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Energy Initiative Provides Boost for Nixon Alternative Energy Mandate Could Benefit Candidacy

To: Ballot Initiative Strategy Center

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Executive Summary

Missouri voters broadly support the development of clean, alternative energy and, an initiative that requires investor-owned utilities to generate a percentage of their electricity from clean, alternative sources would stand a good chance of passing in November. The initiative, as we tested it, starts with 59 – 30 percent support that grows to 65 – 27 percent as we go through the survey.

Perhaps most important is how the measure could help shape electoral debates. Such an initiative is viewed as a forward-looking plan that can be a boost for the economy and create new jobs of the future. Voters think it also can lessen Missouri's dependence on foreign energy, clean its air, and help solve global warming. Opposing the initiative puts candidates on the wrong side of public opinion and casts them as stuck in the past, without a real plan for the future.

In this vein, this initiative can be a boon to Attorney General Jay Nixon in his race for Governor. After a vote where Nixon and the largely unknown Republican Kenny Hulshof have biographical information and brief messaging introduced for them to simulate the opening round of a campaign, Nixon leads Hulshof by 52 – 39 percent. After a debate about the initiative, with Nixon supporting it and Hulshof opposing it, Nixon's lead grows to 53 – 33 percent. Most of the movement is away from Hulshof, as opposed to towards Nixon. This is both good and bad news, as it does not provide Nixon with a powerful talking point, but it casts Hulshof as a candidate stuck in the past who is in the pocket of special interests and has no real plan to move Missouri forward.

The following are findings from a survey of 602 likely Missouri voters we conducted for the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center (BISC) on February 14-19, 2008.

Key Findings

- **The initiative starts with broad majority support, and builds additional support after a balanced debate for and against it.** The alternative energy initiative starts out with 59 percent support and 30 percent opposition. Normally, initiatives that pass start out with higher support than this. After voters hear balanced information for and against the initiative, support for it increases to 65 percent, with 27 percent opposing. This is atypical for ballot initiatives—their support usually drops in a balanced debate—and suggests that the initiative’s majority can be maintained or even increased in a well-funded campaign. Much of the initiative’s growth occurs among important electoral audiences: Independent men move towards the initiative by 15 points, moderate and conservative Democrats move towards it by 7 points, and seniors move towards the initiative by 21 points.
- **The alternative-energy initiative has strong future-oriented imagery associated with it.** Initially, 65 percent of voters think it will take Missouri to a better future, while only 20 percent think it will set Missouri back. Seventy percent think it will make us less dependent on foreign oil, and only 14 percent disagree. Voters see an alternative energy initiative as an economic boon, as well: they think it will create jobs in Missouri by a 57 – 23 percent margin, and they think it will strengthen Missouri’s economy by a 53 – 25 percent margin.
- **Jay Nixon, despite his current name-identification advantage, starts with a small majority after both candidates are introduced.** Nixon is known by 76 percent of the electorate, but once voters hear positive messages from Nixon and Republican Kenny Hulshof, Nixon holds a 52 – 39 percent lead. This includes a 1-point lead among Independents of 44 – 43 percent.
- **After a balanced debate, the alternative energy ballot initiative helps solidify Nixon’s electoral advantage in the gubernatorial contest.** After voters hear balanced profiles of Jay Nixon and Kenny Hulshof, Nixon leads by 13 points, 52 – 39 percent. Nixon grows his lead by 7 points to a 20-point advantage, 53 – 33 percent, after voters hear Nixon’s reasons for supporting the initiative and Hulshof’s reasons for opposing it, as well as attacks on each candidate for their stances on the initiative. Voters mostly move away from Hulshof and not towards Nixon. Nixon’s edge among Independents grows 22 points as a result of the debate about the alternative energy initiative. Women over 50 years old move 13 points towards Nixon, moderate and conservative Democrats move 18 points towards Nixon, and voters over 50 without a college degree move 12 points towards Nixon.

