Public opinion, climate change and government action

Report

National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy
David McLaughlin, President & CEO, NRTEE
344 Slater Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario
K1R 7Y3

Wednesday, March 31, 2010

Prepared by:

Innovative Research Group, Inc.
Toronto
350 Bay Street, 3rd Floor
Toronto, ON | M5H 2S6

Vancouver
1055 West Hastings, 3rd Floor
Vancouver BC | V6E 2E9

Montréal
1010 Sherbrooke Ouest, Suite 1800
Montréal, QC | H3A 2R7
Public Opinion and Government Action on Climate Change ........................................ 3
Model 1 - Personal Action .......................................................................................... 4
Model 2 – Perceived need for government action .................................................... 5
Model 3 – Model of government action .................................................................... 7
Bibliography .............................................................................................................. 11
Public Opinion and Government Action on Climate Change

In Spring 2010, the National Round Table on Environment and Economy (NRTEE) engaged the Innovative Research Group Inc. (INNOVATIVE) to review public opinion on climate change in Canada and abroad, and will examine how and why these attitudes are changing when they do change.

INNOVATIVE’s work was informed by Managing Director Greg Lyle’s participation in the NRTEE’s The Sustainability Project’s Round tables. In particular, the first Round table’s discussion focused on the question of why hasn’t there been more progress on sustainability. While Round Table participants acknowledged a number of sustainability successes, there was a clear sense that on climate change in particular, needed progress has not been made.

Does public opinion matter, and if so is it part of the problem or part of the solution?

Public opinion can impacts progress in combating climate change in a number of different ways:

1. Public opinion can drive or hinder more sustainable individual behaviours.
2. Public opinion can force or slow markets from delivering more climate friendly products and services.
3. Public opinion can help or hinder government action on climate change.

Initially the project focus primarily solely on public opinion, but right from the first briefing it became clear we needed to understand not just how opinions form and change on climate change, but when and how opinion impacts government decisions.

This report is intended not as an almanac of current opinion research, but to review the existing literature and reports to establish a model of how opinion forms and changes AND how government responds to those changing opinions in order to provide structure and direction to the NRTEE’s future research efforts.

As a result, we structured the report around three key research questions:

1. What is driving Canadians to act in more, or less, sustainable ways.
2. What is driving Canadians’ preference for government action on climate change issues.
3. Which factors influence how government responds to opinion.

The following outline and attached PowerPoint slides lays out our initial take on the likely models that represent the answers to each of those questions. The attached bibliography provides the resources consulted thus far.
**Model 1 - Personal Action**

Various studies estimate at about one in three the proportion of people who declare having taken personal action to reduce climate change. The type of actions that are mentioned appear to be “easy” fixes, e.g. changing light bulbs, adjusting thermostats, insulating windows and doors, turning off lights and getting more efficient appliances. It appears that only a few participants do mention more central changes to their lifestyles (buying smaller cars, driving less, etc.).

Five basic factors have an impact on personal action.

1. **Beliefs and attitudes.** Beliefs and attitudes have a central impact on likelihood to take personal action. We know that people who believe climate change is happening, that is an important issue or concern to them, that climate change poses a risk to current or next generations or will have a negative impact on one’s lifestyle and is anthropogenic (caused by humans) are more likely to take personal action.

2. **Barriers.** A second factor impacting one’s actions for climate change are socio-psychological barriers that resolve psychological dissonance caused by the realization that one is not taking action, even faced with overwhelming evidence that one should. In the face of that dissonance, barriers increase perceived costs action (“I’d have to sell my car and move into a smaller house”) or decrease benefits of action (“It would make no difference at all anyways”).

3. **Values.** We know that people’s values matter when it comes to taking action. Value statements such as sense of social responsibility, ecological lifestyle, social Darwinism, concern for others, etc. will increase or decrease likelihood to take action.

4. **Media.** The prevalence and the valence of climate change stories are shown to impact beliefs and attitudes about the environment (perception that climate change is important, that it is caused by humans, etc.)

5. **Demographics.** It appears that some key demographics matter in explaining personal action on climate change. Party affiliation, education, age and region are obvious candidates.
Model 2 – Perceived need for government action

Many Canadians believe their government should take action on the environment, because their mere actions won’t be enough to curb emissions or stop climate change.

- Last year, Environics showed that when it comes to consumer action, 39% of Canadians say we “need government fees and taxes to motivate change”; 60% feel “voluntary actions by consumers will be enough”.
- A recent study by INNOVATIVE showed even more thirst for action: 66% of Canadians agree that “Unless the government makes environmentally friendly products or behaviour mandatory, we are not going to make any real progress on protecting the environment”.

