

Candidates, Take Note: New Hampshire Voters Strongly Support State Clean Energy Policies

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Recent surveys offer revealing insights into voter attitudes in the northeast U.S. toward state policies that expand the use of clean and renewable energy. There is also intriguing data about voters' willingness to pay for those policies. In the context of state elections coming in November, polling results in these northeastern states indicate that substantial majorities of these voters support strong renewable energy policies and are willing to pay even more to advance them than they are today. These results have important political implications for state-level candidates and policy-makers in the northeast and possibly across the country.

The Results of the Suffolk University Political Research Center Poll

The most vivid example of voters' attitudes toward renewable energy policies can be found in the results of a statewide poll conducted in New Hampshire by the Suffolk University Political Research Center in March of this year. The poll sought to illuminate voters' opinions on key national and state issues in advance of the upcoming elections in November.²

Among a host of other questions on unrelated topics, the poll included several questions on voter attitudes toward renewable energy policies and their willingness to pay for these policies.³ In particular, these questions covered four policies that have been gaining importance and attention among audiences in the northeast. They are to (1) increase the use of renewable energy to generate electricity, (2) increase the use of solar energy in particular, (3) require reductions in the emission of "greenhouse gases" in electricity production, and (4) encourage the importation of hydroelectric power from Canada. The results demonstrate that solid majorities of likely voters in this politically sophisticated northeastern state have positive attitudes toward these state renewable energy policies. To support these policies, a substantial portion of those surveyed would be willing to pay as much as \$5 more per month on their electricity bill.

To understand the context in which these attitudes occur, we should consider the current conditions in New Hampshire. The average residential electricity bill there is about \$99 per month.⁴ Over the last few years, New Hampshire, like other northeastern states, has enacted various renewable energy policies and incentives.⁵ These policies have an effect on residential electricity costs. For example, in 2007, New Hampshire passed legislation that created a "renewable portfolio standard" that requires electricity suppliers to demonstrate each year that they are obtaining minimum levels of their electricity from renewable energy resources. Those renewable supplies are only available at a premium of between \$25 and \$50 per megawatt hour above the cost of electricity produced with fossil fuels. The premiums for solar electricity are even greater. The cost of these policies has already been incorporated, to some degree, in monthly residential electricity bills.⁶

When the Suffolk poll asked likely voters in New Hampshire if they approve of renewable energy policies aimed at replacing fossil fuels with renewable fuels to generate electricity, a strong majority, 66%, said they approve of that policy. Additionally, 51% of the supporters of the policy said they would be willing to have their monthly electric bills increase by \$5 or more in order to increase the use of renewable fuels to produce electricity.

The survey also questioned likely New Hampshire voters on their opinions of financial incentives to homeowners and businesses that install solar energy systems on their homes or buildings. Almost 69% of the New Hampshire respondents support such policies. Some 44% of those supporters would be willing to pay an additional \$5 or more on their monthly electric bill to enable these policies.

The Suffolk poll investigated the level of support among likely voters in New Hampshire for policies designed to reduce emissions of so-called "greenhouse gases," such as requiring fossil fuel burning plants to buy "allowances" to emit these gases. The polling results indicate that the majority of surveyed voters (61%) are in favor of greenhouse gas reduction policies, while less than a third of voters (30%) are opposed. Roughly 49% of supporters would be willing to pay \$5 or more to support these policies. Only 14% would be unwilling to pay any additional amount.

Venturing into an area of some controversy in New Hampshire, the Suffolk poll asked likely voters about their attitudes toward proposals to import electricity from large hydroelectric dams in the eastern Canadian provinces. While some have argued this would reduce emissions of air pollution and stabilize

electricity prices, others have objected to the impact of a proposed new transmission line running the length of the state and bringing this power to consumers in Massachusetts and Connecticut.⁷

The polling results show that 46% of likely voters would favor importing hydroelectric power while 37% are opposed to doing so; 17% remain undecided. With undecided voters generally skewing against new ballot proposals, this question is more of a 50-50 proposition. When those in favor were asked how much of an increase in their monthly electric bill they were willing to pay for imports of hydroelectricity, 36% would be willing to pay \$5 or more, while 26% would be unwilling to pay any additional amount.

