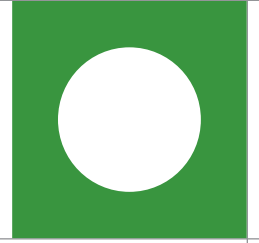


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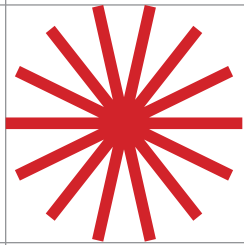
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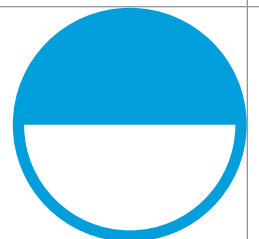
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A Look at Collaboration, Cohesion,
and Collective Action Across Sectors



Introduction

Confronted by the climate crisis, both the private and public sectors are trying, in their own ways and to varying degrees, to establish and adhere to a strategy for achieving net-zero emissions. Their goals may be the same, but their road maps are often different. And it's not clear who should be leading the way.

KEY FINDINGS

Overwhelmingly, both private- and public-sector respondents—**91%** overall—believe that the clean energy transition has had a positive effect on American life.

Respondents recommend prioritizing and further developing **five** specific clean-energy sources: solar, hydroelectric, wind, geothermal, and nuclear.

To achieve net-zero emissions objectives, **improving communication** between the public and private sectors will be crucial, respondents said.

In a 2021 address at Stanford University, former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared, “We need thinkers who can appreciate the scale of challenges before us, and we need doers who move forward to take action.” For this custom research, Atlantic Insights, the marketing research division of *The Atlantic*, partnered with Southern Company to survey 318 such doers in both the public and private sectors, from chief executives to policymakers to elected officials. Read on to explore their thoughts on the clean-energy transition: why it's important, how it's going, what they think lies ahead, and how they believe they can contribute.

At a Glance

45%

Of leading listed U.S. companies have established a net-zero emissions commitment of any kind.

96% *and* **47%**

Of public- and private-sector respondents, respectively, believe their own sector can help drive the clean-energy transition to “a very great extent.”

23%

to

37%

Percentage by which the U.S. is currently projected to fall short of its 2030 net-zero goals

solar



hydroelectric



wind



geothermal



nuclear



85%

Of private-sector respondents believe we will achieve net-zero emissions by **2050**.

Top five most promising clean-energy sources, according to private- and public-sector respondents in this survey

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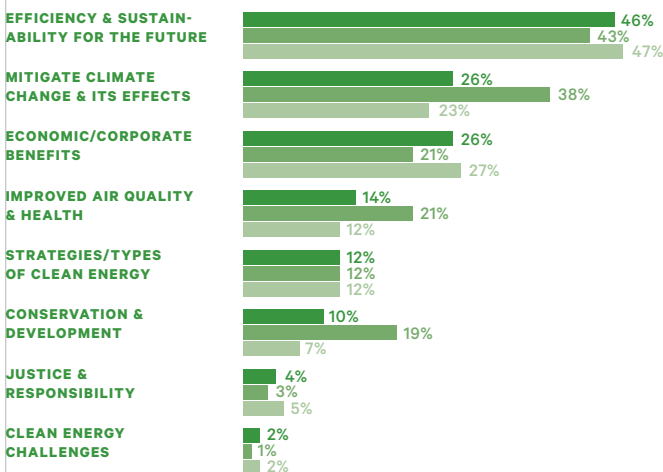
CHAPTER ONE

THE BENEFITS OF THE CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION

In assessing and predicting the effects of the transition, the private and public sectors tend to focus narrowly on their own spheres of influence: the economy and regulation, respectively.



WHY IS IT SO CRITICAL?



While a plurality—46%—agrees that the transition to clean energy is important in order to promote **efficiency and sustainability for the future**, public-sector participants were more likely to select areas affected by policy or regulation, such as **mitigating climate change and its effects (38%)**, **improved air quality and health (21%)** and **conservation and development (19%)**.

