

U.S. Public Favors Raising Auto Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) Standards

May 11, 2006

With gas prices pushing \$3.00 a gallon, the Republican leadership in Congress is pushing legislation that would do what until recently was considered politically unthinkable: force U.S. automakers to raise fuel efficiency standards. Efforts to raise the Corporate Average Efficiency Standards, known as CAFE standards, have failed since Congress passed legislation in 1995 that blocked any change in the rules.

But surveys show that the American public favors higher fuel efficiency standards and supported them long before high prices at the pump became a burning political issue.

A February 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center on possible government policies to address U.S. energy needs found that 86 percent were in favor of requiring better fuel efficiency for cars, trucks and SUVs. Twelve percent said they opposed such regulations.

A poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes and fielded by Knowledge Networks in January 2005 asked respondents to assume that requiring car manufacturers to meet higher fuel efficiency standards would mean "it would cost more to buy or lease a car." Nonetheless, 77% supported requiring them, with just 20 percent opposed. This was a bipartisan view, favored by 74% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats.

Polls also show that the American public does not believe the U.S. government is doing enough to conserve energy. In November 2005, the Civil Society Institute asked respondents whether, in view of reports that fuel supplies were likely to get scarcer and more expensive, they believed the United States had done enough to develop alternative energy resources and to conserve fuel use, through steps such as requiring more efficient vehicles. Eighty-two percent of the respondents said the United States had not done enough; twelve percent said the United States had done about the right amount. Three percent believed the United States had done too much.

Support for Raising CAFE Standards

Would you favor or oppose the government...requiring better fuel efficiency for cars, trucks, and SUVs?

Favor 86%

Pew 2/06

Assuming it would cost more to buy or lease a car, would you approve or disapprove of the government requiring car manufacturers to meet higher fuel efficiency standards than they do now?

Approve
Overall 77%
Republicans 74%
Democrats 83%

PIPA/KN 1/05

The same survey found that nearly eight in ten Americans agreed with the statement, "We need higher federal fuel-efficiency standards for vehicles now in order to conserve more energy, making us less dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and to reduce the ill effects of global warming."

The House is expected to consider legislation by the end of May giving the President greater authority to tighten CAFE standards.

President Bush asked for such powers April 27 during a visit to a gas station in Biloxi, Miss., where he touted his administration's efforts to bring down fuel prices. "I encourage Congress to give me that authority," the U.S. president said, promising to use "it wisely."

Congress set the fuel-efficiency standards in 1975 in response to soaring fuel prices resulting from the 1973-74 OPEC oil embargo. The regulations require car manufacturers to meet average fuel efficiency standards for their fleets of passenger cars and light trucks.