Missouri Divided About Its Direction

Missourians are divided about the direction of the state. Forty two percent think the state is headed in the right direction, while 41 percent think it is headed in the wrong direction. Predictably, with a Republican governor, Republicans are more bullish on the state, as they believe things are going in the right direction 69 percent – 17 percent in the right direction. Independents match the overall electorate at 42 – 40 percent, while Democrats are pessimistic, at 22 – 63 percent. One particular group of note is rural voters; despite 6 percent more self-identifying as Republican than Democrats, they are negative on the direction of the state, at 39 – 48 percent right to wrong direction.

Serious Concerns About Energy Independence

Concerns about dependence on foreign energy weigh heavily on voters. Fully 61 percent of them call our dependence on foreign energy a very serious concern, and 87 percent call it a serious concern. They see it as just as serious as education—a major state issue—and a more serious concern than high taxes. It is a bipartisan worry: 65 percent of Democrats, 65 percent of Independents, and 56 percent of Republicans call it a very serious concern.

Global warming is a concern that most people share, but it does not have near the intensity of dependence on foreign energy. While 68 percent of people call it a serious concern, only 36 percent of voters think it is a very serious concern. Unlike with energy independence, there is a strong partisan divide on the seriousness of the issue: 51 percent of Democrats think it is a very serious concern, while only 15 percent of Republicans feel the same way.

The cost of electricity bills is also a low-intensity concern for voters, at least at this particular moment. Seventy-three percent of voters call it a serious concern, but only 33 percent call it very serious. This is much more of a concern for downscale voters: 51 percent of voters with no education past high school call it a very serious concern, but only 17 percent of those with post-graduate degrees say the same.

Table 1: Concerns

	Very Serious	Very or Somewhat Serious
High cost of health care	73	91
Dependence on foreign energy	61	87
The quality of education in public schools	60	85
Taxes that are too high	54	84
Salaries and wages are not keeping up with the cost of living	53	82
Global warming	36	68
Electricity costs	31	73

Partisan Environment Competitive

Like they are about the direction of their country, Missourians are very split on their choice for president in 2008. In a head to head matchup, both of the Democratic candidates are narrowly behind John McCain right now. Barack Obama trails John McCain 48 – 43 percent, while Hillary Clinton runs behind McCain 49 - 42 percent.

Obama and McCain both have positive favorability ratings; Obama stands at 45 – 34 percent favorable-unfavorable, and McCain has an almost identical rating of 42 – 33 favorable. Both McCain and Obama have significant crossover appeal. Barack Obama receives a favorable rating from 23 percent of Republicans; John McCain gets the same rating from 21 percent of Democrats. They also both appeal to voters in the middle; Obama has a favorable rating of 47 – 35 percent among Independents, while McCain has a 42 – 33 rating among the same group.

Mirroring national polling, Hillary Clinton is a less popular figure in Missouri, and she has a net unfavorable rating of 40 – 45 favorable-unfavorable. She has a stronger rating among Democrats than Obama, but her rating among Republicans is 8 – 81 percent favorable-unfavorable. Her favorability among Independents, 32 – 53 percent, is lower than President Bush's 32 – 47 rating among the same group.

Mirroring the split of the state, Senator McCaskill's favorability is almost equal favorable to unfavorable at 35 – 33 percent. This includes a slightly negative rating among Independents of

28 – 37 percent. Though voters are split electorally, they have given up on President Bush across the state. He receives a 34 – 50 favorable-unfavorable rating, and in none of the congressional districts in the state does he have a net positive favorability. This includes the contested 6th CD, which he won 57 – 42 in 2004; he has a 39 – 41 favorability rating in that district.

Nixon Starts In Good But Not Great Position

Jay Nixon, the long-time Attorney General, has good but not great standing for a statewide official in a high-profile position. Seventy six percent of voters can substantively identify him; 32 percent of voters view him favorably and 21 percent view him unfavorably. Democrats generally feel favorable towards him—only 76 percent identify him, not an overwhelming number for the presumptive party standard-bearer, and he has a 39 – 17 percent favorable-unfavorable standing among them. He also scores well with Independents at 30 – 20 percent favorable-unfavorable, and holds his own among Republicans at 25 – 26 favorable-unfavorable.

