

American Energy Attitudes: Support Grows for Nuclear Power, Drops for Coal, Remains Strong for Wind & Solar

Americans are feeling the impacts of climate change harshly this season. California and the West are plagued with wildfires wiping out millions of acres resulting in the worst air quality in the world, while the Southeast and Midwest are grappling with hurricanes and floods. During the 2020 presidential election, the Biden campaign has pledged a clean energy platform, while the Trump administration has reversed more than 100 environmental protections and protected the oil and gas industries. A legacy of misinformation likely influences energy attitudes, characterized by the fossil fuel industry's broadsides against climate science and competing energy technologies such as nuclear power and renewables. But what energy sources do Americans support today? ecoAmerica studied what Americans think of energy sources in 2020 and whether these attitudes had changed over time.

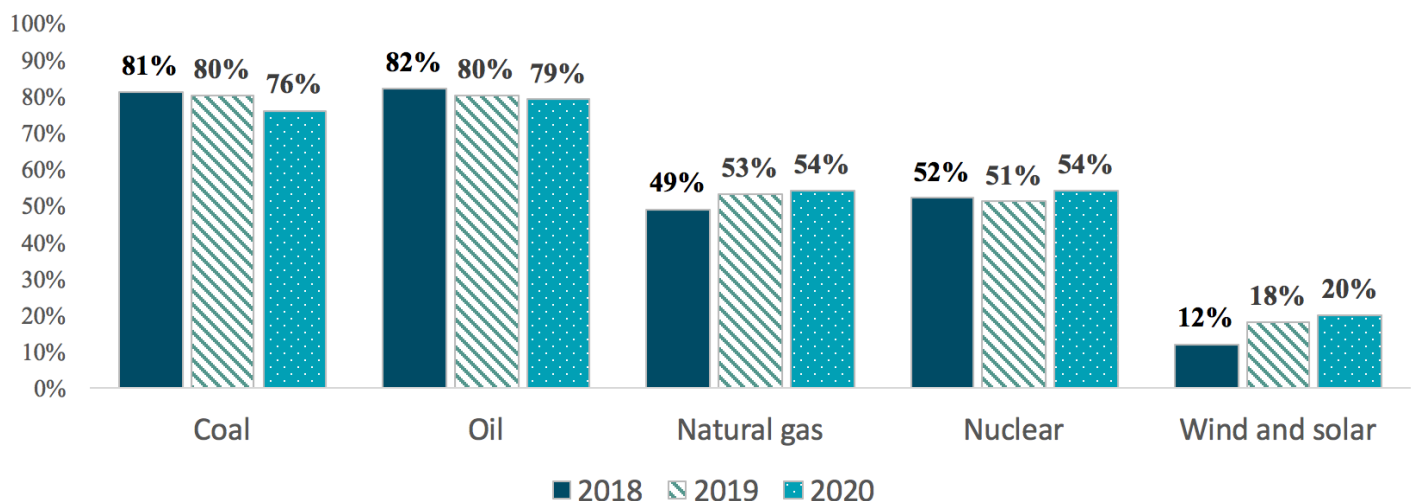
ecoAmerica's **American Climate Perspectives Survey** found year-over-year shifts in American views on energy sources. The results show an increase in support for current and "next generation" nuclear power, notably among Democrats, a decline for coal, and that the majority of Americans continue to support wind and solar energy. While majorities understand the energy-climate change connection, confusion lingers about how each energy source contributes to unhealthy air pollution and climate change. Concerns about nuclear power persist, relating to health and safety and waste disposal, however, concern has waned significantly over the past two years.

Which Energy Sources Contribute to Climate Change? Shifts in Understanding

The majority of Americans accurately identify how much energy sources contribute to climate change but perception has shifted over the years. The misconception that nuclear energy contributes to climate change shifted slightly upward (*up by 3 points vs. 2019*) and in 2020, 20% of Americans falsely believe that wind and solar energy sources contribute to climate change compared to 18% in 2019 and 12% in 2018.

When it comes to coal and oil, the two larger contributors to unhealthy air pollution and climate change, the large majority of Americans are aware of the pollution, though understanding is trending downward over the years. Awareness that natural gas contributes to climate change has grown slightly since 2018 (*up by 5 points*).

