



Focus Canada 2015

Canadian public opinion about climate change

As part of its ongoing Focus Canada public opinion research program, the Environics Institute partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation to ask Canadians about climate change, to determine how perceptions have changed (or not) over the past year or so. The survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 2,004 Canadians between August 4 and 16, 2015. 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.

Background

It has been almost a decade since climate change became widely recognized outside of scientific circles as a pressing global challenge. The world-wide financial meltdown in 2008-09 and a lack of progress in securing international consensus about how to address the problem pushed the issue off the front pages for years to come. More recently, climate change appears to be reemerging as a global priority, the result of growing scientific evidence, an expanding number of extreme weather events (e.g., the multi-year drought now punishing the west coast), an unexpected new agreement on emissions targets between the US and China, and an historical encyclical by Pope Francis. Together, these developments are contributing to fresh momentum for a new global pact at this year's international climate summit in Paris, which some believe is the best and perhaps last hope for an effective response to the challenge.

Canada has been notably quiet amidst these developments. The federal government has done little beyond making vague commitments and climate change is clearly a side issue in the current Federal Election campaign. Does this reflect a lack of interest among Canadians, or is there in fact a clear public will for the country to make a greater commitment to this challenge at the domestic and international level? To answer this question, the Environics Institute for Survey Research once again partnered with the David Suzuki Foundation to take a new sounding of public opinion on climate change, as part of its ongoing Focus Canada 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 purpose of this research on climate change is to measure Canadian public opinion on an ongoing basis to determine how attitudes and priorities are changing (or not) in response to events and broader social change. This is accomplished by repeating key indicators of public opinion about various aspects of climate change over time. These questions originated with an ongoing syndicated study (*The Canadian Environmental Barometer*) conducted by the Environics Research Group over the period 2007 – 2011, and then subsequently as part of Focus Canada.

Executive summary

Results from the latest survey reveal that the Canadian public is not yet having its "climate moment", and appear to be little influenced by new scientific warnings, unusual weather, or recent pronouncements by Barack Obama and Pope Francis. Most Canadians accept the scientific reality of climate change, and are concerned about what it means, but the proportions sharing these views has changed little over the past few years (the one exception being rising concerns in British Columbia, due perhaps to the current record-setting drought). And this is by no means surprising given the limited media attention devoted to climate change at the national and regional levels.

And yet, Canadians are now expressing increased support, if not expectations, for government leadership and concrete policy actions to address the growing challenge posed by global warming. A rising majority voice support for Canada to participate in a new international agreement on climate change, even if this might result in some job losses in some industries or higher costs to consumers. A significant proportion (four in ten) feel strongly enough about this to say they would be upset if their country does not follow through on such a commitment.

It is widely assumed that Canadians will not accept climate policies that will cost them directly, but there is growing public support for carbon pricing as an appropriate response to the climate challenge. In British Columbia, support for the provincial carbon tax is now at the highest level since it was introduced in 2008; support now outweighs opposition by a two-to-one margin. Moreover, there continues to be a comparable level of public support for a BC-style carbon tax in most other provinces; this endorsement is most evident in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, but even in Alberta there are now as many supporters as opponents.

Canadians are also expressing increased confidence in the feasibility of shifting their province’s energy mix from fossil fuels to renewable power. Three-quarters now say they think this can be done, a higher proportion than in 2013 with this growth most noticeable in the western provinces.

Public opinion on these issues is by no means uniform across the country. Albertans and Federal Conservative Party supporters continue to stand out as being less concerned about climate change and least supportive of policy actions; but even among these groups opinions are divided rather than weighted heavily in opposition to climate action (as is the case in the US where the issue is much more polarized between Democrats and Republicans). Climate change is not yet enough of a priority for the Canadian public to emerge as the ballot box issue in the current Federal election, but the evidence is now clear that Canadians are more receptive to concrete climate change measures than their politicians or media give them credit for.