His potential opponent, Kenny Hulshof, is virtually unknown outside of his congressional district, where he has a 34 – 12 favorability rating. Statewide, only 36 percent of voters can identify him, and he receives a 10 – 11 favorability rating. For this reason, an initial vote between the two, like the February Rasmussen poll where Nixon led Hulshof by a 48 – 30 margin, does not represent the reality of the race once Hulshof and Nixon run their initial introductory TV ads.

In order to level the playing field in this survey, we introduced both candidates in a balanced way with messages that simulate what we believe they would communicate in a campaign, and followed those messages with a vote. After this exercise, Nixon leads Hulshof by a margin of 52 – 39 percent. While this is a sizeable lead, it is not overwhelming for Nixon given his huge name recognition edge, and his margin among voters who know both candidates is a tighter 52 – 43 percent (voters who know Nixon but not Hulshof, 41 percent of the electorate, give Nixon a 21 point advantage of 56 – 35 percent). There are some disconcerting trends as well for Nixon, who does not perform particularly well in the middle of the electorate among independents. He and Hulshof are essentially even among Independents (Nixon leads by one point) and he runs even with Hulshof among men. Encouraging is his solid Democratic base, where he gets 84 percent support. However, his lead comes from losing only 7 percent of Democrats but getting support from 21 percent of Republicans—an unlikely route to victory in November if Independents are split 50-50.

Nixon holds a similar lead over Hulshof on a few key image attributes. Notably, his lead on who would do a better job on the economy—an issue that tops voters minds by far right now—is only 42 – 33 percent, and he trails Hulshof among Independents by three points on that measure. Nixon holds larger leads on who will do a better job on energy policy, who will move Missouri forward, and who has a vision for the future.

■ **Table 2: Initial Imagery Nixon-Hulshof**

	ALL VOTERS			INDEPENDENTS		
	Total Nixon	Total Hulshof	Nixon – Hulshof	Total Nixon	Total Hulshof	Nixon - Hulshof
Will move Missouri forward	43	31	+12	36	30	+5
Has a vision for the future	43	27	+16	37	29	+7
Will do a better job on the economy	42	33	+8	33	37	-3
Will do a better job on energy policy	41	31	+10	38	32	+6

Initiative Attracts Broad Support

The alternative-energy proposal we proposed to voters mandates investor-owned utilities to produce at least 15 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2021. It also sets maximum rate increases that can impact consumers. The full ballot language we tested was:

This initiative would require utilities to generate, or buy credits for, electricity from renewable energy resources such as wind, biomass and hydropower, with the amount increasing from two percent of retail sales in 2011 to fifteen percent in 2021, and two percent of each requirement to be met with solar energy, and require the Public Service Commission and Department of Natural Resources to make rules providing a maximum rate increase of one percent, a system for trading renewable energy credits, recovery of prudent utility costs of compliance, and a process for certifying electricity as renewable.

After voters heard the ballot language and no other information, they supported the initiative by a margin of 59 – 30 percent. It performed well across partisan groups; Democrats favored the initiative 68 – 23 percent, Independents favored it 60 – 30 percent, and Republicans favored it 48 – 39 percent. The initiative performed strongest with younger voters; voters under 40, despite self-identifying as Republican by a 9-point margin, favor it 64 – 29 percent. Men under 50, normally a very tough, Republican audience for measures that will hit their pocketbook, favor the initiative 58 – 35 percent despite identifying as Republicans by a 13-point margin. It also does well among educated voters; voters with college degrees, a Republican group in Missouri, support it 60 – 28 percent.

The initiative starts out in its most vulnerable position among downscale voters. Voters with no education past high school, despite identifying as Democrats by a 20-point margin, are tougher than the overall electorate for the initiative at 55 – 32 percent. It also struggles among rural voters, with 55 – 34 percent support, and among non-white voters, at 53 – 38 percent.

Perhaps most important are the powerful positive attributes voters associate with this initiative. A large majority of voters see the initiative as something that can move Missouri forward on a range of issues they care about. As illustrated in the table below, voters see the initiative as something that will strengthen Missouri's economy, create jobs for Missourians, reduce the state's dependence on foreign oil, clean its environment, and move it towards a better future. Voters think the initiative will cost them money on their electricity bills by a slight 45 – 37 percent margin, and 22 percent are neutral on its cost or don't know enough to have an opinion. But, as we will detail later, this does not prove fatal to the initiative.

