

From: Michael McKenna, MWR Strategies
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Re: Survey results

We recently conducted a nationwide survey of 1005 likely voters (margin of error = 3.1%) on a variety of issues including the Green New Deal, climate change, and the federal auto mandate. The results (summary topline attached) speak for themselves, but I wanted to draw your attention to a few salient points emerging from the research.

Climate change

Responses related to climate change, its causes, likely solutions, willingness to pay, trust, and prioritization remain essentially unchanged over time. For instance:

- When asked about priorities, few identify climate change as a priority. Only 3% identified “environment” in total as the most pressing issue facing the United States, and less than 1% specifically mentioned climate change. For comparative purposes (and as a peek into the difference between what voters care about and what their rulers care about), that is about the same percentage as identified “income inequality” as the most pressing issue (1.1%), but more than double those who identified “infrastructure” as the top issue (about 0.4%). This unwillingness or inability to prioritize climate change over other, more pressing issues, is consistent with research we and others have done for a number of years.

Similarly, when asked about the most pressing national security issue, a shade less than 1% (0.7%) identified climate change. This is the first time we have asked this question, and it suggests that the narrative equating climate change with national security may not be as catchy as its advocates had hoped.

- With respect to causation, there is little indication that the ground has recently shifted on this issue. In this survey, 53% said that global warming is caused mostly by humans; 47% chose to give another answer – either that it was the result of natural causes (27%) or that there is no solid evidence of global warming (13%) or that they didn’t know (7%). That is consistent with other responses we have received to this question, most recently in June 2018, when 54% said global warming was caused mostly by human activity and 46% offered other answers.

- With respect to solutions, respondents remain confident that the solutions are more likely to come from innovators (39%) and consumer demand (19%) than government action (25%). Those responses track similar responses we have received in surveys over the last ten years or so.
- Voters willingness to pay also remains fairly stable (and very modest). When asked how much they would be willing to pay annually to address global warming, the median response was 50 dollars (35% of respondents offered “zero” or “nothing” as their response). We have seen median responses fluctuate as high as 50 dollars (this survey) and as low as 20 dollars (June 2018).

As an aside, those who favor the green new deal offered a median number of 200 dollars a year, including a remarkable 16% who offered “zero”.

Specifics win

At least for those on the right, specifics seem to win and vagueness loses. Across multiple questions, the responses make it clear that the right side of the argument is always strongest when dealing with specifics. For example:

- The green new deal has some aspirational elements that are popular, including more federal government involvement (and presumably fairer outcomes) in health care and the economy. However, when asked which works best, capitalism or socialism, capitalism wins by 44 percentage points. Even more emphatically, when descriptions of capitalism and socialism are used (voluntary exchanges vs. mandated exchanges), capitalism wins by 55 percentage points. Similarly, respondents expressed very strong reservations about the potential effect on the size and spending of the federal government as a result of the green new deal. Specificity wins; advocates for the new green deal know that as well, which is why they avoid specifics and focus on aspirations as much as possible.
- We have asked for a number of years the extent to which knowledge of air quality improvements affects sentiments about regulations. In this most recent survey, when presented with information about air quality improvements, half of the respondents (50%) indicated that as a consequence of that data, they believe that we don't need additional federal regulations or taxes. This compares with 38% who offered the same response in July 2017. Again, specificity helps.
- We have also asked for a number of years which of the following come closest to respondents' thinking -- is carbon dioxide is a pollutant or whether it is needed for plant life and humans both exhale and consume it. In this survey, only 37% identified it as a pollutant, while 49% indicated that it is needed for plant life. That is similar to other response sets we have received when we have asked this question.

Corporate Average Fuel Economy mandate

Those who would alter the federal auto mandate are making progress, but still have some way to go before voters are sufficiently educated on the program and the wisdom of altering it. When we asked a simple favor/oppose question in June 2018, 45% of respondents favored the program, 34% opposed. This time, 41% favor and 35% oppose. Last June as now, there were a large number of undecideds (22% in June; 24% now).

There are paths forward. When we offered respondents a choice between avoiding continued reliance on gasoline or avoiding government purchasing mandates, 55% said that they would rather avoid government mandates, compared to 37% that thought it was more important to reduce our reliance on gasoline.

We also asked about the subsidization between car buyers in this survey. More than half (54%) indicated that such subsidization was unfair, although there is a stark partisan split on this response, with 49% of self-identified Democrats saying it is fair and 76% of self-identified Republicans indicating it is not. This response compares to 51% who said it was unfair in June 2018.

When asked to identify what a fair level of subsidization was, the median response was 200 dollars (38% responded “zero”, including 58% of self-identified Republicans). It is very likely that the actual amount of subsidization per vehicle is much higher. If that is the case, the question of subsidization (a “truck/SUV tax”) could become powerful.

Trust

One final thought on this (and on almost all issues) bears notice. When asked whether they trusted the federal government to decide what kind of cars or transportation technologies should be subsidized or mandated, 69% said they did not, including 58% of self-identified Democrats and 54% of those who support the green new deal. Questions of trust and who makes decisions are powerful, they tend to unify sentiment across demographic and ideological groups, and they invariably cut against the government.

The pivotal question with respect to this and every issue is, “who should make the decision”? Fortunately, voters remain solidly on the right side of that divide. When we asked who should make decisions about what kinds of cars they should buy, about three in four voters (73%) indicated that they preferred to make those decisions themselves. That is in line with other times we have asked that question, and provides the appropriate path forward and frame for the issue.

Demographic notes

One demographic note was entertaining and informative.

By a fairly narrow margin (45-37), self-identified liberals indicated that capitalism is a better system than socialism. Interestingly, when asked whether voluntary exchanges were better than exchanges mandated by the government, this same cohort split decisively (61-21) in favor of voluntary exchanges.