

To the Editor
No Shortcuts

The main point of David W. Moore's article, "The Myth and Mythology of Trust in Government" in the January/February issue of *Public Perspective* is wrong and misleading. When trust in government is low, in-depth and high-quality public interest polling confirms that people feel their legitimate policy needs and desires are being ignored by elected officials of both parties. Moneyed interests that finance candidate campaigns and their careers after leaving office get paid off with the legislation and regulations they want. In short, democracy is failing.

With stiff competition and low-ball quotes, commercial pollsters have to cut corners. Questions are typically too few, too shallow and off the mark. Tightly budgeted time and space produces inadequately analyzed, misinterpreted findings. Analysts complain privately that their professionalism suffers.

As a first step in good polling, when trust in government is low (or high) ask, "Why"? Ask why questions — both open-ended and with batteries offering a wide range of possible reasons for mistrust. Repeat the process with different samples over a period of time and correlate the results with various versions of the trust issue.

It is sad that well-known organizations cannot seem to figure out how to do high-quality, reliable polling. The country pays a big price for that, and democracy hangs by a slender thread.

Alan F. Kay
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Americans Talk Issues Foundation

Not So Dark

By Ann Stouffer Bisconti & Mark David Richards

In his article, "More Power to Us" [November/December *Public Perspective*], Eugene Rosa acknowledged recent optimistic signs for public opinion favorable toward nuclear power, but then returned to several outdated themes on the subject. National surveys about nuclear energy that we have directed several times per year every year since 1983 contradict Rosa's assertions, first, that there has been a "longstanding mood of strong opposition to nuclear power;" second, that "The more immediate in space (near me) or in time (now) the posed questions about nuclear power are, the more likely the public will be opposed to the technology;" and, third, that "Nuclear power has been dead in the water" for nearly two decades.

We do agree that there was a dramatic upturn in public support for nuclear energy in 2001. In October, we recorded the highest numbers in all our survey history on the percentage favorable to nuclear energy (65%), those believing nuclear energy should play an important role in providing power (74%), and those finding nuclear power plants safe (66%; see Figure 1). In the previous March, we recorded an all-time high number saying we should definitely build more nuclear power plants in the future (66%). (That number fell to 63% in July and 59% in October due to declining concern about energy shortages.)

Regarding the longstanding mood of the public, however, a better characterization than that of strong opposition cited by Rosa would be unenthusiastic acceptance.

We are not claiming that there has not been controversy or a small core

of dedicated activists strongly opposed to nuclear energy. There has been. We are not claiming that nuclear energy has come close to the popular appeal of solar energy. It has not. We are not claiming that large numbers of the public have not had concerns about nuclear power plant safety. They have.

But very large majorities, in all surveys, have weighed the pros and cons in their minds and concluded that we should keep existing plants, as well as the option to build more plants in the future. That hardly qualifies as strong opposition.

As for proximity, contrary to Rosa's claims, those living closer to operating nuclear power plants are generally more supportive of nuclear energy than others.

The evidence is substantial. Utility surveys of people living near plants find even greater support locally than national surveys show. We found that same pattern when we compared attitudes of those who believed their electric company operated a nuclear power plant with those of respondents to our own national surveys.

For example, we asked nationally representative samples of 1,000 adults, "If a new power plant were needed to supply electricity, would it be acceptable to you or not acceptable to you to add a nuclear power plant next to the nearest nuclear power plants that are already operating?"

In October, 66% nationally said it would be acceptable. Among those who said their electric company already operated a nuclear power plant, the percent who said a new plant would be acceptable at the nearest existing site was slightly higher (69%).

