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Inglis pushes energy reform

By [Jason Spencer](#)

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JOHN BYRUM/ JOHN.BYRUM@SHJ.COM | [Order a reprint](#)

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis meets representatives of District 2 schools in Boiling Springs Tuesday evening before he leads a discussion on hydrogen power as an alternative to oil.

None of the current 2008 presidential contenders - Republican or Democrat - have distinguished themselves as leaders on energy policy, U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., said Tuesday.

"A lot of people have ideas, but I don't think anyone has made it their signature issue yet," said Inglis, who has not endorsed anyone in the presidential race.

A soon-to-be released Clemson University poll of likely Republican voters in South Carolina finds that the war in Iraq and immigration are the top issues for voters; global warming and energy security rank at the bottom of the list.

Inglis brought this up toward the end of an hour-and-half town hall meeting in Boiling Springs late Tuesday, saying energy is the "issue behind the issues" most people care about - particularly national security.

"The attitude in a poll-driven campaign is to look at the numbers, and then run around and get in front of people," Inglis told a crowd of about 75. "That's a demagogue, rather than a leader. A leader says, 'This is the issue,' and gets out front."

The majority of Inglis' presentation and question-and-answer session Tuesday night dealt with the hydrogen economy, along with other fuels that could help ease America's move away from dependency on foreign oil as - Inglis believes - this country moves toward hydrogen as its main energy source. He highlighted several projects in South Carolina, like Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research in Greenville, as an example of how this state is a part of that future.

With a crowd full of Boy Scouts, community and local school district leaders, senior citizens and firefighters, Inglis was offered perhaps the warmest reception he's seen in months. He spent much of the summer defending his decision to oppose President Bush's troop surge in Iraq, and was criticized, too, for not jumping on the amnesty bandwagon when immigration reform tore apart the Senate - usually, in front of crowds seething with anger. (The immigration reform bill never made it to the House.)

Responding to a handful of people supporting Texas Rep. Ron Paul's presidential bid on letting the free market determine the future of fuel, Inglis said he wasn't sure the free market always had national security interests at heart. Oil and energy companies should be pressured by the government to end America's reliance on foreign oil, he said. Many such companies, like Exxon Mobil and Shell, are researching alternative fuels, but Inglis would like to see the future happen more quickly than has been predicted.

"Blood is more important than oil," the congressman said. "We need to tell them, 'We're not going to fight a war to protect your business. Hydrogen? Go develop it. Or, come up with batteries that last longer.' "

He later added: "We don't like the business model of sending Marines to protect your interests. We need to serve notice on oil interests. Iraq is not just about oil - there are terrorists - but the oil is where they get the money from. So, we're funding both sides of the war."

Inglis, the ranking member on the House Energy and Environment Subcommittee, has made alternative fuels, particularly hydrogen, paramount since winning a return trip to Washington in 2004.

"There was more interest than I thought there would be," said Kelley Ezell, the administrator of the

Upstate Family Resource Center, where Inglis spoke. "I learned a lot - that we're going to have to be proactive to get ahead of the curve."

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