



David  
Suzuki  
Foundation

## Focus Canada 2014 Canadian public opinion about climate change

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*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, to determine how perceptions have changed (or not) over the past 12 months. The survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 2,020 Canadians between October 6 and 19, 2014. 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.*

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### Background

Many people consider global warming or climate change to be the most pressing challenge facing human civilization, but it continues to command limited media attention and has yet to elicit a concerted policy response in North America or elsewhere. This is despite increasingly unpredictable and sometimes violent weather patterns experienced worldwide, which scientists predicted as an outcome of global warming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently issued the final report of its Fifth Assessment providing the most definitive scientific evidence yet about current and future consequences, including environmental disruption and the social and economic upheaval that may result.

Where does the Canadian public stand today on the issue of climate change? Have Canadians lost interest or do they remain concerned and want strong actions to address the problem? The Environics Institute for Survey Research partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation to take a new sounding of public opinion on climate change, as part of its ongoing Focus Canada public opinion research program. Focus Canada is the country's longest-running national public opinion research program, and is now a public interest initiative providing credible, independent and sustained insight into Canadian public opinion on important issues facing the country.

The survey included questions that are key indicators of public opinion about various aspects of climate change. These questions originated with an ongoing syndicated study (*The Canadian Environmental Barometer*) conducted by the Environics Research Group. Environics Research has made the trend data for these questions available (covering the period 2007 to 2011) so that current findings can be compared with those from previous years.

### Executive summary

As the scientific evidence for global warming continues to mount, the Canadian public is increasingly coming to accept this reality and take the issue seriously. A majority is clearly concerned about climate change, and about the potential consequences in terms of weather events, environmental impacts and in particular about what it may mean for future generations. One out of 10 Canadians remains a climate skeptic who questions the science, with this proportion largely unchanged since 2007.

As with most major issues, Canadians look first to their governments to take a leadership role in addressing climate change through laws, regulations and policies, rather than placing their faith in voluntary changes by industry or consumers. Confidence in government leadership has waned somewhat over the past two years, but no other sector at this point is seen as ready to take over the challenge. The public's assessment of the federal government's performance on addressing climate change relative to other countries is surprisingly positive (given the significant bad press Canada has been receiving over recent years), and this view has remained remarkably stable since as far back as 2007. This likely reflects the fact that few Canadians pay close attention to government

policy in this area, either in Canada or abroad. At the same time, there is widespread public support for Canada pledging significant new actions on the climate change front (voiced by close to nine in 10 Canadians), in the context of international meetings and efforts to find an international solution to the problem.

Canadians are looking for leadership from their governments on climate change, but few are informed about what policies might be the appropriate response. Opinion is divided about whether citizens should help shoulder the cost through higher taxes and prices for some products and services, and public acceptance of this idea has declined over the past year. At the same time, the B.C. carbon tax has enjoyed sustained public support since its introduction in 2008, and this has strengthened over the past 12 months. Moreover, modest majority support continues for the introduction of a B.C.-style carbon tax in other provinces, most notably in Ontario and Atlantic Canada.

## Science on climate change

**A growing number of Canadians believe that climate change is real and is caused by human activity, up marginally over the past year and continuing an upward trend dating back to 2010. Those not yet certain about the science remain divided on whether it is best to take action now or wait until we know more.**

**Is climate change happening?** The scientific evidence documenting the reality of global warming and its impacts has been mounting steadily over the years, and public opinion is gradually responding, although not yet back to the point it was in 2007 when the issue enjoyed its strongest public profile.