■ **Table 3: Initial Initiative Imagery Statement Pairs**

	Total First Statement	Total Second Statement	First – Second
This initiative will save consumers money on their electric bills. OR This initiative will cost consumers more money on their electric bills.	37	45	-8
This initiative will create jobs in Missouri. OR This initiative will cost Missouri jobs.	57	23	+34
This initiative will make us less dependent on foreign energy. OR This initiative will make us more dependent on foreign energy.	70	14	+56
This initiative will strengthen Missouri's economy. OR This initiative will hurt Missouri's economy.	53	23	+28
This initiative will make Missouri's environment cleaner. OR This initiative will not make Missouri's environment cleaner.	63	23	+39
This initiative will take Missouri forward to a better future. OR This initiative will set Missouri back.	65	20	+45

Debate Moves Voters Towards Initiative

Typically, with an initiative, we see support over a survey (and over a campaign) drop as voters learn more about it and find a reason to vote no and keep the status quo. This initiative, however, moves from 59 – 30 percent support to 65 – 27 percent after a debate where it faces equal numbers of positive and negative statements about it.

The initiative gains among all parties after a debate. It makes substantial progress among men: they move towards it by 14 points. This movement erases the initial 9-point gender gap, and men support the initiative after the debate 66 – 29 percent while women support it 64 – 24 percent. In particular, Democratic men move towards the initiative by 25 points, and Independent men move towards it by 14 points.

Among the audiences that are tougher at the start of the campaign, non-whites move 23 points after the debate and finish strongly supportive at 66 – 28 percent, suggesting that they are an audience that can be moved significantly with an effective campaign. Voters with only a high school education are also persuadable, as they move 12 points toward the initiative and support it at the end of the survey 63 – 29 percent. Rural voters, also initially a difficult group, prove tougher to sell, and they lag behind the rest of the state in their support at 61 – 32 percent after the debate.

Nixon's Position Boosted by Initiative

After the initiative debate and the informed gubernatorial vote, we assigned the potential gubernatorial candidates positions on the initiative, with Nixon supporting it, and Hulshof opposed to it. In a balanced way, we had both candidates give positive statements about their position, and then we attacked both candidates for their positions on the initiative.

When we did this, Nixon moves from a 52 – 39 percent advantage to a 53 – 33 percent lead. Almost all of that movement comes from positive information—before we attack both candidates for their positions, Nixon has 54 – 35 percent support. And strikingly, almost all of this movement comes from Independents, who were essentially tied initially at 44 – 43 percent but end the survey supporting Nixon by a 51 – 28 percent margin. Nixon makes also broad gains across gender and educational lines, but particularly draws in the democratically-inclined audience of non-college older women; these women move to Nixon by 18 points, from 57 – 36 percent support at the beginning—a margin equal to Democrats partisan advantage among them—to 62 – 24 percent support at the end of the survey.

■ **Table 4: Nixon-Hulshof Vote Shift**

	Initial Nixon - Hulshof	Final Nixon - Hulshof	Change Initial - Final
All voters	52-39	53-33	+8
Democrat	84-7	87-4	+6
Republican	21-74	18-73	-3
Independent	44-43	51-28	+22
High School or less education	57-35	57-26	+8
Post High School, Non College	55-38	59-32	+9
4 Year College Graduate	45-43	51-38	+11
Post Graduate	45-45	44-42	+2
College Men	37-54	40-25	+9
Non College Men	53-42	52-35	19
College Women	53-34	57-28	+5
Non College Women	59-31	62-24	+5
Non College Older Women	54-40	56-29	+12

Nixon makes large gains among those that support the initiative—he gains 11 points among a group that ends the survey supporting him 65 – 26 percent. Among those who oppose the initiative at the end of the survey, Nixon does not lose any ground outside the margin of error, as his support goes from 39 – 53 percent to 35 – 52 percent. He also makes large gains in cities—he grows his vote 17 percent in large metro areas (St. Louis City and Jackson County) and 19 percent in small metro areas (counties like Greene County, Jasper County, Boone County, and Cole County that have small to medium-sized cities in them). The initiative does not help in rural areas, which as noted are a tough audience for the initiative. He does not gain any ground among rural voters, among whom he starts at 55 – 39 percent and ends the survey at 52 – 38 percent.

