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Americans at "tipping point" about energy-poll

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By Lisa Lambert

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Americans are nearly as worried about their country's dependence on foreign energy sources as they are about the war in Iraq, a poll released by the magazine Foreign Affairs showed on Thursday.

Almost half of the 1,000 Americans surveyed for the Public Agenda Confidence in U.S. Foreign Policy Index gave U.S. policymakers a failing grade in weaning the country from foreign oil.

Nearly 90 percent said the lack of energy independence jeopardizes national security.

Public Agenda, a nonpartisan group, conducted the poll in early January with funding from the Ford Foundation. It said that Americans are at a "tipping point" on energy, akin to their state of mind about the war.

Daniel Yankelovich, chairman of Public Agenda, said the public reaches a "tipping point" when it is gravely worried about an issue and believes the government has the ability to change matters. When the index was first published in August 2005, only the Iraq war triggered a similar response, he said.

"This time we find that a second issue has reached a tipping point, which is energy independence, and you have a very strong increase in the number of Americans who are intensely worried about the problem," Yankelovich said in a conference call.

"Now with this issue having reached the tipping point in the public I think that that means the political complexion of that issue is about to change considerably," he added.

In the latest survey, 85 percent of respondents said the U.S. government could do something about energy dependence if it tried. The share of those who worried foreign conflicts will drive up oil prices or cut off supplies rose to 55 percent from 42 percent in the August poll.

Since the August index was published, the U.S. energy chessboard has been rearranged by a broad energy reform law going into effect, a two-hurricane punch that shut in domestic oil production, sudden spikes in oil prices spurred by geopolitics, and record oil company profits.

While energy independence is certainly on citizens' minds, the index found that the war in Iraq remains their leading international concern.

Their least pressing international issue was promoting democracy abroad, with only one out of five participants saying they considered the activity "very important."

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