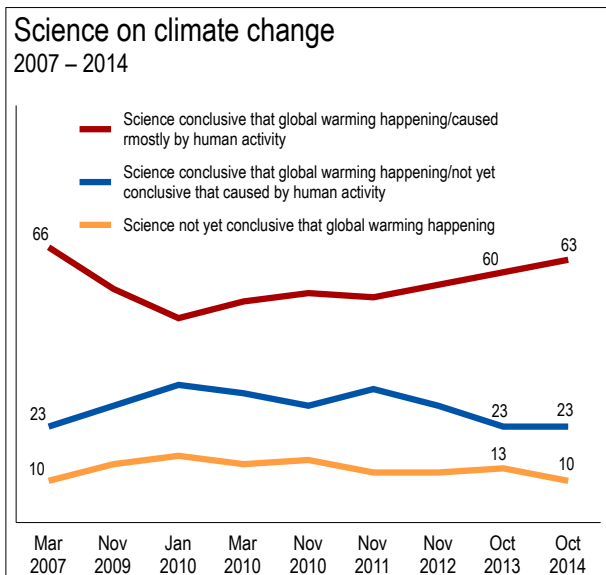
More than six in 10 (63%) Canadians now believe the scientific evidence is conclusive and that climate change is primarily caused by human activity. This proportion is up marginally over the past year, and continues an upward trend dating back to January 2010, which represents a low point when only 49 per cent of the population shared this perspective.

Fewer than one in four (23%) say climate change is real but are yet to be convinced about the main cause, while one in 10 (10%) remains skeptical about the science. In both cases these percentages match the lows recorded in March 2007.

Opinions about the reality of climate change continue to vary across the country. Acceptance of

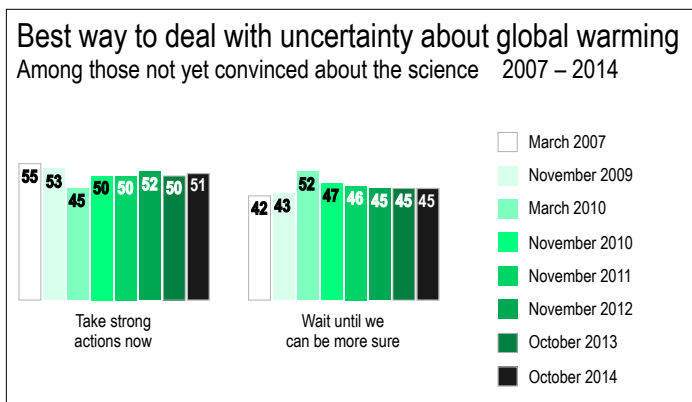
the science and cause remains most widespread in Quebec (75%), where this view has strengthened over the past year (up 10 percentage points). This view is shared least in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (47%, down five points), and Alberta (50%, up three). Views about the science of climate change also differ by community size, with acceptance notably stronger in the major urban centres (70%) than in rural areas (54%).

Belief in climate change remains partly a function of education, with belief in the science most widespread among Canadians with a university degree (70%) and least so among those without a high school diploma (50%). But the strongest predictor of attitudes continues to be federal political party preference: Belief in climate change is strongest among those who support the Green Party (82%) and NDP (79% — both up three points since 2013), followed by the Liberal Party (70%), and weakest among supporters of the federal Conservative Party (42%, up one; compared with 21% who remain skeptical, down three points). Among the three in 10 Canadians with no party preference, 59 per cent accept the scientific reality of climate change (up five points), versus 10 per cent who are skeptics.



**Dealing with uncertainty.** The one-third of Canadians who are not convinced of the scientific reality of climate change remain divided on how best to deal with the uncertainty surrounding the issue.

Half (51%) of this group continue to say we should take strong actions now to reduce the chances of a worst-case scenario, while 45 per cent think it is best to hold off taking action until stronger evidence emerges of what may happen in the future. These proportions are essentially unchanged since November 2010.



Among this segment of Canadians who remain uncertain about the reality of climate change, preference for action continues to be stronger among Quebecers (63%) and Canadians with a college or university education (55%), and least so among Conservative Party supporters (43%).

