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BOB DOPPELT: Fighting climate change is good politics, polls show

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Fear is often a great motivator. But with elected officials it frequently works the other way. From health care to financial industry reform, members of Congress seem paralyzed by the fear of voter backlash if they support new policies. On climate change, however, new polling indicates Congress should have no fear. Passing sweeping legislation is smart politics for Republicans and Democrats alike.

A lefty group did not do the polling. It was conducted by no less than Republican pollster Frank Luntz, who helped Newt Gingrich craft the “Contract with America.” This is the same guy who in 2002 wrote a memo advising the Bush administration to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate about global warming.

Actually, an environmental group was involved. Luntz was hired by the Environmental Defense Fund to do the polling. Politics makes strange bedfellows.

Luntz conducted a series of studies this past November and December and found that most Americans do believe that climate change is real and that there is strong bipartisan support for congressional action on the issue.

He concluded, however, that focusing on climate change alone is insufficient. There is strong bipartisan support for legislation that boosts national security and energy independence, promotes innovation and new technology, creates jobs and reduces pollution as part of a declining cap on carbon emissions.

“A clear majority of Americans believe climate change is happening. This is true of McCain voters and Obama voters alike,” Luntz said. “And even for those that don’t still believe, it is essential for America to pursue policies that promote energy independence and a cleaner, healthier environment.”

What is especially interesting about Luntz’s polling is that, although a majority of Americans believe global warming is happening, the percentage who think so appears to be declining. This is not surprising. Jobs and the economy are the top issues for most American’s today. The raucous health care debate, anger over the bailout of Wall Street,

and other lunchpail issues have also diverted the public's attention.

But Luntz's polling points to other reasons for the slump in public concern. Due to its "low threat saliency," global warming is tailor-made to be a low human priority. Many people believe the effects of global warming will occur far in the future, or in other regions of the world. Humans respond best to clear and present dangers.

The causes of global warming, such as the carbon dioxide our vehicles emit, are difficult to see, and there is no clear enemy. Humans, on the other hand, react most forcibly when the threats are intentional and personal or when our moral sensibilities are violated.

And there is no single, simple or quick fix for the problem. Humans are most apt to engage in solutions that are easy to implement, straightforward and produce swift, easily measurable results.

Global warming has also been framed as a scientific, environmental and technological problem. As a result, most Americans can't see how it affects their everyday lives. This is one of greatest mistakes of those working to address the issue. Few people understand that the consequences of a warming planet will directly affect their jobs, their family's health and their security.

Even with the sag in concern, Luntz's polling shows that the public wants Congress to act. "People are much more interested in seeing solutions than watching yet another partisan political argument," he said.

Although Luntz's polling focused on congressional action, his findings likely apply to the state and local levels as well. As in Congress, many elected officials are fearful of supporting new policies.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski's top priority, the cap-and-trade-focused Western Climate Initiative, never left the launching pad in the 2009 Oregon legislative session. It also failed in other Western states. Not much else of significance on the energy or climate front was accomplished, either. Only a few bills dealing with energy or the climate are being heard during this month's short Oregon legislative session.

Luntz's polling indicates this is a mistake. State officials should step to the plate and enact bold legislation.

Similarly, the Eugene City Council, Lane County and other local governments should not shy away from adopting policies that promote safe and healthier energy options and reduce carbon emissions.

Local jobs in energy efficiency and many forms of renewable energy will be generated. Air quality will get better, improving local residents' health. And we will enhance our energy security by weaning ourselves from foreign sources.

Despite all of the trials and tribulations our nation has endured in the past few years, and despite a well-funded campaign to derail climate legislation, the American public has stood firm and wants action. Let's see if our elected officials can rise to the challenge.

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