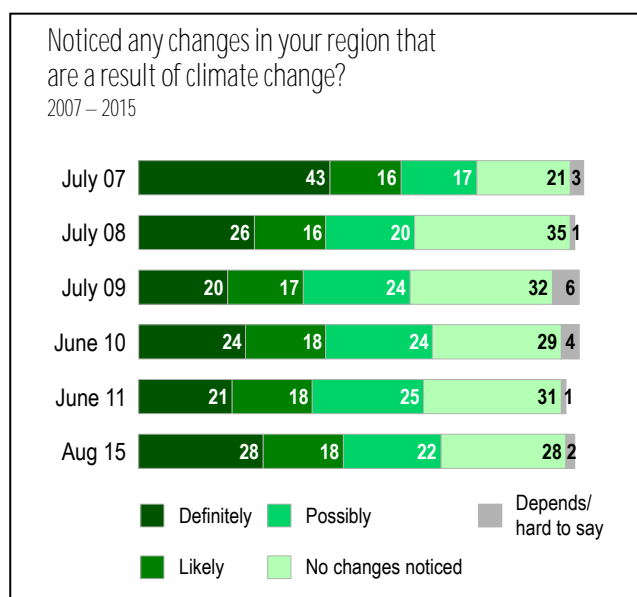
Reality of climate change

Despite growing evidence of climate change, including record breaking weather, fewer than three in ten Canadians are sure they are seeing climate change happening where they live. As in 2014, six in ten are convinced that climate change is for real and human caused, compared with one in ten who remains skeptical.

Evidence of local climate changes. The scientific consensus on the reality of society-induced climate change continues to solidify, and is consistent with unusual weather patterns in almost every part of the globe (e.g., record temperatures, drought, extreme storms). But most Canadians have yet to witness what they consider to be definitive evidence of climate change where they live.

Just under three in ten (28%) Canadians say they have “definitely” noticed changes where they live which they ascribe to climate change. This proportion is up modestly from 2011 (up 7 points), but remains well below the number who expressed this opinion in 2007 (43%) when climate change had a much more significant media profile.

Among those not convinced about local climate effects, four in ten believe they likely (18%) or possibly (22%) are taking place, while another 28 percent do not believe there have been any climate-related changes in their part of the country.



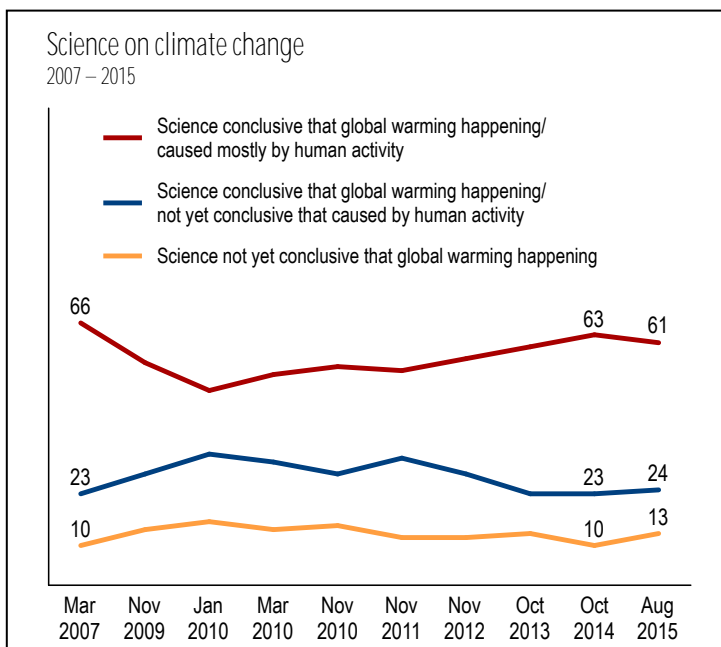
Across the country, the most significant increase in perceptions of local climate change effects is in B.C., where 44 percent now say this is definite (up 25 points since 2011, possibly due to this year’s extensive drought). Smaller increases are evident in Atlantic Canada (up 10), Manitoba/Saskatchewan (up 9) and Ontario (up 7), while unchanged in Quebec and Alberta. Reports of definite climate changes are up in all age cohorts, but most significantly among Canadians 18 to 24 (up 15 points).

Climate change is a politically partisan issue, and this extends to perceptions about evidence of local area climate changes. Definite changes are most likely to be reported by Canadians who currently support the Federal Green Party (39%), followed by the NDP (31%) and Liberal Party (31%), and those currently undecided (28%). In contrast, only 18% of Conservative Party supporters share this view, compared with 44 percent who believe no such changes have taken place in their area [note: there is no trend data on this question by Federal party support].

Is the science conclusive? New evidence and disruptive weather has not had a noticeable impact on public views about the reality of climate change. Six in ten (61%) Canadians believe the scientific evidence is conclusive and that climate change is primarily caused by human activity.

