

Energy Issues: How the Public Understands and Acts



T. Tompson, J. Benz, J. Broz, M. Kozey, J. Agiesta, D. Junius

© 2012 AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs research, with funding from the Joyce Foundation, conducted a nationally representative household survey with 1,008 adults to measure the general public's opinions about key energy issues in the United States. Additionally, the survey assessed how the public understands, learns about, and acts upon energy issues.

Key findings from the survey are provided below. Additional information, including the survey's complete Topline Findings, can be found on the AP-NORC Center's website at www.apnorc.org.

The U.S. public accepts some responsibility for the country's energy problems, but most place responsibility with the energy industry and want the government involved in finding a solution.

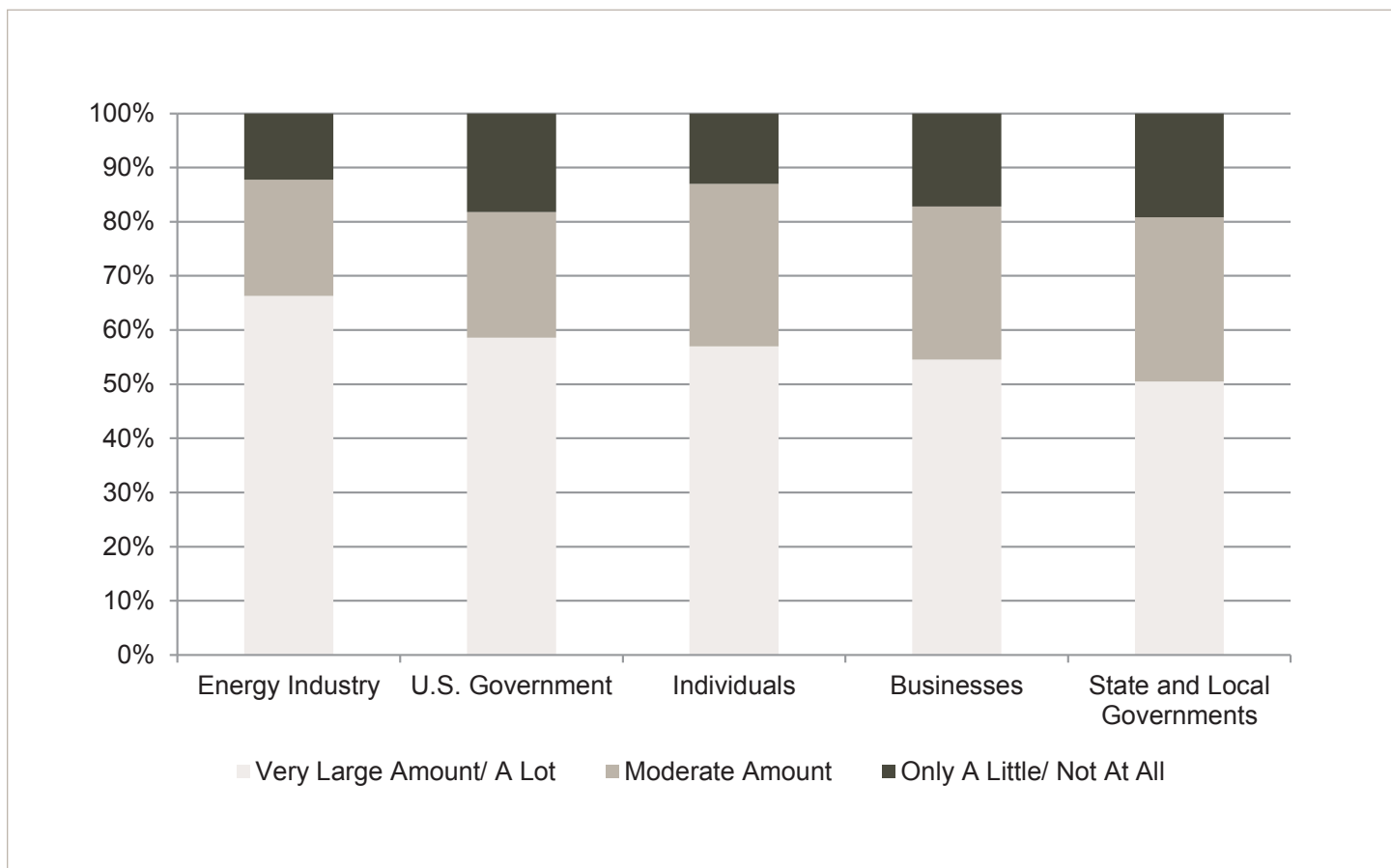
When asked about several possible reasons for this country's energy problems, the survey found that the American people are willing to assign blame both to themselves and to the energy industry. For example, 64 percent cite people's unwillingness to reduce their energy demand as a major reason for the country's energy

problems, and, 62 percent say a major reason for the country's energy problems is that the energy industry does not do enough to make energy saving products and services more affordable.

