

June 16, 2009

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Third Way and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research
RE: Get America Running on Clean Energy: Findings from National Focus Groups

Summary

A set of 12 focus groups with swing voters in six states, conducted by Third Way and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner,¹ finds that the public is hungry for dramatic change in American energy policy. While knowledge about energy is low, the public is convinced there are better ways to make and use energy than those we use currently. And they believe that moving to clean energy will help our economy—and that while change could be difficult, we should act now regardless of the recession.

Yet our research also finds plenty of evidence that this issue is fraught with challenges. Americans are not yet engaged in the issue and are susceptible to the argument that the progressive proposal amounts to a big energy tax. And the language that clean energy advocates use is often confusing or meaningless to the public.

To win this debate, we must understand the public opinion landscape and tell a positive and resonant story about how energy reform will benefit the economy, the country and individual Americans. We believe the overall framework should be: **Get America running on clean energy.** This framework uses the economy as the principle driver for reform, which is the main focus for the people in our groups. It is also future-looking and action-oriented, which are attributes that voters like about Democrats on this set of issues. And the goal of getting American running on clean energy seems achievable and clear.

To most effectively implement this frame, we recommend the following seven strategic actions:

- 1. Broaden the economic case beyond jobs to overall US economic growth and global leadership.** Jobs are certainly important, but they fit into a broader narrative about how clean energy can help jumpstart our economy and make America a leader again.
- 2. Use global warming only as a supporting story, not as the primary frame.** Awareness about global warming is broad, and some in the public are seriously concerned about it. But almost no one in our groups expressed such concern; for most voters, global warming is not significant enough on its own to drive support for major energy reform. So while it can be a part of

the story that reform advocates are telling, global warming should be used only in addition to the broader economic frame, not in place of it.

3. **Argue that clean energy reduces foreign dependence, but don't call for "energy independence."** Part of the power in the frame "get America running on clean energy" is that it taps into the public's desire for less foreign dependence without holding out the false promise of "energy independence" or pointing toward the development of carbon-intense domestic sources.
4. **Drop "cap and trade"; replace it with "clean energy incentives."** "Cap and trade" is worse than meaningless to voters: it actually conjures up a range of negative images. "Clean energy incentives" is more resonant and informative, since reforms should be named to emphasize the goals, not the mechanisms.
5. **Drop "green" and "government investment."** "Green" is meaningless or confusing—the term "clean" resonates with voters. And in the wake of the bailouts and growing deficits, voters are not responsive to government "investment"—they do like the idea of government-sponsored "research and development."
6. **Own and define "all of the above."** Voters support the idea of doing everything possible to reform our energy, and they have shifted in their impressions of the two parties. Where Republicans once were the party of "all of the above" during the oil crisis, now voters are more likely to associate that approach with Democrats, who they see as the party leading the efforts for reform and new, clean sources. Since Democrats own this valuable brand, they should use it to define their clean energy policies.
7. **Describe opposition to reform as "more of the same."** We want to get America running on clean energy, while they want to keep doing what we're doing and stand still.

In addition to taking these steps in making the affirmative case, reform proponents also must be prepared to respond aggressively to the attack by opponents that reform would be tantamount to a massive energy tax. We describe a strategy to fight their phony numbers with real numbers of our own and offer voters a choice between continuing to do what we've been doing or spending a little now to get America running on clean energy.

I. The Public Opinion Landscape on Energy

Voters want big changes on energy, despite the recession.

Change was not merely a campaign slogan—the voters in our groups clearly see the results of the 2008 elections as a strong mandate for change on many topics, including energy. They are looking to policymakers to begin showing results quickly.

The economy is dominating the national consciousness and has driven up cost sensitivity in all areas of life, including energy. Nevertheless, our research suggests that the recession is not a roadblock to new energy policies—even those that may impose near-term costs. Indeed, even when pushed on whether the recession

I'm all about change. Things have got to change. I think that's why so many bad things have come to a head because people refuse to change. I'm all about that. I happen to be stable and I can take a little extra for the good.



Oakland County, Michigan woman

I think if you are looking to move ahead and do something to improve your life and the economy, I think you should look at all aspects. So I say now is just as good a time as any.



Columbus, Ohio woman

should slow progress on clean energy, very few respondents conclude that we should wait for better economic times to make these changes.