This number is down marginally since 2014 (when it stood at 63%), ending a gradual upward trend dating back to 2011. The comparable percentage among Americans is 52 percent, and has also held steady over the past several years (from a March 2015 survey by the Yale Project on Climate Change).

Just under one in four (24%, up 1) say climate change is real but is yet to be convinced about the main cause, while roughly one in 10 (13%, up 3) remains skeptical about the science (the comparable US figure is 18%).



This overall stability in opinions over the past year mask notable shifts in subgroups of the population, in some cases reversing previous trends. Acceptance of the science has increased among youth (to 78%, up 11 points), among residents of Manitoba and Saskatchewan (up 12), Vancouverites (up 9) and Canadians without a high school diploma (up 8). By comparison, this view has declined among women (down 5), Canadians 35 and older (down 5), Quebecers (down 11) and university graduates (down 6).

The survey reveals the importance of local experience in shaping opinions about climate change: Belief in the certainty of the science is expressed by 82 percent of those who believe they have witnessed local area climate changes, compared with only 37 percent of those who have not seen such evidence.

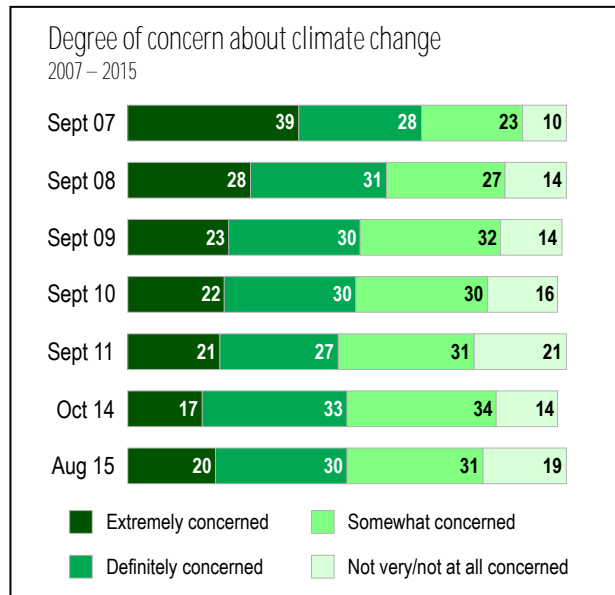
Acceptance of the scientific evidence on climate change continues to be strongly influenced by political party preference, but the past year has seen a modest drop in such acceptance among Opposition Party supporters, while remaining unchanged among Conservative Party supporters and those who remain undecided. Belief in the scientific reality of climate change remains strongest among NDP and Green Party supporters (72% each), and lowest among Conservative Party supporters (43%; compared with 23% who are climate skeptics).

Public concern about climate change

Half of Canadians continue to express clear concern about climate change, with the intensity of worry up marginally over the past year. Strong concerns are most widespread in British Columbia and among NDP supporters, and least evident in Alberta and among Conservative Party supporters.

How personally concerned are Canadians about the changes to our climate due to global warming? Most are concerned at some level, with half saying they are extremely (20%) or definitely (30%) concerned. This overall proportion is unchanged from 2014, but there has been a three point shift from “definitely” to “extremely” concerned, indicating a small increase in the intensity of feeling about this issue over the past year.

Another three in ten (31%, down 3) are somewhat concerned about climate change, while one in five say they are not very (12%) or not at all (7%) concerned (up 5). Overall, the degree of public concern about climate change has changed relatively little since 2009, and remains well below the level recorded in 2007 when climate change had a much higher profile.



Across the country, public concern about climate change is now most widespread in British Columbia (61% are extremely or definitely concerned; up 5 points since 2014), and especially in Vancouver (72%, up 20 points). This view is least apt to be shared in Alberta (40%, down 6), Manitoba and Saskatchewan (45%, down 1), as well as in Quebec (44%) although overall concern there is up seven points in the past year (and extreme concern up 13 points). Over the past year the gap in concern among urban and rural Canadians has largely disappeared (reversing a previous trend), while the gap across education levels has increased.

Concern about climate change continues divide along politically partisan lines. Extreme or definite concern is expressed by majorities in each of the Federal Opposition parties, while only one-third (32%) of Conservative supporters share this view (with a comparable number (31%) saying they are not very or not at all concerned about climate change). The one notable change in the past year is a drop in concern among Green Party supporters (to 58%, down 13 points). NDP supporters (63%) are now the most likely to be extremely or definitely concerned about the issue, followed by Liberal Party supporters (53%) and those who remain undecided (49%).