However, when asked to think about solving the country's energy problems, only 41 percent of the public think that the actions of individuals like themselves can make a large difference. In particular, Republicans (33%) are less likely to believe that the actions of individuals can make a difference than Democrats (46%).

The public is looking to the government and the industry for solutions to the country's energy problems. Sixty-two percent of the public believe that the government should be extremely or very involved in finding solutions to this country's energy problems. Democrats (79%) are more likely to say the government should be involved, compared to only 42 percent of Republicans who report that the government should be extremely or very involved in finding solutions to the country's energy problems.

<i>Do you think each of the following statements is a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason at all for this country's energy problems?</i>	<i>Major reason (%)</i>	<i>Minor reason (%)</i>	<i>Not a reason at all (%)</i>
People use a lot of energy and they are not willing to reduce that demand.	64	27	9
The energy industry does not do enough to make energy saving products and services more affordable.	62	26	11
The energy industry does not invest enough in clean energy sources like wind and solar.	61	25	11
People use a lot of energy and they do not know how to reduce that demand.	60	29	9
People do not do enough to support clean energy sources like wind and solar.	59	29	10
People are not willing to pay more for energy saving products and services.	52	34	11
The energy industry does not supply enough energy to meet the demands of the people.	36	37	24

How much of the responsibility do you think each of the following groups share for increasing energy savings in the U.S.?


Of those that think the government should be at least slightly involved in finding solutions (90%), 58 percent think the government should focus on helping the energy industry provide better energy-saving options for consumers compared to 38 percent who believe the government should focus directly on consumers to help them make better choices. This is true for both Democrats and Republicans.

When asked how much of the responsibility different groups share for increasing energy savings in the U.S., 65 percent say the energy industry shares a very large amount or a lot of the responsibility, which is a significantly higher percentage than the percentage who say the U.S. government (58%) or individuals (57%) share a very large amount or a lot of the responsibility. In particular, Democrats, college educated individuals, and adults under 50 years of age are the most likely to look to the industry as the responsible party for increasing energy savings in the U.S.

The public may want the government involved, but it lacks knowledge of major energy savings programs and trust in the information.

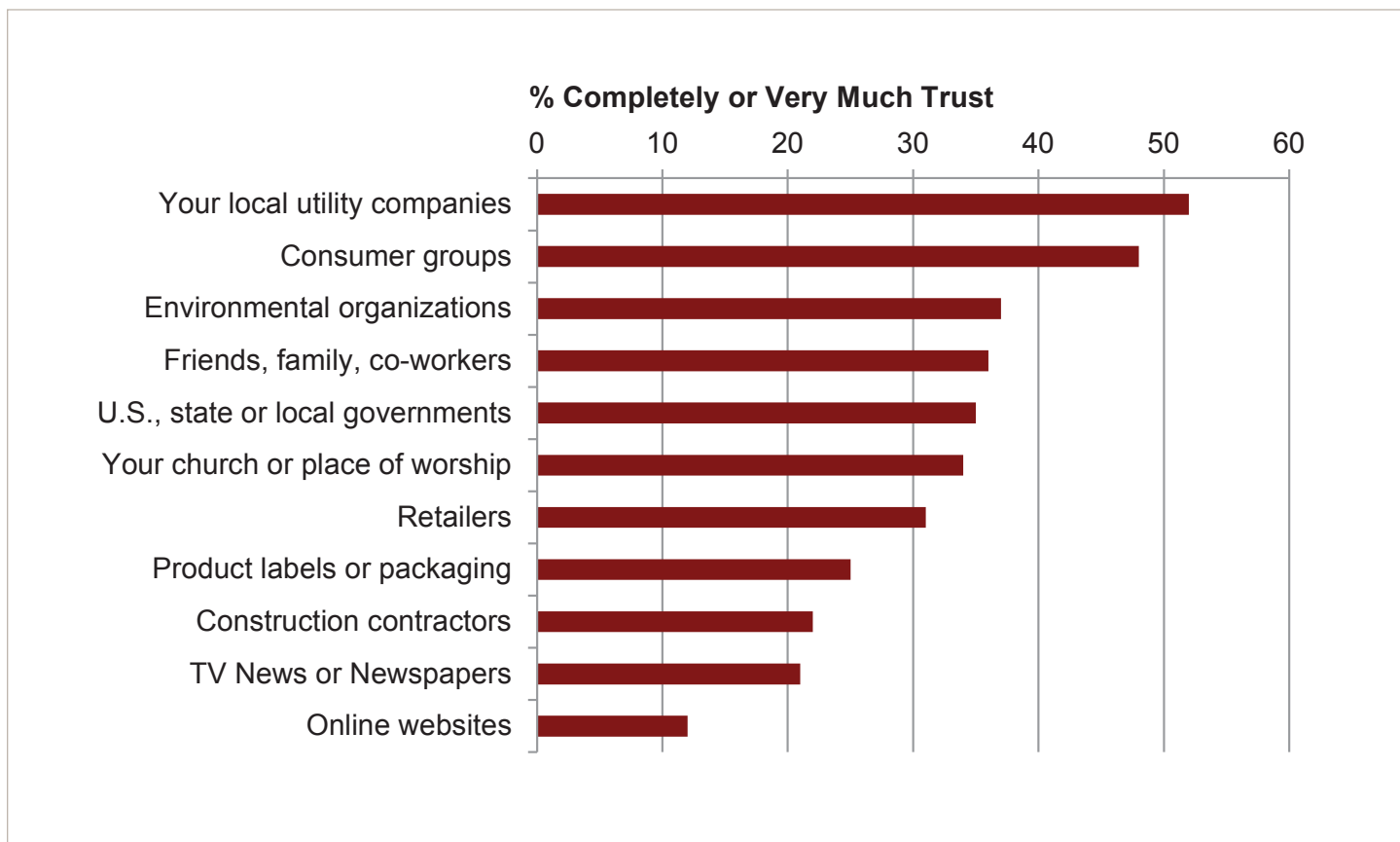
Overall, few Americans express a high degree of trust in many of the common sources of information about energy savings that were tested in the survey. Most sources score