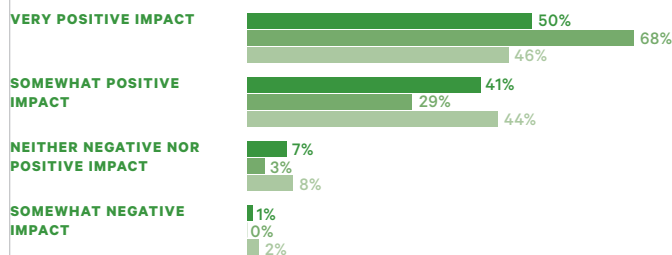
“Poor communities suffer most from climate change and fossil fuel pollution, and transitioning to clean energy will bring cleaner air, better health, and new economic opportunities.”

D.C.-BASED ELECTED OFFICIAL

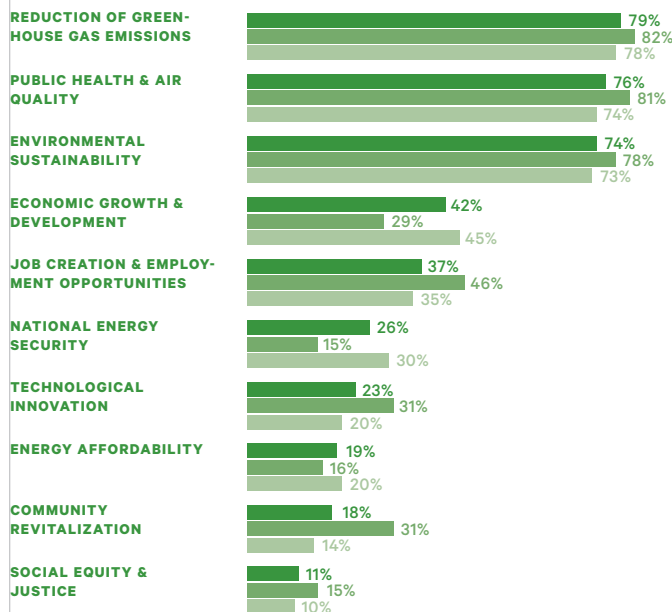
For their part, private-sector respondents were more likely to select economic and corporate benefits (27%), specifically in areas such as **employee health, the cost and reliability of power generation, brand reputation, corporate leadership, and revenue-stream diversification**, particularly in the area of **job creation**. “I believe that clean-energy projects are a key to economic growth, by creating new jobs and boosting local economies,” as the COO of a private-sector company located in Washington, D.C. put it.

The importance of **energy independence** was a unifying factor for both sectors. A C-suite officer in a D.C.-based private-sector company declared, “The transition to clean energy will help protect our nation from the strategic threats and economic uncertainties that come with dependence on foreign energy imports.”

HOW MUCH HAS THE CLEAN-ENERGY TRANSITION BENEFITED AMERICA?



Respondents agree emphatically about the clean-energy transition’s effect on American life: A clear majority (50%) indicated that the effect has been **very positive**. Altogether, 91% of all respondents saw the effect as **positive overall**. Both sides were particularly enthusiastic about the transition’s economic benefits.



“The clean energy sector is a driver of economic growth through investment in renewable energy projects and the creation of jobs in a range of areas such as manufacturing, research, and development.”

PRIVATE-SECTOR C-SUITE OFFICER

The public and private sectors are aligned in identifying the top three areas in which the transition’s benefits have been most pronounced. But after that, their answers diverge.

Areas where the clean energy transition’s positive impacts have been felt most keenly:

- Reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions: **79%**
- Public health and air quality: **76%**
- Environmental sustainability: **74%**

Public-sector leaders were focused on bringing people into the economy. They were more likely to identify **job creation and employment opportunities** (46%) than their private-sector counterparts (35%). On the other hand, more private-sector respondents (45% versus 29%) cheered the **economic growth and development** that has been spurred by the clean-energy transition.

