

Public opinion on nuclear energy: Turning a corner?

For the first time in 36 years, the “perception gap” disappears, suggesting that the U.S. public is hearing more about nuclear energy’s clean air role.

By Ann S. Bisconti

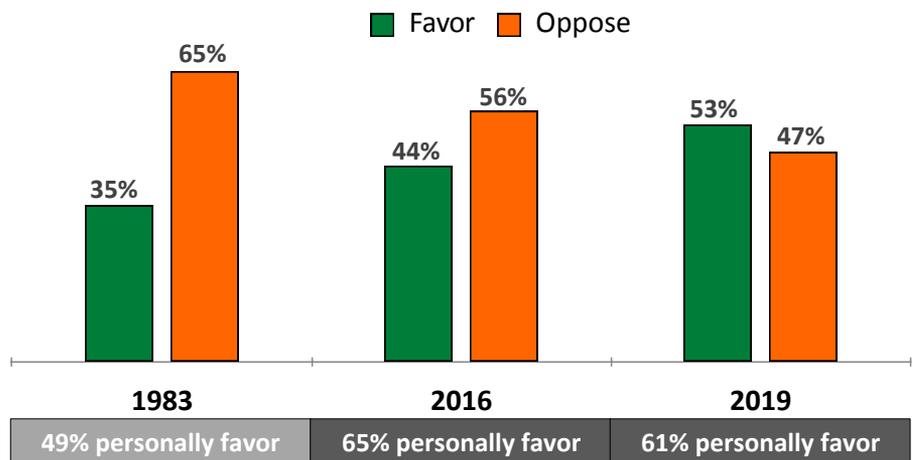
A recent *Nuclear News* editorial raised the question, “Good news, anyone?” and cited a March Gallup poll as one sign of possible good news (*NN*, May 2019, p. 4). So, are we turning the corner on public perception of nuclear energy? The annual national survey conducted in April by Bisconti Research indicates that the answer is yes.

The April poll marks an inflection point in attitudes toward nuclear energy for three reasons: (1) the historic perception gap, when respondents viewed public opinion toward nuclear energy more negatively than their own, is vanishing—especially among those aged 18 to 34; (2) two-thirds of respondents would put the primary focus on an energy mix, including nuclear energy, instead of only renewables or only nuclear energy; and (3) large majorities judged five environmental advantages of current or future nuclear power plants as extremely or very important.

At a time when many world environmental and energy leaders are envisioning nuclear energy technologies as part of a transition to emissions-free energy systems of the future, it is significant that the public sees value in nuclear’s various potential contributions to these systems—such as for electricity, clean drinking water, and heat. For example, an initiative of the Clean Energy Ministerial,

Ann S. Bisconti is President of the public opinion and communications research company Bisconti Research Inc. and has twice served on the ANS Board of Directors.

Do you think that the majority of people in your community favor or oppose the use of nuclear energy?



a global forum created in 2010 to promote policies and programs that advance the deployment of clean energy technology, envisions multiple ways that nuclear technology could accelerate progress in achieving clean air goals.*

Bisconti Research conducted the public opinion survey online with Quest Global Research from April 26 to April 30. The independent survey updates 36 years of trend data from polls sponsored by the Nuclear Energy Institute. These polls are the

* The initiative is called Nuclear Innovation: Clean Energy Future (NICE Future). For more information, visit <www.cleanenergyministerial.org/initiative-clean-energy-ministerial/nuclear-innovation-clean-energy-future-nice-future>.

only source of continuous data on public opinion about nuclear energy, asking the same questions in approximately the same question context over many years.

The vanishing perception gap

For three decades, a perception gap told a story of stigma attached to nuclear energy; the majority of Americans judged public opinion about nuclear energy to be less favorable than their own. In April 2019, for the first time ever in 36 years of surveying the national public about nuclear energy, a majority of Americans said they believe that a majority of people in their community favor nuclear energy; 53 percent perceive the majority to be in favor, and 47 percent perceive the majority to be opposed. That finding suggests that

Major Environmental Advantages of Nuclear Energy



the image of nuclear energy may be changing. Among younger Americans, ages 18 to 34, 58 percent perceive public opinion to be majority favorable, and 42 percent perceive it to be majority unfavorable.

Overcoming the perception gap and the stigma that caused this gap has been a big challenge for supporters of nuclear energy. Even though a large segment of the public still underestimates the support that exists (61 percent personally favor nuclear energy), this is the first time that a majority holds an accurate perception.

Public opinion on nuclear energy topics is based largely on impressions, as few feel very well informed about the topic. Only 20 percent feel very well informed about energy sources used to produce electricity, and only 19 percent feel very well informed about nuclear energy. These numbers are significantly higher than a year ago, however, when they were 14 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Information may be reaching more of the public.

Yes to nuclear in energy mix

When it comes to the environment, most of the public would agree with using all carbon-free energy sources, including nuclear energy. The survey offered the following proposition: “We should take advantage of all carbon-free energy sources, including nuclear, hydro, and renewable energy, to produce the electricity we need while limiting greenhouse gas emissions.” Three-fourths of the public (75 percent) agreed; 40 percent agreed strongly, compared with just 3 percent who disagreed strongly.

When asked what should be the primary focus for meeting U.S. electricity needs, the public supported a broad energy focus over an approach that puts all eggs in one basket. Two-thirds selected one of two energy mixes, both of which include nuclear energy: (1) use cleaner energy sources such as wind, solar, and nuclear (37 percent); and (2) use a diverse mix of fossil fuels, nuclear, and renewables (28 percent).

While 26 percent thought that the primary focus should be only on renewable sources such as wind and solar, only 9 percent thought the focus should be only on carbon-free nuclear energy.

Green advantages of nuclear

Five major environmental advantages of current or future nuclear power plants are central to the vision for future energy systems. Large majorities of the public judged all five to be extremely or very important, in this order: (1) clean air—emits no air pollution; (2) clean drinking water—in addition to making electricity, can convert seawater into safe drinking water; (3) preservation of natural resources—uses far less land than any other energy source for 24/7 energy; (4) minimal waste—advanced reactor technologies minimize waste, and some use it as fuel; and (5) support to renewable energy—provides electricity when the wind doesn’t blow and the sun doesn’t shine.

More informed, more favorable

The value of communications is clear. The more informed people feel, the more they favor nuclear energy. Of those who feel very well informed, 68 percent strongly favor nuclear energy, and 7 percent are strongly opposed, a 10 to 1 ratio.

During the survey, attitudes toward nuclear energy were measured before any in-

formation was provided, so as not to bias responses. Key tracking questions measure the different components of public opinion on nuclear energy as of the current time.

■ 61 percent favor nuclear energy, and 26 percent are opposed; while many people take middle positions, those who strongly favor nuclear outnumber those who strongly oppose it by 27 percent to 8 percent.

■ 75 percent agree with license renewal for nuclear power plants that continue to meet federal safety standards; 15 percent disagree.

■ 55 percent agree that more nuclear power plants should definitely be built in the future; 31 percent disagree.

Note that Gallup uses the same favorability question that the Bisconti poll has asked at least once every year since 1983, but it put that one question in an entirely different question context—hence the difference in the level of support between Gallup’s survey and ours. The public still sees two faces of nuclear energy, so question context influences the face people see when answering questions. The vanishing perception gap may be the key to turning the corner on one of the faces as the environmental advantages of nuclear energy and exciting new technologies become part of the public discourse. For this change, credit should be given to the members of ANS, who are more visible than ever in this discourse. **■**