moderate levels of trust. Local utility companies are the only source of information completely or very much trusted by a majority of the public (52%), though consumer groups are a close second at 48 percent. Trust in both sources is significantly higher than the 35 percent who report completely or very much trusting the U.S., state, or local governments' information on energy savings.

Fewer Republicans than Democrats trust information about energy savings from governments, product labels and packaging, environmental groups, and TV news and newspapers. But both Republicans and Democrats place a relatively high level of trust on information they get on energy savings that comes from utility companies and consumer groups.

Utility companies are the most commonly cited sources of information about energy savings other than TV news and newspapers. Of those who heard or read about ways to save energy in the last twelve months, 78 percent list their local utility company as a source of that information compared to 61 percent who list retailers, 46 percent who list consumer groups, and 45 percent who list the U.S., state, or local governments.

If you received information from the following about ways to save energy, how much do you trust the information they provide?



Given the lack of awareness and trust in government sources of energy savings information, it is perhaps not surprising that the public does not know a lot or a great deal about some major government and private sector energy savings programs.

- Forty-six percent of the public report knowing a lot or a great deal about programs to **phase out incandescent light bulbs**.
- Thirty-three percent of the public report knowing a lot or a great deal about **Energy Star product labels**.
- Twenty-five percent report knowing a lot or a great deal about **fuel efficiency standards for cars**.
- Less than 20 percent of the public report knowing a lot or a great deal about the following programs: **rebates for energy saving technologies, home renovation tax credits, home energy audits, hybrid car tax credits, or LEED certification**.

These numbers suggest that while the public might have some awareness of these programs, they do not have detailed knowledge of them. Individuals with a college education, those over 50 years of age, and with annual incomes over \$50,000 tend to report more familiarity with the programs. Additionally, there is some regional variation with individuals in the western U.S. more likely to have familiarity with fuel efficiency standards for cars.

Looking more broadly, the public is aware that governments and utility companies have increased efforts to help individuals save energy over the last decade. Seventy-eight percent believe that there are a lot or somewhat more government programs designed to help people save energy now than there were ten years ago. Similarly, 75 percent believe utility companies have more programs than a decade ago.

People believe they are taking actions to save energy and do not want to be forced into savings through regulations.

