

Poll: President Obama voters don't want Keystone



The poll reveals an electorate deeply split on the Canada-to-Texas oil pipeline. | AP Photo

by Erica Martinson

Environmentalists armed with new poll numbers have a warning for President Barack Obama: Approving the Keystone XL pipeline would put him at odds with core members of his base.

The poll reveals an electorate deeply split on the Canada-to-Texas oil pipeline, which is wildly popular among Republicans and almost equally unpopular among Democrats. A small majority of people overall either support the project or don't know what to think, according to results provided to POLITICO.

But the Center for Biological Diversity, the group that commissioned the poll, says the president should pay attention to what his most fervent supporters are saying. Sixty-eight percent of people who voted for Obama want him to reject the pipeline, the poll found.

Opposition is especially strong among Obama voters age 18 to 29, according to the survey conducted by Public Policy Polling. More than 60 percent think he would be breaking his promises if he OKs the pipeline — and 16 percent would feel betrayed.

Of course, Obama has already won his second term and will most likely never face the electorate again. But he's also spoken of his desire to keep his base fired up during his second term.

Keystone could put a quick kibosh to that, said Jerry Karnas, the environmental group's national field director.

"This thing is a potential mass demoralizer for a large amount of Democrats," Karnas said.

“Keystone is bad news for America, its wildlife and the future health of our climate — and the people who put President Obama in the White House know it,” he added.

Administration officials have repeatedly said they’ll make the pipeline decision based on facts and science. The White House stressed Tuesday that Keystone isn’t even on the president’s desk.

“In line with long-standing precedent, the State Department is conducting the assessment of the project,” White House spokesman Clark Stevens said. He added that Obama will pursue his promises to confront climate change at the same time that he supports efforts to increase U.S. energy independence.

Still, the poll’s findings offer a glimpse at some of the political considerations at play as the administration weighs its stance on Keystone, an issue that pits supporters’ promises of jobs and energy independence versus fervent opposition from climate activists.

Some people proffering advice for the president say approving the pipeline would be a smart move to the middle — for instance, a January editorial in the scientific journal *Nature* said it would “bolster his credibility within industry and among conservatives” as he pursues strong action on climate change.

But Karnas said Obama needs to think longer term.

“His legacy is really hanging in the balance right now,” Karnas said. “He’s looking a lot more like an oil and gas president than he is a solar, wind and innovation guy.”

For the electorate as a whole, 50 percent of people surveyed said they approve of Keystone after being read a series of facts concerning the pipeline, Karnas said, while 42 percent disapproved and 8 percent are unsure. That’s much different from a recent Fox News poll that said 70 percent of registered voters support building the pipeline.

In the Center for Biological Diversity’s poll, the pipeline has opened a vast partisan gap: Seventy-six percent of Republicans say Keystone would be in the national interest while 72 percent of Democrats say it would not be, Karnas said.

The poll tested the opinions of 1,122 registered voters, including 536 who voted for Obama in 2012 and 431 who range from 18 to 29 years old.

The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for the overall survey, 4.3 percentage points for the Obama voters and 4.7 percentage points for Democrats and young people.

Greens “know where Republicans stand on the issues, but we wanted to measure the level of intensity of the people who put Obama in office,” Karnas said. He said the poll was purposely heavy on young voters to take the hard-to-reach demographic’s temperature on Keystone.

“These are the folks who walked neighborhoods two election cycles in a row,” Karnas said.

If the president were to approve the pipeline, 49 percent of young Obama voters polled said they would be disappointed, and an additional 16 percent said they would feel betrayed.

The results also show a deep divide in how much young voters as a whole care about the issue: Forty-five percent of 18- to 29-year-olds said they are “not that concerned” about Keystone, compared with 40 percent who are “very concerned” and 15 percent who are “somewhat concerned.” (Women are more likely than men to care.) A slight majority of young voters said it wouldn’t be in the best interests of the U.S. to approve the pipeline.

That’s in response to an explanation of the project that said tar sands oil “produces two to three times more greenhouse gases than conventional oil. If it’s built, the pipeline would cross wetlands, rivers and grasslands. The U.S. government predicts there could be up to 100 oil spills from the Keystone pipeline.”

More than 60 percent of young Hispanic voters said they weren’t that concerned about the pipeline’s environmental, climate change, greenhouse gas or water and wildlife impacts. They also approved of the oil being shipped overseas and think the pipeline will increase energy independence, although 49 percent said Obama would be breaking campaign promises if he approves the pipeline.

Voters overall also think Congress should stay out of the Keystone issue, the poll found: Fifty-three percent disapprove of congressional interference.