

BLOG Published July 10, 2025 • 6 minute read

Messaging Guidance on Permitting Reform



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There's limited publicly available polling on permitting reform, and any data must also be examined in the context of how little Americans know about—or care about—energy issues.

For example, many survey participants responded positively to the Energy Permitting Reform Act (EPRA) in an August 2024 poll conducted by [Heatmap News](#). But a significant percentage simply didn't know what to make of the proposal. That leaves the door open for tremendous shifts in public opinion as Americans are exposed to more messaging (both positive and negative) on permitting reform.

America's interconnection queue is dominated by clean energy, with thousands of GW waiting to be deployed. We can't realize that potential without permitting reform and massive transmission expansion. The need for faster permitting and additional energy infrastructure only grows more urgent as energy demand increases. To maintain momentum for the energy transition, Congress needs to act soon to reform our broken permitting process.

Below, we've included helpful findings from our own surveys, as well as evidence from other high-quality polls that can help guide your thinking on messaging permitting reform.

Top Takeaways

- Climate and energy issues are low-salience for key voters and only motivate our base.
- Concerns about other costs—groceries in particular—are often more pressing for most people than concerns about energy prices and utility bills.
- Most people support reforming government regulations and making the government more efficient and less wasteful. Almost 60% of Americans hold a negative view of the federal government.
- Voters are more likely to trust Republicans to fix parts of the government that aren't working. They also trust Republicans more to increase domestic energy production by a 12-point margin.
- Previous permitting reform proposals have received support from a slim majority (52%) of Americans, with the remainder evenly split between 'not sure' and 'opposed.'

Bottom Line: Americans aren't especially excited about permitting reform itself, but they are compelled by what it can deliver. They want lower energy costs, more reliable power, and a government that works. The problem is that they are not convinced Democrats can get it done.

That skepticism and limited enthusiasm may make it difficult to craft a winning message for Democrats on permitting reform. More effective messages on energy focus on cutting costs for consumers, growing energy independence, and creating good-paying, durable jobs.

For those who do message on permitting reform, center the following core principles:

- Emphasize its importance for energy affordability and reliability, not climate change
- Keep your language simple
- Frame it as an appeal to voters' existing priorities for the energy sector, like energy independence, rather than trying to make them care about other, lower priority issues like the environment

Relevant Research

In open-ended questions, cited clean energy's primary benefits as environmental, including lower greenhouse gas emissions and reduced local pollution.

- 48% say climate change and the environment are the best reasons to support clean energy buildout.
- 19% volunteered that economic benefits, like lower costs or better-paying jobs, were the best reason to support clean energy buildout.

And voters *are* broadly supportive of clean energy buildout. In most surveys, 70-75% of Americans say they support building more clean energy in the United States.

But climate change and environmental protection are low-salience issues for voters.

- Just 4% of survey participants rank climate change as their top issue for elected officials.
- In a recent Gallup survey, a higher percentage—21%—included these issues among their top priorities, but those voters were disproportionately Kamala Harris supporters.

Taken together, these stats suggest voters aren't opposed to clean energy but don't view it as a high priority for candidates. In short, in a perfect world, they're on board, but that support can easily fall by the wayside in the face of other issues.

Message Testing on Clean Energy

Even though voters don't make the connection between economic benefits and clean energy independently, they respond exceptionally well to messaging that draws that connection for them.

In Third Way's message testing, we found that the most effective messages in support of clean energy presented it as a tool to meet Americans' other priorities: energy independence, stable and low-cost energy, creating high-paying jobs that don't require a college degree, and improving public health outcomes through cleaner air and water.

When asked why they found these messages effective, respondents, especially young ones, cited the potential to keep costs down and drive salaries up.

Existing Polling on Permitting

The most high-profile polling on permitting reform comes from Heatmap News, which worked with Embold Research to poll 5,202 American adults in 2024.

- 52% of Americans said they backed the general idea of the bipartisan permitting reform bill, introduced by Senators Manchin and Barrasso. About one quarter of respondents opposed the bill, and another quarter said they weren't sure.

- Republicans were somewhat more amenable to the bill than Democrats: 58% of GOP voters supported the proposal, while only 47% of Democrats did. Independents were most skeptical at 44%.

The conservative think tank Rainey Center surveyed more than 1,000 Americans in 2024.

- 56% of Americans agree with the statement that there are “too many government regulations preventing the development of new infrastructure,” with Republicans (67%) expressing more widespread agreement than Democrats (49%) and Independents (52%).

Michigan Case Study

In late 2023, Michigan passed legislation to shift permitting and siting for clean energy from local authorities to the state’s Public Service Commission.

Third Way partnered with Impact Research to survey likely voters in Michigan and gauge their reactions to the legislation, complemented by three focus groups of undecided voters (including one group of non-college white women, one of Black men ages 18-34, and one drawn from union households).¹

We see Michigan as a live test case for how voters respond when clean energy permitting reform changes in their communities. A few topline from our focus groups:

- In our focus groups, most participants didn’t know the law existed. After our moderators explained it, presenting arguments in favor and against the new law, participants largely supported the siting reforms.
- Participants liked the idea that landowners should have the final say in how their land is used, including the right to host clean energy projects.
- But support was fairly weak (more “sure, I’m fine with that,” than “I love this!”), and the proposals were less popular among those who were already skeptical of clean energy.

We also polled 800 likely voters from across Michigan. Primary takeaways included:

- A majority of Michigan voters supported the provision, including over 50% of Independents and persuadable voters.
- Opposition messaging that paints the law as government overreach into local communities knocks support down by 8 points, leaving it at just a slim plurality.

- Successful counter-arguments restored support to the pre-opposition messaging level. These messages highlighted property owners' rights, energy diversity, and increased American energy independence.

Conclusion

Public opinion on permitting reform is under-researched, but based on current data, support for permitting reform proposals is soft and malleable. Messaging on permitting reform is, therefore, unlikely to perform well with voters and will quickly be overwhelmed by other, more pressing issues on voters' minds.

ENDNOTES

1. From September 9-15, 2024, Third Way and Impact Research conducted a multi-modal poll of 800 likely voters in Michigan built to understand how voters perceived clean energy in Michigan. Responses were collected via phone and text-to-web surveys. The margin of error for the sample size is +/- 3.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for subgroups varies and is higher. The research was not conducted on behalf of the Slotkin campaign and was not focused on the 2024 Senate election—it was built to understand how voters perceived EVs in Michigan.