



David
Suzuki
Foundation

Focus Canada 2013 Canadian public opinion about the BC carbon tax

As part of its ongoing Focus Canada public opinion research program, the Environics Institute partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation this fall to ask Canadians about the issue of climate change and related issues such as carbon taxes, to determine how perceptions have changed (or not) over the past 12 months. Some of this research has been issued in a separate report on November 18th. This report presents the results on Canadians' opinions about carbon taxes in British Columbia and across the country, updating research dating back to 2008.

The survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 2,003 Canadians between October 1 and 17, 2013. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples. The B.C. sample is 250 (margin of sampling error is +/-6.2% in 19 of 20 samples).

Background

Surveys conducted by Environics and others have consistently documented that the Canadian public is looking for leadership from its governments to take steps to address the global challenge presented by our rapidly changing climate. But does this sentiment extend to accepting new taxes on personal consumption of the fossil fuels that contribute to rising greenhouse gas emissions? For at least a decade, economists and policy experts have made a strong case that putting a price on carbon offers the greatest potential for shifting consumer and industry behaviour away from energy-intensive consumption. But in Canada and elsewhere there has been limited application of carbon pricing policy. In the 2008 Federal Election, the Liberal platform included a comprehensive "Green Shift" proposal for carbon pricing, but the party's poor showing at the ballot box quickly led many to conclude that Canadians were not prepared for this approach to climate change action (although there were other equally compelling reasons why the Liberals did so poorly in that election).

The stand-out exception has been in British Columbia, which in 2008 became the first jurisdiction in North America to implement a true carbon tax aimed at reducing use of greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors. When first introduced, this tax was controversial, but has been sustained through two hard-fought provincial elections. Environics has been measuring public opinion on the BC carbon tax since it was first announced in February 2008, both in BC and across the country.¹ This latest survey, conducted in partnership with the David Suzuki Foundation, updates the research, with a specific focus on how public support has changed (or not) over the past year.

Conclusions

When British Columbia unveiled its groundbreaking new carbon tax in 2011, it was widely seen as ahead of its time and bucking what was widely considered to be the prevailing public sentiment against new taxes of any kind (even ones promising to be revenue neutral). The new tax did prove controversial, and elicited backlash from some rural communities when implemented later that year (coinciding with surging gasoline prices). And yet the carbon tax was broadly supported by BC citizens, and successfully weathered two provincial elections, and over time public acceptance has been rising.

¹These questions originated with an ongoing syndicated study (The Canadian Environmental Barometer) that has been conducted by the Environics Research Group between 2007 and 2011. Environics Research has made the trend data for these questions available for purposes of comparing the current findings with those from previous years dating back to 2007ff

The current survey reveals a reversal of this trend, with public support for the carbon tax dropping 12 percentage points since November-December 2012. The tax is now endorsed by a bare majority (52%) of BC citizens, although this proportion remains higher than it has been since the tax came into effect in July 2008. The reason for this change over the past year is not immediately clear, although it may reflect in part the impact of a recent campaign against the carbon tax by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. What is clear from this research is that the public's continued support for the carbon tax cannot be taken for granted. Few citizens likely have a solid understanding of how this policy measure works and its effectiveness in reducing provincial greenhouse gas emissions, and this makes it vulnerable to attacks that portray it as yet another government tax grab lightening consumers' wallets.

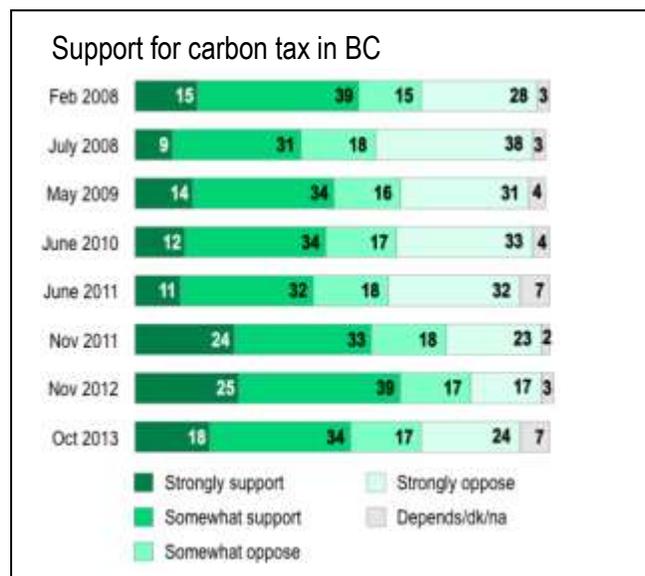
Elsewhere in Canada, there continues to be remarkably sustained public support for the introduction of a BC style provincial carbon tax, at levels that are now above that recorded in B.C. More than half of Canadians outside of BC would support this type of climate change policy, down marginally from late 2011 and 2012, but still above the proportions expressing this view in earlier years. Public support for a carbon tax is stronger in eastern Canada than in the west, but the latest decline is primarily in Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, while rising marginally in Atlantic Canada and Alberta. These results provide further evidence that public resistance does not represent a major obstacle to the introduction of a provincial carbon tax in Canada. Climate change is a significant issue for many Canadians, and they are looking first to governments for leadership in finding solutions; a modest tax on fuel consumption may prove to be an effective means of meeting these expectations.