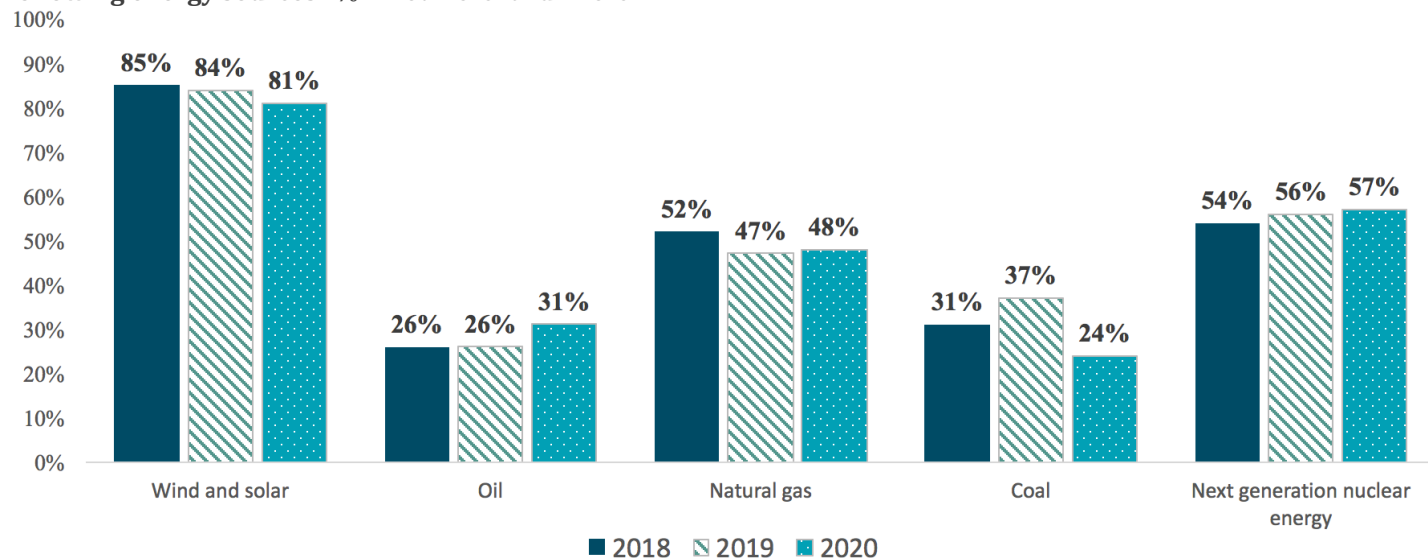
How much does each of these energy sources contribute to unhealthy air pollution and climate change? % "A lot" and "Some"



American Support Grows for Next Gen Nuclear Research and Development, Remains High for Wind and Solar

This year, 81% of Americans say the United States should be spending more on research and development (R&D) for wind and solar, which Americans have overwhelmingly supported since 2018. Support for more R&D on next generation nuclear energy increased, from 54% of Americans supporting more spending on R&D in 2018 to 57% in 2020 — the second highest level of support in 2020. Support for oil R&D has grown in 2020 to 31%, up from 26% in prior years. Fewer Americans think that the United States should spend more on R&D for coal (24% in 2020, down from 37% in 2019) and natural gas (48% in 2020, down from 52% in 2018).

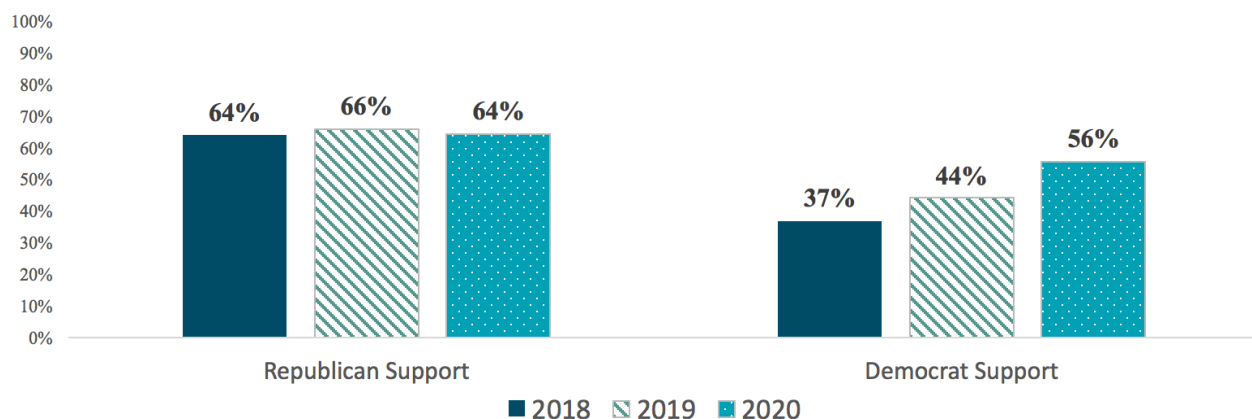
In the next few years, should the United States be spending more or less on research and development of each of the following energy sources? % “A lot more” and “More”



