

Pew published some intriguing [polling results](#) on energy issues just before Christmas. Americans have clearly noticed falling prices at the gas pump, but only half realize that U.S. oil and gas production has soared. So far, the changes haven't affected policy views: a large majority favors expanding use of alternative energy, but solid majorities continue to favor the Keystone pipeline and expanding drilling on federal lands and offshore. (I suspect, however, that this will seem like less of a priority as people get used to lower gasoline prices.) There's very broad support (over 80%, and even among Republicans) for tough CAFE standards. A majority disfavor expansion of nuclear power. A smaller majority oppose fracking. People will differ in their views on those issues, but this majority sentiment may make it a bit harder to cut carbon emissions by expanding use of natural gas and nuclear power.

Notably, there is a big age difference. When asked what approach to energy should be stressed, over 65s are about split between expanding fossil fuels and alternative energy, but the 18-24 year-olds favor alternative energy by 70% to 20%. ([Other studies](#) probe the basis for public attitudes. They confirm the broad support for wind and solar, and public concern about environmental harm caused by energy production (tempered by concern about energy costs.) Race, gender, education and region have smaller effects than age, but still have noticeable impacts on attitudes. The ideal supporter of fossil fuels would apparently be a retired man in a Southern state with a high school education. As today's under-24s age and start turning out to vote more, while today's elderly dwindle, the politics of energy should shift.

Further confirming what we already knew, party affiliation is a huge factor: Republicans favor fossil fuels over alternative energy by 53 to 36 percent, whereas Democrats have a strong preference (72% versus 19%) in the other direction. Since demographics and party affiliation are correlated, it's hard to separate the two, but given the stark difference along party lines, it's hard to avoid the impression that party affiliation and ideology are playing independent roles, not merely reflecting demographics. Unfortunately, the Pew data don't separate out Tea Party Republicans/Fox News viewers, which [other polls](#) suggest are generally much more sharply distinct from other groups than non-Tea Party Republicans.

Because of the age gap, fossil fuels are likely to have diminishing political traction in the future, while alternative energy will have increasing political appeal. Of course, that doesn't necessarily tell us much about how energy politics will unfold over the next few years. As I wrote last week, however, I suspect that expanding drilling will seem like a much lower priority to most people, even if they're still in support of the idea. So expect those issues to fade in the 2016 campaign (at least so long as we don't have an unexpected price spike at the pump.)