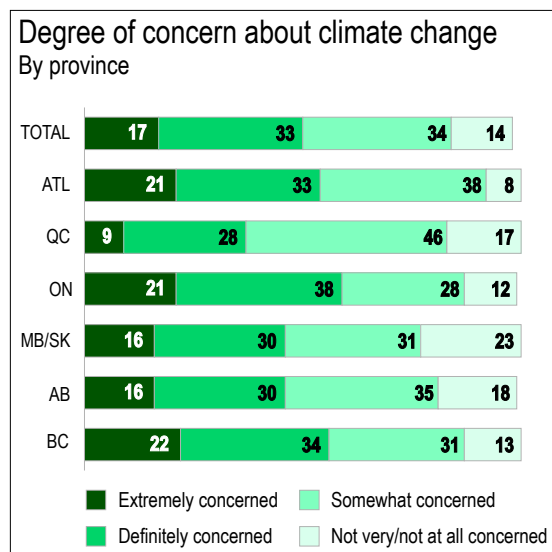
### Public concern about climate change

**A large majority of Canadians continues to be clearly concerned about climate change, although the intensity of worry continues to diminish over time. The public’s concerns are based on a number of potential consequences of global warming, but at the top of the list is what it may mean for future generations.**

**Overall concern about climate change.** How personally concerned are Canadians about the changes to our climate due to global warming? Most are concerned at some level, with half now saying they are extremely (17%) or definitely (33%) concerned. Another third (34%) are somewhat concerned about climate change, while one in six say they are not very (8%) or not at all (6%) concerned.

The proportion clearly concerned (extremely or definitely) has increased marginally (up four percentage points) since November 2011, although it remains below the peak level recorded in September 2007 (when 57% expressed this level of concern).

The “extremely concerned” group is a leading indicator of public concern as it encompasses those with the strongest emotional connection to the issue and therefore most predisposed to act in response. The size of this group has in fact been declining steadily since 2007 and is now at the lowest level yet recorded. The fact that the intensity of public concern about climate change is declining even as acceptance of the scientific evidence is growing suggests Canadians may be acclimatizing to the problem, which has by now become familiar, with an absence of fresh and compelling evidence of its magnitude or impact.

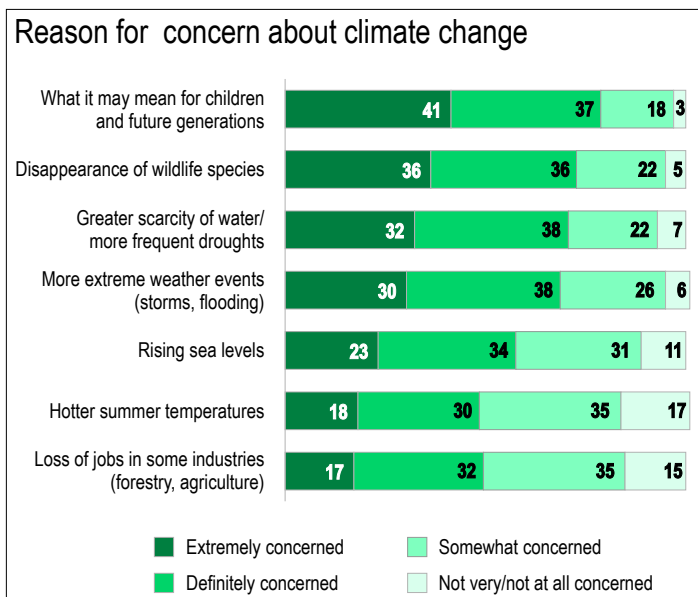


Across the country, public concern about climate change is now most widespread in Ontario (59%) and British Columbia (56%; up noticeably in both provinces since 2011), and lowest in Quebec (37%), followed by the three Prairie provinces (46%; up marginally in Alberta and down more noticeably in Manitoba and Saskatchewan). Atlantic Canadians are less likely to be both clearly concerned (down five) and unconcerned (down seven), with more now indicating they are somewhat concerned about climate change.

Concern about climate change is higher among urban Canadians than those living in rural areas, and this gap has widened since 2011. Predictably, differences of opinion span the political spectrum, between supporters of the Green Party (71% extremely or definitely concerned) and NDP (64%), compared with those who support the Conservative Party (31%, versus 25% who are not very or not at all concerned).