Demographics of the New Hampshire Results

The demographics of the results are revealing as well. With the exception of the attitudes toward hydroelectric import policies, surveyed voters who support renewable energy policies and are willing to pay more for them identified themselves as registered Democrats, minorities, or younger voters between the ages of 18 and 35. The voters who oppose renewable energy policies and are unwilling to pay more for them identified themselves as registered Republicans, males, or being over the age of 65.

Even among those who consistently support renewable policies, there is a notable difference between those who support solar incentive policies and those who are willing to pay an additional amount on their monthly electricity bills. While both the supporters and payers identified themselves as registered Democrats and minorities, the supporters primarily represent a younger generation between the ages of 18 and 35, whereas those willing to pay at least \$5 more per month on their electricity bill represent older voters, mainly between the ages of 56 and 65 years.

Less than a quarter of the surveyed voters (23%) oppose solar incentive policies and roughly one-fifth of supporters (19%) are not willing to pay any additional amount to support these policies. The respondents who oppose these policies and are unwilling to increase their monthly electric bills to support them identified themselves primarily as registered Republicans, males, and being over the age of 75.

Unlike the demographic patterns found in the other policy areas, the respondents in favor of hydroelectric imports primarily identified themselves as males and being older than the age of 75. Those in opposition to hydro imports mainly identified themselves as registered Democrats, females, and being between the ages of 18 and 55.

For two of the policies, either a general renewable energy policy or a greenhouse gas reduction policy, at least 50% of the supporters of those policies indicated that they are willing to pay \$5 or more on their monthly electric bills. Those willing to pay more to support clean energy policies tended to be registered Democrats and voters between the ages of 18 and 65. On the other hand, those unwilling to pay any additional amount to support these policies tended to be registered Republicans and voters over the ages of 65.

Trends in Renewable Energy Attitudes

Other polling results and surveys tend to mirror the results of the Suffolk poll. For example, Mass Insight Global Partnerships, a Boston-based consulting and research firm that organizes leadership initiatives through publications of policy research and public opinion surveys, recently reported on the attitudes of Massachusetts residents toward the energy and climate change options facing the Commonwealth. The results from its survey of 450 residents confirm the results from the Suffolk survey that residents in the northeast U.S. strongly support renewable energy policies. Mass Insight found that more than 7 in 10 Massachusetts respondents (71%) expressed a level of concern over global warming and climate change, and a solid 62% majority would pay an additional fee on their electric bill in order to fund government efforts to limit the effects of climate change. When asked about how Massachusetts should transition to greater use of clean energy, 67% of the respondents support the increased use of solar energy and 58% support more use of wind energy. By contrast, only 46% support the use of imported hydroelectric energy.⁸

In a demographic that closely mirrors the Suffolk results, the Mass Insight survey found that the demographic of Massachusetts respondents who support clean energy development as a "high priority" in the Commonwealth is the strongest among registered Democrats and among people between the ages of 31 and 45.

The partisan gap, identified in both the Suffolk and Mass Insight surveys, between voters in favor of and opposed to clean energy policies corresponds with a trend observed over the last few years in national elections and surveys. For example, a 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, found there was broad, bipartisan agreement on alternative energy policies: increased federal funding for research on wind, solar, and hydrogen technology was favored by 85% of Independents, 82% of Republicans, and 77% of Democrats.⁹ However, a 2013 Pew survey indicated that support for these energy policies among Independents had fallen by 10 points to 75%, while support among Republicans had fallen by a whopping 24 points to 58%. Over the same period, support for these policies among Democrats had increased substantially, by 7 points to 84%.¹⁰

Overall Impressions

These survey results indicate a strong degree of support for clean and renewable energy policies among voters in several of the northeastern states. The overall positive attitudes are clearly evident among certain demographic groups. While acknowledging for inevitable variations from state to state, the support seems strongest among registered Democratic and Independent voters, young and middle-aged voters, and female voters.