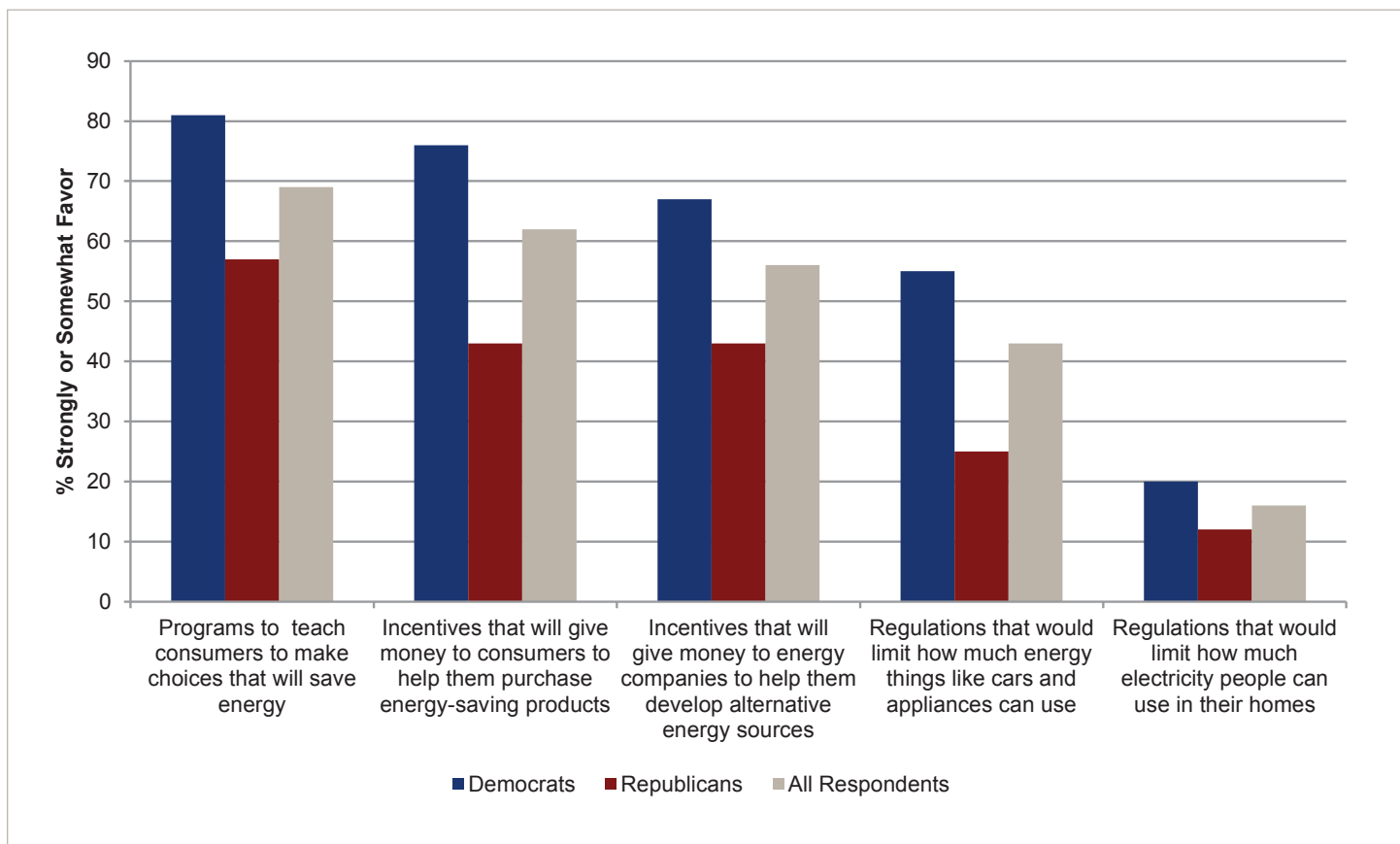
Although the public is wary of the impact individuals can have on the country’s energy issues, individuals do believe they are taking actions to save energy. An overwhelming majority, 89 percent, of the public reports personally doing something to try to save energy in the past year, with day-to-day actions, such as turning off lights, turning down the heat, and driving less and walking or biking more reported most often.

Furthermore, only 9 percent of the public think that they use a lot or a little more energy than other people in their communities. Forty-four percent think they use the same amount and 45 percent believe they use somewhat or a lot less energy than others in their community. Adults with a college education and those over 50 years of age are more likely to say that they use less energy than others in their community.

When asked what prevents people from saving more energy, the cost of energy saving products and technologies is most often cited as a major factor by 67 percent of the public. People perceive these short term costs as a major barrier even though 77 percent of the public thinks that doing more to save energy will personally save them money in the long run.

To help them save more energy, most people favor programs that incentivize consumers and utility companies. For example, 62 percent favor incentive programs that give money to consumers to purchase energy-saving products. Americans strongly oppose consumer regulations aimed at reducing energy use such as those to limit the amount of electricity people can use (opposed by 76%). Democrats are significantly more likely to express support for all programs mentioned on the survey than Republicans.

Please tell me if you would favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the following programs?



