



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.

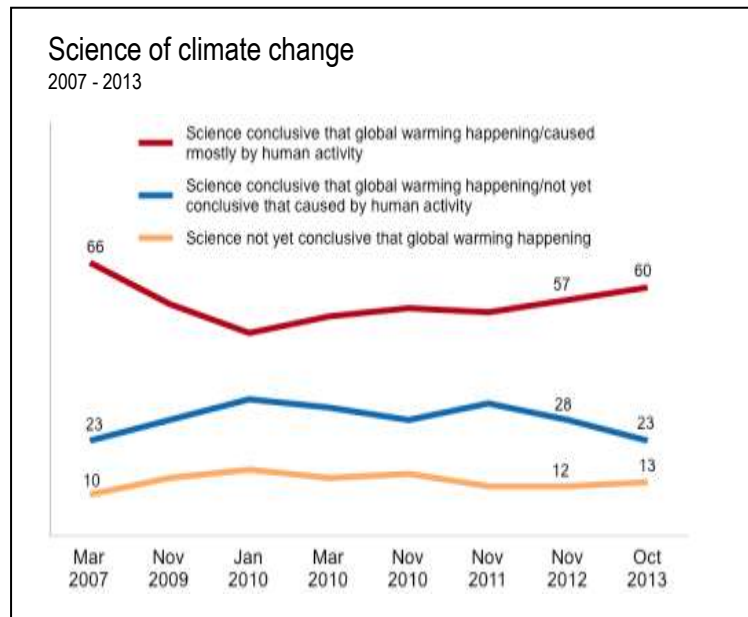
Science on climate change

Six in ten Canadians now believe that climate change is real and caused by human activity, up marginally over the past year and continuing an upward trend dating back to 2010. Those not yet certain about the science remain 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 (60%) 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 Spring 2007).

One in four (23%) now say climate change is real but do not feel the science proves humans are the main cause (down 5 points since 2012), while one in ten (12%) continue to be skeptical about the scientific evidence (largely unchanged since 2007).

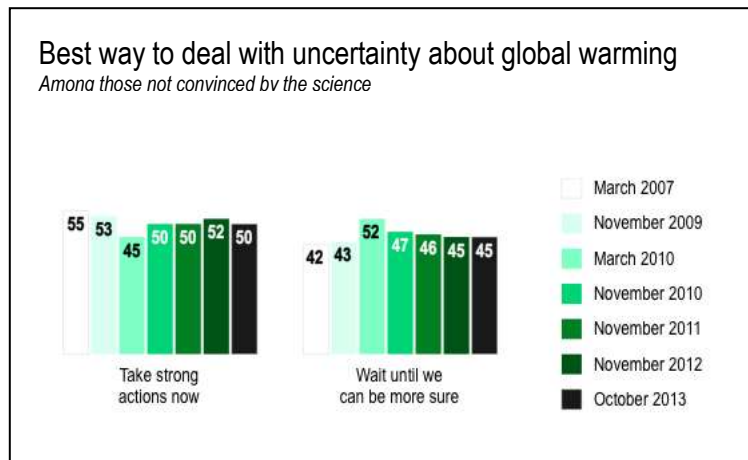
As before, opinions differ somewhat across the country. Belief in the science of climate change is most widespread in Quebec (66%) and Atlantic Canada (65%), followed by Ontario (61%) and B.C. (59%). This view is least apt to be shared in Manitoba/Saskatchewan (52%) and Alberta (47%, where 17 percent are skeptical about the reality of climate change. Since 2012, belief in the



conclusiveness of the science has increased noticeably in Ontario, Atlantic Canada, while declining in Quebec.

Education continues to be the strongest predictor of belief in climate change, although the gap has narrowed over the past 12 months as this view has strengthened among Canadians without post-secondary education. Opinions also vary in a predictable pattern based on Federal political party affiliation: Belief in the science is most widespread among those who generally support the NDP (76%) and Green Party (79%), followed by the Bloc Quebecois (70%), Liberals (69%). By comparison, only four in ten (41%) Conservative Party supporters share this view, compared with 24 percent who are not sure that climate change is happening. Among those who do not affiliate with any party, 54 percent believe in the science, versus 12 percent who are skeptics. Over the past year, belief in the science has increased modestly for all groups except those who support the Bloc Quebecois.

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. Half (50%) of this group continue to say we should take strong actions now to reduce the chances of a worst case scenario (versus 52% in 2012), while 45 percent think it is best to hold off taking action until stronger evidence emerges of what may happen in the future (unchanged).