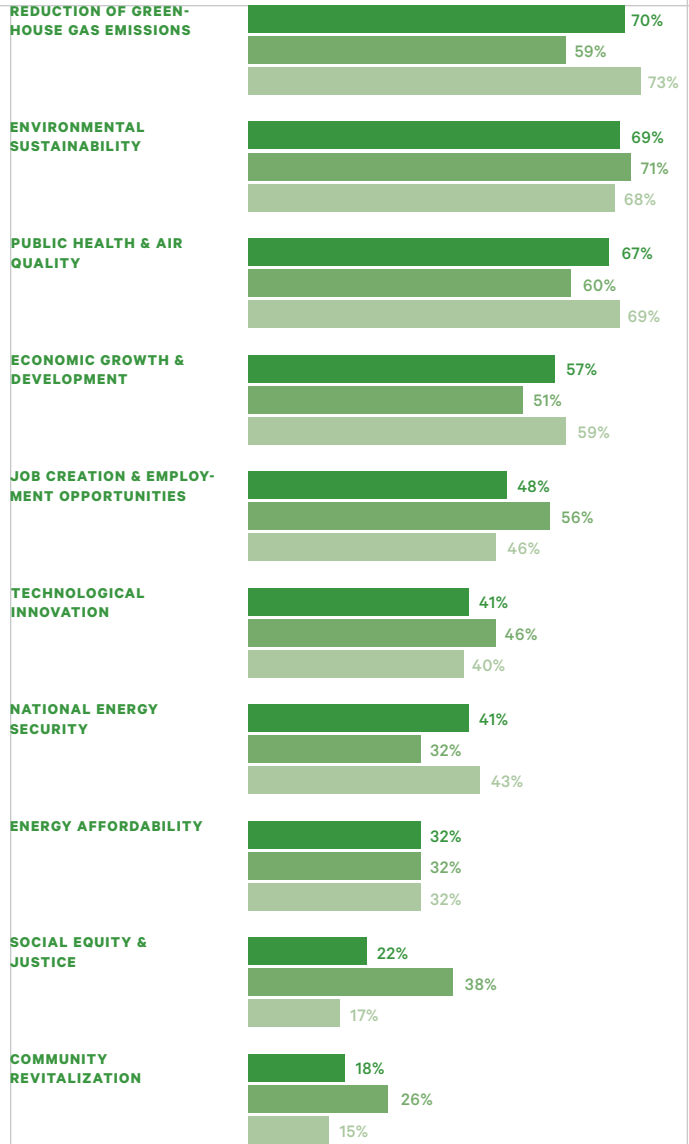
“The transition to clean energy is leading to the invention of new technologies that are transforming communities across the U.S. and creating economic opportunities.”

C-SUITE OFFICER FROM THE PACIFIC REGION

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE OF TRANSITION LOOK LIKE?

Respondents agreed that the following three areas have the potential for the greatest future growth:

- Economic growth and development
42% now / 57% future
- Job creation and employment opportunities
37% now / 48% future
- National energy security
26% now / 41% future



The present benefits of the transition, respondents predict, will extend and even be amplified in the future. The private sector displays more optimism than the public sector about environmental benefits: 73% cited **GHG reduction** (versus 59% in the public sector) and 69% **public health** (versus 60%). Their optimism, unfortunately, is consistent with the fact that a majority of companies unrealistically assess their own climate actions.

The cost of clean energy was a subject of debate; specifically, the degree to which its initial expenses will be mitigated by downstream savings. Some predicted that the substantial upfront costs of installing a grid-scale energy storage system will be passed on to the consumer. Others disagreed: “As I observe, the cost of clean energy has become increasingly affordable in the market. The declining prices of renewable technologies, such as solar and wind power, make them a more viable and cost-effective option for our company,” one midwestern CFO stated.

CHAPTER TWO

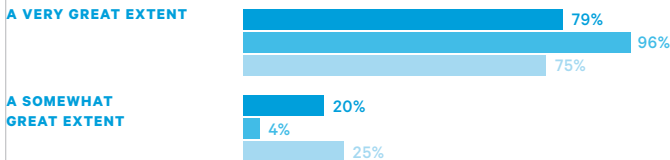
PERSPECTIVES: LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP

At times, the energy transition appears to bring out a kind of puerile instinct among the private and public sectors: The two sides evoke bickering siblings, each insisting that the other should be doing more.