What Is The Regional Distribution Of Preferences in Canada?
Are People Who Believe They Are Affected By Climate Change More Likely To Support Gov Action?

Three basic factors matter when it comes to perceived need for government action

1. Beliefs and attitudes. Beliefs and attitudes also have a central impact on the perceived need for personal action. We know that people who believe climate change is happening, that is an important issue or concern to them, that climate change poses a risk to current or next generations or will have a negative impact on one’s lifestyle and is anthropogenic (caused by humans) are more likely to want their government to take action

2. Values. We know that people’s values matter when it comes to taking action. Value statements such as sense of personal action efficacy, concern for others (in the case of a green tax for example), preference for smaller governments, or shame and international reputation of the country will have an impact on wanting the government to take action on climate change

In a 2009 study on Environment pricing and social values, Environics showed that support for government action was linked to a subset of values, namely adaptability to risk and complexity, embracing technology and reluctance to consumer society. Those who did not support government action in the area of environmental pricing scored high on measures of fatalism, privacy concerns, risk aversion behaviour, financial concern for the future and ethical consumerism.

The study also showed that support for environmental pricing is limited as it comes up against traditional collective action and protection of the vulnerable values. Views regarding social responsibility, ethical consumerism are not entirely environmental.

Finally, the study showed that the type of environmental action demanded by Canadians is also a function of values. For example, values like adaptability to risk
and impact on others made it more likely that one would demand environmental action rather than consumer based environmental action.

The Eurobarometer (2009) on the environment showed that a majority of Europeans believe something can be done to fight climate change. A majority of Europeans also agree that tackling climate change can have a positive impact on the European economy and boost economic growth. It points to a potential scenario where Europeans could avoid the economy/environment trade off scenario perceived by so many as one of the major obstacles to fighting climate change.

3. Demographics. Usual suspects matter: party affiliation, education, age and region are connected with wanting government to take action
Model 3 – Model of government action

When it comes to explaining how governments take their decisions to take action, multiple competing and complementary models of government action and policy outcome are used in the literature. Three models appear particularly relevant to this exercise.

1. National interest matters. Rational choice theory of government action predicts that states will maximize gains and avoid costs, beyond political circumstances or electoral gains. From that perspective, international institutions play a significant role in getting the states to coordinate and avoid the paradox of collective action (free riders) in minimizing national costs (by allowing negotiation) and increasing certainty of outcome.

2. Leaders and institutions matter. We know that political leaders’ ideals, values and programs matter in getting governments to act on issues as complex as climate change, but their will is mediated by institutions:
   a. First of all, political systems concentrate power to varying degrees in the hands of Prime Ministers, Presidents, Chancellors, etc. and make it more or less difficult for a leader to mobilize its government and ratify a treaty or adopt a policy course.
   b. Political systems also diffuse power to some extent and allow different actors to claim credit, bear the blame or be accountable for any given policy, make policy implementation more or less difficult.

3. Public opinion matters. The first set of explanations explores the role of public opinion on government action. Two distinct mechanisms have to be taken in consideration.
   a. First, public opinion matters through issue prominence. Public attentiveness shifts over time because it is limited (only so many issues can matter at once). There is evidence that the public is shifting its attention before policy response, which suggests that governments do care about what the public thinks about
   b. Public opinion also matters through its preferences. There is a systematic relationship between Canadian public preferences for “more” or “less” spending on the environment, and federal and provincial government spending on environmental issues. Moreover, it appears that public opinion responds to policy change. If the public wants more spending this year, and the government provides more next year, public opinion responds accordingly — the public does not still want more spending.
Does public opinion matter to policymaking on environmental issues? Efforts by environmental groups reflect an assumption that it does, but we should perhaps not take for granted that policymakers reliably follow public opinion. That said, there is a good deal of academic work focusing on exactly this question. That work suggests that public opinion does matter. Indeed, it suggests that opinion may matter in two different ways: through prominence, or preferences.

Attention — from the public, from policymakers, or from media — is a finite resource. We simply cannot pay attention to everything; we have to prioritize. This is the emphasis of academic work on agenda-setting, for instance (see McCombs and Shaw 1972, or Soroka 2002) — work that describes the ways in which the public and policymakers allocate attention across the many issues relevant to politics. (Not to mention the many issues not relevant to politics.) The process of prioritization means that at any given point in time certain issues will receive more attention than others. And more attention dedicated to one issue necessarily means less attention dedicated to others.

