

Public Acceptance of Nuclear Power: A Briefing*

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Of What Use is Public Opinion?

Background

1. Opinions reflect public preferences
 - (a) Voting is an expression of opinion
 - (b) Opinion surveys can be viewed as a surrogate for voting
 - (c) Policy makers are attentive and influenced, to some degree by public opinion (there is considerable evidence showing that citizen policy preferences significantly impact what governments do)
 - (d) Social movement organizations are attentive as a source of legitimacy (“we represent the public”) and a source of recruitment
2. Sampling and other statistical methods are well established
 - (a) Election polls are typically quite accurate

Commonly Voiced Concerns

- A. “The public is capricious in its attitudes, demonstrating arbitrary rapid shifts and swings in preferences.”
 - (1) True for some attitudes, especially attitudes about specific objects or people (such as presidential popularity polls that rise and fall in response to events and media coverage).
 - (2) True for a certain percentage of the public (uninformed and capricious) but they tend to be in opposite directions, thereby canceling each other out.
 - (3) False in general for policy issues; publics show a remarkable degree of stability in their collective policy preferences

See, for example: Page, Benjamin I. and Robert Y. Shapiro.
1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago:
U. of Chicago Pr.

- B. “The public is irrational” (usually voiced when public opinion differs from one’s own opinion)

(2) But specific knowledge is not a pre-condition for voicing an opinion or voting in a democracy.

Criteria of Acceptable Survey Data:

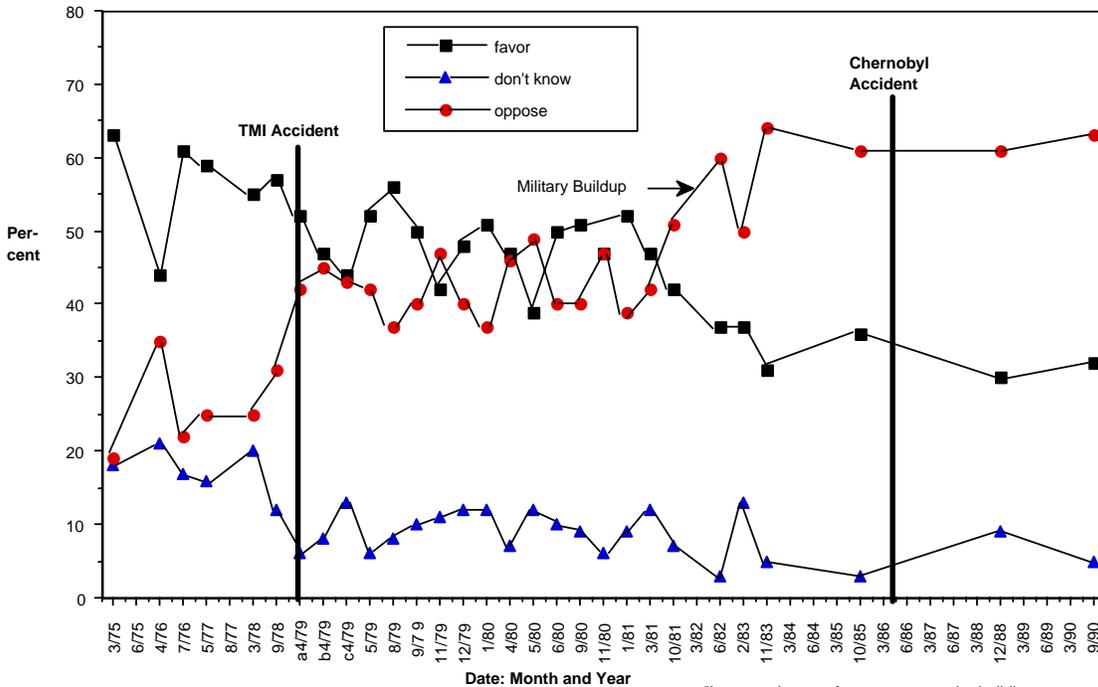
1. National probability samples
2. Multiple data points
3. Consistency of question wording

Key Questions About Nuclear Power:

What has been the historical mood of the public on this technology?