But the need for collective action and collaborative work is abundantly clear. A 2023 Carnegie Endowment white paper on achieving global net-zero emissions goals outlines the necessary cooperative framework: “Even though most of the finance for the energy transition will inevitably have to come from the private sector, public funds will play an important role in catalyzing and steering private investment.”

HOW MUCH CAN THE PUBLIC SECTOR DO?



The success of the clean energy transition hinges in part on the actions of the public sector—a reality that respondents are well aware of. It’s enlightening to consider the public sector’s assessment of its own potential impact, however: Asked to rate how much it can help drive the transition, only 4% of respondents said to a **somewhat great extent** and 96% said to a **very great extent**. A member of top management from a Southeastern public-sector company said, “I think that strong government policies, coupled with a favorable economic climate, have significantly enhanced our efforts to meet carbon reduction targets, while also contributing to our building maintenance.” A D.C.-based top manager at a public-sector company pointed out that government subsidies can “lead to significant cost savings.”

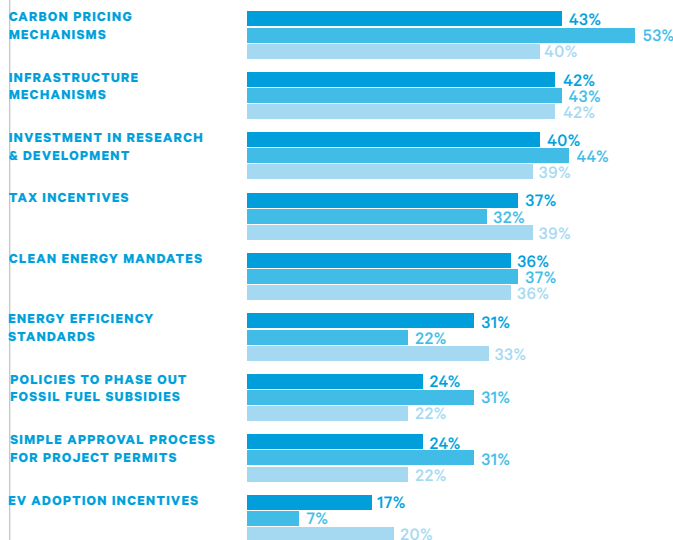
The private sector seems to have reservations about the public sector’s ability to drive the transition. It doesn’t yet

see the public sector, with its emphasis on regulation, as an equal partner. Twenty-five percent of private sector respondents said that government and policy leaders can drive the transition to a **somewhat great extent** and 75% said to a **very great extent**. The disparity here is instructive in making sense of the divide between the two sectors: The private sector is contributing most of the financing. The public sector is making the policy decisions. It’s an age-old story: Business wants more say in how the government spends its money. More deeply, the private sector may not trust the public sector’s expertise—or perhaps even its motivations—in mobilizing this funding.

“A lot of the things that governments ask for are things that cost businesses money. You have to have an appreciation for both sides of the equation.”

PRIVATE-SECTOR BOARD MEMBER

MEANINGFUL STEPS FORWARD



Evaluating the importance of each sector’s ability to contribute to the transition calls for a kind of reality check. How much does one sector’s self-assessment match the other sector’s external assessment of it?

We begin with the public sector: how it sees itself, and how the private sector sees it. Respondents were asked to cite specific ways in which the public sector can drive the energy transition more effectively.

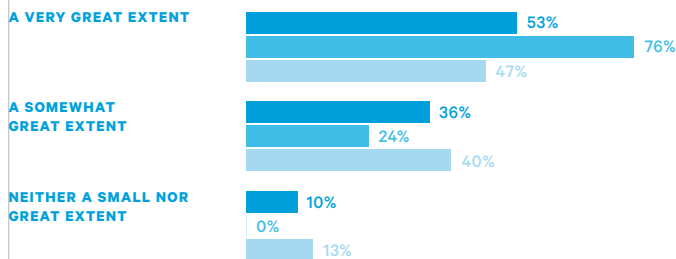
On its face, the private sector’s support of governmental programs seems encouraging. Forty percent identified **carbon pricing mechanisms** as a meaningful public-sector

clean-energy initiative—but numerous reports have raised questions about the effectiveness of such mechanisms. And 33% cited **energy-efficiency standards for buildings, vehicles, and appliances**, which is higher than the public sector’s own response (22%). Numerous respondents described steps toward “greening” they have taken in their own buildings. Well-intentioned though these efforts may be, their significance isn’t measurable: Only in June 2024 was a national standard established to define a zero-emissions building.