**Basis of concern about climate change.** Those who are at least somewhat concerned about the changes in climate due to global warming (81% of the population) were asked about the extent to which this concern is based on each of seven specified potential consequences. All seven are identified as a basis for concern by a significant proportion of Canadians.

The public is most likely to be worried about what climate change may mean to their children and grandchildren (78%), followed by the disappearance of wildlife species (72%), greater scarcity of water, as well as more frequent droughts (70%), and extreme weather events like storms and flooding (68%).



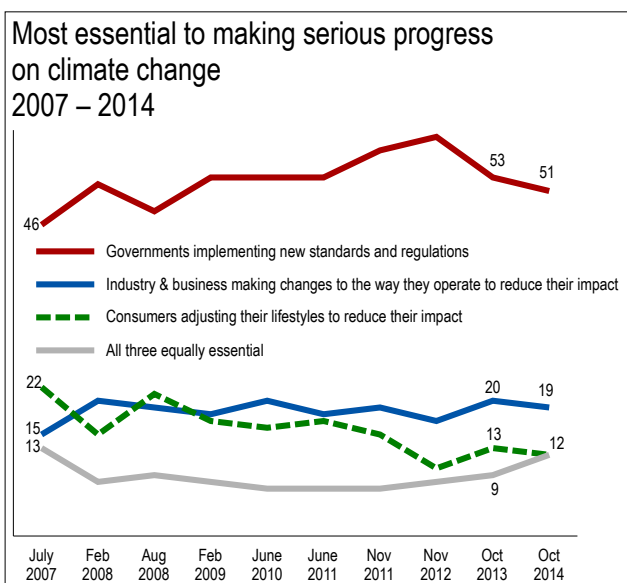
Roughly half express this level of concern about the potential consequences of global warming in terms of rising sea levels (57%), a loss of jobs in some industries, such as forestry and agriculture (48%), and hotter summer temperatures (49%). In none of these areas does more than one in six say they are not very or not at all concerned.

Across these reasons, concern levels are higher in Ontario, among women and supporters of the Federal Green Party and NDP, while lower in Quebec and among Conservative Party supporters (although even with this group significant proportions express clear concern; for instance, about the impact on future generations (69%, versus 6% unconcerned, and extreme weather events (56% versus 9%). Canadians with the lowest incomes are among the most likely to be concerned about the potential consequences of global warming in the areas of extreme weather events, the disappearance of wildlife, a loss of jobs and hotter summer temperatures.

## Government leadership on climate change

**Canadians look first to governments to play a leadership role in addressing climate change. Most believe we are doing as well or better than other countries in tackling this issue, but public support for pledging significant new actions in light of growing international momentum is almost universal.**

**Most essential sector for making progress on climate change.** Who does the public look to for making serious progress on tackling climate change in Canada? Over the past seven years Canadians have looked primarily to governments to implement new standards and regulations (51%) rather than industry and business making changes in the way they operate (19%) or consumers adjusting their lifestyles (12%).



Since 2012, the proportion looking first to government has been declining, while a marginally increasing number volunteer that all three sectors are equally responsible for progress (12%).

The government is the identified sector for climate change leadership by at least a plurality of Canadians in all identifiable groups across the country. This view is most widely endorsed by Quebecers (57%) and by supporters of the NDP (60%) and Liberal Party (59%), and least evident among residents of the Prairie provinces (39%) and Conservative supporters (40%, although up 3 percentage points from 2013).