1. General Mood: Harris and 2. Cambridge Report Surveys

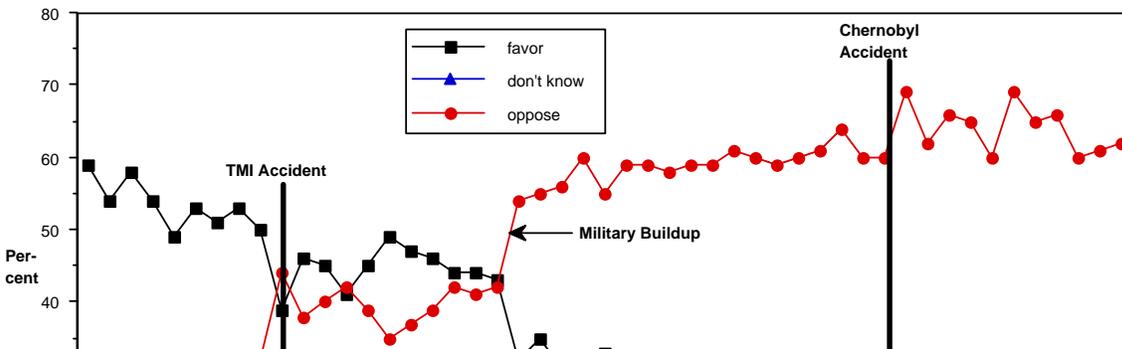
Figure 1. Public Attitudes Toward Building Nuclear Power Plants in the United States



Source: Louis Harris and Associates National Samples

"In general to you favor or oppose the building of more nuclear power plants in the United States"

Figure 2. Public Attitudes Toward Building Nuclear Power Plants in the United States



The most recently available data is generally consistent with the pattern of a decade ago, although there may be some signs that opposition is weakening.

In **March 1999** International Communications Research of Media Pennsylvania polled 1000 registered voters and asked this question and found levels of opposition consistent with the Harris and Cambridge time series:

“Do you favor or oppose the building of more nuclear power plants in the United States?”

Oppose	60%
Favor	26%
Don't Know/Refused	14%

In **March 2001** Gallup polled 1060 adults and found a sizable reduction though still majority opposition:

“I am going to read some specific environmental proposals. For each one, please say whether you generally favor or oppose it. How about...expanding use of nuclear energy?”

Oppose	51%
Favor	44%
No Opinion	5%

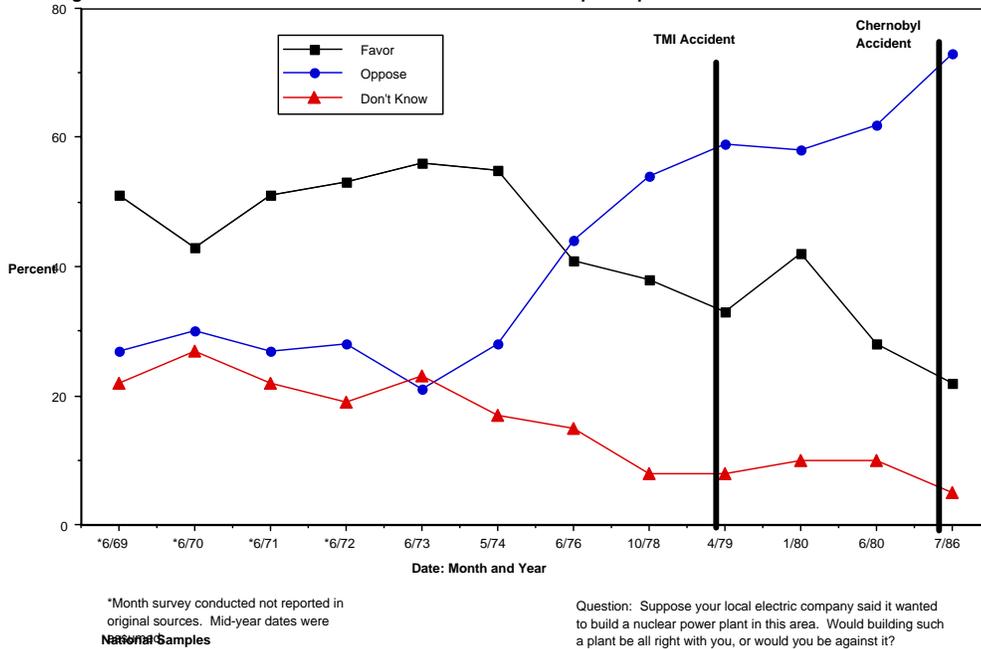
ABCNews/*Washington Post* also conducted two surveys in **2001**, the first in **January** and a second in **June**:

“In general, would you favor or oppose building more nuclear power plants at this time

	January 2001 (N=1350)	June 2001 (N=689)
Oppose	60%	52%
Favor	37%	41%
No Opinion	3%	7%

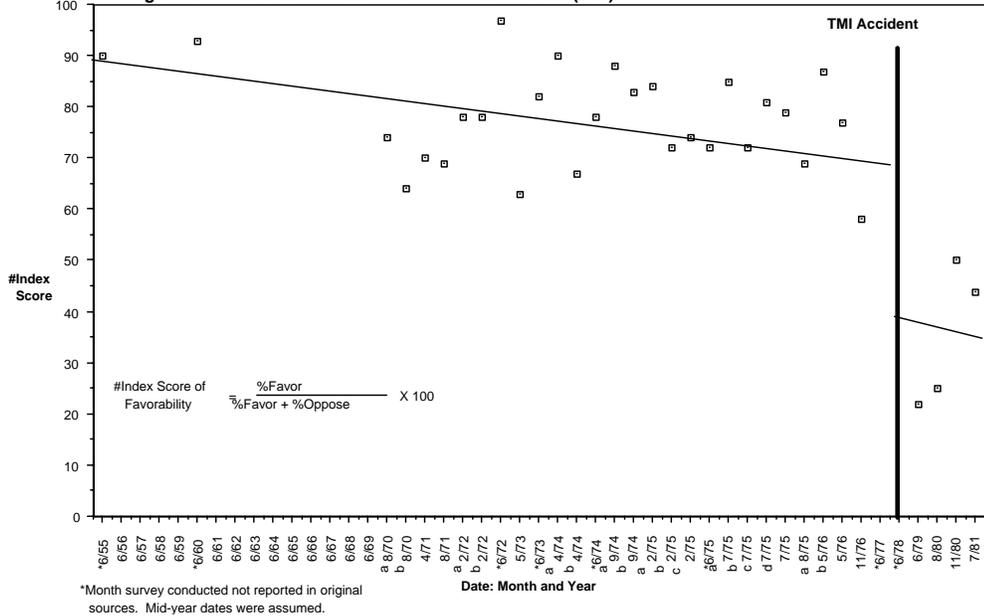
3. **How has the public felt about having a nuclear power plant in or near its community?** (What are your views about having the local electric company...build a nuclear power plant in this area?)

Figure 3. Public attitudes toward construction of local nuclear power plants



4. **How have host communities felt about their nuclear neighbors?**

Host Community Attitudes Toward Nuclear Power Plants
Figure 4. Plants Before and After Three Mile Island (TMI)



To what extent does opposition to the local siting of plants persist?
Three recent polls tend to sustain the past pattern of opposition.

The Associated Press conducted polls in **March 1999** and **April 2000**
asking:

“Would you support or oppose the construction of a nuclear power plant within ten miles of your home?”