Interestingly, three times as many private- as public-sector respondents (20% vs. 7%) cited **electric vehicles**. This is consistent with reports suggesting that car manufacturers overestimated the alacrity with which consumers would adopt EVs (affordability and charging station availability remain obstacles). “Now, most of the people interested in owning an EV already do,” says a November 2023 BBC report.

The public sector firmly believes that government investment in the transition, whether directly or in the form of subsidies, can have a powerful ripple effect. “The financing of renewable energy projects acts as a catalyst for wider green innovation, leading to the creation of new products and services that benefit the environment,” stated a D.C.-based public-sector team leader.

HOW MUCH CAN THE PRIVATE SECTOR DO?



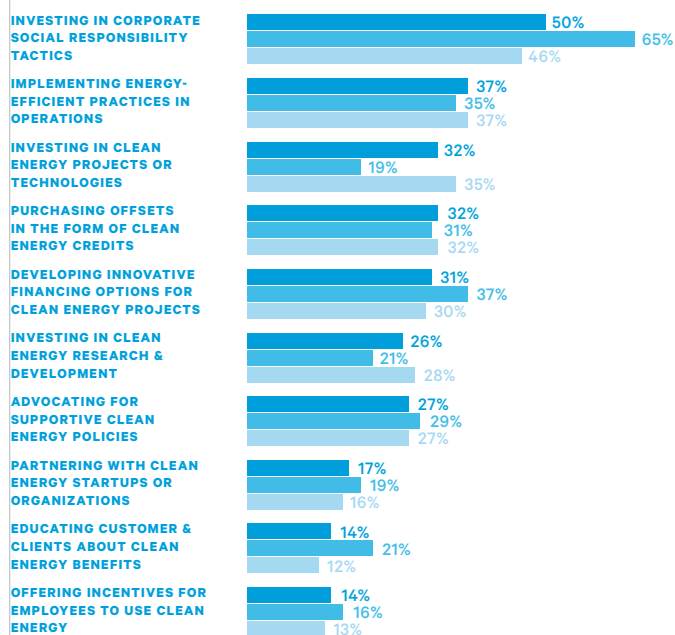
The public sector’s rating of the private sector’s influence was virtually identical to the private sector’s rating of the public’s: 24% believed the private sector can influence the transition to a **somewhat great extent** and 76% to a **very great extent**. But the public sector’s assessment also exceeded the private sector’s rating of its own influence: Forty percent of private-sector respondents said that the private sector can help drive the transition to a **somewhat great extent**; and 47% that it can do so to a **very great extent**.

If the two sides don’t seem to be seeing eye-to-eye, it may be because the public sector tends to see the private sector as relatively unencumbered, while the private sector tends to see itself, rightly or wrongly, as somewhat burdened by regulation.

“China is building out something like 36 different nuclear plants over the next three to four years. America takes something like 20 years to license one nuclear plant. If we start streamlining regulatory pressure on the nuclear front, that’s where the biggest opportunity is, hands down.”

D.C. -BASED PUBLIC-SECTOR SENIOR MANAGER ON THE SLOW DEVELOPMENT OF NUCLEAR ENERGY IN THE U.S.

MEANINGFUL STEPS FORWARD



If the private sector is focused first and foremost on the bottom line, the government tends to prioritize the mobilization of public opinion.