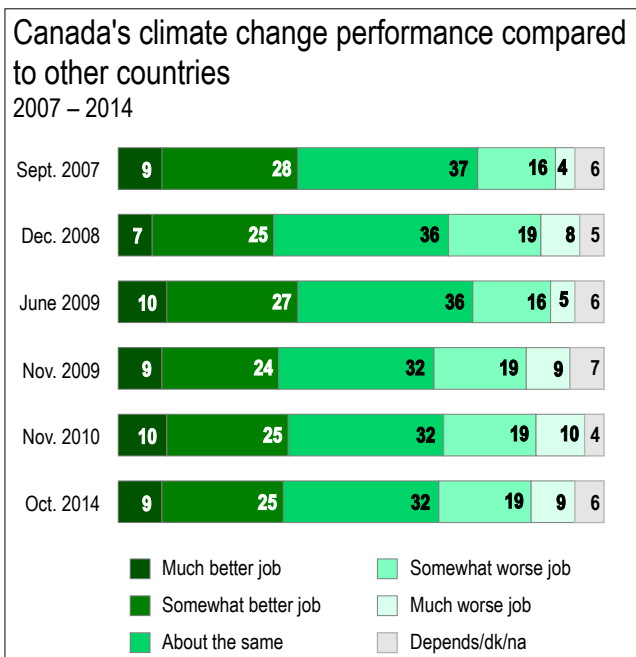
Belief in government as lead actor has declined since 2012, most noticeably among residents of Atlantic Canada, Montreal and Vancouver, as well as among Canadians earning between \$30K and \$50K, and Green Party supporters.

**Canada’s international record on climate change.** Canadians’ assessment of their country’s performance on climate change relative to other countries has been remarkably stable over the past seven years, despite a steady stream of criticism from environmental groups and being awarded “Dinosaur of the Year” awards in multiple years for its reputed inaction on the issue.

One-third believe Canada’s performance is much (9%) or somewhat (25%) better than that of other countries, compared with one-third (32%) who say it is about the same, and three in 10 who consider it to be somewhat (19%) or much (9%) worse.

These results are almost identical to those recorded in November 2010, and similar to earlier years.

Public assessment of Canada’s performance relative to other countries is the most positive in Alberta (50% say we are doing a better job, versus 13% who say worse), followed by Ontario (40% versus 27%), while the most negative view is expressed by Quebecers (17% better versus 37% worse). Since 2010, ratings have declined in Atlantic Canada, Quebec and British Columbia, while improving in the three Prairie provinces.

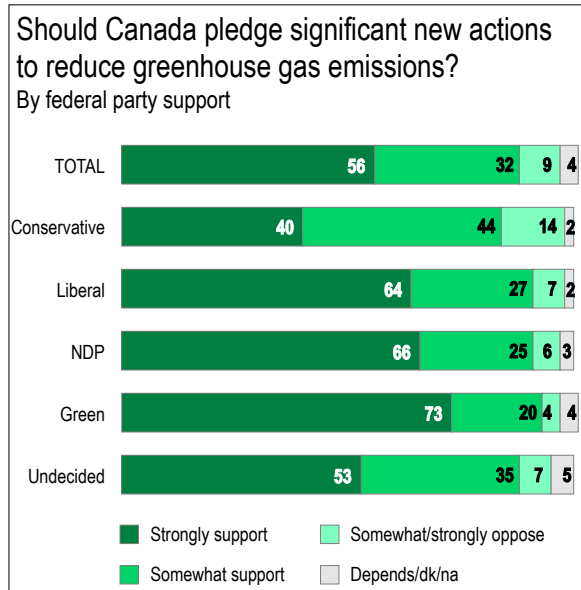


As before, Canadians with higher incomes and education are more likely than others to be critical of Canada’s position on climate change, and this is now also the case with older Canadians (27% of those 55 or older say Canada is doing a better job than other countries, a view shared by almost twice as many as those between 18 and 24 (52%).

As would be expected, supporters of the Conservative Party (currently the government party) are generally positive in their assessment (46% better versus 12% worse), in contrast with those who support the Green Party (26% versus 39%), NDP (30% versus 41%) and Liberal Party (30%, versus 37%).

**Support for new climate change actions.** While most Canadians believe their country is doing as least as well as other nations in addressing climate change, there is also widespread public support for doing more. Almost nine in 10 say they strongly (56%) or somewhat (32%) support Canada pledging to take significant new actions to reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions, as a number of other countries are now beginning to do.

