

Canadians are not nearly as divided about environmental issues as it seems, study finds

July 13 2022, by Don Campbell



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Canadians are not nearly as divided about many important environmental issues as we may think—and that lack of division could offer common ground in drafting national environmental policies, according to a new

study.

Researchers in the department of physical and environmental sciences at the University of Toronto Scarborough used Statistics Canada data to explore Canadians' behaviors and attitudes towards the environment.

"A real positive finding is that Canadians—regardless of their age, income, location, politics or income—are not deeply divided on many very important environmental issues," says Professor George Arhonditsis, who authored the study with Ph.D. student Cindy Yang.

"This is a promising trend and offers hope that Canadians can unite to tackle some of these issues in the near future."

For the study, researchers compiled a set of 59 questions based on StatCan's Household and the Environment Survey. The number of responses ranged from 4,071 to 80,735 for each question.

The questions covered a range of environmental behaviors, including product purchases, time and money spent on environmental causes, as well as household practices relating to air quality, [waste disposal](#), energy and [water conservation](#). The researchers also included social and demographic information about the respondents, including their location, [political party](#), age, education, income and household size.

They found that households with a higher median age are slightly more likely to buy environmentally-friendly products, visit nature spots and adopt better waste management practices. By contrast, [younger people](#) are more likely to be involved in environmental activism, which includes dedicating time and resources to volunteer activities aimed at conservation, clean-up projects and protection or restoration of wildlife and habitats.

There were also some regional differences. Ontario and British Columbia showed a slightly higher willingness for sustainable living compared to other provinces. While there was no distinct urban-rural divide on environmental behaviors and attitudes, the researchers found people living in Toronto and Vancouver reacted more positively towards environmental activism and lifestyle questions.

One issue that did divide Canadians along political lines is climate change. The researchers found that Canadians who identify as conservatives are more reluctant to take actions aimed at climate change, including purchasing electric vehicles or adopting renewable forms of energy.

"We found that political conservatism influenced some climate change-related behaviors, but overall we don't find a significant conservative-versus-liberal divide about the broader-spectrum of environmental issues," says Arhonditsis.

"It's not like conservatives recycle a lot less, are more wasteful with water or don't care about green spaces compared to liberals."

The study, which is published in the journal *Ecological Informatics*, is the first to map nation-wide environmental behaviors in an OECD country and use the results to identify priorities in designing national environmental policies.

Arhonditsis says the fact that Canadians are not as divided on many environmental issues should help in crafting national policies, adding that it might be pragmatic to start with issues where Canadians are united such as waste management, water conservation and ecological restoration programs.

"I'm not trying to downplay the importance of climate change—it's of

huge significance and needs to be addressed," he says. "But politically, it is controversial."

Arhonditsis says that since [climate change](#) tends to dominate the conversation, it can often detract attention from other important environmental issues that are not as divisive but still need a lot of work.

"Political parties might be able to look at some of these other issues and find common ground among voters, regardless of their political stripes."

More information: Cindy Yang et al, What are the primary covariates of environmental attitudes and behaviours in Canada? A national-scale analysis of socioeconomic, political, and demographic factors, *Ecological Informatics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ecoinf.2022.101661](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoinf.2022.101661)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Canadians are not nearly as divided about environmental issues as it seems, study finds (2022, July 13) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-canadians-environmental-issues.html>

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