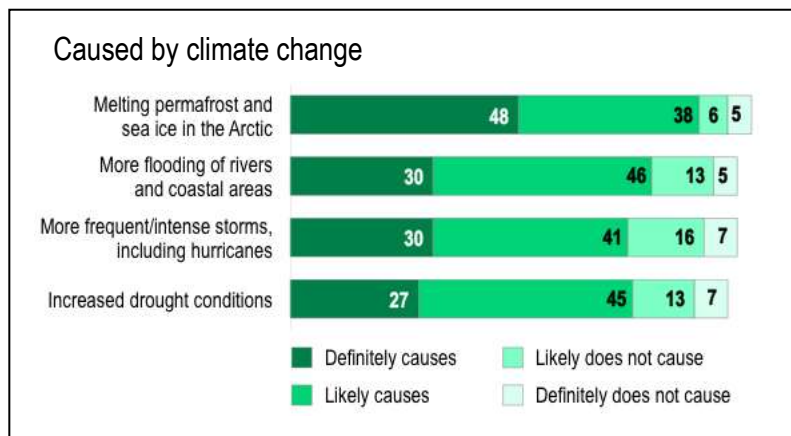
A preference for acting now is more prevalent among Quebecers, women, younger Canadians and Green Party supporters, in comparison with residents in Saskatchewan and Alberta, Canadians without a high school diploma, and Conservative Party supporters.

Environmental impacts of climate change

Most Canadians believe that climate change is causing environmental changes such as melting sea ice, increased flooding, more intense storms and increased drought. But the level of certainty around these changes has been declining since 2008.

Opinions about the reality and significance of climate change are likely grounded in large part on how this phenomenon is affecting weather patterns and environmental conditions. As on previous surveys, strong majorities of Canadians believe climate change is at least a likely cause of four specified environmental impacts in Canada, although a declining minority is definite about these impacts.

Close to eight in ten believe that climate change is definitely (48% or likely (38%) causing melting permafrost and sea ice in the arctic. The public is somewhat less likely to see climate change being the cause of more flooding of rivers and coastal areas (76%), more frequent and intense storms (71%), and increased drought conditions (72%) in Canada.



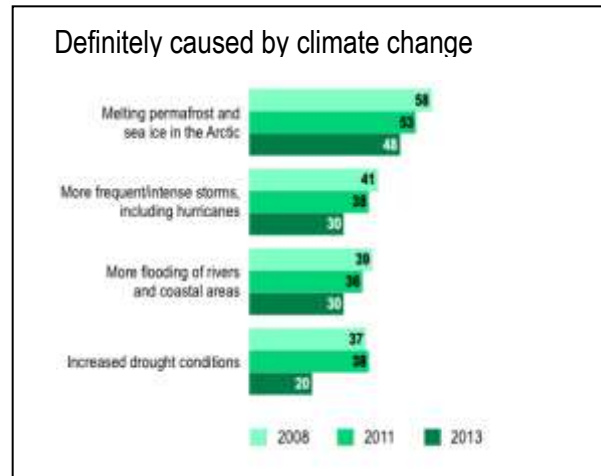
In all cases, the belief that climate change is definitely causing these environmental impacts is most widely voiced by Quebecers and Canadians with a university degree, while this is least apt to be case among residents of the Prairie provinces and Conservative Party supporters.

While Canadians are increasingly coming to the conclusion that climate change is real and the result of human activity, their level of certainty about the environmental consequences has weakened over the past couple of years. For each of four specified environmental impacts, the proportion who believes it is definitely the result of climate change has declined since 2011, and in three of four cases this continues a trend dating back to 2008.

This downward trend is evident across the country. Decline in the belief that climate change is causing increased drought is most evident in Atlantic Canada, while perceptions about the effect on permafrost/sea ice and storm activity has diminished most significantly in Ontario.

The link between climate change and increased flooding of rivers/coastal areas has declined since 2011 in provinces Saskatchewan and east, while increasing marginally in BC and Alberta.