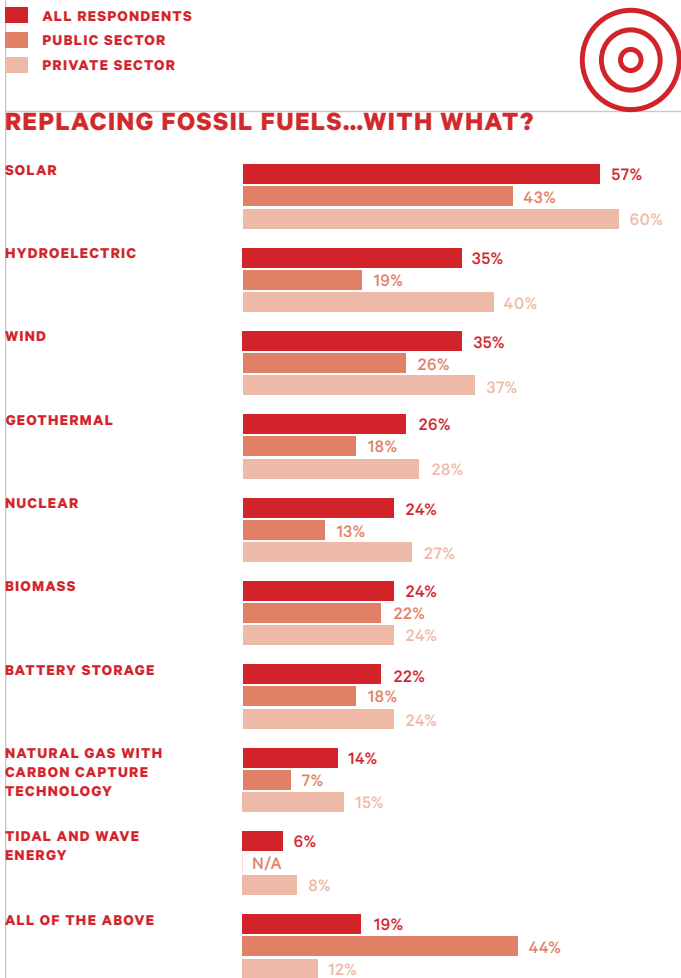
Asked how the private sector might drive clean energy adoption more effectively, a plurality (46%) of respondents cited continued **investments in corporate social responsibility tactics**. Meanwhile, the public sector sought the private sector’s assistance in **educating their customers and clients about the benefits of clean energy** (21% public vs. 12% private).

Another noteworthy divergence: 35% of the private sector favored **investing in clean-energy projects or technologies**. Only 19% of the public sector endorsed the private sector doing so, seemingly concurring with the policy experts who wrote in a 2022 Washington Post op-ed, “The technology we need is already available to us. We just need to use it.”

CHAPTER THREE

STRATEGIES AND OBJECTIVES

When it comes to their preferred clean-energy sources, the private and public sector are at odds: The private sector tends to fixate on the development of individual clean-energy sources. The public sector appears to be interested in developing all of them at once.



Highest-priority energy sources:

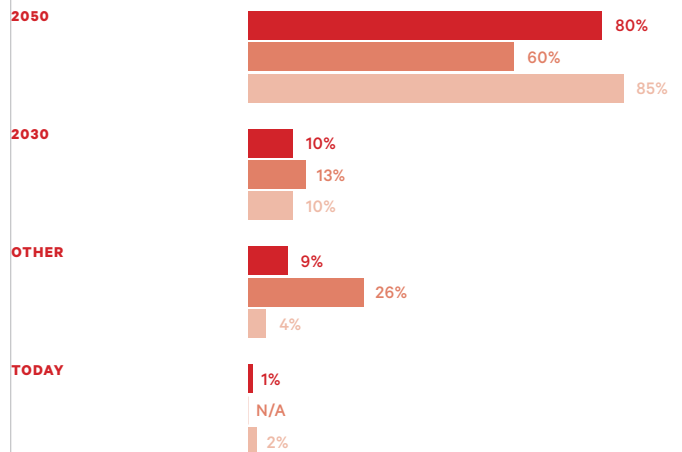
- Solar: **57%**
- Hydroelectric: **35%**
- Wind: **35%**
- Geothermal: **26%**
- Nuclear: **24%**

The public sector took a holistic view of the possible options, with 44% selecting “all of the above” against just 12% of their private-sector peers. A senior team member in a Northeastern public-sector organization explains: “The combination of different renewable-energy options can enable local authorities to meet their energy efficiency targets, as the varying ability and strength of these resources can provide a more consistent and efficient energy supply.” Weather-dependent sources of energy, as numerous respondents noted, can be unreliable.

