



Presidential Climate Action Project

Climate Action Brief:

Will Drilling for Oil Mean a Gusher of Votes?

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Political candidates at all levels and from both political parties have been shifting their positions lately to support offshore oil drilling, apparently in response to public opinion polls that seem to show that voters favor it.

Early in July, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press released a poll indicating that the public favors new energy sources over protecting the environment (60 percent to 34 percent). Polls by CNN, Fox, CBS and the LA Times reportedly showed similar results.

But David Moore, former vice president of Gallup and author of “The Opinion Makers: An Insider Reveals the Truth Behind the Polls,” points out that public opinion on drilling isn’t as clear-cut as it might seem. When Pew asked respondents to choose between energy conservation and more oil production, their answers were a statistical tie – 45 percent to 47 percent respectively. Moore writes:

An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll offered five different approaches to dealing with the energy problems. Almost half (46 percent) opted for energy conservation and more emphasis on wind and solar, while 40 percent chose offshore oil drilling and drilling in protected areas in Alaska, while 10 percent preferred nuclear power.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says she’ll have a drilling bill ready when Congress returns to session, apparently containing a deal that would give the country more oil production in return for concessions on conservation and renewable energy. It might be a way to break the stalemate in the Senate on such important policies as the Production Tax Credit for wind energy and the Investment Tax Credit for solar energy, both due to expire at the end of this year.

For its part, the U.S. oil industry is looking for new production opportunities as more of the world’s oilfields are nationalized.¹

Some climate-action advocates believe a drilling compromise could be a good deal. Joseph Romm of the Center for American Progress calculates that the impact of offshore oil drilling on greenhouse-gas emissions in the United States will be almost too small to measure, while an extension of renewable energy tax credits is important to the continued progress of those carbon-neutral technologies.

But the drilling controversy provokes some interesting questions. Such as:

- What are the candidates' plans for rapid emission reductions? The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that global carbon emissions must be stabilized by 2015 if we hope to keep climate change from spinning out of control. By itself, a cap-and-trade bill won't be enough. As McKinsey & Company concludes, "The U.S. will need to develop and implement a strong, coordinated program of economy-wide abatement actions in the near future if it is to achieve emissions reductions proposed (in bills before Congress) for 2030 at the lowest cost to the economy."ⁱⁱⁱ How do the various policy ideas advanced by the candidates – from alternative fuels to power production – fit into a coherent plan to reach or exceed that goal?
- What commitments will the candidates make to a timetable? Several climate-action groups, including the Presidential Climate Action Project, are preparing 100- or 150-day action plans for the next administration. Some advocate decisive action within hours of inauguration to send a signal to the nation and to the international community that a new climate sheriff is in town.

With the two presidential candidates both committed to climate and energy security, America has an opportunity to move beyond the de facto energy policy of the past, described by John Deutch, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency: "The United States has been unwilling to adopt and to sustain policy measures that would slow the trend and begin the long process of a transition to a post-petroleum economy. Our citizens and their elected representatives do not wish to sacrifice, in the short-run, the convenience and economic benefits of low-cost energy."

Today, few American consumers would put petroleum in the category of low-cost energy. Instead they are looking to the next President to lead them finally on the path to affordable, clean, sustainable alternative energy sources.

This brief was prepared by the nonpartisan Presidential Climate Action Project at the University of Colorado Denver. PCAP, which is developing a 100-day climate action plan for the next President of the United States, issues briefs from time to time for the use of the presidential candidates as they consider policies to deal with climate change. Details are available at www.climateactionproject.com

ⁱ "As Oil Giants Lose Influence, Supply Drops," Jad Mouawad, New York Times, Aug. 19, 2008

ⁱⁱ "Reducing U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions: How Much at What Cost?" McKinsey & Company, December 2007, P. xvi