

Are Canadians on-side with Trudeau in fighting climate change?

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The 42nd federal election is now over, and the deconstruction of what it was really about will go on for some time. What is already clear is that the outcome was driven primarily by a growing desire for change after almost a decade of Conservative government. This meant that other issues, and in particular climate change, were given limited attention by the three main parties and their leaders, and in the end do not appear to have been the ballot box issue for most voters.

On this basis, some might argue that Liberal leader Justin Trudeau's massive victory does not give him a clear mandate to act decisively on climate change when he arrives in Paris later this week for the crucial round of international climate talks. He will need to negotiate with other world leaders, as well as contend with his provincial counterparts in assembling something resembling a national strategy on carbon reductions. Should Trudeau succeed in pulling this off, it will be an unprecedented achievement given the decentralized and regionally fractured structure of our country. But one thing he will have on his side is public opinion, based on a national survey conducted this past August by the Environics Institute for Survey Research in partnership with the David Suzuki Foundation (the latest in a series of annual national surveys dating back to 2007).

Well before the historic election outcome, results from this latest survey revealed that Canadians are expressing increased support, if not expectations, for federal government leadership and policy actions to address the growing challenge posed by global warming. A rising majority wants Canada to participate in a new international agreement on climate change, even if it might result in job losses in some industries or higher costs to consumers (neither of which may come to pass given recent experience with provincial climate actions spurring growth in the clean energy sector). And many Canadians take this seriously: A significant proportion (four in 10) feel strongly enough about Canada's participation in a global climate deal to say they would be "upset" if their country does not follow through on such a commitment. By comparison, only 12 per cent of those surveyed would be upset if Canada *does* sign such an agreement.

It is widely assumed that Canadians are not prepared to accept new climate policies that will cost them directly, but there is growing public support for carbon pricing as an appropriate response to the climate challenge. In 2008 B.C. introduced such a policy (which adds a new tax on carbon emissions, while relieving tax on income), and British Columbians now support it by a two-to-one margin. But this view is by no means exclusive to the West Coast. There continues to be a comparable level of majority public support for a B.C.-style carbon tax in most other provinces, consistent with our previous surveys stretching back several years. This endorsement of carbon pricing is most evident in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, but also in Ontario and the Prairies. In Alberta – where taxes and environmental policies have long been considered anathema – there is now sufficient public support for the Notley Government to announce a new carbon pricing policy that will take effect in just over a year from now. The absence of clear regional divisions among Canadians on carbon pricing provides the essential political foundation for a national climate change strategy.

Growing public support for an active carbon reduction strategy in part reflects greater confidence in realizing a low-carbon future. Three-quarters of Canadians now say they believe their province can shift most of its energy requirements from fossil fuels to renewable forms of energy such as solar, wind and biofuels. This view has strengthened since 2013, with the growth most noticeable in Western Canada and in rural communities across the country (rather than in eastern urban enclaves, as some may assume). No wonder then that Saskatchewan has just announced a commitment to meet 50 percent of its energy needs through renewable power by 2030.

Where public opinion on climate change divides is along politically partisan lines, perhaps not surprising given the sharp differences in party positions. Among those who supported the federal opposition parties in the lead-up to the recent election, large majorities expressed concern about climate change and support for policy actions, while Conservative Party supporters were more divided; about four in 10 in this group accept the science of climate change as real and human-caused, and support a carbon tax (despite their party's clear rejection). Party support is now the most reliable predictor of Canadian public attitudes about climate change, more so than region, education, gender or community size. And yet, the level of polarization is nowhere near as evident as in the U.S., where climate change is a virtual litmus test of party allegiance, and ideology rules over science. By comparison, Canadians demonstrate a notable degree of consensus on the issue. So when newly minted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau arrives at the Paris summit, he will not only have provincial and territorial leaders at his side, but the Canadian public at his back.

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