



Focus Canada 2012

Climate change: Do Canadians still care?

As part of its annual Focus Canada national public opinion survey, the Environics Institute asked Canadians about the issue of climate change, to determine how perceptions have changed (or not) over the past 12 months. This latest survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 1,500 Canadians between November 15 and December 5, 2012. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.5 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Background

Global warming or climate change is described by some as the greatest challenge ever faced by human civilization, but over the past year it has commanded strikingly little attention in the mainstream media and in policy/political debates in North America. The increasingly unpredictable and sometimes violent weather patterns experienced in many parts of the continent (which scientists predicted as an outcome of global warming) has not galvanized an institutional response. It is as if the issue has become yesterday's news, and attention has shifted elsewhere.

Does this mean that Canadian citizens have lost interest or no longer take the issue of climate change as seriously as they did just a few short years ago? To answer this question, the Environics Institute for Survey Research took a new sounding of public opinion on climate change, as part of its annual Focus Canada survey. Focus Canada is the country's longest-running national public opinion research program, that provides credible, independent and sustained insight into Canadian public opinion on important issues facing the country.

The survey included five questions on climate change that serve as key indicators of public opinion about the seriousness of climate change, sector responsibility for addressing the issue, and carbon pricing. These questions were drawn from an ongoing syndicated study (The Canadian Environmental Barometer) which has been conducted by the Environics Research Group since 2007. Environics Research has made the trend data for these questions available for purposes of comparing the current findings with those from previous years dating back to 2007 (when climate change had a major presence on the national and international agenda).

Conclusions

Despite the lack of media and political attention given to climate change over the past year, the Canadian public's focus and concern about this issue has nudged upwards. While there is no public consensus, a clear majority believe the problem is real, that government must take the lead role through new regulations and standards, and that citizens like themselves must help pay for the necessary actions through taxes and higher prices for the goods and services they consume. British Columbians are increasingly embracing their three-year old carbon tax (64% now support it), and there is clear support for this type of climate change tax in most other parts of the country.

Opinions differ somewhat across the country. Public concern and support for policies like carbon taxes are most widespread in Quebec, among younger, urban Canadians and those who support the federal NDP, Green Party and Bloc Quebecois; they are less evident in the Prairies, among older, less educated Canadians and those who support the federal Conservatives. But these differences are one of degree rather than fundamental disagreement, and are modest in comparison to the starkly partisan divide on this issue among Americans. Canadians are no longer relying on their elected representatives to tell them whether they should be taking climate change seriously; they care about this issue and are looking for leadership from those who can marshal collective action.

Science on climate change

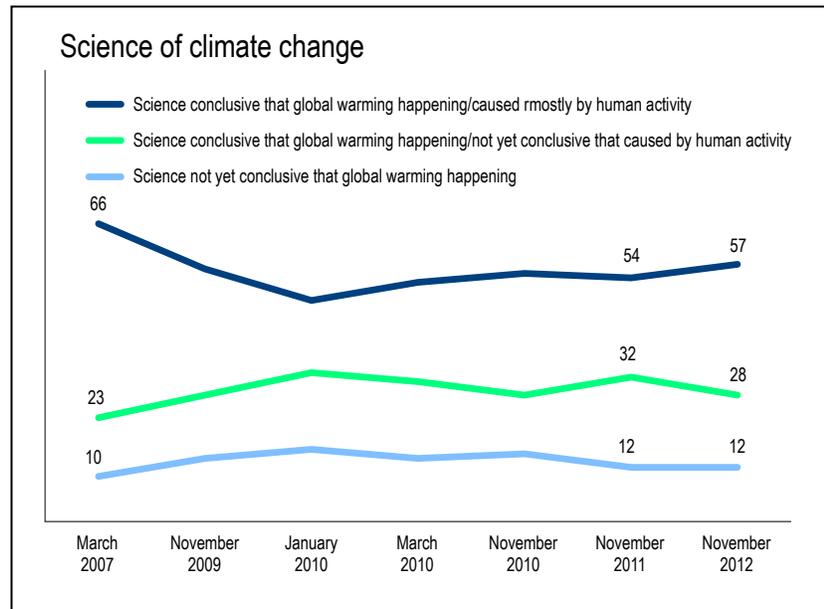
An increasing majority of Canadians believe that climate change is happening and is caused by human activity, although there remain notable differences in views across the country. Those not yet certain about the science remain largely divided on whether it is best to take action now or wait until we know more.

