

# Public Opinion and the Energy Sector

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# Is Public Opinion Important?

- ▶ Yes....and no
- ▶ The energy sector is complicated AND complex.
  - It is a highly “expert” field, where judging or deciding rightly, justly, or wisely is important
- ▶ Public opinion is important, but it is subjective, in contrast to knowledge and fact
  - If public opinion really counts, then why do people frequently behave quite differently than polls indicate?
- ▶ Does it matter?

# Awareness of energy issues is on the rise

- ▶ Important to the economy, environment, social policy & politics
- ▶ Energy experts are playing a more influential role
- ▶ But there is still much we don't know about how the public thinks about energy
  - Unclear how well political leaders or experts understand or reflect the public's views and values around energy
- ▶ Alignment or divergence of expert views compared to public attitudes is critical

# Public Knowledge Level is Low

- ▶ Some recent work suggests that
  - “public’s knowledge level is low on energy, with significant numbers who do not know some basic facts about how energy is produced.”
  - “profound mismatch in how leaders and the public define the problem and think about solutions.”

Source: **Putting the Pieces Together: How Do Citizens and Experts See the Energy Issue?** A Report for the Kettering Foundation from Public Agenda, February 2008. (Public Agenda is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues and work together to find solutions. It was founded by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1975.)

# What's the problem? Partial understanding

- ▶ Energy is complicated and complex, with many connections and sub-issues
- ▶ Citizens have "... a limited understanding of the connections between these various energy sub-issues.
- ▶ "Experts, by contrast, tended to view the nation's energy dilemma as a complex, interactive mix of economic, national security and environmental challenges."

# From Opinion to Judgement

- ▶ What we know about public opinion is that it is volatile and changeable
  - In the initial stages, people may not understand an issue well; the quality of public opinion is raw and unformed
- ▶ But, peoples' views can change over time from "opinion" to "judgement"
  - When public opinion is fully developed, opinion surveys will reveal a reliable and stable picture of people's thinking, a picture which accurately reflects their values, priorities, and beliefs.

# Opinion vs. Judgment

## Opinion

- Is volatile.
- Emphasizes diversity.
- Relies on incomplete information.
- Looks like a knee-jerk response.
- Little or no engagement in the issue or opportunity.
- Compartmentalized thinking.
- An emphasis on risks.
- Consequences are not considered or addressed.
- An emphasis on the “facts”, laws and rights.

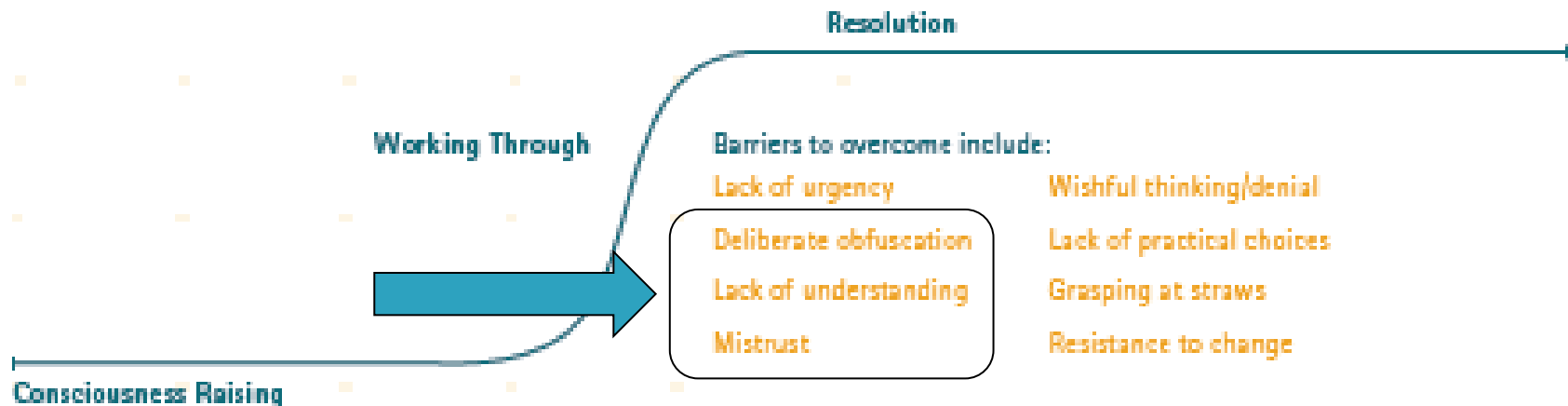
## Judgement

- Is mature and stable.
- Emphasizes coherence.
- Relies on relevant and useful information.
- Looks like a fair-weighting.
- Higher level engagement in the issue or opportunity.
- Full context thinking
- Reconciliation of risks and benefits.
- Understanding and acceptance of the consequences.
- An emphasis on values and ethics.

# The Energy Learning Curve™

## The Energy Learning Curve™

A new way of interpreting opinion data to establish how best to move public opinion forward on public policy issues. Public opinion moves through several stages when grappling with a complex problem.



See Yankelevich, "The New Pragmatism," 2009, <http://www.prdlogenda.org/Files/NewProg7.pdf>.



# The Gap between Experts and Laypeople

- ▶ Determining “energy policy “ is a complicated technical process for experts.
  - The focal point tends to be the “evidence”
- ▶ Judging the acceptability of a policy is a complicated social process for laypeople.
  - The focal point tends to be “values”
- ▶ How do we bridge this gap?

# Some Keys to Closing the Gaps

- ▶ *Public Agenda* suggests five ways in which experts and leaders can help the public come to terms with energy issues:
  1. Nurturing more systemic thinking among the public about energy problems
  2. Viewing conservation, especially through increased efficiency, as a place to begin creating momentum for change
  3. Building on the shared support among citizens and experts for renewable energy
  4. Building on the common ground about the need for better leadership
  5. Engaging the public in the search for solutions, beginning with those aspects of energy that strike closest to home

# Credits

- ▶ Decision Partners
- ▶ Public Agenda

**Thank you!**