Nuclear Energy Support, A Closer Look

In 2019, nuclear power produced [8.5 quadrillion BTU’s](#) of energy in the United States, [8% of the country’s total energy production](#). Wind produced [2.7 quadrillion BTU’s](#) and geothermal and solar [produced 1.2 BTU’s](#). When presented with the information that America’s traditional nuclear power plants produce around 20% of our electricity, 64% of Republicans and 56% of Democrats say they support nuclear power. Overall national support has grown, up from 49% in 2018 to 56% in 2020, driven by a notable rise in Democrat support (*up from 37% in 2018*). Republican support has remained steady (*64% in 2018, 66% in 2019, and 64% in 2020*).

America’s traditional nuclear power plants produce around 20% of our electricity. Which is closest to your opinion? % “Strongly support nuclear” and “Somewhat support nuclear”

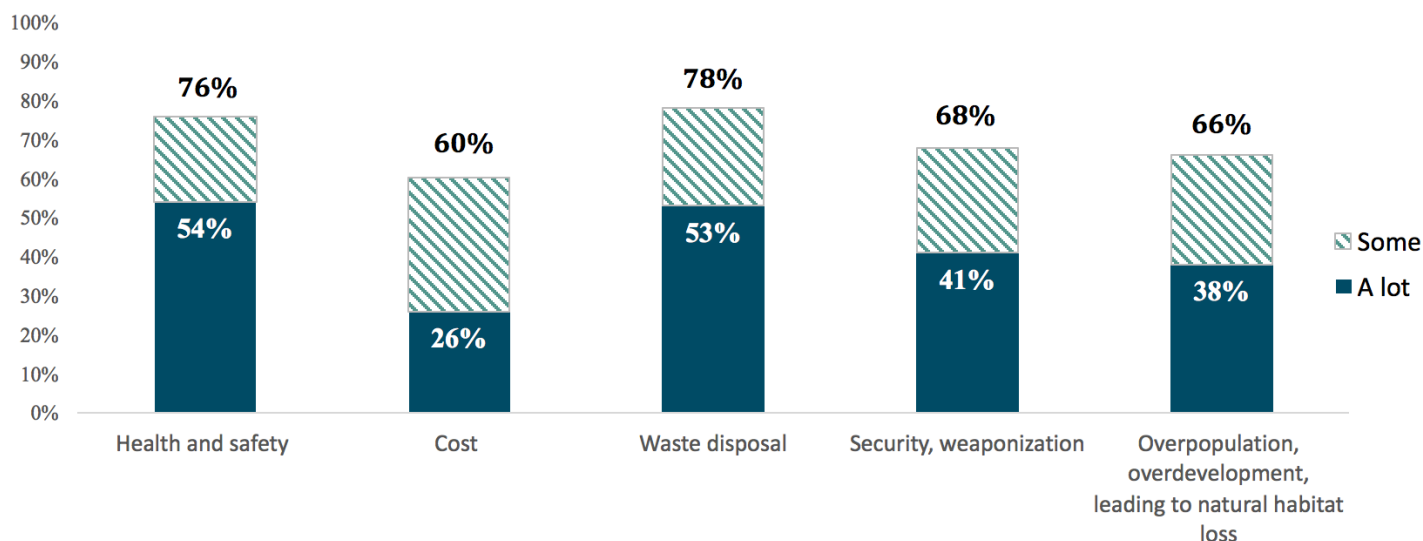


Out of the survey respondents who noted support for nuclear energy, 70% said one of the most important reasons is that it reliably generates a lot of our electricity (*an increase from 64% who said this in 2018*). The belief that nuclear power plants should be kept running until lower cost renewable energy becomes available has also seen increasing support at 69% in 2020, up from 63% of nuclear supporters indicating this in 2018. Among those who do not support nuclear power, 17% indicated they would shift their opinion to support it after learning that we can clean up unhealthy pollution and make the climate stable by modernizing nuclear power. 43% indicated that they might support nuclear energy, but only until lower cost renewable energy becomes available. Further, ecoAmerica asked respondents if they would support moving to new nuclear energy that is fail-safe — 74% of Americans supported this move.