Is climate change happening? As has been the case since tracking began in 2007, a majority (57%) of Canadians believe that the scientific evidence about the existence of climate change is conclusive and that it is primarily caused by human activity. This proportion has increased marginally over the past 12 months and is now at its highest point since November 2009 (though still below the peak recorded in March 2007).

Less than three in ten (28%) now say climate change is real but do not feel the science proves humans are the main cause (down 4 points since 2011), while one in ten (12%) remain skeptical about the scientific evidence (unchanged since 2011, although down marginally from 2010 levels).

Opinions differ somewhat across the country in a predictable pattern. Belief in the science of climate change is most widespread in Quebec (70%), B.C. (61%) and Atlantic Canada (59%), lower in Ontario (51%) and

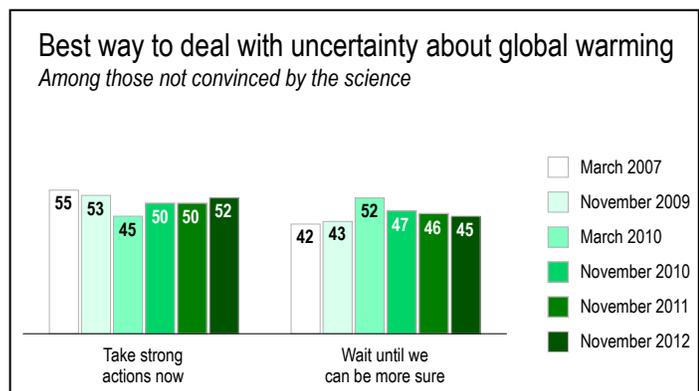
Alberta (50%), and lowest in Saskatchewan (46%) and Manitoba (44%). Since 2011, these proportions have increased in Ontario and B.C. while declining in Quebec and Saskatchewan.



Belief in the science is also higher among younger, urban and educated Canadians, and those who affiliate with the Federal Green Party or Bloc Quebecois, while lowest among those without a high school diploma, 60 years or older, and supporters of the Federal Conservatives (23% of whom remain skeptical about the reality of climate change).

Dealing with uncertainty. Canadians who are not convinced of the scientific reality of climate change remain divided on how best to deal with the uncertainty surrounding the issue. Just over half (52%) say we should take strong actions now to reduce the chances of a worst case scenario, while 45 percent think it is best to hold off taking action until stronger evidence emerges of what may happen in the future.

A preference for acting now is more prevalent among Quebecers, women, younger Canadians and Green Party supporters, in comparison with residents in Saskatchewan and Alberta, Canadians without a high school diploma, and Conservative Party supporters.

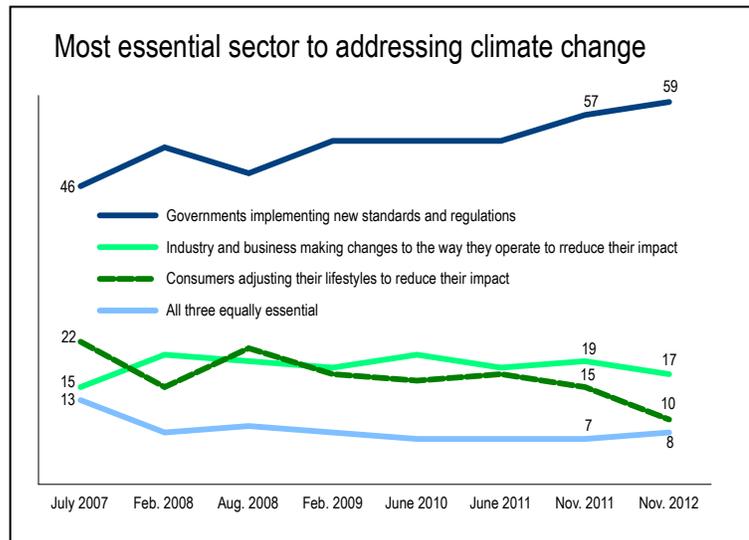


Sector most essential to progress on climate change

A growing majority of Canadians believe that the most essential progress on addressing climate change must come from government standards and regulations, rather than voluntary actions from industry or consumers.

