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Public Opinion Context for Trump's Environmental Actions

AMERICANS: ENVIRONMENT SHOULD BE
PRIORITIZED OVER ENERGY
PRODUCTION

59%

GALLUP, MAR 1-5

by Andrew Dugan and Frank Newport

On Tuesday, President Donald Trump signed a "sweeping" executive order that will rollback a number of Obama-era environmental regulations. The president's stated reasons for taking these actions include the following: make the U.S. "energy independent," cheapen the price of different forms of energy (or at least stop the price from rising) and keep states from shutting down energy production sites, like coal mines, which otherwise might have closed because of existing emissions standards.

Gallup recently conducted its annual Environment Gallup Poll Social Series (GPSS) survey. Generally speaking, when compared with recent years, a larger portion of the public is sympathetic to protecting the environment and limiting human pollution, and less worried about energy production or cost.

To some extent, this may be an anticipatory reaction to the new Trump Administration, given Trump's campaign promises and statements about energy and the environment. To that point, fewer than half of Americans said Trump was doing a good job protecting the nation's environment (36%) or improving the nation's energy policy (46%) even before Trump issued his executive order affecting energy and the environment.

Results show that the majority of Americans do not believe two of the main aims of Trump's environmental policy -- increasing production of energy in the U.S. and keeping it cheap -- should be prioritized over environmental protection. In particular, 59% of Americans agreed that protection of

the environment should be given priority, even at the risk of limiting the amount of energy supplies, up from 41% in 2011. And 56% of Americans said that protection of the environment should be prioritized over economic growth.

Both of those questions were asked before Trump signed the executive order, and perhaps Americans have since been persuaded by his arguments. But, as responses to many questions on Gallup's Environment GPSS survey make clear, near-record lows of Americans are worried about the cost or availability of energy supplies -- making it tough for Trump to win support for his energy-focused executive actions among these Americans.

More specifically, the percentage of Americans who say they worry "a great deal" about the availability and affordability of energy in the U.S. fell to the lowest level on record in 2017, at 27%. The relatively low price of gasoline may be a major factor in shaping Americans' opinions on this matter.

And it isn't just gasoline that has become cheaper in recent years: the price of residential natural gas dropped significantly between 2008 and 2016. In general, Trump is announcing this major push for energy independence and increased levels of domestic production of energy sources at a time when energy production in the U.S. has been increasing substantially.

One notable energy source has not benefitted from this rising tide: coal. The industry has struggled in recent years, with production down substantially over the past two years. But the decline in the availability of coal has not been associated with an increase in Americans' concerns about energy; in fact, just the opposite has occurred.

Additionally, in 2015, Gallup found that 28% of Americans wanted to put more emphasis on coal in order to produce more energy, at the bottom of the list of the six energy sources measured in the survey question.

Majority of Americans Want More Emphasis on Solar, Wind and Natural Gas

Do you think that as a country, the United States should put more emphasis, less emphasis or about the same emphasis as it does now on producing domestic energy from each of the following sources -- [RANDOM ORDER]?

	More emphasis	Less emphasis	Same emphasis
	%	%	%
Solar power	79	9	12
Wind	70	14	14
Natural gas	55	12	32
Oil	41	30	27

	More emphasis	Less emphasis	Same emphasis
	%	%	%
Nuclear power	35	33	28
Coal	28	43	27

MAR 5-8, 2015

GALLUP

Just this month, nearly three-quarters of Americans (71%) said they avored protecting the environment over a focus on increased production of coal, oil and natural gas.

Even Republicans are not wholly convinced the U.S. should prioritize producing energy over environmental protections. More than one-third of Republicans and Republican-leaning think environmental protection, not energy production, should be the key concern. This is up from as low as 22% in 2011 among the same group. Republicans are less likely than Democrats to say they worry at a very serious level about the availability of energy in the U.S. -- 22% vs. 30%. And less than one-fifth of Republicans say the energy situation in the U.S. is "very serious" (19%) while 26% of Democrats say this.

A common charge leveled at the new president is that he has not sought to broaden his support beyond the core group of Americans who helped put him in office. Trump's failure to do so may be one reason why he holds a historically low approval rating for a president at the beginning of his tenure. Unless Trump is able to convince more Americans that energy production is so important it warrants prioritizing it over environmental protection issues, it seems this executive order could be an instance of Trump implementing or pursuing a policy that is out of sync with broad trends in American public opinion.

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