Level of concern is tied to perceptions about the reality of climate change, but most strongly in terms of perceptions of local area impacts: Extreme concern is more than twice as evident among Canadians who are definite about local changes (42%) than among those who say such changes are likely (19%) or possible (10%).

Government leadership on climate change

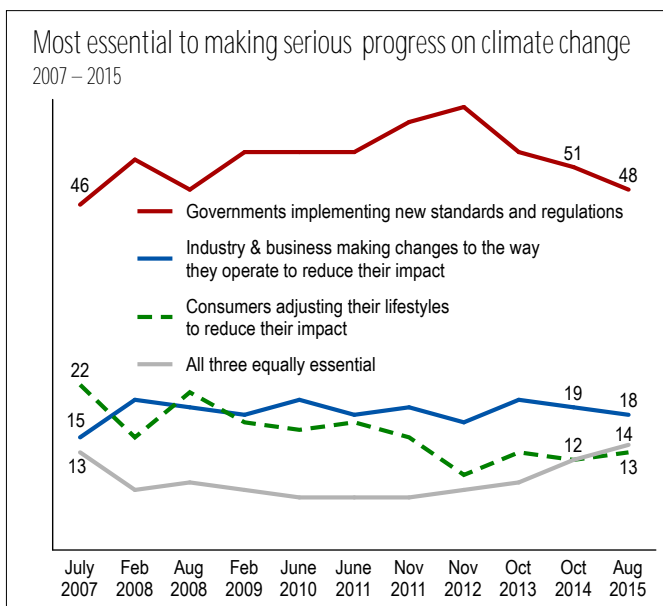
Canadians continue to look to governments rather than to industry or consumers to play the key leadership role in addressing climate change. But this view is gradually diminishing over time, suggesting that the public may be losing confidence in their governments’ commitment and/or capacity for leadership.

Who is seen as the most essential actor in addressing the climate change challenge in this country? As on past surveys, the public is most likely to look to their governments to implement new standards and regulations (48%), rather than to industry and business making changes in the way they operate (18%) or to consumers adjusting their lifestyles (13%).

But Canadians' focus on government leadership has declined marginally since 2014 (down 3 points), continuing a gradual downward trend dating back to 2012 (when 59% expressed this view). This trend is mirrored by a gradual rise in the proportion who volunteer that all three sectors are equally essential to make progress in addressing climate change (14%, up from 8% in 2012).

Government is identified as the most essential sector by at least a plurality of Canadians in all groups, but most widely among residents of eastern Canada (53%), and those who support the NDP (57%) and Green Party (55%), and predictably among those clearly concerned about climate change (55%) and who accept the science (55%). By comparison, government is least apt to

be identified as the most essential actor on climate change among Albertans (39%) and Conservative Party supporters (37%). The decline in this view since 2014 is most evident among Canadians under 35 years of age, British Columbians, rural residents and Liberal Party supporters.

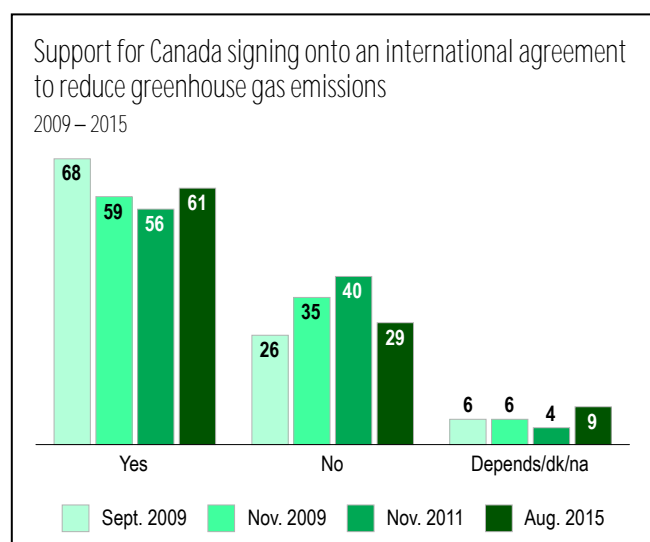


International climate change agreement

An increasing majority of Canadians want their country to sign a new international climate change agreement, even if this may affect jobs and consumer prices. Strong supporters outweigh strong opponents by more than three to one.

