

## New Polling Shows Iowans Are Surprisingly Divided on the Renewable Fuel Standard

### Summary:

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Historically, nearly every candidate campaigning in Iowa has embraced the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS), frequently describing it as a ‘green’ policy and important to the local economy. But a decade of research by the U.S. government, academics, and NGOs has found that the RFS is damaging the environment and failing to reduce climate emissions. And despite the RFS’ economic contributions, farmers and small-holders are struggling now more than ever. **Recent polling suggests that Iowa voters recognize the drawbacks to the RFS and are increasingly open to messages advocating for its repeal and reform.**

In the midst of growing support for climate and environmental solutions and ecological and health impacts in rural America, this polling sought to determine if Iowans still support the RFS as strongly as the conventional wisdom suggests. **Surprisingly, only a minority of Iowans do.**

Most Iowans recognize and understand the RFS. And while it retains a significant base of support, a surprisingly large percentage of voters oppose the policy. Many more are open to changing their opinion. A few key takeaways from the full, attached polling data:

- Among likely Democratic caucus-goers, all Democratic voters, and Independent voters, the RFS failed to get majority support. Although a plurality of each group (40-47%) support the RFS, the opposition is strong (31-36%).
- A regression analysis found that voters are movable in their opinions of the RFS when exposed to new messages, especially Independents (coefficient of .79, where  $>0.20$  indicates a significant increase in support of repeal) and Democrats (.63).
- These voters are most moved by messages describing how the RFS has destroyed millions of acres of wildlife habitat, caused great harm to wildlife, and has led to more water pollution from fertilizers and pesticides.

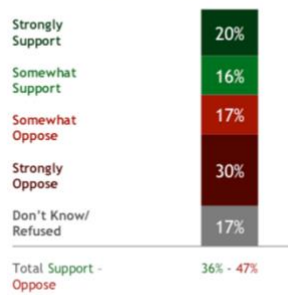
To place these results in context, the RFS has received near-universal support from Iowa’s congressional delegation, Iowa’s state-level leadership, visiting presidential candidates, and the companies at the top of Iowa’s agricultural economy. To date, there has been a notable dearth of leading voices questioning the RFS’ contributions and impacts. Against this backdrop, to have around a third of Democrats and Independents who are critical of the policy is remarkable.

The fact that Iowa Democrats’ and Independents’ support for the RFS polls is under 50% – and with an even larger audience receptive to anti-RFS messaging – reflects an opening for candidates to lead on this issue.

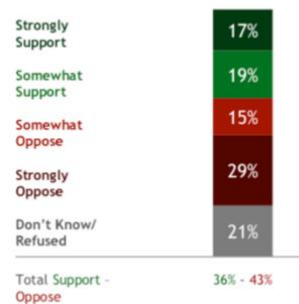
## Topline results

This survey was conducted to assess the support of Iowa voters for the repeal of ethanol mandates. The results found that only 44% of Democratic primary voters in Iowa are in favor of the RFS and 36% support repeal. Among independents, 40% support the Renewable Fuels Standard and 31% support repeal.

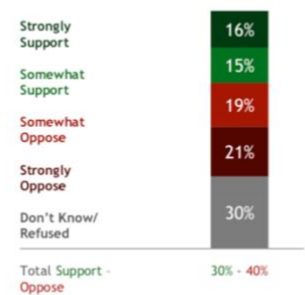
Key Metrics Among Democrat Voters  
Support For Repeal



Key Metrics Among Democratic Primary Voters  
Support For Repeal



Key Metrics Among Independent Voters  
Support For Repeal



## Messaging

Support for repeal has plenty of room to grow, which is reflected in voters' response to the tested messages. **Support for repeal of the Renewable Fuels Standard increased significantly across all voters – regardless of party – after exposure to new information.**

Focusing on the environmental damage caused by the mandates was the most persuasive message:

Top Messages Among Independent Voters	
* Messaging run using regressions; Coefficients > 0.20 indicate there was a <u>significant increase in support to repeal</u> among those who heard that message	
TOP	Q18. Ethanol mandates wiped out five million acres of wildlife habitat causing great harm to the wildlife and natural eco-systems. 0.79
	Q17. Government mandates to encourage corn for fuel are based on outdated ideas long debunked by science. Ethanol is harmful to older cars and small engines, produces smog, and is something the government should be moving away from instead of continuing to encourage. 0.73
	Q23. More than a third of the corn in Iowa is dedicated to fuel, even though one in seven children across Iowa struggle with hunger. If less fuel crops were grown and more food crops were produced, Iowa might be better able to make sure its children have enough healthy food to eat. 0.65

Top Messages Among Democrat Voters	
* Messaging run using regressions; Coefficients > 0.20 indicate there was a <u>significant increase in support to repeal</u> among those who heard that message	
TOP	Q22. Increased demand for corn for ethanol has destroyed wildlife habitat and led to more pollution from fertilizers and pesticides polluting our water. 0.63
	Q18. Ethanol mandates wiped out five million acres of wildlife habitat causing great harm to the wildlife and natural eco-systems. 0.55

## About the Renewable Fuel Standard:

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In 2007, when the current version of the Renewable Fuels Standard passed as part of the Energy Independence Security Act, it was supported by both Democrats and Republicans as well as many in the environmental community. In addition to reducing our reliance on imported oil and supporting American farmers, one of the chief rationales behind the law was that biofuels could dramatically improve the environment and reduce climate emissions, by offering cleaner alternatives to oil and gas.

It has now been more than 10 years since Congress passed the Renewable Fuel Standard. Largely driven by federal mandates, the increased production of food-based biofuels like corn ethanol and soy biodiesel have spurred the conversion and loss of important carbon sinks like wetlands and forests in the Midwest and around the world. Biofuels have been shown to deplete soils, pollute waterways with agricultural runoff, and harm native ecosystems. All in all, the Renewable Fuel Standard has negatively impacted water quality and availability, destroyed wildlife habitat, and impacted biodiversity.<sup>1</sup>

Far from being a climate solution, biofuels exacerbate the climate crisis. The Government Accountability Office reported in 2019 that the RFS has had “limited effect, if any, impact on greenhouse gas emissions reduction.”<sup>2</sup> Recent research shows that 2.8 million acres of land in the United States have been converted to agricultural production or kept in production because of the RFS, which has resulted in more than 27 million metric tons (MMT) of carbon emissions.<sup>3</sup>

Not only has the RFS depleted America’s grasslands and prairies over the past decade, it has also driven the destruction of tropical forests - which act as carbon sinks for the Earth - in southeast Asia, Latin America and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> These data place the carbon footprint of most biofuels on par with that of oil and gas.

## Conclusion

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Given the nuances in the local electorate that this polling reveals, we believe that support for the RFS is weaker than it has been perceived over the last decade. Voters are moveable and their top priorities are shifting toward climate and the environment more than ever before. There is an opportunity to leverage this information to make inroads with this savvy electorate and for a candidate to stand out in the field by speaking to the harm the RFS has caused toward the environment and casting a vision for dramatic policy reform.

## Methodology

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Interviews were conducted June 24 through June 26, 2019 by telephone, including landlines (20%) and cell phones (80%). Interviews include 500 Likely Voters (LVs) across Iowa. Quotas on age, gender, education, ethnicity, party, region, and 2016 presidential election were used to ensure a representative distribution. The study’s margin of error is  $\pm 4\%$ . Interviews also include 257 Likely Democratic Primary Voters (DPVs) across Iowa. Quotas on age, gender, and region were used to ensure a representative distribution. The DPV results’ margin of error is  $\pm 8\%$ . This study was conducted by Ragnar Research (<https://www.ragnarresearch.com/>).

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. EPA. Biofuels and the Environment: The Second Triennial Report to Congress. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, DC, EPA/600/R-18/195, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> GAO Renewable Fuel Standard: Information on Likely Program Effects on Gasoline Prices and Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Government Accountability Office, Washington, DC, GAO-19-47, May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> New Research Findings Link Biofuel Mandate to Environmental Harm. National Wildlife Federation, Washington DC, March 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Lustgarten, Abraham. “Fuel to Fire,” Pro Publica & The New York Times. New York, November 2018.