

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Geoff Garin, Jay Campbell, and Corrie Hunt
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RE: Connecting with Voters on Gas Prices

This memorandum presents the key findings from an in-depth survey Hart Research Associates conducted on behalf of Climate Power and the League of Conservation Voters that examines what voters believe about the causes of rising gasoline prices and what they want their elected officials to do about them. The survey was conducted March 9 to 10 among a representative national cross section of 1,000 voters.

1. To start with the obvious: Gasoline prices are a dominant concern for voters, and they want the President and Congress to take action to lower the price of gasoline.

Fully 73% of voters say that they are very concerned about gasoline prices today, slightly higher than the 68% who say they are very concerned about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Slightly more than half (51%) of voters say that higher gasoline prices are a big problem for them personally, and another 33% say that they are somewhat of a problem. Seventy-three percent (73%) say it is very important for the President and Congress to take action to lower the price of gasoline.

One of the most important takeaways from the survey is that it's essential for Democrats and clean energy advocates to be on the offensive in addressing voters' concerns about gas prices—both by fixing blame where it belongs and offering a clear path forward to voters. It would be dangerous and political malpractice to stand on the sidelines and let the other side define this debate.

2. A large majority of voters see Putin's war as a major cause of rising gasoline prices in the United States, and similarly large majorities also blame price gouging by oil companies and decisions by oil producers to limit production. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of voters say the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on world oil prices is a major cause of high gas prices in the United States, and when voters rank the order of the

causes of high gas prices, Putin's war is at the top of their list. Sixty percent (60%) say that "price gouging and excessive price increases by oil companies to increase their profits" is a major cause of rising gas prices, and 60% also say that "decisions by oil producers in the United States and overseas to limit production in order to keep oil prices high" is a major cause. In ranking the top cause of higher gas prices, more voters blame price gouging and production limits than blame pipeline cancellations and limits on oil drilling, though the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is most frequently selected as the top cause.

3. Of all the actions the President and Congress might take to address the problem of rising gasoline prices and long-term energy costs, the one voters support most strongly and most broadly is cracking down on price gouging and excessive price increases by oil companies. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of voters favor a crackdown on price gouging by oil companies, including 63% who strongly favor it.

One reason voters are so emphatic about cracking down on price gouging is that they believe oil company CEOs are "profiteering" off of the war between Russia and Ukraine and are using the war as an opportunity to raise gas prices just to increase their profits. By 57% to 24%, voters say this is a valid criticism of oil company CEOs while 19% say they do not know enough about it to have an opinion. Only 37% of voters say that the gas prices consumers are paying at the pump are based on actual market conditions and what it costs oil companies to produce gasoline, while 49% say the prices at the pump are a reflection of oil companies wanting to increase their profits as much as possible.

In connection with these attitudes, there is overwhelming support among voters for placing a windfall profits tax on the extra profits oil companies are making from higher gas prices during this period. Eighty percent (80%) of voters favor a windfall profits tax on oil companies, including four in nine voters who strongly favor it.

4. There also is strong and broad support for suspending the federal gasoline tax and banning the export of U.S. oil to China and countries that aligned with Putin. Three quarters of voters say they favor suspending the 18.3-cents-per-gallon federal gasoline tax, with 49% strongly in favor. Support is even greater for banning U.S. oil exports to Putin’s allies (79% favor, including 57% strongly favor).

5. Notwithstanding the common wisdom that higher gasoline prices will be a political windfall for Republicans, the survey results show that Democrats can more than hold their own against Republicans by advocating an agenda that includes: (a) reducing our dependence on oil by moving quickly to expand clean energy alternatives, (b) cracking down on price gouging by oil companies, (c) making electric vehicles more affordable, and (d) suspending the gasoline taxes. By 52% to 48%, voters say they would agree more with a Democrat who takes these positions than with a Republican who says “we should focus on expanding our oil and gas development in the United States, including on public lands and offshore, and allow construction of more oil pipelines.” Swing voters (voters who are neither strong partisans nor strong ideologues) prefer the Democrat by 54% to 46%.

Democrats can increase their advantage on these issues by not taking Republican calls for expanded oil production at face value and by making sure voters understand these proposals for what they really are. For example, by 46% to 36%, voters *oppose* relaxing or eliminating clean water protections that limit the development of shale oil, and voters need to know that this is what Republicans want when they call on America to “drill, baby, drill.”

As noted earlier, a majority of voters say that gasoline prices are higher because of decisions by oil producers to limit production. There is an opportunity for Democrats and others to push back on Republican calls for more production by shining a spotlight on the fact that instead of increasing their current production or developing on the 9,000+ government leases they already have, oil companies are spending their huge profits on stock buybacks to raise their stock prices and reward wealthy shareholders.

Democrats can also strengthen their position in this debate by moving aggressively to make sure voters know that Republicans are joined at the hip with oil company CEOs and big oil lobbyists. Two-thirds of voters say they have little or no confidence in oil industry CEOs and 71% say they have little or no confidence in oil industry lobbyists when it comes to gas prices and the cost of energy, but the hottest place in gas price hell is reserved for “politicians who depend on oil companies for campaign contributions” (76% little or no confidence, including 58% no confidence).

6. The dramatic effect that Putin’s war is having on gas prices is creating the potential for a critical new inflection point when Americans recognize that it is essential to reduce our reliance on oil not only as an environmental imperative, *but also as an economic imperative and a necessity for achieving true energy independence.*

Consider the following:

- 61% say that America’s continued dependence on oil is a major cause of rising gasoline prices today.
- 59% say it is very important for the President and Congress to take action to reduce America’s dependence on oil.

Voters put a premium on making America more energy independent (71% say it is very important for the President and Congress to act on this). *Democrats and clean energy advocates can take ownership of this goal by making the case that the best way for America to be truly energy independent is to increase the production of energy in the United States from clean and renewable sources, while reducing our dependence on oil.* Seventy-seven (77%) percent of voters favor this approach to energy independence (which is a more meaningful long-term goal for voters than “energy security”), including 44% who strongly favor it.

These are the two most important messages to communicate in making the case for reducing our dependence on oil and moving to clean and renewable energy sources instead:

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- ✓ We will continue to experience big spikes in gasoline prices and energy costs as long as we are dependent on oil, because oil supplies are unreliable, dictators like Vladimir Putin and countries like Saudi Arabia use oil as a political weapon, and oil company CEOs are focused on maximizing their profits.
- ✓ Unlike oil, clean and renewable energy sources like solar and wind power won't ever run out and will provide a secure and stable energy supply long into the future.

For Republican-leaning audiences, it also is important to frame the case for renewable energy over oil in nationalistic terms: the price we pay for oil in America is determined by the world oil market, and we can never be truly energy independent and in control of our own energy security as long as we are dependent on oil.