

Canadians' appetite for climate action growing, but beware of polarization

How keen are Canadians for climate action in these extraordinarily trying times? New survey results from the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy program and Nanos Research suggest that enthusiasm may be on the rise, despite the unprecedented fiscal, economic, and health situation, writes Monica Gattinger.



Monica Gattinger

Opinion

Last fall, the federal government released a flurry of new climate measures: net zero by 2050 legislation, a climate plan that will increase the carbon price to \$170 per tonne by 2030, and strategies for hydrogen and small modular nuclear reactors. Ottawa says these measures pack the policy muscle needed to hit the country's 2030 emissions targets and 2050 ambitions.

But how keen are Canadians for climate action in these extraordinarily trying times? New survey results from the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy program and Nanos Research suggest that enthusiasm may be on the rise, despite the unprecedented fiscal, economic, and health situation.

We asked Canadians on a scale of zero to 10, where zero means absolutely the worst time and 10 absolutely the best, how good a time it is for Canada to be ambitious in addressing climate change even if there are costs to the economy. We first asked this tracking question in June 2020.

Canadians' views are divided. But since June, climate ambition has grown: a small majority of Canadians (52 per cent) answered seven or higher, a seven per cent increase from June. Just over a quarter (27 per cent) answered three or lower, a two per cent decrease from the summer. Less than one in five (18 per cent) answered four to six (a five per cent decrease).

On the face of it, this is good news for Ottawa. It suggests the majority of Canadians are behind the government. But dig deeper into the numbers, and it's not all sweetness and light.

The zero to 10 scale helps to reveal the strength of disagreement among Canadians. Disagreement over policy issues need not prevent policy progress, but strong disagreement can. When views are con-



The oilsands, pictured in Fort McMurray, Alta. Decision-makers need to remain attuned to these concerns. Successfully charting Canada's energy and climate future depends on it. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

centrated at either end of a spectrum, they tend to be hardened and resistant to compromise. This is where the survey results are a bit concerning.

Almost 40 per cent of respondents hold very strong views on whether now is the best or worst time to address climate change, answering zero or 10. Nearly one in four Canadians (24 per cent) answered 10, while 15 per cent answered zero. This is up from June, when the figures stood at 17 per cent responding zero, and 17 per cent responding 10.

Governments will need to tread carefully.

Interestingly, we do not see opinions get much more polarized when we break the data down based on age or gender. Regionally, respondents from the Prairies are more likely to say now is the worst time (27 per cent). Respondents from British Columbia are more likely to say now is the best time (30 per cent).

But dig into ideology and party affiliation, and opinions get very polarized.

We asked respondents to score themselves on a scale of zero to 10 for their political views, where zero means left and 10 means right. Among left-leaning respondents (those answering zero to three, about 30 per cent of those surveyed), 48 per cent answered 10 on climate ambition. Among right-leaning respondents (those answering seven to 10, about 23 per cent of those surveyed), 42 per cent answered zero.

When it comes to partisan views, 40 per cent of Conservative Party supporters answered zero, while over one-quarter (27 per cent) of Liberal supporters answered 10, as did 46 per cent of NDP, 30 per cent of Bloc Québécois, and 66 per cent of Green Party supporters.

The results underscore that those charting Canada's energy and climate future will need to understand how to navigate polarized contexts. This means listening to Canadians' concerns.

We asked respondents why they answered the way they did. For those who said now was the worst time (zero to three), the most common responses were that there are other priorities, like health and the vaccine, (32 per cent, up from 22 per cent June) and that we should wait until the economy has recovered from the pandemic (23 per cent, down from 47 per cent in the summer). For those saying now is the best time (seven to 10), by far the most common answer was that we need to act now and climate change can't wait (60

per cent, up from 39 per cent in June). People also said the pandemic offers a good opportunity for change and highlights the extent of our potential impact (20 per cent, down from 38 per cent in the summer).

Decision-makers need to remain attuned to these concerns. Recent experi-

ence shows that strong, concentrated opposition is enough to derail initiatives that have majority support—particularly if that support is broad but not particularly deep. This is especially important as the full brunt of the second wave bears down on the country. Successfully charting Canada's energy and climate future depends on it.

The survey was an RDD dual frame (land- and cell-lines) hybrid telephone and online random survey of 1,096 Canadians, 18 years of age or older, between Nov. 26 and Nov. 29, 2020, as part of a Nanos Omnibus survey. The margin of error for this survey is ± 3.0 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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The Hill Times