

Public relatively uninformed about climate policies—and maybe that's okay

October 27 2014

According to a new study authored by a trio of Simon Fraser University researchers, British Columbians know little about climate policies and their likely effectiveness.

In fact, the study by Ekaterina Rhodes, Jonn Axsen, and Mark Jaccard in SFU's School of Resource and Environmental Management finds that increased awareness of [climate science](#) and climate policy does not necessarily lead to higher support among Canadian citizens.

In short, the authors suggest that, "widespread knowledge and well-informed citizen support are not necessarily required for implementation of effective climate policies."

The journal *Global Environmental Change* recently published the study *Does effective climate policy require well-informed citizen support?*, which uses B.C., "one of the leading climate policy jurisdictions in North America," as a case study.

The survey used by the researchers for their study is unique in that, from the start, it challenges any assumption that citizens are aware of climate policies. "Surveys about climate policy typically tell respondents what the policies are and then ask for their views. This can give a misleading sense of citizen interest and awareness," says Jaccard.

In this study, in contrast, the researchers asked a representative sample of 475 B.C. residents – chosen according to income, age, gender,

education and ethnic composition – about their understanding of which policies actually exist in B.C.

Most respondents (73 per cent) could not name one B.C. policy. Of the quarter that could name one, the majority identified the [carbon tax](#). "In other words, without that controversial policy, which dominated a recent election campaign, there is virtually no citizen knowledge of B.C.'s multiple [climate policies](#)," notes Jaccard.

"It appears that most people are not interested in becoming technology and policy experts, even if they are concerned about environmental threats and expect government and industry to address them," says Jaccard.

"One frequently hears that a wider public debate on climate policy is an essential step for implementing policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. One hears this from environmental groups, the media, politicians, industry and sometimes academics. We designed this survey to test this assumption."

The next research step was to educate survey respondents about the slate of policies that have been implemented in B.C. Follow-up questions revealed that the majority of respondents preferred regulations (such as B.C.'s clean electricity policy) to pro-market policies (such as B.C.'s carbon tax).

The results of this study, says Axsen, a professor specializing in sustainable energy systems, beg some hard questions. "If we want to implement effective climate policy, is it essential that we actively build citizen awareness and active support? Maybe it is better for some policies to do their work in the background, shifting us towards a low-carbon economy, while citizens go about their normal lives."

For example, says Jaccard, "B.C. has a world-leading electricity regulation that prohibits new coal and natural gas-fired plants. This policy has an upward effect on electricity prices for B.C. consumers. Yet, there is not a public call to eliminate the policy."

The study also hints that other strategies may be helpful in inspiring citizens' interest in and support of climate policy-making. These include cultivating public trust in government, industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and creating arms-length regulatory agencies that have a sustainability [policy](#) mandate, as exists in California for example with the California Air Resources Board.

More information: Ekaterina Rhodes, Jonn Axsen, Mark Jaccard, "Does effective climate policy require well-informed citizen support?" *Global Environmental Change*, Volume 29, November 2014, Pages 92-104, ISSN 0959-3780, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.09.001).

Provided by Simon Fraser University

Citation: Public relatively uninformed about climate policies—and maybe that's okay (2014, October 27) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-uninformed-climate-policiesand.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.