Opinion

Canadians’ appetite for climate action growing, but beware of polarization

How keen are Canadians for climate action in these extraordinarily trying times? New survey results from the University of Ottawa’s Positive Energy program and Nanos Research suggest that enthusiasm may be on the rise, despite the unprecedented fiscal, economic, and health situation, writes Monica Gattinger.

On the face of it, this is good news for Ottawa. It suggests the majority of Canadians are behind the government. But dig deeper into the numbers, and it’s not all sweetness and light.

The results underscore that those charting Canada’s energy and climate future will need to understand how to navigate polarized contexts. This means listening to Canadians’ concerns.

We asked respondents why they answered the way they did. For those who said now was the worst time (zero to three), the most common responses were that there are other priorities, like health and the vaccine, (32 per cent, up from 22 per cent June) and that we should wait until the economy has recovered from the pandemic (23 per cent, down from 47 per cent in the summer). For those saying now is the best time (seven to 10), by far the most common answer was that we need to act now and climate change can’t wait (60 per cent, up from 39 per cent in June). People also said the pandemic offers a good opportunity for change and highlights the extent of our potential impact (20 per cent, down from 38 per cent in the summer).

Decision-makers need to remain attuned to these concerns. Recent experience shows that strong, concentrated opposition is enough to derail initiatives that have majority support—particularly if that support is broad but not particularly deep. This is especially important as the full brunt of the second wave bears down on the country. Successfully charting Canada’s energy and climate future depends on it.

The survey was an RDD dual frame (land- and cell-lines) hybrid telephone and online random survey of 1,996 Canadians, 18 years of age or older, between Nov. 26 and Nov. 29, 2020, as part of a Nanos Omnibus survey. The margin of error for this survey is ±3.0 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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