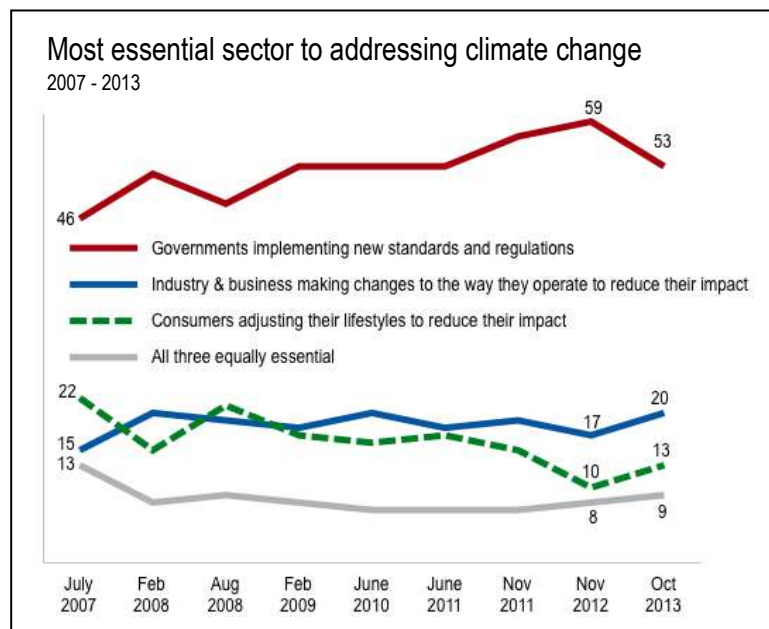
Despite record flooding earlier this year, Albertans (25%) are still less likely than others to say that increased flooding is definitely the result of climate change, with the remainder saying this is a likely result (40%), or likely/definitely not a result of climate change (30%).



Sector most essential to progress on climate change

Canadians continue to believe the most essential progress on addressing climate change must come from government standards and regulations, rather than through the voluntary actions of industry or consumers. But confidence in government leadership has weakened noticeably over the past 12 months.

Who does the public look to for making serious progress on tackling climate change in Canada? Over the past six years Canadians have looked primarily to governments to implement new standards and regulations, and this proportion had been increasing since 2011. Over the past 12 months, however, the public's confidence in government as the lead actor in addressing climate change has declined sharply (to 53%, down 6 points) and is now back to where it stood in June 2011.



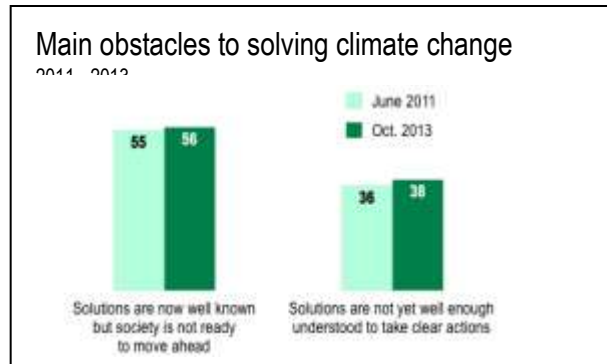
By comparison, Canadians remain much less likely to say the essential actions on climate change must come from industry making new investments (20%) or from consumers making lifestyle adjustments (13%), although both views have strengthened modestly since 2012. One in ten (9%) continue to insist that all three sectors have an equally critical role to play in making progress on climate change in this country.

The declining confidence in governments as the essential sector on climate change has taken across the country, with the exception of Atlantic Canada (64%), where support for government action has grown since 2012. Belief in government as the lead actor is most widespread in Atlantic Canada (64%) and Montreal (65%), as well as among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age (60%), and those who support Federal opposition parties. This view is least evident in the Prairie provinces (44%) and among supporters of the Federal Conservative Party (37%), with most of the remainder largely split on whether the essential actions need to be taken by consumers or industry.

Obstacles to solutions

Canadians continue to believe the biggest obstacle to addressing climate change is more about politics and public resistance than about a lack of solutions to the problem.

What do Canadians see as the biggest obstacle to solving the problem of climate change? As in 2011, a majority (56%) agree with the view that the solutions are now well known but that society is not ready to move ahead with them, compared with 38 percent who believe the solutions are not yet well enough understood to justify clear action. These proportions are essentially unchanged from June 2011.