	<u>March 1999</u> <u>(N=1015)</u>	<u>April 2000</u> <u>(N=1002)</u>
Oppose	54%	50%
Favor	21%	22%
DK/No opinion	25%	28%

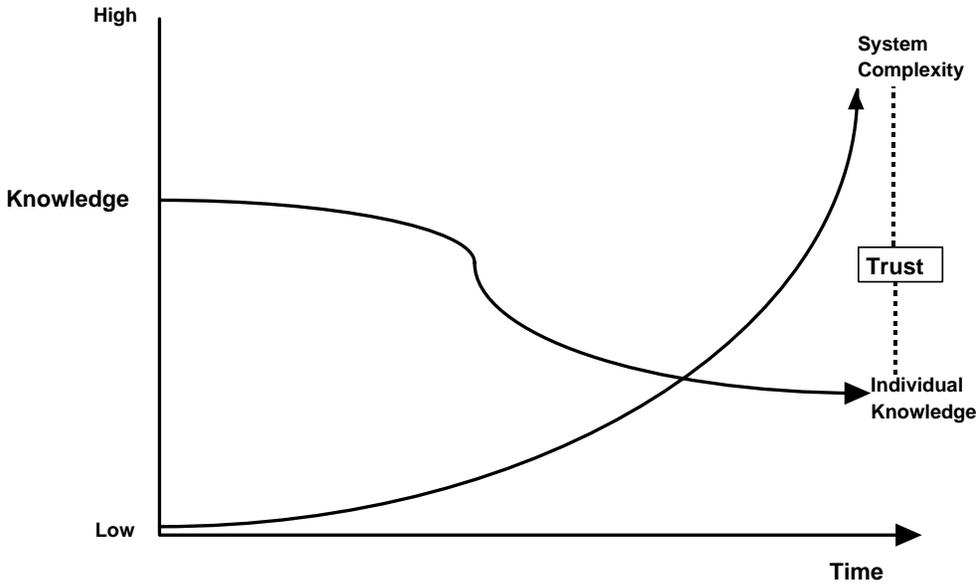
In **March 2001** Gallup asked 554 adults about the local siting issue:

“Overall, would you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the construction of a nuclear energy plant in your area as one of the ways to provide electricity for the U.S.?”

Oppose	63%
Favor	34%
No Opinion	3%

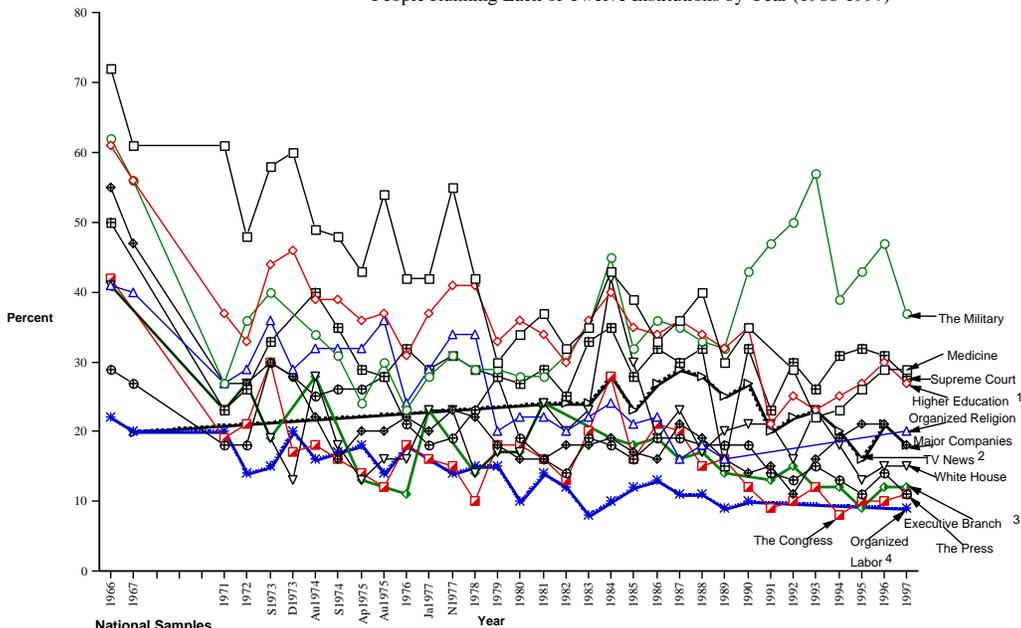
5. Why is trust important in the public acceptance of complex or risky technologies like nuclear power?