Nixon's image makes strong gains to complement the gains in his vote share as well. His smallest gains against Hulshof are on the economy, where he gains 4 points to move to a 45 – 33 percent advantage. This includes 11 points of gain among Independents, equivalent to his 10-point gain among Democrats on the issue (Republicans move away from him by 10 points). By itself, the debate between the candidates on this initiative moves him from a 3-point deficit to an 8-point lead on this critical issue among Independent voters. It also moves voters 9 points towards him on who has a vision for the future, 11 points towards him on who will move Missouri forward, and 16 points towards him on who will do a better job on energy policy. Like in the vote, much of his gains on image items are among Independents.

■ **Table 5: Imagery Shift**

	ALL VOTERS			INDEPENDENTS		
	Initial Nixon - Hulshof	Final Nixon - Hulshof	Initial - Final	Initial Nixon - Hulshof	Final Nixon - Hulshof	Initial - Final
Will move Missouri forward	+12	+23	+11	+5	+18	+13
Has a vision for the future	+16	+25	+9	+7	+22	+14
Will do a better job on the economy	+8	+13	+5	-3	+8	+11
Will do a better job on energy policy	+10	+26	+16	+6	+20	+14

It's also worth noting that Kenny Hulshof has cast bad votes on alternative energy that we intentionally did not test in the survey, because we wanted the survey to be a good approximation regardless of which Republican faces Jay Nixon in the general election. In a campaign against Hulshof, he could likely be further damaged by these votes he made while in Congress.

Three Pronged Message Strategy

It should be noted that this survey was not intended to develop a targeted campaign strategy for passing this initiative. The goals of the research was to see if a campaign with sufficient resources could pass the initiative, which it can, and if the debate surrounding the initiative would have a positive impact for Jay Nixon as the campaign played out, which it would. However, with the structure of the survey, we were able to get an initial read on why people are moved to support the initiative and what arguments will likely prove effective among persuadable audiences.

There are three main facets to the support for the initiative, and why it moves towards us in a debate.

- **The future versus the past.** Voters think by 71 –19 percent that this initiative will take Missouri forward to a better future. Also, the idea of those being for it being forward-looking and its detractors being stuck in the past was by far the most consistent theme voters drew in our focus groups we conducted for BISC last summer. This is in some ways about the environment—framing the initiative as helping to stop global warming for the sake of our children’s future was one of our strongest-testing positives for the initiative—but it is also about changing what voters see as the rudderless nature of our country. They see a plan like this having the potential to get America moving forward again by being able to create our own energy right here and using American technological know-how building the jobs of the future.
- **Economic progress.** Voters see the initiative as a job builder that will have positive effects on the economy. After the debate, voters think the initiative will strengthen Missouri’s economy by a 64 – 22 percent margin. This represents a substantial 14 points of movement from the initial majority of 53 – 25 percent that believed the same at the beginning of the survey. They also believe it will create jobs by a 65 – 21 percent margin; this is 9 points of movement from the initial 57 – 23 percent majority that believe this. This will be a point we will have to fight for, but convincing voters this will create the jobs of tomorrow is crucial to seizing the upper hand
- **Energy independence.** An overwhelming majority of voters think the initiative will move us towards energy independence: by 70 – 14 percent, voters think this it will reduce our dependence on foreign oil. In national focus groups for BISC, though they didn’t cite a direct mechanism as to how this will happen, voters talked about reducing our dependence on foreign oil as one of the main reasons they support investing in alternative energy. And among Missourians that cite energy independence as a very serious concern—a very large, bipartisan segment of the electorate—the initiative comes out of the debate with a 70 – 23 percent majority.