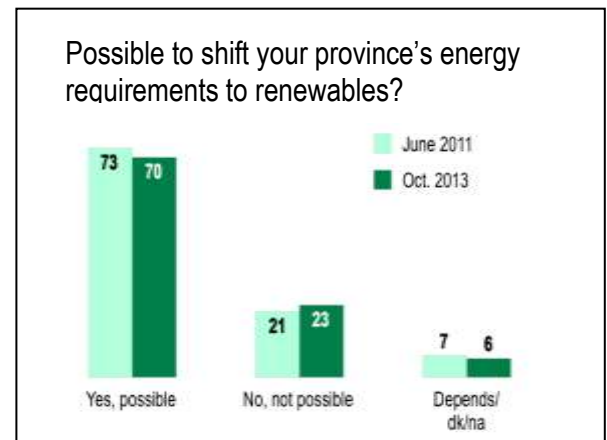
The view that the primary obstacle is societal resistance is most evident in Quebec and Atlantic Canada (62% in each), among Canadians with a university degree (64%), those 18 to 29 (66%), and NDP supporters (74%). This perspective is least apt to be shared by Prairie province residents (46%), Canadians without a high school diploma (46%), those 60 years and older (46%), and Conservative supporters (42%).

Since 2011, belief in societal resistance as the primary obstacle has increased marginally in Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, while declining in Atlantic Canada and Alberta (where opinion is now evenly divided between the two points of view). This same time period has also seen a widening of the gap across education level and age cohort, as younger more educated Canadians have increasingly come to see the challenge as one of societal resistance, while older less educated individuals are now less apt to share this opinion.

Shift to renewable energy

A strong majority of Canadians believe it is possible for their province to shift its energy resources from fossil fuels to renewable power.

Because fossil fuel combustion is a major source of greenhouse gases, renewable “green” sources of energy, such as wind, solar and biomass, are now being actively developed across the country. Despite the growth of such renewables, their potential to make a significant contribution to reducing reliance on fossil fuels has been a matter of ongoing debate among government, corporate and non-profit stakeholders. The Canadian public, however, is optimistic that renewable energy is a viable future.



Seven in ten (70%) Canadians say they believe it is possible for their province to shift most of its energy requirements from fossil fuels to clean renewable forms of energy, such as wind power, solar power and biofuels. One in four (23%) do not believe this can be done, while a handful are unable to say either way (6%). Opinions have essentially held steady since June 2011.

Optimism about the future of renewable energy is a majority view across the country, but as in 2011 there are notable differences in the strength of this opinion. Belief in the feasibility of shifting provincial energy sources to renewables continues to be strongest in Quebec (81%) and lowest in Alberta (52%). Over the past two years, this viewpoint has declined noticeably in Atlantic Canada (down 10), and to a lesser extent in the Prairie provinces

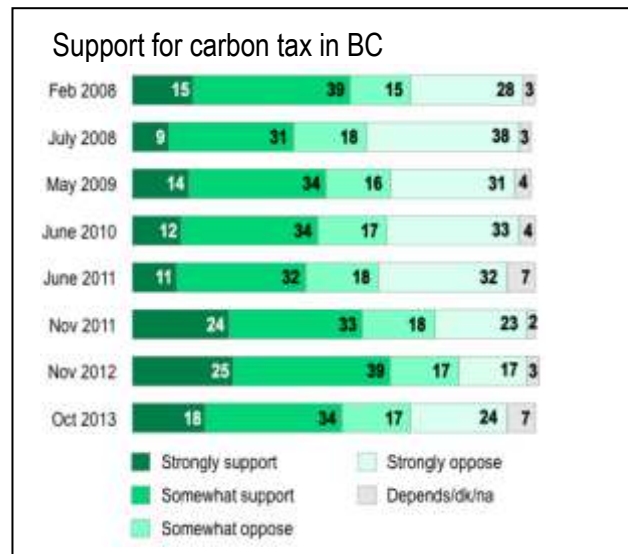
(down 5 points). In Ontario – where there has been considerable controversy over the implementation the province’s Green Energy Act – opinions remain stable with 68 percent of residents saying their province can make the shift to renewable power.

Public support for carbon tax in B.C.

British Columbians’ support for their provincial carbon tax has declined over the past year, but remains above 50 percent, and is stronger than during the first three years of its implementation.

Public support for the carbon tax in B.C. has declined noticeably in the past year, although it is still backed by more than half of the province’s residents. A bare majority now say they strongly (18%) or somewhat (34%) support the current carbon tax that has been in place since 2008.² This proportion is down from 64 percent who expressed this view in November-December 2012, and reversing the upward trend dating back to 2011.

Four in ten somewhat (17%) or strongly (24%) oppose the provincial carbon tax, up from 34 percent who did so a year ago. The proportion who do not have a clear opinion on this question increased from three percent to seven percent.