Who does the public look to for making serious progress on tackling climate change in Canada? Over the past five years Canadians have looked first to government implementing new standards and regulations (59%); this proportion has increased since 2011 and is now at the highest level since 2007.

By comparison, the public is less apt to say the most essential actions must come from industry making new investments (17%) or consumers making lifestyle adjustments (10%). Close to one in ten (8%) continue to insist that all three sectors have an equally critical role to play in making progress on climate change in this country.



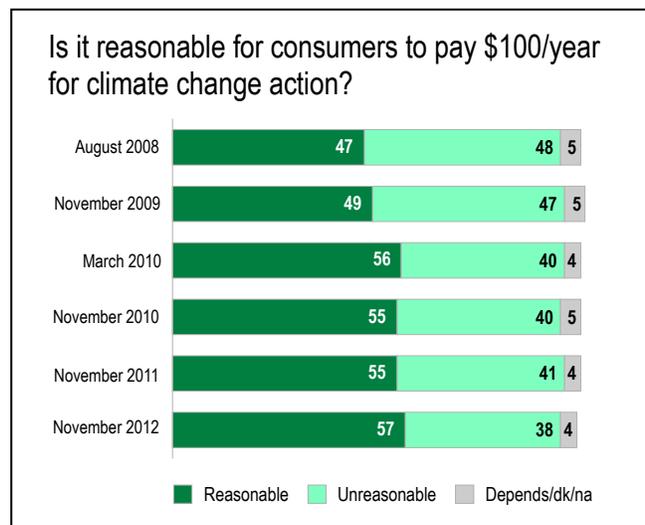
Government is the most widely looked-to sector across the country, but especially so in Quebec, among Canadians under 45, and supporters of the NDP, Green Party and Bloc Quebecois. This also represents the plurality view among Conservative supporters (46%), who are more likely than others to look to either industry (22%) or consumers (18%) to take the lead role.

Putting a price on carbon

More than half of Canadians feel it is reasonable for households to help pay for climate change programs. An increasing majority of BC residents now support their provincial carbon tax, and there is sustained support for this type of tax across the country.

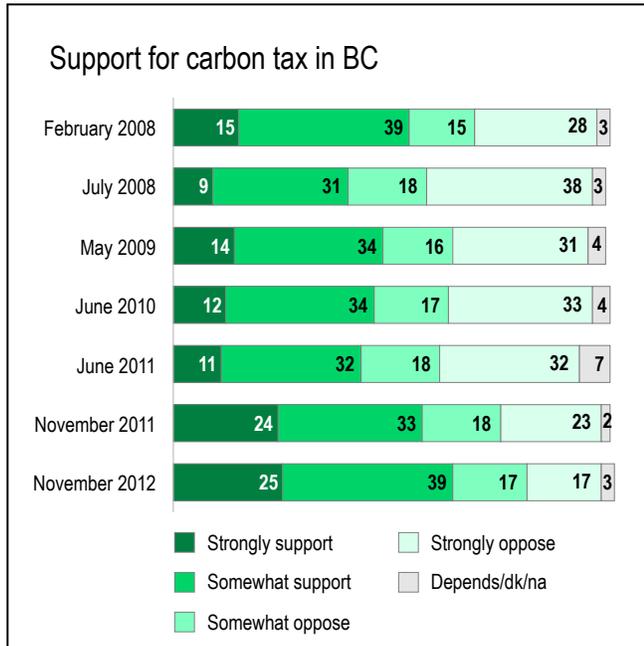
What is reasonable for households to pay for climate change actions? Substantive new strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in this country will cost significantly, and ultimately these costs will fall to consumers, whether through taxes or higher prices on products and services. Are Canadians prepared to help pay for solutions to climate change? No public consensus exists, but a clear majority (57%) thinks it is reasonable for an average household to pay an additional \$100 per year in higher taxes and prices to help address this problem, up marginally from 2010 and 2011.