Cost Vulnerability a Drag on Initiative, but Not a Fatal One

The cost argument is the one area we tested that the initiative loses, and it is the only one that we don’t gain ground on over the course of the survey. The initiative goes from a 45 – 37 percent deficit to a 48 – 37 percent disadvantage on whether the initiative will cost or save

consumers money on their electric bills. The argument that the initiative will cost voters money, with a direct comparison of energy costs from coal, wind, and solar energy, is the only attack that resonates to any significant degree—24 percent of voters say this gives them very serious doubts about the initiative.

However, this is not ground we should cede, and it is also not a fatal problem for the initiative. There is some texture to the cost wariness that make it something we can overcome, as long as we are not fighting about the price of next month's electricity bill but we are framing cost within a broader, forward-looking economic argument.

- Electricity cost is clearly a factor in people's minds, but it is not the dominant factor in their thinking about energy. As outlined above, thirty-three percent of voters find electricity costs a very serious concern, compared with 61 percent who think dependence on foreign energy is a very serious concern.
- In BISC's focus groups we conducted across the country last summer, many voters understood that alternative energy like wind and solar power was going to cost them more money in the short term. But most focus group participants perceived this as the cost of any new technology like flat screen TV's, or computers: they think every new invention is expensive at first, but once we start efficiently mass producing it, its cost will go down.
- Many voters are willing to pay some cost for concrete steps to do all of the positive things we outlined above: in fact, 40 percent of voters who are initially voting for the initiative think it will cost them more on their electricity bills, barely less than the 45 percent of all voters who feel this way. Even among voters who think electricity costs are a very serious concern, the initiative actually does better than it does among the general population, as it is favored 62 – 25 percent. And among those cost-focused voters, the initiative gains ground during the survey and finishes with 68 – 21 percent support.
- Voters that are most convinced that the initiative will cost them money are the least concerned with electricity costs in general. For example, college graduates think the initiative will cost them money by a 48 – 30 percent margin, but only 22 percent of them think electricity costs are a very serious concern. In contrast, voters who have no more than a high school degree think the initiative will save them money by a 45 – 36 percent margin, and 51 percent of them think electricity costs are a very serious concern.
- All of our losses in the cost imagery during the survey is among Republicans. They go from thinking this initiative will cost them more money by a 46 – 37 margin to thinking it will do so by a 58 – 29 margin. Among Democrats and Independents, we push back effectively on the cost attack and do not lose any ground on this argument during a balanced debate.

Popular Co-operative and Municipal Utilities Could Present Roadblock

Our instincts, and some evidence, tell us this initiative has a greater chance of success if it excludes the co-operative and municipal utilities.

Co-ops and municipals are extremely popular among their customer base. When co-op customers are asked to rate their individual electricity provider, they give co-ops a combined rating of 78 – 5 percent favorable-unfavorable. Municipal customers rate their individual utility similarly: the combined municipals utilities have a 64 – 8 favorability rating. In contrast, the state's biggest investor-owned utilities in Missouri are mildly popular with their customers, but not formidably so. For example, AmerenUE has a favorability rating of 44 – 24 percent favorability among their customers, and Aquila has a favorability rating of 35 – 20 among their customers.

Also, co-ops are predominantly located in rural areas, places where this initiative does not perform as well as the rest of the state. Forty-eight percent of co-op customers are located in rural counties—counties that represent only 22 percent of the state's population. While the initiative's support is at 59 – 30 percent statewide at the beginning of the survey, in rural areas, it stands at only 55 – 34 percent.

These popular groups speaking out against this initiative could damage it among their customers. Particularly for co-ops, a highly credible messenger attacking this initiative in their service areas—service areas where the initiative underperforms compared to the rest of the state—is likely to cost the initiative a significant amount of votes in these areas.

Appendix A: Methodology

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner designed and administered this telephone survey conducted by professional interviewers. The survey reached 602 adults, 18 years or older, who indicated they were registered to vote, that they voted or were ineligible to vote in the 2004 general election, and who say they are almost certain to vote or probably will vote in the 2008 general election. The survey was conducted February 14-19, 2008.

Respondents were randomly selected from a list of registered voters. The sample was stratified by county. Quotas were assigned to reflect the expected contribution of these areas to the total vote in the general election. The data were weighted by gender, age, race, education and region to ensure an accurate reflection of the population. The sample size with these weights applied is 602.