Despite having electricity bills that are above average for the U.S. as a whole, a majority of likely voters in these states say they would be willing to spend more to advance these policies. Depending on the particular policy and the particular state, that might be as much as \$4 to \$5 on a monthly bill of \$100.

For candidates who are inclined to support clean and renewable energy policies, these survey results provide an indication that targeted and visible support for such policies may increase the turnout of and support from such voters in November. Thus, it will be interesting to see if, in the run up to the November voting, candidates target these demographic groups with messages that confirm a candidate's support for such policies. If so, it will be even more interesting to see if the post-election returns indicate investments of campaign capital in support of policies that would expand the use of clean and renewable energy pay off.

Endnotes

1 **David O'Connor** is Senior Vice President for Energy at ML Strategies, LLC and is the former Commissioner of Energy Resources for Massachusetts. David Paleologos is the Director of the Suffolk University Center for Political Research Center and is a professor of government at that university. The authors are grateful for the research and editorial assistance provided by Rajdeep Dhaliwal, Project Analyst at ML Strategies and Mintz Levin.

2 The Suffolk statewide survey of 800 likely voters was conducted between Thursday, February 27 and Wednesday, March 5. The survey used a split sample of landline and cell phone numbers and a screen to filter out "low intensity" voters. The methodology has a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent and a 95% confidence level.

3 The Suffolk poll only investigated the attitudes of likely voters by contacting their household. The results therefore do not take into account the attitudes of commercial businesses and industrial organizations.

4 In 2012, the average monthly bill for residential customers in New Hampshire was \$98.80. This is about the mid-point of monthly bills across the New England states. Average monthly residential electricity bills range from a low of \$78 in Maine to a high of \$127 in Connecticut. Source: 2012 Average Monthly Bill – Residential, U.S. Energy Information Administration, [Hyperlink](#) (Nov. 8, 2013)

5 For example, New Hampshire provides rebate programs for residential customers who install solar water heating and Energy Star-rated appliances such as washers, air conditioners, refrigerators, and light bulbs.

See: New Hampshire: Incentives/Policies for Renewables & Efficiency, Database of Incentives for Renewables & Efficiency, [Hyperlink](#) (Aug. 8, 2013)

6 By 2025, electric utilities in New Hampshire are directed to obtain at least 25% of their electricity supplies from renewable sources. Other New England states have adopted similar legislation—Massachusetts law requires 15% of renewable energy to be included in the mix of the electricity sources serving the Commonwealth by 2020. Connecticut's law requires suppliers to demonstrate 23% renewable energy use by 2020, and Rhode Island requires 16% by the end of 2019. Also, as of 2012, 85 cities and towns in the state have adopted an exemption from residential property taxes for solar, wind, or wood-fired central heating systems used on a property. Furrey, Laura, State Renewable Portfolio Standards and Energy Efficiency Resource Standards, American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, [Hyperlink](#) (June 2009).

7 The Northern Pass transmission line is a portion of a system that would run from Canada through a significant portion of New Hampshire and into southern New England states. The proposed line has stirred much local controversy, in part because it would pass through areas such as White Mountain National Forest.

8 Mass Insight Strategic Issue Public Opinion Report: Energy, Clean Energy and Climate Change, Prepared by Mass Insight Global Partnership and Opinion Dynamics, [Hyperlink](#) (Jan. 2014).

9 Dimock, Michael, Both Reds and Blues Go Green on Energy, Pew Research Center, [Hyperlink](#) (Feb. 28, 2006).

10 Continued Support for Keystone XL Pipeline, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, [Hyperlink](#) (Sep. 26, 2013)

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