Waste Disposal and Health and Safety Lead Nuclear Energy Concerns

When asked about concerns regarding nuclear energy, 78% of Americans reported that they are concerned about waste disposal, a 6 percentage point decline since 2018, followed by 76% of Americans reporting concern about health and safety, a 4 percentage point decline since 2018. Americans also report concern with security and weaponization (68%), overpopulation and overdevelopment, and cost (60%). Surprisingly, 66% expressed concern that nuclear power would cause overpopulation and overdevelopment, which some may call progress (*74% expressed concern in 2018*).

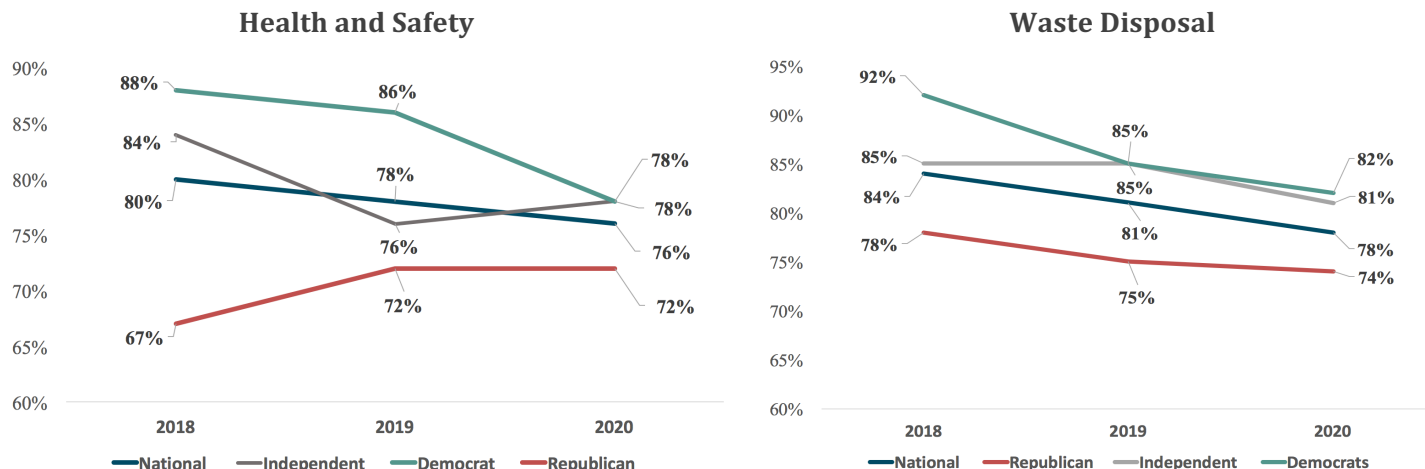
People have concerns about upgrading nuclear energy. Which of the following make you concerned? % “A lot” and “Some”



While a health and safety and waste disposal concerns about nuclear energy remain fairly high, there has been a notable trend downward year-over-year. Nationally, the percentage of Americans concerned about health and safety has dropped four percentage points since 2018 from 80% concerned to 76% concerned. Waste disposal concerns have reduced notably as well, with 84% of Americans concerned in 2018 to 78% concerned in 2020.

When asked about their perspective on how we choose energy going forward, safety was likewise noted. Out of the several options presented, the most votes went to those that named safety. 43% of Americans agree that engineers, scientists and economists should choose energy systems that make us safe and prosperous and 32% say we should do what it takes to choose energy that makes us safe and prosperous for 400 years. Only 12% say that we should protect today’s jobs and companies and accept the possible risk to climate and health that result.

People have concerns about upgrading nuclear energy. Which of the following make you concerned? % “A lot” and “Some”



Full data is available in the accompanying [toplines](#).

Methodology

ecoAmerica designed and administered this survey, which was conducted online September 1st-2nd using Survey Monkey. The survey yielded a total of 1,097 complete adult responses. The sample was drawn from an online panel and the respondents were screened to ensure that they were over the age of 18. The margin of error for the sample is +/-3%. In interpreting the survey results, it is important to note that all sample surveys are subject to possible sampling error. Thus, the results of a survey may differ from the results that would be obtained if the entire population was interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends upon both the total number of respondents in the survey and the percentage distribution of the responses to a particular question. For example, if 50% of the respondents in a sample of 1,097 respondents answered, “Yes” to a particular question, we can be 95% confident that the true percentage would fall within 3 points, or range from 47% to 53%.

Suggested Citation

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ecoAmerica does not hold a formal position on nuclear energy.

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