

POLARIZATION OVER ENERGY AND CLIMATE: UNDERSTANDING CANADIAN PUBLIC OPINION ISSUE 3 – RENEWABLE AND NUCLEAR ENERGY*

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Study in Brief

This survey research explores Canadian attitudes on three issues: the country's climate performance; the present and future of renewables and nuclear energy; and the role that local communities should play in energy infrastructure projects. We distinguish between fragmented opinion, where the public is divided but views are not strongly held, and polarized opinion, where the public is split and opinions cluster at the extremes. This distinction matters for decision-makers charting Canada's energy and climate future: fragmented opinions are more open to change and compromise than polarized opinions.

The survey was conducted online between September 9-29, 2019 using Qualtrics Services. We surveyed 2,679 Canadians with five regional subsamples of over 500 (BC, Prairies, Ontario, Québec, Atlantic Canada). Findings for individual survey questions (a companion deck of over 60 slides) are available on the [Positive Energy's website](#).

Key Findings

This survey research explores what Canadians think about Canada's performance on climate change, along with their attitudes on renewable energy, nuclear energy, and the role local communities should play in energy infrastructure projects. Views are measured using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Analyzing the data across numerous demographic categories (partisan affiliation, ideology, region of residence, age, gender), we identify areas of agreement (green), fragmented opinion (yellow), and polarized opinion (red).

A plurality of Canadians agree that Canada is doing its fair share on climate change. However, the issue is fragmented overall, and tends towards polarized along partisan lines. This is in line with previous analyses of Positive Energy's survey research, which revealed voting preference as the most common dividing line on a number of high-profile energy and climate issues, including carbon taxes, pipelines, the future of oil and gas, and Indigenous consent on energy projects. In this data, opinions that tend towards polarized occur based on ideology and region as well; Canadians from the Prairies and ideologically right-leaning respondents were likelier to say that Canada is doing its fair share to address climate change, for example.

Interestingly, partisanship and ideology do not appear to be strongly correlated with opinion on renewables. Canadians strongly agree on the current and future economic importance of renewable energy and believe we should produce more of it. However, Canadians are less convinced that renewables can power our entire economy. On this question, skepticism transcends partisan, ideological and regional lines. Canadian opinion on nuclear energy is similarly fragmented and, except for strong opposition from Québec and Bloc Québécois supporters, does not appear to be polarized across any demographic group.

Lastly, we asked whether local communities should have the final say on energy projects. Canadians tend to agree with this statement, with some fragmentation along partisan and regional lines.

* This work was developed using survey design and implementation executed by professors Stephen Bird (Clarkson University) and Erick Lachapelle (Université de Montréal), and supported by Positive Energy in Fall 2019.

IN BRIEF

Issue Area	Overall Opinion	By Party	By Ideology	By Region	By Age	By Gender
Climate change performance						
Canada is already doing its fair share in addressing climate change	Slight agreement	Tending towards polarized	Furthest left/right polarized	Slightly stronger agreement in the Prairies		Men agree more
Renewable energy						
The importance of the renewable sector to Canada's current economy						
The importance of the renewable sector to Canada's future economy	Very strong agreement		Less agreement furthest right			
It's impossible to power an advanced economy like Canada's using only renewable energy	Slight Agreement	Polarized Conservative and NDP/Green	Furthest left/right polarized	Prairies agree most strongly	Gen Z disagrees most strongly	Men agree more
Canada needs to produce more renewable energy, even if it raises the cost of electricity		Less agreement among conservatives	Strong agreement on furthest left			
Nuclear energy						
The importance of the nuclear sector to Canada's current economy				ON and QC polarized		
The importance of the nuclear sector to Canada's future economy		Bloc Québécois supporters strongly against	Higher Agreement furthest left	ON and QC polarized		
Generating more nuclear energy is one of the best ways of addressing climate change		Bloc disagrees strongly		Fragmented overall; ON and QC tending towards polarized		Men agree more
Final say of local communities						
Local communities should have the final say when deciding whether or not energy infrastructure projects that affect them should go ahead	Tending toward agreement	Greater agreement among NDP	Slight agreement		Slight agreement	

Relevance for Decision-Makers

As Canada emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, pursuing energy and climate policies that already enjoy broad public support could help improve confidence in energy decision-making. These results show near-universal and cross-partisan belief that renewables will be important to Canada's future economy. While a sizeable portion of Canadians believe that the country is doing its fair share on climate change, this does not appear to dampen their enthusiasm for renewables.

To date, Positive Energy's survey research suggests that Canadian attitudes on energy and climate issues are not as polarized as many believe. Overall, there are more areas of agreement than disagreement. Support for renewable energy emerges in this analysis is uniquely strong and seemingly unaffected by partisanship, ideology, or region. We have yet to identify an energy or climate issue that enjoys this level of support.

Next Steps for Positive Energy

This In Brief marks the final round of analysis for this survey research. Positive Energy intends to replicate questions from the survey on a quarterly basis through 2021. This analysis is part of Positive Energy's ongoing research to understand polarization over energy and climate issues and identify strategies and tactics to address and navigate polarized contexts.

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