Voters embrace the idea of doing something big, and they expect energy costs will go up regardless of what happens in Washington or in state capitals. The question in the current economic climate is how *much* prices will go up, *where* the money from the

energy price increases will go, and whether the money will help bring about changes that eventually result in energy that is cleaner, more affordable, and “made in America.”

Democrats have a strong brand on energy

What voters have been seeing and hearing from Democrats leads them to conclude that Democrats are more committed to bringing about needed changes on energy—and better positioned to deliver. In fact, the voters in our groups want Democrats to take action, and **the overriding concern they have about Democrats on energy is that they won't follow their convictions or that they will wait too long to get started.**

[Democrats are] Innovative, forward thinking. Ready to try new things.

Virginia Beach, Virginia man



This finding should offer Democrats who favor reform real comfort—the public is primed for change, and they trust Democrats to do it. And while no major reform is without political risk, the general feeling in the electorate seems to be quite favorable towards big, dramatic steps by Democrats to set the country back on the right course.

Republicans are distrusted.

By contrast, Republicans in Congress, who currently form the vanguard of the opposition to reform, are poorly positioned on energy. They are seen as favoring the status quo and unwilling to embrace new ideas. They are also seen as closely tied to “big business” and “big oil,” which complicates their motives. A recent Democracy Corps survey, conducted March 4-8, found that 54 percent of likely voters believe that Democrats in Congress would do a better job with our nation's energy policy, compared to just 25 percent for Republicans, a 29-point advantage.

It's not a priority for them. They think we have unlimited resources. They don't believe in global warming. They cut some funding for alternatives...

Virginia Beach, Virginia woman



They seem stuck in the past.

Virginia Beach, Virginia man



Too far in bed with big oil to do what is needed to look for America's future.

Little Rock, Arkansas man



The change voters want is energy that is clean, domestic and cheap.

When we ask what kind of change voters would like to see in how America gets and uses energy, three key themes emerge:

1. A dramatic shift toward clean energy sources like wind and solar;
2. Far less reliance on foreign energy sources; and
3. Lower energy prices

Participants in the focus groups do not view these three goals as inherently in conflict, because they do not expect us to reach them simultaneously. Instead, they want energy reform to be built around working toward these goals. They also know that lowering prices may have to wait in the short term. Many offer that accomplishing the first two goals would ultimately lead to a drop in prices as well as price stability, and they believe that it would be worth the wait.

Third Way Focus Group Word Cloud: "...What would change mean in how we get and use energy—the kind of change you would like to see?"



II. Telling the Story for Reform—*Get America Running on Clean Energy*

Advocates of energy reform should power their efforts with a unifying narrative that taps into the public's appetite for change. But that narrative should set out broad goals, rather than getting lost in mechanical details that lose the majority of voters who pay scant attention to the issue. It must place reform in the context of the economy, while assuaging fears that the cost of reform will harm our recovery.

The focus groups suggest that the key is to argue that we must ***get America running on clean energy***. This will help recharge our economy with new

technology, new businesses and new jobs, and will move us to a more domestic and ultimately stable and affordable set of energy sources. This framework tells a compelling story that taps into Americans' values of entrepreneurship, patriotism and self-sufficiency. It also uses the economy as the principle driver for reform, which is the main focus for the people in our groups. It is also future-looking and action-oriented, which are attributes that voters like about Democrats on this set of issues.

To build this broad contextual argument, the following seven insights stand out from our recent research:

1. Broaden the economic case beyond jobs to overall US economic growth and global leadership.

In our groups, voters of every region, education level and age identify clean energy as holding real potential to drive economic growth. In some areas, they are familiar with the potential that clean energy holds for local employment, with groups in Little Rock citing a wind turbine manufacturer opening nearby and those in Montana noting the potential for wind farms in the eastern part of the state.

But the vision goes beyond specific local jobs, as voters associate clean energy with a broader economic impact on the country and on their communities. Restoring America's global leadership goes hand-in-glove with maintaining a broad frame focused on economic growth. It also plays into another element of the energy debate that voters readily believe—that the US is falling behind other countries and will continue to miss out on the jobs that come with new technologies.

We have the technology. We have the labor force. We have people that need work. Let's get back to building stuff again in this country.

St. Louis, Missouri man



2. Use global warming only as a supporting story, not as the primary frame.

There is an important discussion happening in the progressive community about the emphasis that advocates should place on global warming in their attempts to move the public to support reform. Our research found that the myriad efforts to raise awareness of global warming have paid some dividends, as most voters in our groups have heard of the problem and expressed some concern. Many view global warming as one reason that we need to move to cleaner energy, and given its prominence in the national debate, the issue of global warming cannot and should not be ignored by energy reform advocates.

