



Focus Canada 2013

Canadian public opinion about climate change and carbon taxes

As part of its ongoing Focus Canada public opinion research program, the Environics Institute partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation this fall to ask Canadians about the issue of climate change, to determine how perceptions have changed (or not) over the past 12 months. The survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 2,003 Canadians between October 1 and 17, 2013. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Background

Global warming or climate change is considered by many to be the most pressing challenge facing human civilization, but continues to command limited attention in the mainstream media, and has yet to see any type of concerted policy response in North America or elsewhere. This despite increasingly unpredictable and sometimes violent weather patterns experienced worldwide which scientists predicted as an outcome of global warming. The International Panel on Climate Change has recently issued its latest report providing the most definitive scientific evidence and fresh predictions about future consequences in the form of environmental disruption and the social and economic upheaval that may result.

Where does the Canadian public stand today on the issue of climate change? Have Canadians lost interest or do they remain concerned and want strong actions to address the problem? The Environics Institute for Survey Research partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation to take a new sounding of public opinion on climate change, as part of its ongoing Focus Canada public opinion research program. Focus Canada is the country's longest-running national public opinion research program, and is now a public interest initiative providing credible, independent and sustained insight into Canadian public opinion on important issues facing the country.

Surveys conducted by Environics and others have consistently documented that the Canadian public is looking for leadership from its governments to take steps to address the global challenge presented by our rapidly changing climate. But does this sentiment extend to accepting new taxes on personal consumption of the fossil fuels that contribute to rising greenhouse gas emissions? For at least a decade, economists and policy experts have made a strong case that putting a price on carbon offers the greatest potential for shifting consumer and industry behaviour away from energy-intensive consumption. But in Canada and elsewhere there has been limited application of carbon pricing policy. In the 2008 Federal Election, the Liberal platform included a comprehensive "Green Shift" proposal for carbon pricing, but the party's poor showing at the ballot box quickly led many to conclude that Canadians were not prepared for this approach to climate change action (although there were other equally compelling reasons why the Liberals did so poorly in that election).

The stand-out exception has been in British Columbia, which in 2008 became the first jurisdiction in North America to implement a true carbon tax aimed at reducing use of greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors. When first introduced, this tax was controversial, but has been sustained through two hard-fought provincial elections. Environics has been measuring public opinion on the BC carbon tax since it was first announced in February 2008, both in BC and across the country.¹

¹These questions originated with an ongoing syndicated study (The Canadian Environmental Barometer) that has been conducted by the Environics Research Group between 2007 and 2011. 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 2007ff

The survey included questions that serve as key indicators of public opinion about various aspects of climate change. These questions originated with an ongoing syndicated study (The Canadian Environmental Barometer) that 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

The reality of a rapidly changing climate due to human activity has taken hold among a majority of Canadians, and the proportion who believe in the conclusiveness of the science has increased marginally over the past year (although it has not yet returned to the level recorded in 2007 when climate change was the new hot issue). At the same time, Canadians are having difficulty connecting this general phenomenon to specific environmental consequences, such as melting sea ice and more intense storms, despite recent episodes of major flooding in central Alberta and Toronto.

Few Canadians may have a good understanding of the effective policy responses for addressing climate change, but most believe something can be done about it, and that the obstacles are more about politics and public resistance than due to a lack of solutions. And a strong majority of Canadians believe their province can shift its energy requirements from fossil fuels to cleaner renewable forms of energy, a view largely unchanged from 2011. The public continues to look first to governments to take the lead role in taking the essential actions on climate change, rather than relying on voluntary actions of industry and consumers. But Canadians' confidence in their governments on this issue has declined noticeably over the past year, reversing an upward trend dating back to 2008.

The broad conclusions about how Canadians view climate change largely hold across the country, but as before there are differences of opinion across regions, by level of education, and by Federal political party affiliation, in a generally predictable pattern. Quebecers, Canadians with a university degree and those who support Federal opposition parties take climate change more seriously, while residents of the Prairie provinces and Federal Conservative party supporters tend to be more skeptical (e.g., that the science is conclusive, about the environmental consequences, and the role of government).

When British Columbia unveiled its groundbreaking new carbon tax in 2011, it was widely seen as ahead of its time and bucking what was widely considered to be the prevailing public sentiment against new taxes of any kind (even ones promising to be revenue neutral). The new tax did prove controversial, and elicited backlash from some rural communities when implemented later that year (coinciding with surging gasoline prices). And yet the carbon tax was broadly supported by BC citizens, and successfully weathered two provincial elections, and over time public acceptance has been rising.

The current survey reveals a reversal of this trend, with public support for the carbon tax dropping 12 percentage points since November-December 2012. The tax is now endorsed by a bare majority (52%) of BC citizens, although this proportion remains higher than it has been since the tax came into effect in July 2008. The reason for this change over the past year is not immediately clear, although it may reflect in part the impact of a recent campaign against the carbon tax by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. What is clear from this research is that the public's continued support for the carbon tax cannot be taken for granted. Few citizens likely have a solid understanding of how this policy measure works and its effectiveness in reducing provincial greenhouse gas emissions, and this makes it vulnerable to attacks that portray it as yet another government tax grab lightening consumers' wallets.

Elsewhere in Canada, there continues to be remarkably sustained public support for the introduction of a BC style provincial carbon tax, at levels that are now above that recorded in B.C. More than half of Canadians outside of BC would support this type of climate change policy, down marginally from late 2011 and 2012, but still above the proportions expressing this view in earlier years. Public support for a carbon tax is stronger in eastern Canada than

in the west, but the latest decline is primarily in Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, while rising marginally in Atlantic Canada and Alberta. These results provide further evidence that public resistance does not represent a major obstacle to the introduction of a provincial carbon tax in Canada. Climate change is a significant issue for many Canadians, and they are looking first to governments for leadership in finding solutions; a modest tax on fuel consumption may prove to be an effective means of meeting these expectations.