There is solid majority public support for new climate change actions across all provinces and subgroups of the population. Strong support is most prevalent among women, Quebecers, Canadians with a university degree and Green Party supporters, a view also shared by 40 per cent of Conservative Party supporters (83% of whom strongly or somewhat support new actions, compared with 14% who oppose this).

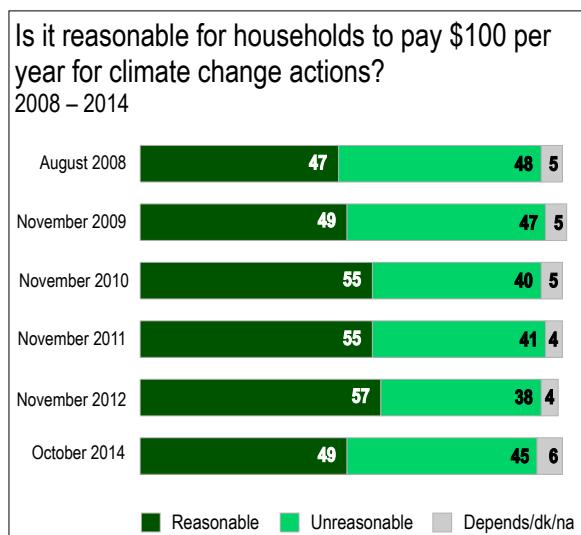


### Public support for carbon-based pricing

**Canadians are divided on what is reasonable for households to pay for climate change actions. But a growing majority of British Columbians support their provincial carbon tax, and a similar proportion elsewhere in the country would support such a tax in their own province to address climate change.**

**Paying more to support climate change actions.** If Canadians believe their country needs to get more serious about tackling global warming, are they prepared to help pay for what it will cost to implement substantive new strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?

The survey asked Canadians if they believe it is reasonable for the average household to pay an additional \$100 a year in higher taxes and prices for certain kinds of products and services, as a way of doing their part to address the problem. There is no public consensus, with about half (49%) saying this is a reasonable amount for everyone to pay, and almost as many (45%) indicating it is unreasonable. The proportion that thinks this type of citizen involvement is reasonable has declined since November 2012 and is comparable to the 2009 results.



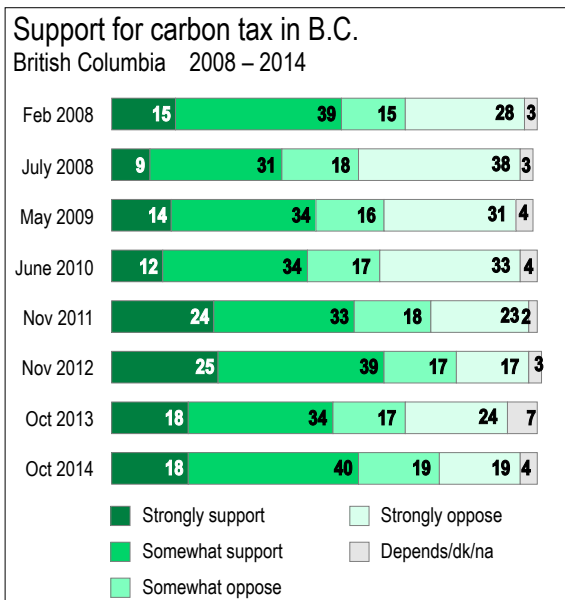
This divided opinion extends across Canada. There is bare majority support for households paying the \$100 per year for climate change action among men, residents in all provinces except Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan (where support declined most noticeably since 2012), as well as among Canadians with a university degree, those in mid to upper income brackets and Liberal and NDP supporters.

This view is least evident in Quebec (44%), among high school graduates (44%), and those who do not support any federal party (41%). Conservative Party supporters are evenly split between those who consider such costs reasonable (47%) and unreasonable (48%). Since 2012, public acceptance of this type of cost has declined more among NDP (down 10) and Green Party (down 21) supporters than among Conservative Party supporters (down three).

**B.C. Carbon Tax.** The Province of British Columbia introduced a tax on carbon-based fuels in 2008 as a concrete step to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the first jurisdiction in North America to do so. This tax has encountered resistance but has proved to be politically sustainable and generally accepted by the public who are now paying more for fuels (with comparable savings on other provincial taxes).

