

# Not all Canadians feeling the heat of climate change

November 30 2015

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While Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is in Paris hammering out the details of the global fight against climate change, a new study out of the University of Montreal and the Trottier Energy Institute shows that Canadian attitudes are somewhat ambivalent. The report, entitled, "Feeling the Heat? The Paradox of Public Opinion and Climate Change Policy in Canada: Toward a New Research Agenda" examines public perceptions of this complex policy problem. "Though a majority see evidence of a global warming trend, few feel personally at risk from a changing climate," explained Erick Lachapelle, lead author of the study and Assistant Professor at the university's Department of Political Science. "Moreover, Canadians are generally unprepared to personally assume some of the costs associated with a transition towards decarbonised energy." The findings result from a telephone survey of 1,014 Canadians. The margin of error for this size sample is 3.1% 19 times out of 20.

As reflected in the relative lack of attention to climate in the course of the 2015 federal election campaign, the climate change issue lacks public salience going into the climate change talks in Paris. This is reflected in the low level of self-assessed knowledge of global warming: only 27% say they are well informed on the issue. "People who are really passionate about climate change, to the point where they take it upon themselves to become informed and stay up to date, are a relative minority in Canada. About a quarter of the population would fall into the well-informed category," said Professor Lachapelle.

Although most Canadians are aware that the climate is changing, substantially fewer attribute this warming primarily to human activity. While 82% of Canadians perceive evidence of warming, 49% attribute this warming primarily to human activity, and 18% to a combination of human and natural factors (12% attribute warming to natural forces and 3% are not sure.) In other words, while a majority (67%) attribute at least some human responsibility to rising temperatures, only about half subscribe to the scientific consensus that rising temperatures are primarily human caused. "The question of cause is an important nuance," said Professor Lachapelle. "People aren't going to alter their behaviour or support greenhouse gas reduction policies if they question humanity's role in a warming planet" he said.

Few perceive themselves as personally at risk from climate change, with 24% feeling they are likely to face no harm at all. Only 14% feel they are likely to be harmed a great deal by the phenomenon; 31% believe they will be harmed a moderate amount, and 31% feel they will be harmed only a little. "This perception of individual invulnerability is not due to confidence in our ability to adapt, since Canadians are much more likely to believe future generations will bear the brunt of climate change," Lachapelle explained. Indeed, nearly half (49%) of Canadians believe the country's future generations will be harmed a great deal. The belief that climate change would cause no harm, a little harm, or a moderate amount of harm to future generations accounted for 7%, 13% and 30% of [public opinion](#) respectively. Professor Lachapelle says this "discrepancy in risk perceptions suggests Canadians perceive climate change to be less of an individual than a collective problem."

Even provincial action on climate has done little to raise awareness of the issue. Despite the adoption of cap and trade programs in Quebec and Ontario, 44% admit hearing nothing at all about this policy and 37% say they have heard a little. Only 19% believe they have heard a lot about the concept. "Though federal government inaction is partially responsible

for this general lack of awareness among Canadians, it is not the whole story" said Professor Lachapelle. "In fact, many Canadians have never heard of cap and trade, despite the two largest provinces adopting this measure."

Moreover, Canadians are generally unprepared to pay more to support increased production of decarbonized energy – a quarter of Canadians aren't willing to pay anything at all. Forty-four percent would be willing to pay somewhere between \$1 and \$100 per annum for the production of renewable energy. Only a third would be prepared to pay more than that. Erick Lachapelle finds this unsurprising. "Canadians are unwilling to pay more for services they already obtain relatively cheaply," he said. "It is up to governments to educate the public on the co-benefits of a transition to a decarbonised economy. These include opportunities for economic innovation and growth, jobs, better air quality and public health. All are outcomes that resonate with various values found in the Canadian public."

Nevertheless, change is in the air. "After all these years of expecting the public to push government into action, we are beginning to see the emergence of real political leadership on this issue," Lachapelle said. "Canadians elect politicians to lead. These findings challenge the new Trudeau government to engage the public on the issue of [climate change](#) after years of federal government inaction. Canada's new federal government, the blocking of the Keystone pipeline by Washington and the occasion of the Paris conference are creating a golden opportunity for a renewed federal role. If the policy changes, the public won't be that far behind. The challenge now lies with the government to better communicate the benefits of transitioning toward a decarbonised economy."

Provided by University of Montreal

Citation: Not all Canadians feeling the heat of climate change (2015, November 30) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-canadians-climate.html>

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