

# ANALYSIS: Support for nuke-free Japan defies government calculations

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## THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

Policymakers determined to maintain nuclear energy believed most people would still want it as part of the nation's power generation despite the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

Their calculations were way off.

In a new type of government poll, 46.7 percent of respondents favored scrapping nuclear power generation by 2030 after hearing expert opinions and holding discussions among themselves, according to the results released on Aug. 22.

In fact, anti-nuclear sentiment has grown so large that it could force the government to adjust its plan for the nation's long-term energy policy and will likely become a key issue in election campaigns.

The deliberative polling was conducted to measure levels of support for three options the government proposed for the ratio of nuclear energy in power generation in 2030.

The two other options--15 percent and 20-25 percent--drew support from 15.4 percent and 13 percent of respondents, respectively.

Government officials expected the 15 percent option would prove most popular, garnering support from both anti-nuclear and pro-nuclear voters.

In May, nuclear policy minister Goshi Hosono was so confident that he said the 15 percent option will form a basis for government discussions.

"If voters discuss the issue, opinions will converge on 15 percent," a senior industry ministry official said before the two-day discussions as part of the deliberative polling ended on Aug. 5.

The government said it will establish a new energy policy based on a "national debate" following the disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant last year.

The nuclear power ratio in 2030 will be a pillar of the new policy.

disaster.

To foster a national debate, the government has conducted public hearings and sought public opinions over the Internet and through other means on top of the deliberative polling.

At public hearings held in 11 cities, only a few people selected by a drawing were allowed to speak, although 1,447 applied after identifying the option they favored.

Sixty-eight percent of the 1,447 applicants backed the nuclear-free option, while 11 percent and 16 percent of the applicants supported the 15 percent option and the 20-25 percent option, respectively.

The government also received 89,000 opinions during the public comment period between July 2 and Aug. 12. According to an interim report on about 7,000 opinions released on Aug. 22, 81 percent called for scrapping nuclear power generation outright, and 9 percent backed phasing out nuclear power.

Government officials had downplayed the overwhelming support for the nuclear-free option at the public hearings.

"Many of those who want to state their opinions support zero tolerance," the senior industry ministry official said, adding that the government could argue that the public hearing figures are biased in favor of the anti-nuclear stance.

The deliberative polling was expected to be more neutral. The initial telephone survey covered 6,849 eligible voters selected at random as in an ordinary opinion poll. Of them, 285 attended the discussions and answered questionnaire surveys before and after the talks.

The three surveys were designed to gauge how voters changed their opinions, particularly after they heard expert opinions and held group discussions.

Government officials expected support for the 15 percent option would increase when voters learned that going nuclear-free could stunt economic growth, increase carbon dioxide emissions and raise electricity bills.

In reality, however, support for the 15 percent option fell from 16.8 percent in the initial telephone survey to 15.4 percent in the third survey after the discussions, while support for the nuclear-free option jumped from 32.6 percent to 46.7 percent.

Support for the 20-25 percent option remained unchanged at 13 percent.

"The 15 percent option has sent only a weak message to the public," Yasunori Sone, a professor of political science at Keio University, who chaired the committee in charge of the deliberative polling, said on Aug. 22.

The government plans to decommission nuclear reactors past 40 years of service, which would reduce the ratio of nuclear energy in power generation to 15 percent in 2030.

But the government has not made clear whether it will eventually abolish nuclear power generation or maintain a certain level of nuclear energy after 2030, when it adopts the 15 percent option.

The government postponed a decision on the post-2030 course because anti-nuclear and pro-nuclear members of an industry ministry panel failed to reach an agreement when they discussed the three options in May.

Sone said the two-day discussions, as part of the deliberative polling, failed to convince many participants of the safety of nuclear power generation.

An overwhelming 81 percent of voters picked "securing safety" as the top consideration for a new energy policy in the final survey, up from 68 percent in the initial survey.

The figure was well above 16 percent who chose "stable supply of energy," 2 percent who cited "cost of power generation," and 1 percent who selected "prevention of global warming."

During the discussions on Aug. 4-5, one participant said safety is the top priority in raising children. Another said disposal of nuclear fuel waste cannot be described as safe.

"We can understand that the public chose (the zero percent option) after making up their mind to promote renewable energy and change their lifestyles," Sone said.

The government plans to decide on a new energy policy at the Energy and Environment Council by the end of September, after a new research panel of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan makes its proposals.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for political leaders to ignore public calls for a nuclear-free Japan.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda on Aug. 6 instructed four Cabinet ministers to identify potential problems when nuclear power is phased out and offer solutions.

On Aug. 22, he met with representatives of citizens groups that organize weekly protests outside the prime minister's office against the government decision to reactivate nuclear reactors.

"It is necessary to touch on 'zero nuclear power generation' if (Noda) wants to win the DPJ presidential election (expected on Sept. 21)," a lawmaker close to the prime minister said.

Anti-Noda lawmakers in the DPJ are planning to bar his re-election, with zero nuclear power generation as a key point of confrontation.

If Noda dissolves the Lower House in the near future, as he has suggested, the nuclear power policy is certain to become a key issue in the subsequent election.

Motohisa Furukawa, who is in charge of energy policy as national policy minister, said at a news conference Aug. 21 that the government intends to build a society that does not depend on nuclear power generation.

Seiji Maehara, chairman of the DPJ's Policy Research Committee, also said Japan must aim to become a nuclear-free society.

But it remains unclear whether the government can decide to abolish nuclear power generation by 2030.

"It is extremely important how to maintain nuclear technologies and how to secure experts for decommissioning reactors at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant," Hosono told a news conference on Aug. 21.

In addition, the business community is staunchly opposed to scrapping nuclear power generation.

Tadashi Okamura, chairman of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, submitted a statement to Noda on Aug. 22, which said the three nuclear energy options the government proposed for 2030 are all unfeasible.

Cabinet ministers have indicated the possibility of an alternative to the three nuclear energy options.

"It does not mean that the options are limited to three," Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura said.

Industry minister Yukio Edano said, "We are not necessarily sticking to (the target year of 2030)."

These statements suggest that the government may adopt a nuclear-free policy but still emasculate it by leaving the target year ambiguous or adding preconditions.

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