“First priority is nuclear. Nuclear simply does not have the same baggage renewables do; nuclear is better than renewables. That’s the only place America is solid from a national security perspective, from a clean energy perspective, a climate perspective.”

D.C.-BASED PUBLIC-SECTOR SENIOR MANAGER

WHEN SHOULD WE REACH NET-ZERO EMISSIONS?



Asked about a timeline for achieving net zero, a sizable majority (private 85%; public 60%) predicted it should happen by 2050.

A board member of a private firm said, “I think the folks looking to 2030 are probably not living in reality. I think 2050 is probably a good goal, simply because of the long-term investments that are required to get there and some of the infrastructure that’s already in place that will never be net zero.” Diverging from numerous peers, the VP of a private-sector organization argued, “I think we as a country can do better than that. I would say the goals that we set and objectives are very achievable 10 to 15 years from now.”

LOOKING AHEAD

As of 2023, 929 companies from the Forbes Global 2000 list had set net-zero targets—more than double the number of two and a half years earlier. But several analyses have revealed, in many cases, a gap between intention and reality. Many corporate emission-reduction targets are “of questionable quality.”

Only 45% of the leading listed U.S. companies have a net-zero commitment of any kind, and their average reduction target for direct emissions is only 51%. Moreover, fossil fuel production has not diminished either domestically or internationally, seriously undermining sustainability gains.

In the U.S. public sector, the Inflation Reduction Act has mobilized national clean-energy projects, fostering hundreds of thousands of new jobs, mobilizing both private-sector investment and state and local action. Yet current projections suggest that the U.S. will fall short of its 2030 goals—and a 1.5 Celsius trajectory—by 23% to 37%.

“To have both sides sit down, talk, and understand each other’s challenges—that’s the important part.”

PRIVATE-SECTOR BOARD MEMBER

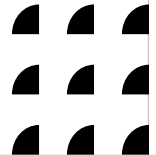
The Atlantic Insights study’s most telling—and frustrating—finding may be that the public and private sector have yet to align in helping to drive the clean energy transition. Rather than communicate and cooperate with each other, they often point fingers. “I see people talking past each other,” said the board member of a private company. “Governments say, ‘Industry can do more’: Yes, industry can do more. Industry is saying, ‘Governments can do more’: Yes, governments can do more.”

To succeed, the board member continued, will require “communicating and working together to achieve goals in a way where both sides win. To make it a ‘win-win’ conversation. Today, it seems like a zero-sum game—‘I win, you lose’—and that’s not going to get us where we need to go.”

But a public-sector board member in the Northeast described an alternate scenario that could get us where we need to go, one in which “multinational corporations work with local

governments, NGOs, and community groups to create and implement clean-energy initiatives that address crucial social and economic challenges.” In recent years, this kind of private-public cooperation has begun laying the groundwork for us to reach net zero, from encouraging EV adoption to massively expanding investment in clean-energy sources—including solar, land- and offshore-based wind turbines, and nuclear—to bringing online the nation’s first newly constructed nuclear reactors in three decades (collectively the largest clean-energy generator in the U.S.), at Plant Vogtle in Georgia.

It’s our responsibility, as individuals and organizations, to harness our own energy and map an actionable path forward, with an awareness that pointing fingers is an inexcusable form of inaction, and that net zero is a promise we must keep for the well-being of the planet’s citizens, communities, businesses, and economies.



Methodology

Atlantic Insights and Southern Company designed a holistic research approach that included both quantitative and qualitative inputs.

Together, the partners designed a 16-question survey fielded to a combined audience of 318 power brokers across the public and private sectors.

Most importantly, all respondents qualified for the study by indicating they manage, oversee, or contribute to projects with significant implications for or from the energy or utilities industries.

Additionally, the partners conducted four in-depth interviews (IDIs) with select respondents. Two of the participants represented private-sector firms as executives and two represented public-sector enterprises as top management.

The research was executed by **Beresford Research**.