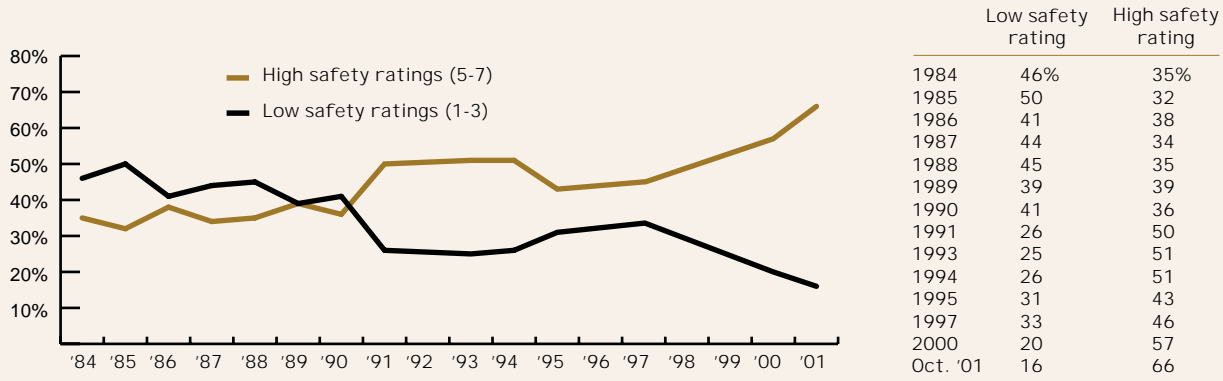
In March, the public who would find a new plant acceptable at the nearest

Figure 1

Nuclear Power Increasingly Regarded as Safe

Question:

Thinking about the nuclear power plants that are operating now, how safe do you regard these plants? Please think of a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means very unsafe and 7 means very safe. The safer you think they are, the higher the number you would give.



Note: Averages shown for years in which the question was asked more than once.

Source: Surveys by Cambridge Reports/Research International, 1984-1991; Bisconti Research, Inc., with Bruskin Research, 1993-October 6-8, 2001.

existing site included 64% nationally and 71% of those who said their electric company currently operated a nuclear power plant.

According to industry sources, the decision to build any new nuclear power plants is at least five to ten years away. When the time comes, will Americans support them in their own areas? Most locations in the US would not be suitable for building an industrial facility, so it is not surprising that many tell interviewers they would oppose new plant construction *in their areas*. Industry officials have indicated that new plants would most likely be built at some of the sites of currently operating plants, where there is substantial good will.

Most Americans (84%) also support renewing the licenses of operating nuclear power plants that meet federal safety standards. Although this national support is important to industry and policy leaders, local support is key to plant-specific decisions. The first nuclear power plants successful in obtaining license renewal in 2000 had good relationships with

nearby communities.

We need to comment once again on the old trend line shown in the Rosa article (data ending in 1990) on the question, “Do you favor or oppose building more nuclear power plants?” We had previously noted in *Public Perspective* [January/February 1991, June/July 1998] that answers to the question, “Do you favor or oppose building more nuclear power plants?” are highly dependent on perceptions of need. From 1982 until early this year (briefly), the public showed little concern about energy shortages. It was precisely in 1982 (not 1979) that support for building more plants dropped. The Three Mile Island accident was in 1979.

Given the significance of perceptions of need, Rosa is correct in stating that support for building more plants is greater if one mentions the future than if one does not specify a time frame. But it is not correct to say that a person who opposes building another plant at the present time is “opposed to the technology,” if that same person favors

the use of nuclear energy, approves keeping existing plants and the option to build more in the future, supports license renewal, and would find a new nuclear power plant at the nearest existing site acceptable if a new power plant were needed.

It’s hard to justify a conclusion that nuclear energy is or has been “dead in the water” in the United States. That characterization does not fit the opinion data, nor does it fit the reality that there are more than 100 nuclear power plants in the US—twice as many as in France, the nation generating the highest percentage of nuclear electricity worldwide—generating more than one-fifth of the nation’s electricity. It also does not fit the picture of most nuclear-generating companies lining up to renew the licenses of their existing plants, and some seriously considering adding new plants sometime in the future.

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