But it is also clear from our research that advocates should use global warming *only* in addition to the main story we are telling about the economic benefits of energy reform. Voters in our groups do not

see global warming as an immediate threat to the United States, their communities or their families—especially relative to the threats posed by high and unstable energy prices and the impact prices are having on their personal finances and the national economy. Even those who view global warming as a threat largely see it as long-term, remote or hard to understand. Consequently, we believe that global warming should constitute a supporting piece of the argument in favor of energy reform, not the principle frame of the story we are telling.

I think it [global warming] is overblown. We can't wait until it becomes a complete problem, but maybe it is not much of a problem now.

Columbus, Ohio woman 

3. Argue that clean energy reduces foreign dependence; but don't call for "energy independence."

Our research confirms what we and others have previously found: there is intense frustration with the sense of America's dependence on foreign oil; in our groups, this feeling was particularly strong among the men. It continually emerges in focus group discussions unprompted, and in a framing exercise in which we asked respondents to rate how important this argument was in convincing them to support clean energy, it received the highest mean score.

A strong narrative for energy reform needs to tap into this sentiment, but there are better and worse ways to do this. It is a mistake to call for "energy independence"; although that may be a popular idea, it is a blatantly false goal, and voters will be justifiably angry if reform is sold on that basis and then never comes close to delivering. There is also a serious risk that a dominant emphasis on "reducing dependence on foreign oil" could channel reform efforts toward deeply problematic policies. For example, if independence were our main goal, we would ramp high-carbon energy sources to replace it.

This initial research suggests that a narrative of “getting America running on clean energy” can tap into the desire for less foreign energy dependence in the right way. In the groups, many participants make this connection on their own—they say that if America were running on clean energy, that would mean the development of more clean energy sources within America, like electric vehicles, which would then reduce reliance on foreign sources.

4. Drop “cap and trade”; replace it with “clean energy incentives.”

As we have argued more fully in a separate memo, the term “cap and trade” should be jettisoned because it pushes big negative buttons for voters. Our focus group respondents and a new Democracy Corps survey confirm why “cap and trade” is so ineffective, and why “clean energy incentives,” is such a powerful

I'm all for incentives for anyone that produces energy cleaner. A company is going to be rewarded—kind of a win-win situation.

Little Rock, Arkansas man



alternative.² The graph below says it all: “cap and trade” leaves voters stone cold, while there are genuinely compelling ways to describe the policy we are talking about.

The poll finds that 68% of voters say the term “clean energy incentives” makes them feel more positive about the Obama energy plan, compared to only 35% for cap and trade.³ We have rarely seen this degree of

differentiation among policy names, and the focus groups show us why—the problem with “cap and trade” isn’t only that it lacks meaning for voters; it actually focuses on the *wrong* things:

- **The problem with “Cap”:** The “cap” is on carbon and pollution, but voters are more focused now on finding an energy policy that brings expansion—of clean energy, of energy that helps the economy, of energy that does not make us reliant on foreign sources. By focusing on capping something, rather than creating something, we steer the debate down a dead end.
- **The problem with “Trade”:** The more voters hear about the mechanism, the less supportive they become because it sounds like big polluters will just buy their way out of doing the right thing. And “trade” conjures up all the Wall Street practices that voters believe have drained their 401(k)s.

We realize that some policy experts might object that “clean energy incentives” is less descriptive of the legislation than “cap and trade.” But, in fact, the bill *does* incentivize the production of clean energy by making it cheaper than conventional energy and by encouraging private sector investment in clean energy research, development and deployment. The name of major reform legislation should evoke the underlying public policy purpose of the bill, not the mechanics of its implementation. No Child Left Behind wasn’t called the “Mandatory Testing of Schoolchildren to a Federal Standard Act.” If it had been, it would have polled at about the same level as “Cap and Trade.”

5. Drop “green jobs” and “government investment.”

For some people, “green jobs” sounds like political speak or something that has more to do with recycling or conserving. Some participants go so far as to conjure up images of people making environmentally friendly soaps and household products. For others in the focus groups, the fact that corporate America has appropriated this language for marketing purposes makes it seem more like a fad without any substance behind it. “Green jobs” is not meaningful to people in the way we are trying to use it and in fact is exclusionary to many and should therefore be jettisoned. The stronger alternative is to stress the benefits *for the broader economy and workforce* of “getting America running on clean energy.”