This is the majority view in all provinces, but highest in BC (60%) and Saskatchewan (60%), as well as among Canadians 18 to 29 (68%), and those who support the Liberal (66%), New Democratic (66%) and Green (65%) parties. Even among Conservative supporters, \$100 per year for climate change is considered reasonable by a 50% to 45% margin.



B.C. Carbon tax. In 2008, British Columbia became the first (and to date the only) jurisdiction in North American to implement a true carbon tax aimed at reducing consumer use of greenhouse gas emitting fossil fuels. When introduced, this tax proved controversial, but over time it has gained public and political acceptance.

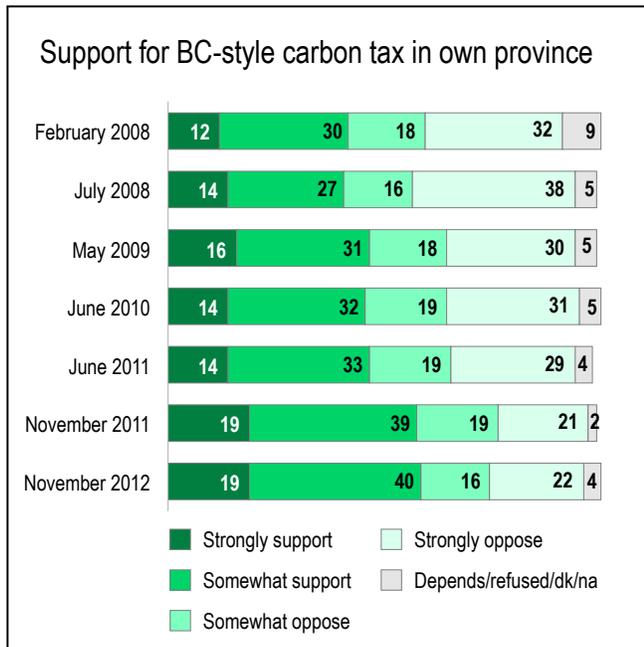
Today, close to two-thirds of British Columbians say they strongly (25%) or somewhat (39%) support this tax as a way to fight climate change, a noticeable increase over the past 12 months and now the highest level of support recorded since the carbon tax was first announced in February 2008. Since June 2011, the proportion strongly opposed to the provincial carbon tax has dropped almost in half (from 32% to 17%).



Elsewhere in Canada, politicians are quick to shut down any discussion about implementing such a carbon tax in their own jurisdiction and it is widely assumed that such a measure would be political suicide. Yet there is in fact considerable public support for just such a measure. Almost six in ten Canadians outside of B.C. say they would strongly (19%) or somewhat (40%) support a B.C. style carbon tax in their own province, essentially unchanged from the viewpoint expressed one year ago.¹

The degree of support for a carbon tax varies noticeably across the country. Support is most widespread in Quebec (67%), followed by Manitoba (59%), Saskatchewan (58%), Ontario (58%) and Atlantic Canada (54%). In Alberta, only 43 percent voice support, compared with 53 percent who oppose such a tax.

Across the country, support is stronger among Canadians with higher levels of education, women, youth, and supporters of the NDP, Green Party and Bloc Quebecois. Opposition is most evident among Canadians with the least education and Conservative Party supporters (by a 43% to 53% margin).



About the Environics Institute

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. The focus of the Institute’s mandate is to survey individuals and groups not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or keith.neuman@environics.ca

¹ The survey question presented a brief description of the BC carbon tax, including the fuels covered, the amount charged per litre, and the concept of revenue neutrality.