FIGURE 5: Role of Trust in Divergence Between Technological Complexity and Individual Knowledge



6. What has been the level of public trust or confidence in America's major institutions?

Figure 6. Percent of the Public in Louis Harris Polls With Great Confidence in the People Running Each of Twelve Institutions by Year (1966-1997)



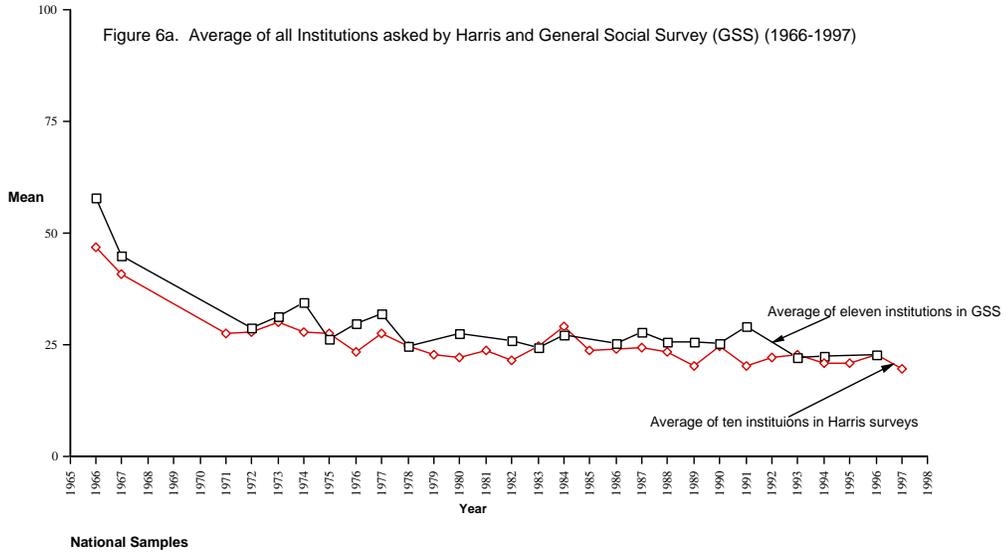
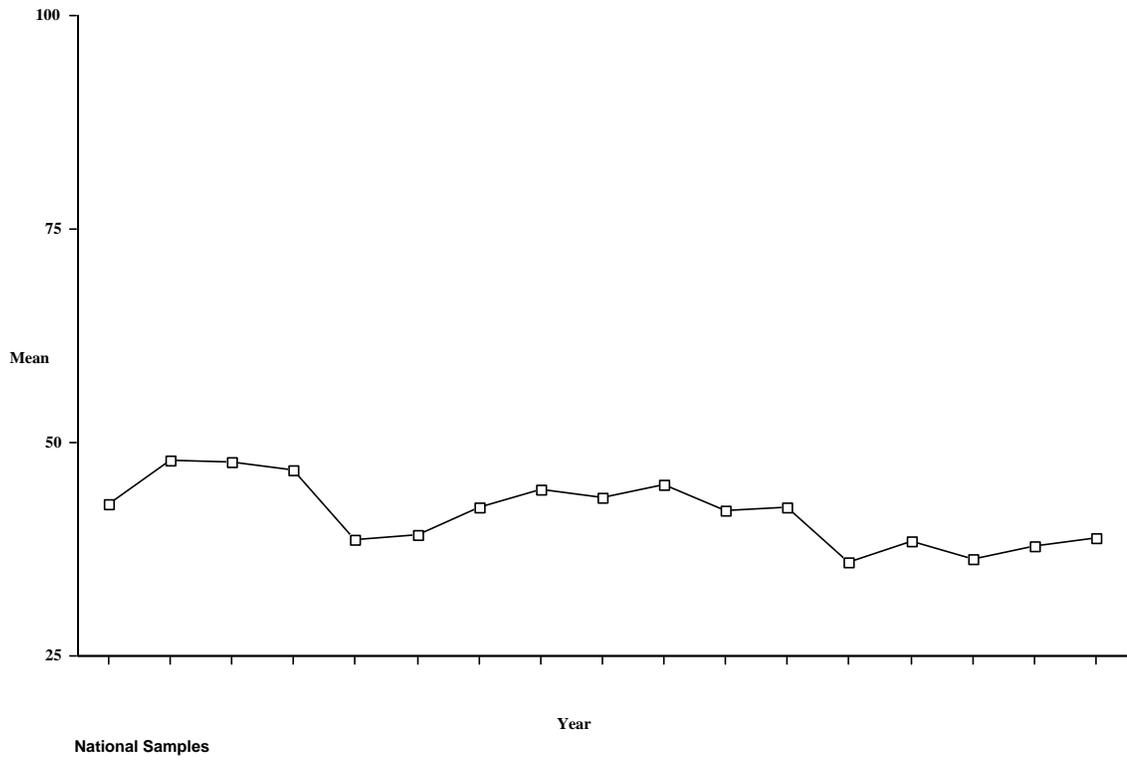
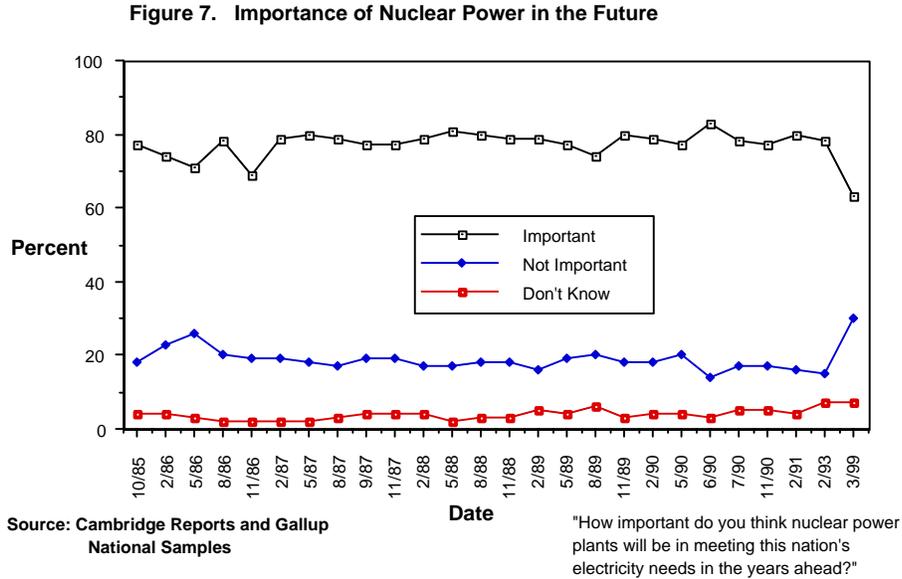