[Green jobs?] Any environmental jobs, like maybe wildlife or something like that.

Columbus, Ohio woman



In polling by Third Way last summer, the notion of massive government “investment” in clean energy was popular. But the financial crisis seems to have soured the public to the idea of government “investment,” conjuring Wall Street bailouts and government giveaways to AIG. Instead of investments, “research and development,” particularly when associated with universities or “incentives” for businesses to develop new technologies, works much better.

6. Own and define “all of the above.”

The public is eager to back the side of the energy debate they see as wanting to spur more production from all energy sources (particularly domestic ones)—“all of the above.” Republicans have attempted to brand their proposals to expand oil drilling as an “all of the above” approach,⁴ and Third Way polling showed that this message was working well last summer, in the height of the oil spikes. But now, while many of our focus group participants continue to favor expanding drilling, most of them do not associate the idea of “all of the above” with Republicans. Indeed, they are far more likely to associate “all of the above” and “do it all” with Democrats, because Democrats are seen as favoring alternative energy sources and being open to new ideas. Thus, rather than argue against the Republican idea of “all of the above,” progressive energy reformers should simply appropriate the concept as an element of their own approach—as part of the effort to “get America running on clean energy.”

7. Describe opposition to reform as “more of the same.”

The public is primed to believe that opponents of reform favor the status quo, and reform advocates should drive home that point aggressively. Where reformers are for change and getting America running on clean energy, opponents are for more of the same, where prices go up, consumers suffer, and nobody benefits but big business.

III. Handling the “Energy Tax” Attack

While there is broad support for the concept of getting America running on clean energy, we find that voters are relatively willing to entertain the opposition’s argument that energy reform won’t work and could cost each household thousands of dollars per year. Voters are willing to bear some cost, but not if it seems overly burdensome or in service of a failed government program.

Our research suggests that it is critical for reform proponents to push back on the phony numbers being offered by reform opponents and to define the cost debate as a choice. Remember that voters want and expect change and are more open to energy reform from Democrats than Republicans. So rather than simply asking voters to favor or oppose a particular proposal, proponents should offer a choice between energy reform, where change means we are moving toward a clean energy future, and more of the same, where we proceed along the same failed path we have followed for decades.

Fight numbers with numbers.

Opponents of reform have already begun to level the charge that the Waxman-Markey legislation now under consideration in the House would constitute a tax of \$3,000 per family per year.⁵ We found that this charge has resonance and is memorable.

Early on in most of our groups, we play a mock radio spot that levels the phony⁶ \$3,000 charge⁷ and asked participants at the end of the group, more than an hour later, if they recalled the figure used in the radio ad they had heard. In every instance, participants remember that figure. Participants also are strongly inclined to believe that utilities, oil companies and others will pass through all of the costs of a carbon pricing system to consumers, as many such businesses have claimed. It doesn’t matter whether they blame big corporations for the higher costs or the policy itself; to them, it is higher costs either way.

Third Way Focus Group Word Cloud: “Imagine that you decided not to support any of the energy proposals. What is holding you back?”



Still, voters in our groups are willing to weigh competing claims about the real costs of clean energy reform. When they are told that the actual figure would be far

less per year⁸ —an Environmental Protection Agency analysis estimates the plan would cost the typical household less than a post stamp per day, or \$140 per year —they are much more open to reform. That figure strikes voters as manageable and a reasonable price to pay to stimulate economic growth, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and cut carbon pollution. While we will need quantitative data to determine with precision whether offering an alternative figure actually works to combat the \$3,000 number, it would be useful if the entire progressive community agreed on a cost figure—a unified message here would make it more credible.

Makes me sick to my stomach to think about it... I need my vehicle to go back to work... I guess we could sit in the dark... But what's the REAL number?

Little Rock, Arkansas woman



It is also important to note that many of our group participants believe that while clean energy costs may initially increase, reform will lead to lower and more stable household and nationwide energy costs. This was an idea that they introduced before we suggested it and should be reinforced as progressives make our case for clean energy.

Offer voters a choice on where their money will go.

In responding to the tax attack, progressives must force the choice—the alternative to change is more of the same. Voters are primed for change and open to hearing the case that “it is time to get on with it.”

