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# Dramatic Transformation in Energy, Global Warming Debate

## America Must Take the Lead in New Energy Future

**To:** Interested Parties

**From:** Al Quinlan, Stan Greenberg, John Podesta

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The public debate about energy and global warming has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past few years. The results of recent polling and focus groups for the Center for American Progress argue that public officials should undertake an extremely aggressive and bold effort to make America energy independent and combat global warming. In the past, the public tended to think favorably of many alternative energy proposals, but these issues lacked both salience and urgency. That has changed dramatically in the past two years. The public now not only believes these issues are extremely important, but also feels strongly that America cannot afford to wait to change its policies on energy.

The sense of urgency is based on a well-developed notion that America is falling behind the rest of the world on energy and global warming. The poll found that just 14 percent believe America is a leader on energy and a majority see our country as falling behind the rest of the world. America is seen as captive to foreign governments and big oil, and we are failing to do what is needed to lead the world. The public concludes that America can do virtually anything once it makes up its mind to change.

The public is now poised to act, and will vote on these issues in a way that puts a political price on elected officials who oppose action on energy and global warming. Simply put, Americans believe we cannot afford to wait to change.

These issues are now a top priority for voters, they carry a sense of urgency and both energy independence and global warming have been elevated to a place unforeseen until this point.

- **Energy independence and global warming more important than ever.** Energy independence and stopping global warming now ranks alongside health care atop Americans' domestic agenda. Twenty nine percent cite it as the most important challenge for us to work on as a country, compared to 32 percent citing health care. And energy dependence and global warming far outdistance education, economic globalization, and retirement security as top concerns. This response would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.
- **Urgency—America cannot afford to wait.** People believe that America is falling behind and remains dangerously reliant on fossil fuels and they want strong action NOW. By an overwhelming 64 – 35 percent margin, the public believes America “*needs to act immediately to make our country less dependent on oil and move to cleaner, alternative*

*energy sources.*” It is important to note that this statement was posed against a position in favor of change, but in a gradual manner. Our focus group discussions were consistent as participants in four regions of the country were adamant that we must start “yesterday” to develop clean new energy and cleaner cars. Similarly, there is no appetite to wait to combat global warming as the public believes by a 60 – 33 percent margin that global warming has been set in motion and “we must take action now or it will be too late.”

- **Global warming elevated to a major issue.** Until now, global warming rested near the bottom of domestic priorities and failed to add power to arguments in favor of new energy policies. That dramatically changed, and global warming rose 15 points as “the top priority or one of the top two or three priorities for Congress and the President.” And it now adds power to the message for major change in energy policy by producing a 7-point increase in intense support for that change.
- **Americans want clean energy solutions.** In addition to their urgency about energy and global warming, Americans strongly favor mandates for clean energy technologies to address these problems. They see clean cars and fuels, wind and solar power, and cuts in global warming as essential to solving these problems, as well as enhancing our future economy.

## Message and Positioning the Debate

The public is not only ready for our agenda, they demand that we change and move in a different direction on energy and global warming. The following are the key themes that project our mission and agenda in the most compelling manner.

**1. America as Leader.** The message must be inspirational and build off the strong belief that America can do anything once we make the commitment. Americans are ready for their leaders to summon the willpower to act *now*. The notion that we should lead the world, not follow, is powerful and captures the public’s general mood and this issue specifically. Americans still believe that we have the technological know-how to improve our energy policy. The reality that other countries have accomplished some of these goals— in Europe and Brazil among others— is a strong reminder that it is not only possible, but is an imperative. America’s can-do spirit, coupled with a commitment to lead the world, is a powerful theme and puts the opposition in the untenable position of being the naysayer about American ingenuity and optimism.

**2. Freedom and Independence.** Freedom, independence and self sufficiency are the essence of what the public believes is our ultimate energy goal. When asked in focus groups, people cited independence and self sufficiency as the most important objectives in an energy plan. These values are our country’s foundation, but have been lost. Instead, people now believe that we have become captive to big oil and foreign countries. We should seize the mantle of freedom and independence.

**3. Seize the Economic Debate.** The public believes America is losing ground in the rapidly changing world economy and they strongly conclude that moving to clean, alternative energy technologies will make our economy stronger, create jobs and save people money. We should take the offensive, not defensive, in the economic debate and advance a message that production of clean, alternative energy will help to restore America as a leader in the world economy, create future jobs, higher incomes and put us back in the forefront of world economic advancement.

## The Agenda

The desire for immediate action on energy independence and global warming is clear, and there are several concrete steps that leaders in government can take right now to bring us closer to our goals—all of which enjoy broad public support and can make a real difference.

- Renewable electricity standard—25 percent renewable sources such as wind and solar by 2025
- New mileage standards for all cars—40 miles per gallon
- Carbon cap—Cap and then reduce carbon emissions by 2 percent each year
- Tax credits—Provide incentives to people who use clean, alternative energy and companies that produce it