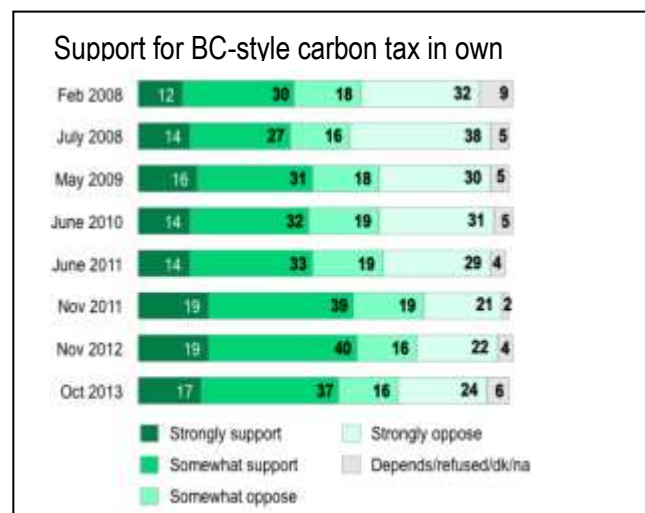
The size of the BC subsample limits the scope of subgroup analysis, but it is evident that public support for the carbon tax has declined most noticeably among men and residents outside of the Vancouver metropolitan area.

British Columbians’ view of their carbon tax is less positive than in 2011 and 2012, but remains more so than in previous years since it was implemented in July 2008. The current level of public support is very similar to that recorded in February 2008, just after it was first announced by then-Premier Gordon Campbell.

Public support for a BC-style carbon tax in other provinces

A majority of Canadians outside of BC continue to support a BC-style carbon tax for their province, with this view strongest in eastern Canada and among youth.

How do citizens elsewhere in Canada view the BC carbon tax as a climate change policy for their own province? As has been the case since 2011, a clear majority of Canadians outside of BC express support for such a tax in their province. The level of support has declined over the past year, but marginally and is now stronger than in British Columbia.



² This is how the carbon tax was described on the survey: “British Columbia now has a tax on all carbon based fuels used by consumers and businesses in the province, as a way to encourage reductions in greenhouse gas emissions generated in the province. This tax is now 7.2 cents per litre. This tax is revenue neutral which means the same amount raised through this tax each year is refunded – by law - to taxpayers in the form of lower personal income and corporate taxes.”

Across the country (outside of BC), more than half of citizens strongly (17%) or somewhat (37%) support a BC style carbon tax for their province, down five percentage points since 2012, but well above levels recorded prior to 2011.³ Four in ten now somewhat (16%) or strongly (24%) oppose such a tax, up two points since 2012.

As in previous years, public views about a BC style carbon tax vary across the country. Support is strongest in eastern and central Canada, and lower in the Prairie provinces, but there have also been notable shifts over the past year. Opinions are now most favourable in Atlantic Canada (60% support, up 6 points since 2012), followed by Ontario (55%, down 3) and Quebec (55%, down 12). Public support for a carbon tax has declined most significantly in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (to 45%, down 14), while rising marginally in Alberta (47%, up 4).

Across the country, public support for a provincial carbon tax is strongest among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age, and this support has strengthened over the past year (to 72%, up 8 points), while declining among older cohorts. Support also increases with level of education, although it is only Canadians without a high school diploma who have become more positive about this policy since 2012. As before, carbon taxes are most widely supported by those who affiliate with the Federal opposition parties, especially the NDP (67%) and Liberal Party (64%), while this view is least apt to be shared by those who support the Federal Conservative Party (40%). Among those who do not identify with any party are largely split between supporters (48%) and opponents (42%). Since 2012, support for a provincial carbon tax has declined noticeably among those who affiliate with the Green Party (60%, down 12) and Bloc Québécois (55%, down 16).

About the Environics Institute for Survey Research

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

About the David Suzuki Foundation

The David Suzuki Foundation collaborates with Canadians from all walks of life, including government and business, to conserve our environment and find solutions that will create a sustainable Canada through science-based research, education and policy work. For more information about the David Suzuki Foundation's climate change work, visit www.davidsuzuki.org or contact Ian Bruce, Manager, Science and Policy at 604-732-4228 or ibruce@davidsuzuki.org.

³ The survey question used the same description of the BC carbon tax, and then asked if respondents would support the introduction of this type of policy in their own province.