Public support for the carbon tax in B.C. has strengthened over the past year, with close to six in 10 now saying they strongly (18%) or somewhat (40%) support it (up from 52% in 2013). This is now the highest level of support since 2012, and well above the level recorded during the first few years of its implementation.

Fewer than four in 10 B.C. residents now somewhat (19%) or strongly (19%) oppose the provincial carbon tax. The proportion strongly opposed has been declining since 2009 (with the exception of 2012), and has dropped noticeably over the past 12 months. The size of the B.C. subsample limits the scope of subgroup analysis, but it is evident that public support for the carbon tax continues to be strongest in the Vancouver metropolitan area.

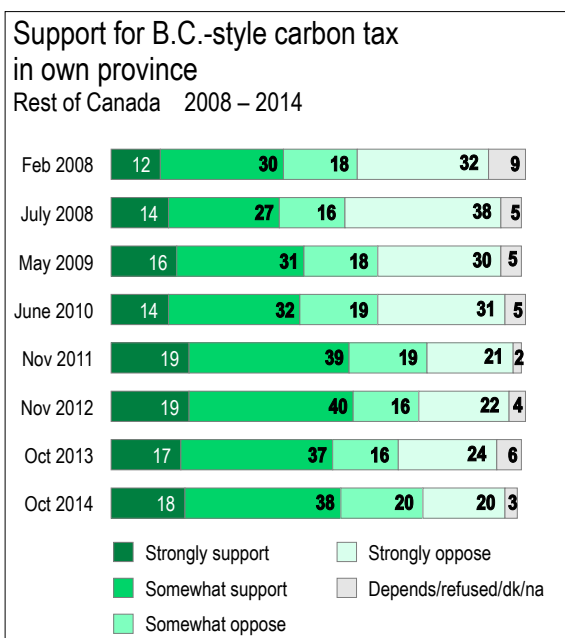


**Support for B.C.-style carbon tax elsewhere in Canada.** How do citizens elsewhere in Canada view the B.C. carbon tax as a climate change policy for their own provinces? As has been the case since 2011, a clear majority of Canadians outside of B.C. express support for such a tax in their province. The level of support has inched upwards over the past year, and is comparable to the views expressed in British Columbia.

Across the country (outside of B.C.), more than half of citizens strongly (18%) or somewhat (38%) support a B.C.-style carbon tax for their province (up two percentage points since 2013), while four in 10 somewhat (20%) or strongly (20%) oppose it (with the strongly opposed group down four points).<sup>1</sup>

Support is now strongest in Ontario (61%) and Atlantic Canada (61%), followed by Quebec (52%), Manitoba and Saskatchewan (51%) and finally Alberta (46%, where strong opposition is highest at 30%). Over the past year, support has increased in Ontario and Manitoba/Saskatchewan (up six points), while declining marginally in Quebec (down three).

Across the country, public support for a provincial carbon tax is strongest among Canadians 18 to 24 years of age (66%, versus 50% among those 55 plus), and increases with level of education. As before, carbon taxes are most widely supported by those who support the federal opposition parties (65% to 67%), but the proportion of Conservative Party supporters who share this view has increased in the past year (45%, up five points), as it has among those who do not support any federal political party (51%, up four).



<sup>1</sup> The survey question used the same description of the B.C. carbon tax, and then asked if respondents would support the introduction of this type of policy in their own province.

## **About the Environics Institute for Survey Research**

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. The focus of the Institute's mandate is to survey individuals and groups not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. For further information see [www.EnvironicsInstitute.org](http://www.EnvironicsInstitute.org), or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or [keith.neuman@environics.ca](mailto: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 about the David Suzuki Foundation's climate change work, visit [www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org) or contact Ian Bruce, Manager, Science and Policy, at 604-732-4228 or [ibruce@davidsuzuki.org](mailto:ibruce@davidsuzuki.org).