This shifting attentiveness to — or prominence of — policy issues can on its own have a significant impact on policymaking. An issue which the public is paying attention to is more likely to matter on election day. When the economy is more prominent, we judge leaders and parties more on their performance on economic matters; when foreign affairs is more prominent, we judge leaders and parties more on foreign affairs issues; and when the environment is prominent, our assessments are based more on environmental matters. (This is the thrust of the literature on “issue priming.” See, for instance, Miller and Krosnick 1996.) There is thus a greater incentive for elected officials to react to opinion on prominent (or “salient”) issues. These are often the issues that will matter more in our assessments of the current government, and in decisions about the next one.

Indeed, one well-known argument in the literature on public policy suggests that there will be more policy activity in a given domain when the public is more attentive to related issues — that is, when the issue is more prominent (see Baumgartner and Jones 1993, or Kingdon 1995). This has been show in the case of environmental policy in Canada. In a paper entitled “Agenda-Setting and Issue Definition,” Soroka (2007) analyses data on the proportion of Canadians saying “environment” in response to the question “what do you think is the most important problem facing our country today, alongside policy activity by the federal government. The opinion series shows a marked increase in public attentiveness to environmental issues beginning in 1988, and that spike in attentiveness, the highest level of salience for environmental issues in the entire postwar period, is followed by a spike in policy activity — indeed, in the emergence of the Green Plan. Soroka suggests that this relationship is by no means exclusive to the late 1980s. The early 1970s reflect a similar relationship between heightened public salience and policy activity; as do, albeit to a lesser extent, the early 2000s. In each case, there is evidence of movement in public opinion attention to environmental issues before policy change.

The prominence of issues is not the only way in which public opinion can matter to policymaking. Policy preferences can matter as well. Put differently, sometimes it
matters whether we are thinking about environmental policy; sometimes it matters what we are thinking about environmental policy as well.

The relevance of public opinion on policy matters tends to be greater when we focus on generalized rather than specific preferences. General support for spending on environmental policy is more likely to be systematically related to policy outcomes than is support for a specific form of environmental regulation, for instance. Again, the motivation may be electoral. A relatively small proportion of voters will have preferences on the minutiae of environmental policy, but many will have general impressions of whether more, or less, should be done to preserve air or water quality, for instance. There is thus more electoral benefit (or greater electoral costs), to responding (or not responding) to those broader preferences. But responsiveness to these broader preferences only may also be desirable. Governments should, after all, respond to informed opinion; and the public is likely to be more sufficiently informed mostly on these broader issues.

There are incentives, then, for Canadian governments to respond to public preferences on environmental policy. Do they? Existing work suggests that they do — that there is a systematic relationship between public preferences for “more” or “less” spending, and actual government spending across a wide range of issues. The connection has been demonstrated in the US and elsewhere. (See, e.g., Erikson et al. 2002.) Indeed, it has been shown in Canada, on environmental issues. Soroka and Wlezien (2010) track public preferences and government spending from the mid-1980s to the present, and find a regular connection between the two. Moreover, their work suggests that public opinion responds to policy change. If the public wants more spending this year, and the government provides more next year, public opinion responds accordingly — the public does not still want more spending. This is particularly powerful evidence of the rationality and potential importance of public opinion on environment issues. Governments respond, the public responds, and the two interact, systematically, over time, in the production of environmental policy.
Figure 1- Canadian’s net preference for spending on environment and change in spending on environment

Spending: % change in spending on the environment, consolidated federal and provincial governments, from Statistics Canada CANSIM database

Opinion: "net preferences" for environmental spending: % saying "more" minus % saying "less" in response to the Environics Focus Canada question, "Do you think that the federal government should spend more, spend less, or spend the same on the environment?"

Available through the Canadian Opinion Research Archive, Queen's University, Kingston ON.

Just as prominence can lead policy activity, then, preferences can lead policy. Indeed, the two are fundamentally intertwined: preferences are likely to matter more for prominent issues. Policymakers have a greater incentive to follow opinion for prominent issues, after all. This will be true across issues. Consider Soroka and Wlezien’s (2010, or 2004) comparison of the opinion-policy connection across a range of issues in Canada: they find that the connection between public preferences and policy on transportation issues is relatively weak, for instance, while the connection between preferences and policy in health care is relatively strong. Environmental issues, they suggest, are somewhere in between. This will also be true over time. Environmental preferences will matter more when environmental issues are more prominent.

All of this speaks to the importance of communication strategies and public opinion in the environmental domain…
Bibliography


