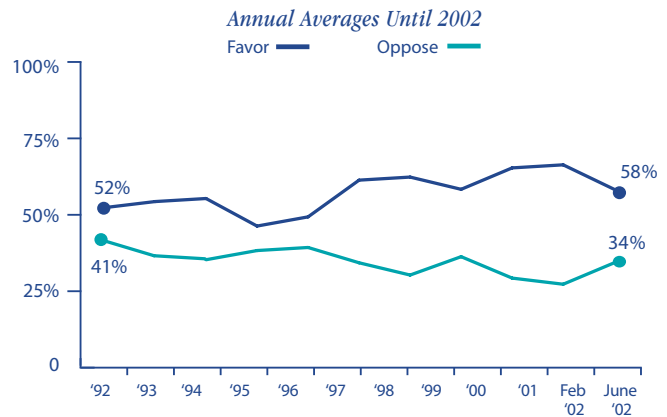
Attitudes toward nuclear energy today are at levels similar to November 2000 and January 2001, just before the peak period of concerns about energy shortages. The findings across a series of tracking questions show less definitive support—but no surge of opposition. There was little or no increase in strong negative attitudes on any question. Fifty-eight percent favor the use of nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide our nation’s electricity; 34 percent oppose using nuclear energy. Those feeling strongly in favor of nuclear energy declined 7 percentage points from February, but those feeling strongly opposed increased only 2 percentage points—statistically unchanged.

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



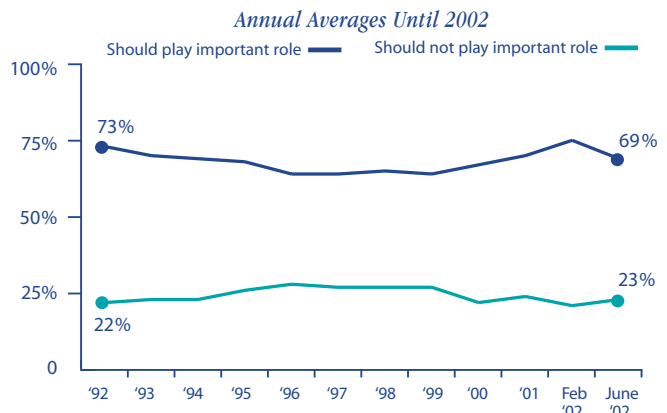
A 10-Year Trend: Favorability to Nuclear Energy

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



A 10-Year Trend: Role Nuclear Energy Should Play

► *Question:* “How important a role should nuclear energy play in meeting America’s future electricity needs. Should nuclear energy play a very important role, a somewhat important role, a not too important role or not an important role at all?”

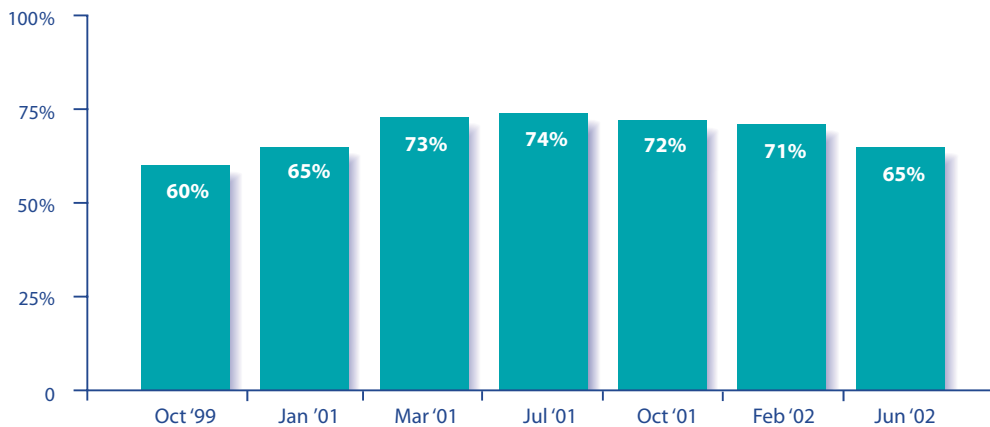


Majority of Americans Still Favor Option to Build More Nuclear Plants

Two-thirds of Americans support keeping the option open for building more nuclear power plants. Those living near nuclear power plants continue to be more receptive to building additional nuclear plants than others. Nationally, 54 percent in June would accept a new nuclear power plant at the

nearest nuclear power plant site. In most regions of the country, majorities also find this acceptable. Of those respondents who described themselves as environmentalists, 52 percent would accept a new nuclear plant at the nearest existing plant; 41 percent are opposed.