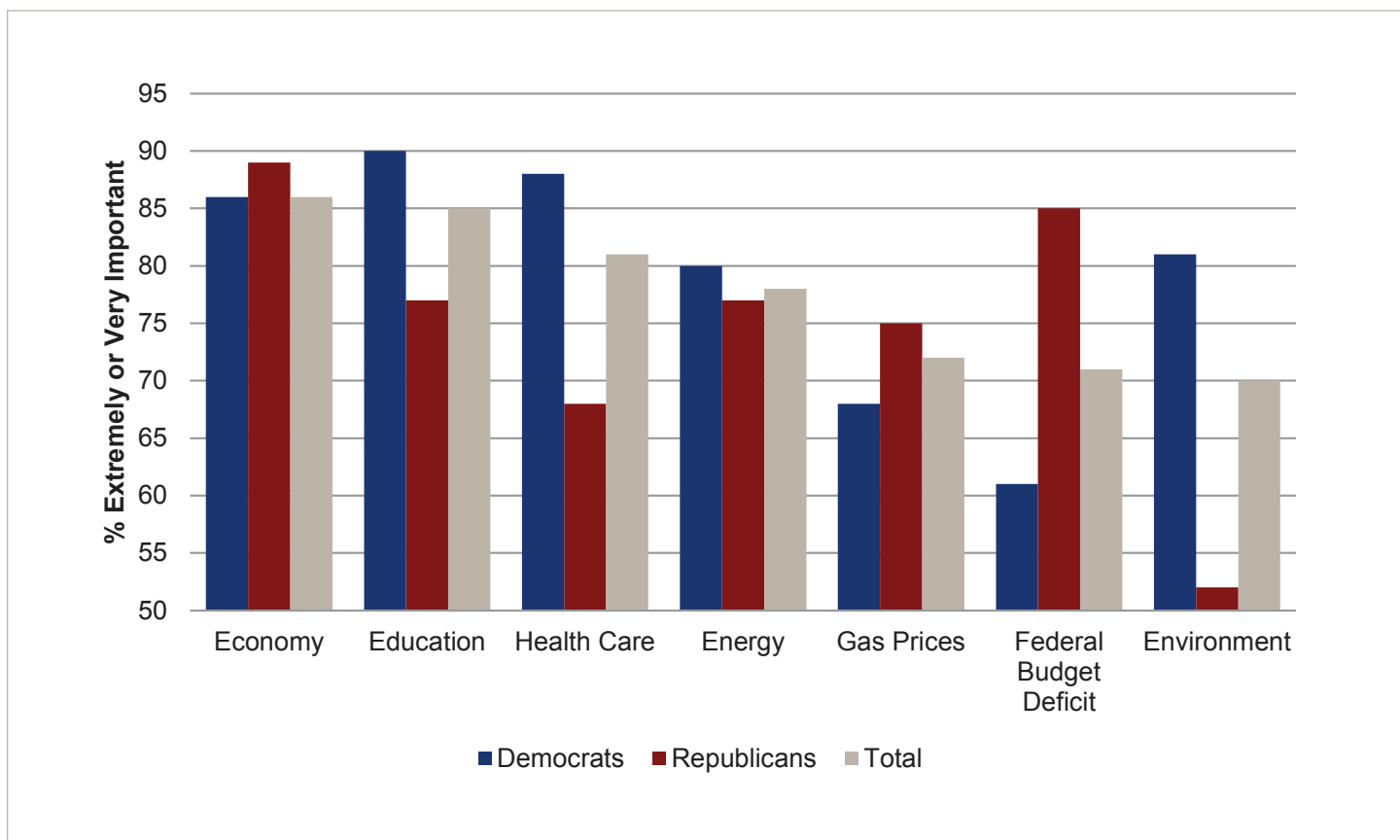
Energy issues cited as an important issue more often than gas prices and the federal budget deficit.

A majority of the U.S. public considers energy issues important. Seventy-eight percent rate energy issues as extremely or very important to them personally. More people rated energy issues as an important issue than gas prices (which had been increasing since December 2011 and were at their highest point during the survey period since mid-May 2011¹) and the federal budget deficit.

Energy and the economy are the only issue areas where levels of personal importance are equal across parties. Additionally, individuals over 50 years of age and those living in the western U.S. are more likely to consider energy issues to be personally important.