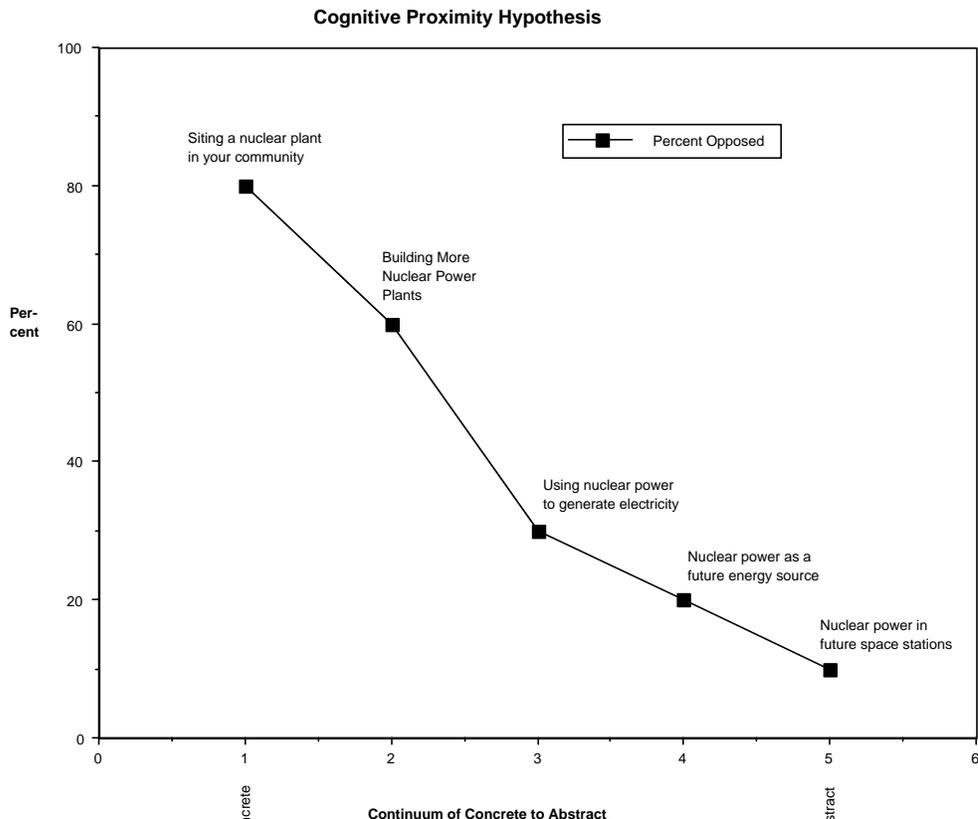
Figure 6b: Mean Confidence Ratings of Ten American Institutions in Gallup Polls by Year (1973-1996)



7. What do Americans think about nuclear power as a future source of Electricity?



8. Inconsistent? Or Consistent? Pattern of Responses: Cognitive Proximity Hypothesis



9. Are Americans willing to accept nuclear energy to avoid climate change?

Table 1. *Gallup*⁺: I'm going to read you some statements, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you agree or disagree with the statement.

a. Using nuclear energy to generate electricity cuts *greenhouse emissions and air pollution*.
(Percent)

	7/90	7-8/91
Agree	52	63
Disagree	21	25
Don't know	27	12

b. We should use more nuclear energy if that will cut greenhouse *gas emissions and air pollution*.
(Percent)

	7/90	7-8/91
Agree	74	71
Disagree	20	26
Don't know	6	3

⁺Sample sizes of approximately 1,000.

The most recent data is from a March 1999 national survey of 1000 registered voters conducted by International Communications Research.

“Various ideas have been offered for dealing with the pollution that causes climate change. I'm going to read you a few, and for each one please tell me if you favor or opposite it. Would that be strongly or somewhat (favor/oppose)?

Use more nuclear power:

	<u>Percent</u>
Strongly Favor	14.4
Favor	27.9
Somewhat Oppose	23.2
Strongly Oppose	31.8
Don't Know/Refused	2.7

10. With respect to nuclear power Americans are: irrational?, fanatical? pragmatic?

11. Can the United States be like France where 79% of their electricity is generated by nuclear power?

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