While cost is clearly a major concern, voters in our groups are quite clear in their belief that energy costs are going to go up in the future, one way or the other. They seem comfortable with the notion that reforms will impose modest costs that power and oil companies

Fines for dirty emissions, rewards for clean energy. We have to start somewhere to create a cleaner future for our children. Every new thing hurts in the transition but is enjoyed afterwards.

Bozeman, Montana woman



I think the costs are going to rise anyway and you are going to pay it here or there, so why don't we do something for the better good, I guess.

Virginia Beach, Virginia woman



I think the gas prices, whether it's natural gas or gasoline or electricity, we pay a lot for those things, and I wouldn't mind paying a little bit more to see something new come along and to see a change in energy costs.

Columbus, Ohio woman



will pass through to them. As long as the costs are defined and modest, and the payoff clear and relatively certain, such up-front costs are far more attractive than endlessly higher spending on oil, heat and power simply to line the pockets of “big business.” Either way, they will pay more, so they prefer to get a benefit out of it.

IV. Conclusion

Clean energy advocates face significant challenges, but we need to remember that if we frame the right policies with the right narrative, we will be pushing on an open door—Americans are hungry for change, and they are inclined to believe that progressives want to provide it. Thus, we should be clear about the choice at hand: we want to get America running on clean energy, while our opponents want to stay where we are. Voters see that as “betting on America.” And that’s a bet they are willing to make.

Endnotes

¹ Third Way and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted twelve focus groups in six states: one group each in Tidewater, Virginia; Little Rock, Arkansas; suburban Columbus, Ohio; exurban St. Louis, Missouri; Bozeman, Montana; and Oakland County, Michigan. Participants were White, Independent voters between the ages of 25-65 who had voted in both the 2006 and 2008 elections. Groups included both men and women, college and non-college educated voters. Our focus was swing voters and those with soft or middle of the road opinions on global warming.

² The Democracy Corps survey was conducted April 22-26, among 1,000 2008 voters (851 likely 2010 voters), and has a MoE of +/-3.1 percent.

³ A recent Rasmussen poll finds that only 24% of voters “can correctly identify the cap-and-trade proposal as something that deals with the environment.”
http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/environment/congress_pushes_cap_and_trade_but_just_24_know_what_it_is

⁴ A leaked copy of a Republican strategy document recommends that Republicans say they are for “an all-of-the-above, pro-consumer clean energy policy...” (Memorandum from Minority Staff, Senate EPW to House/Senate energy/environment staff, May 14, 2009)

⁵ Radio ads using this figure to attack clean energy policies ran in the districts of Reps. Barrow (GA), Butterfield (NC), Doyle (PA), Gonzalez (TX), Hill (IN), Matheson (UT), Melancon (LA), Ross (AR), Sutton (OH), and Murphy (PA) when the Waxman-Markey energy bill was being considered in committee in April-May 2009.

⁶ The \$3100 per family cost increase figure has been refuted by a wide variety of sources, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the Center for American Progress and Professor John Reilly, one of the authors of the 2007 MIT report that opponents used to generate this figure. The \$3100 figure was not based on an economic analysis of how a carbon pricing plan would impact energy costs, but was derived by dividing the total amount of money a theoretical plan would raise by the population of the United States. (<http://blogs.wsj.com/environmentalcapital/2009/04/02/mit-to-republicans-lay-off-the-scaremongering-on-climate-costs/>).

⁷ Radio Ad Script: *Washington politicians and extreme environmental groups say they have a plan to stop global warming, but it's really a fun new math game. Here's how you play: Do you remember your last electric bill? Good. Now triple it. And what about the last time you filled your gas tank. Great. Now multiple that by four. What they're calling a new energy plan is really a hidden energy tax that you'll be paying every time you start your car or even turn on a light switch. A tax of \$3,000 a year per family—the largest tax increase in history. With our economy in crisis Washington should be helping families and small businesses, not taxing the energy we need to live on. A \$3,000 light switch tax will kill jobs and send our economy into a Great Depression. Call your Senator today and tell them you've done the math, and this huge energy tax doesn't add up. Paid for by Americans for the Middle Class.*

⁸ <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/economics/pdfs/WM-Analysis.pdf>; Based on the most comprehensive analysis at the time, we tested an alternative figure of \$300 per year. More recent EPA economic analysis, based on the actual Waxman-Markey legislation, places the cost at closer to \$140 per household per year.. EPA's analysis is a conservative cost estimate, as it does not factor in other cost-saving measures in the bill including energy efficiency, and cost-saving technology gains.