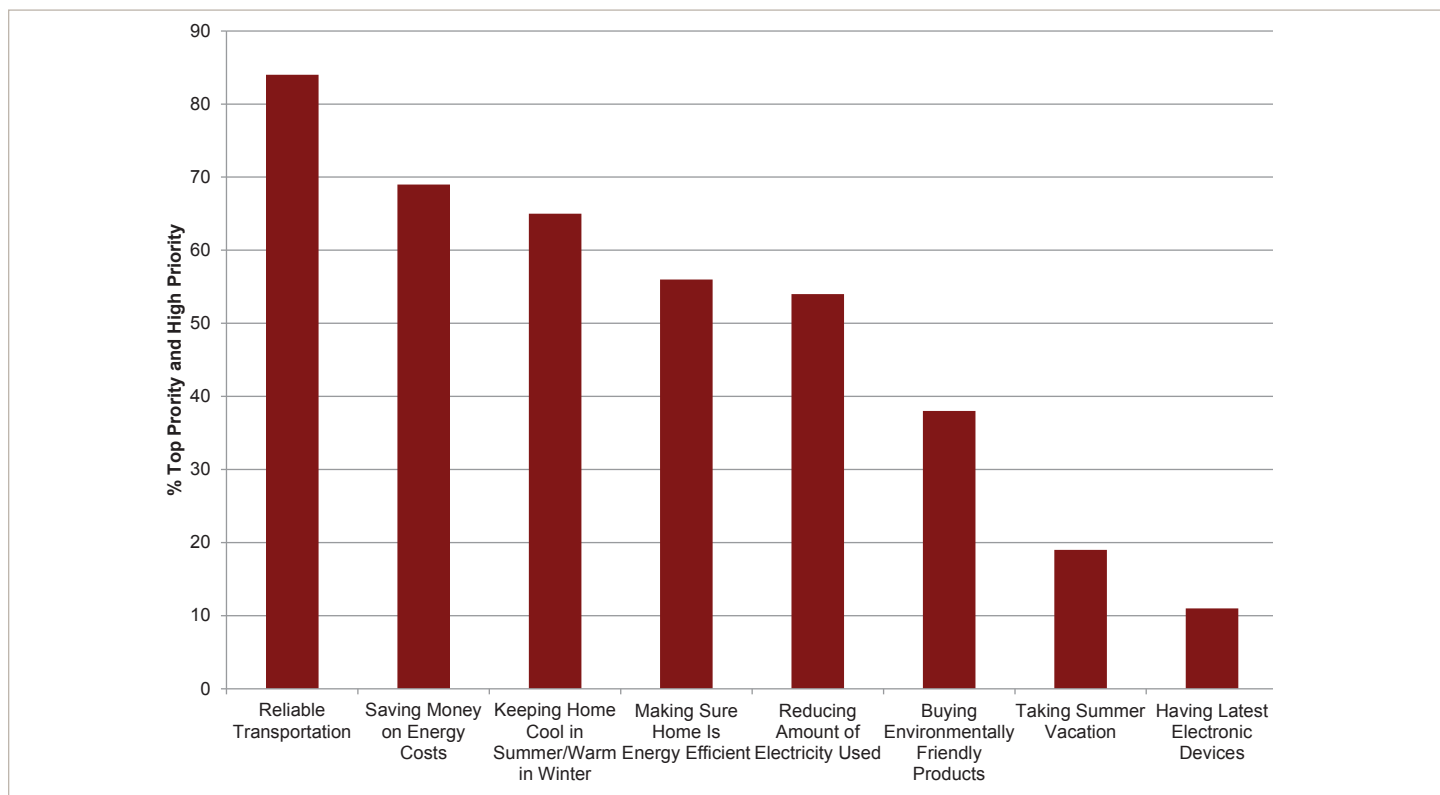
When asked to think about specific energy issues in terms of everyday priorities for individuals and families, saving energy is more often a priority when framed in terms of saving money or basic comforts. Sixty-nine percent of respondents say that saving money on energy costs is a top priority or high priority for them and their family, compared to 56 percent who report making their home energy efficient and 54 percent who report reducing the amount of electricity used as top or high priorities. Additionally, buying environmentally friendly products is a top or high priority for only 38 percent of the public, ranking it much closer to luxury items like summer vacations (19%) and electronic gadgets (11%).

How important are the following issues to you personally?



¹ Regular tracking in polls by AP and GfK have found that the percentage of people citing gasoline prices as an important issue rises in step with actual gas prices, which were on an upward trend leading to and during this survey's field period. Gasoline price data is extracted from: The U.S. Energy Information Administration. Gasoline and Diesel Fuel Update. Available at: <http://www.eia.gov/petroleum/gasdiesel/xls/pswrgvwall.xls>

Please tell me how much of a priority each of the following tends to be for you and your family.



The public understands effective energy saving behaviors, but perceives difficulty in changing behavior.

When asked how much energy certain actions could save, the public is able to correctly distinguish more effective energy saving actions from less effective actions (as defined by experts²). For example, 61 percent correctly report that buying a more fuel efficient automobile can save a very large or large amount of energy and 61 percent correctly note that turning off the lights when you leave the room is a

amount of energy.

While Americans are generally aware of the most effective ways to save energy, they report that many of these actions would be extremely or very difficult for them and their families to implement in the next year. For example, 48 percent say that buying a more fuel efficient automobile in the next year would be extremely or very difficult compared to only 3 percent who say changing their behavior and turning off the lights when they leave the room would be difficult.