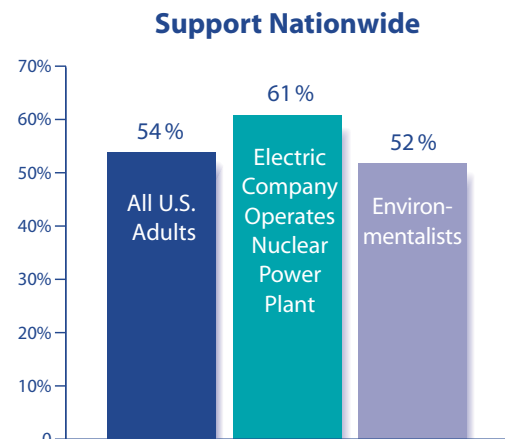
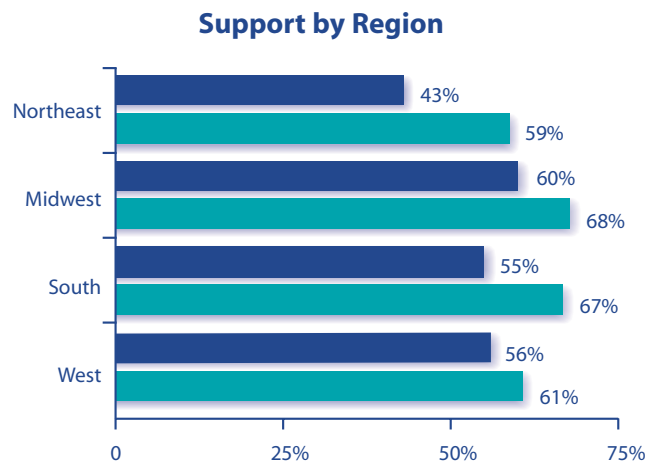
Percent Who Strongly or Somewhat Agrees "We Should Keep the Option To Build More Nuclear Energy Plants in the Future"



Percent Who Would Accept a New Nuclear Power Plant at Nearest Existing Site

► *Question:* "If a new power plant were needed to supply electricity, would it be acceptable to you or not acceptable to you to add a nuclear power plant next to the nearest nuclear power plants that are already operating?"

■ June '02 ■ Feb '02



Awareness of Clean Air Benefits Increases Public Favorability

Many Americans are hearing about nuclear energy's clean air benefits. One-third of those surveyed (31 percent) remembered hearing something in the news during the past six months about nuclear energy's role in reducing greenhouse gases and other air pollutants. That too may have helped to limit the impact of an uneasy national mood.

Before

▶ *Question:* Overall, do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the use of nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide electricity in the United States?"

After (With Positive Message)

▶ *Question:* "There are more than 100 nuclear energy plants in the United States that generate one-fifth of all the electricity we use in the United States without producing any greenhouse gases or other air pollution. Knowing this, do you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the use of nuclear energy as one of the ways to provide electricity and improve our air quality in the United States?"

Hearing about the clean air benefits of nuclear energy increases favorable attitudes. As in previous studies, just one sentence of information about nuclear energy's environmental benefits increased favorable attitudes by 10 percentage points. Those strongly in favor of nuclear energy increased from 20 percent to 27 percent, and those strongly opposed decreased from 15 percent to 12 percent.

	Before %	After %
FAVOR	58	68
Strongly favor	20	27
Somewhat favor	38	41
OPPOSE	34	27
Somewhat oppose	19	15
Strongly oppose	15	12
DON'T KNOW	8	6

Changing Image—Fewer Think Others are Opposed to Nuclear Energy

The June survey demonstrates that the image of nuclear energy is changing. Previous surveys of various groups of opinion leaders and the general public always found a predominant view that a majority of Americans oppose nuclear energy, even though the data showed otherwise. The typical view was, "I support nuclear energy, but others don't."

Compared with a decade ago, fewer Americans believe their neighbors are opposed to nuclear energy. The number of those who believe others are opposed has fallen from 40 percent in November 1991—the last time those surveyed were queried on this subject—to 26 percent in June 2002.

Fewer Think Others are Opposed to Nuclear Energy

▶ *Question:* "Do you think that more people in your community are in favor of or opposed to nuclear energy?"

	Nov '91 %	Jun '02 %
Think others favor	17	19
Think others oppose	40	26
Think half favor, half oppose	5	8
Not sure	38	47