Public support for carbon tax in B.C.

British Columbians' support for their provincial carbon tax has declined over the past year, but remains above 50 percent, and is stronger than during the first three years of its implementation.

Public support for the carbon tax in B.C. has declined noticeably in the past year, although it is still backed by more than half of the province's residents. A bare majority now say they strongly (18%) or somewhat (34%) support the current carbon tax that has been in place since 2008.² This proportion is down from 64 percent who expressed this view in November-December 2012, and reversing the upward trend dating back to 2011.

Four in ten somewhat (17%) or strongly (24%) oppose the provincial carbon tax, up from 34 percent who did so a year ago. The proportion who do not have a clear opinion on this question increased from three percent to seven percent.



The size of the BC subsample limits the scope of subgroup analysis, but it is evident that public support for the carbon tax has declined most noticeably among men and residents outside of the Vancouver metropolitan area.

British Columbians' view of their carbon tax is less positive than in 2011 and 2012, but remains more so than in previous years since it was implemented in July 2008. The current level of public support is very similar to that recorded in February 2008, just after it was first announced by then-Premier Gordon Campbell.

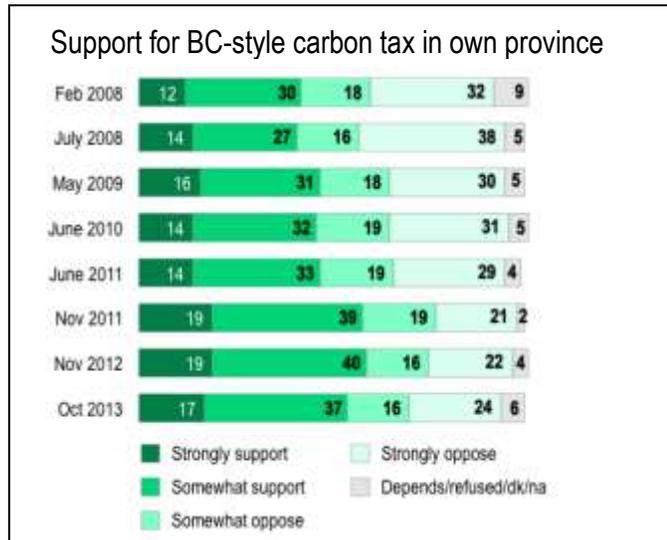
² This is how the carbon tax was described on the survey: "British Columbia now has a tax on all carbon based fuels used by consumers and businesses in the province, as a way to encourage reductions in greenhouse gas emissions generated in the province. This tax is now 7.2 cents per litre. This tax is revenue neutral which means the same amount raised through this tax each year is refunded – by law – to taxpayers in the form of lower personal income and corporate taxes."

Public support for a BC-style carbon tax in other provinces

A majority of Canadians outside of BC continue to support a BC-style carbon tax for their province, with this view strongest in eastern Canada and among youth.

How do citizens elsewhere in Canada view the BC carbon tax as a climate change policy for their own province? As has been the case since 2011, a clear majority of Canadians outside of BC express support for such a tax in their province. The level of support has declined over the past year, but marginally and is now stronger than in British Columbia.

Across the country (outside of BC), more than half of citizens strongly (17%) or somewhat (37%) support a BC style carbon tax for their province, down five percentage points since 2012, but well above levels recorded prior to 2011.³ Four in ten now somewhat (16%) or strongly (24%) oppose such a tax, up two points since 2012.



As in previous years, public views about a BC style carbon tax varies across the country. Support is strongest in eastern and central Canada, and lower in the Prairie provinces, but there have also been notable shifts over the past year. Opinions are now most favourable in Atlantic Canada (60% support, up 6 points since 2012), followed by Ontario (55%, down 3) and Quebec (55%, down 12). Public support for a carbon tax has declined most significantly in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (to 45%, down 14), while rising marginally in Alberta (47%, up 4).

Across the country, public support for a provincial carbon tax is strongest among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age, and this support has strengthened over the past year (to 72%, up 8 points), while declining among older cohorts. Support also increases with level of education, although it is only Canadians without a high school diploma who have become more positive about this policy since 2012. As before, carbon taxes are most widely supported by those who affiliate with the Federal opposition parties, especially the NDP (67%) and Liberal Party (64%), while this view is least apt to be shared by those who support the Federal Conservative Party (40%). Among those who do not identify with any party are largely split between supporters (48%) and opponents (42%). Since 2012, support for a provincial carbon tax has declined noticeably among those who affiliate with the Green Party (60%, down 12) and Bloc Québécois (55%, down 16).

About the Environics Institute for Survey Research

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 to promote public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. A major focus is on surveying individuals and groups not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or keith.neuman@environics.ca

About the David Suzuki Foundation

The David Suzuki Foundation collaborates with Canadians from all walks of life, including government and business, to conserve our environment and find solutions that will create a sustainable Canada through science-based research, education and policy work. For more information the Foundation's climate change work, visit www.davidsuzuki.org or contact Ian Bruce at 604-732-4228 or ibruce@davidsuzuki.org.

³ The survey question used the same description of the BC carbon tax, and then asked if respondents would support the introduction of this type of policy in their own province.