Actual and Perceived Effectiveness of Energy Saving Behaviors

	Actual Energy Savings Rank	% Perceives Very Large/ Large Amount of Energy Saved	% Extremely/ Very Difficult to Make This Change in Next 12 Mo.
Buying a more fuel efficient automobile, for example one that gets 31 miles per gallon rather than 20	1 (most effective)	61	48
Installing more or better insulation in your home	2	52	37
Carpooling with at least one other person to work or school	3	52	41
In the winter: turning down the thermostat from 72° F to 68° F during the day and to 65° F during the night	4	48	14
Replacing old appliances like refrigerators	5	38	34
Turning off the lights when you leave the room	6	38	3
In the summer: turning up the thermostat on your air conditioner from 73° F to 78° F	7 (least effective)	48	17

² Steven Nadel, Anna Monis Shipley, and R. Neal Elliott. 2004. "The Technical, Economic, and Achievable Potential for Energy Efficiency in the United States: A Meta-Analysis of Recent Studies." Proceedings Paper of the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (Panel 8, Paper 19).

The public offers strong opinions about energy independence issues, with significant differences between the parties and generations.

The public is divided about the reasons why the U.S. needs to buy energy from other countries, with 50 percent saying that the most important reason is that we do not produce enough of our own energy to meet the demands of the people, and 45 percent saying that people are too wasteful with the energy that we produce domestically. Perspectives on this issue break down strongly along party lines. A majority of Republicans (65%) perceive the supply side issue as the most important reason that the U.S. needs to import energy and a majority of Democrats (51%) perceive wasting energy as the most important reason.

A majority of Americans, 58 percent, favor policies that would allow energy companies to drill more oil and gas wells in the U.S. Again, opinions on this issue differ by party identification, with 78 percent of Republicans in favor of policies to allow more drilling compared with 47 percent of Democrats. This is consistent with partisans' views of the reasons for the country's energy issues: Seventy-five percent of Republicans cite government limits on drilling as a major reason for the country's energy problems compared to only 34 percent of Democrats.

The public's expectations for the country's long-term energy independence has notable generational differences: Looking ahead 50 years, only 28 percent of the public thinks it is extremely or very likely that the country will be able to stop buying energy from other countries and will be able to rely on domestic production

alone. Interestingly, older individuals are the most likely to perceive energy independence as a likely outcome for future generations as sharply contrasted to younger generations who think energy independence is unlikely.

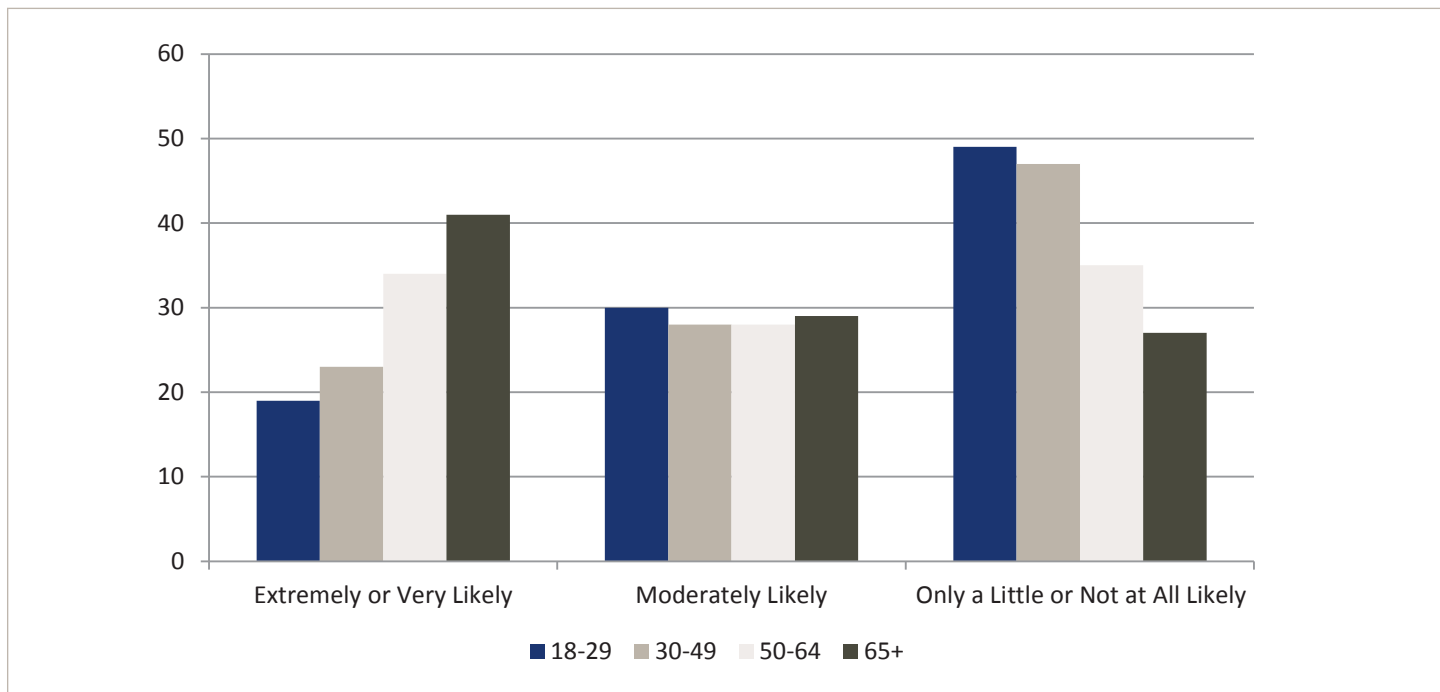
Party identification is a stronger predictor of opinions on energy issues than demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Across the key indicators examined in the survey, party identification is the only characteristic consistently associated with opinions. Other individual characteristics including demographic factors like race, age and gender, socioeconomic factors like income and education, and geography, although sometimes significant, are not reliable predictors of energy attitudes.

While individuals in both parties agree that energy issues are important at fairly equal rates, party identification appears to be the strongest influence on perceptions of the causes and solutions to this country's energy problems. This is especially clear when looking at the partisan differences on views toward the role of alternative energy sources and domestic drilling policies as sources of the country's energy issues:

- Seventy-four percent of Democrats report that a major reason for the county's energy problems is that the energy industry does not invest enough to support clean energy sources like wind and solar, compared to 43 percent of Republicans.
- Seventy-five percent of Republicans report that a major reason for the county's energy problems is government limits on drilling, compared to 34 percent of Democrats.

Looking ahead to 50 years from now, how likely do you think it is that by then the United States would be able to stop buying energy from other countries and rely only on energy produced inside the country?



Similarly, people's preferred policy solutions, including on the role of government, also break down along party lines. For example, 67 percent of Democrats are in favor of government incentive programs that will give money to energy companies to help them develop alternative energy sources, compared to 43 percent of Republicans. Seventy-eight percent of Republicans are in favor of government regulations that will allow energy companies to drill more oil and gas wells in the U.S., compared to 47 percent of Democrats.

Study Methodology

This AP-NORC survey was conducted from March 29 through April 25, 2012. It was made possible by a grant to the AP-NORC Center by the Joyce Foundation. AP and NORC staff collaborated on all aspects of the study, with input from NORC's Security, Energy and Environment Department, AP's subject matter experts, and the Joyce Foundation staff.

Telephone interviews were conducted with 1,008 adults age 18 or older by professional interviewers who were carefully trained on the specific survey for this study. Interviews were conducted with 752 respondents on landlines and 256 respondents on cellular telephones, for a total of 1,008 respondents. Cellular telephone respondents were offered a small monetary incentive for participating, as compensation for telephone usage charges. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. Cognitive testing was performed on a draft version of the questionnaire instrument to ensure understandability and validity of survey questions.

The final response rate was 19 percent, based on the widely accepted Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) method. Under this method, our response rate is calculated as the product of the resolution rate (78 %), the screener rate (62 %), and the interview completion rate (39 %). The overall margin of error was +/- 3.1 percentage points.

Sampling weights were calculated to adjust for sample design aspects (such as unequal probabilities of selection) and for nonresponse bias arising from differential response rates across various demographic groups. Poststratification variables included age, sex, race, region, education, and landline/cellular telephone use. The weighted data, which thus reflect the U.S. general population, were used for all analyses.

All analyses were conducted using STATA (version 12), which allows for adjustment of standard errors for complex sample designs. All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95 percent level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or less) probability that the observed differences

could be attributed to chance variation in sampling. Additionally, bivariate differences between subgroups are only reported when they also remain robust in a multivariate model controlling for other demographic, political, and socioeconomic covariates.

A comprehensive listing of all study questions complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question is available on the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research website: www.apnorc.org.

About the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research taps into the power of social science research and the highest quality journalism to bring key information to people across the nation and throughout the world.

- The Associated Press is the world's essential news organization, bringing fast, unbiased news to all media platforms and formats.
- NORC at the University of Chicago is one of the oldest and most respected, independent research institutions in the world.

The two organizations have established the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals.

The founding principles of the AP-NORC Center include a mandate to carefully preserve and protect the scientific integrity and objectivity of NORC and the journalistic independence of The Associated Press. All work conducted by the Center conforms to the highest levels of scientific integrity to prevent any real or perceived bias in the research. All of the work of the Center is subject to review by its advisory committee to help ensure it meets these standards. The Center will publicize the results of all studies and make all datasets and study documentation available to scholars and the public.

About the Authors

Jennifer Agiesta, *Deputy Director of Polling*, The Associated Press

Jennifer Benz, Ph.D., *Research Scientist*, NORC

Joseph S. Broz, Ph.D., *Senior Fellow*, NORC

Dennis Junius, M.A., *News Survey Specialist*, The Associated Press

Matthew Kozey, J.D., *Principal Research Analyst*, NORC

Trevor Tompson, *Director*, The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research

For more information, visit www.apnorc.org
or email info@apnorc.org