Public support for a new agreement. While public opinion about the reality and seriousness of climate change has changed little over the past few years, there is growing support for policy action. A growing majority (61%) of Canadians say their country should sign a new international agreement to reduce worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, even if this may result in some domestic industries losing jobs and higher costs for some goods and services.

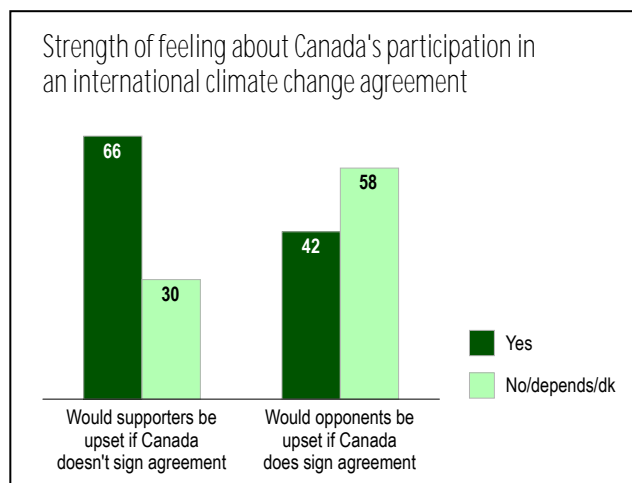
Public support for an international agreement is up from November 2011 (56%), although remains below the high water mark in September 2009 (68%) during the lead up to the much anticipated international summit in Copenhagen. Fewer than three in ten (29%) now oppose such an agreement (down 11 points), while an increasing number say it would depend or have no opinion (9%, up 5).



The increase in support for a new international agreement has taken place across most of the population, but most significantly among residents of Ontario and B.C., Canadians 55 and over, and those without a high school diploma. Support is now most widespread in Quebec (70%), among Canadians with a university degree (68%) and supporters of the NDP (75%) and the Liberal Party (72%). This view is least apt to be shared by Albertans (49%, but up 4 points since November 2009) and Conservative Party supporters (42%, versus 48% who oppose it).

How strongly do Canadians care? Most Canadians express an opinion about this type of international climate change agreement, but do they really care whether or not it happens? The survey reveals that supporters are more likely to feel strongly about this issue than opponents.

Among those who support a new international agreement on climate change, two-thirds (66%) say they would be upset if Canada does not participate (this translates to 40% of the total population). By comparison, among those who oppose such an agreement, 42 percent would be upset if Canada *does* participate (12% of the total population). This means that strong supporters outweigh strong opponents by more than three to one, almost identical to the balance recorded in November 2009. (Supporters are marginally less apt to be upset than in 2009, but there are also more of them than before, and the reverse applies to opponents.)



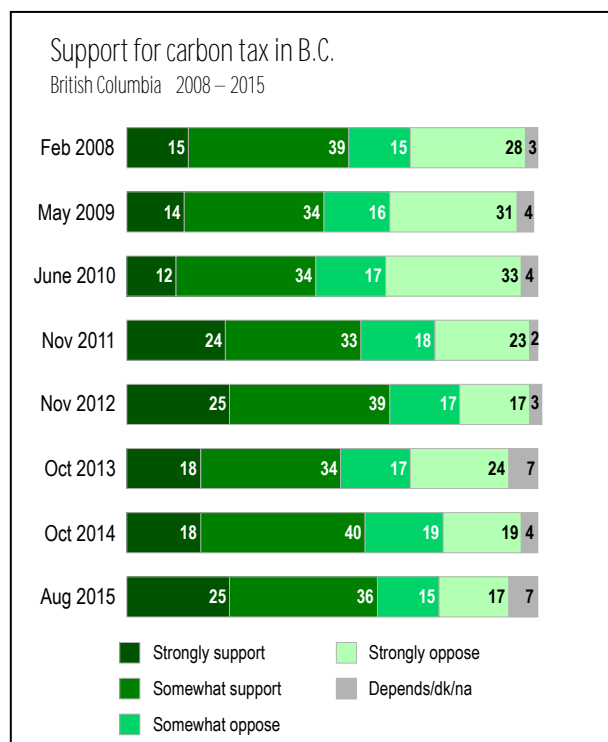
Supporters of a new international agreement most likely to be upset if Canada does not participate include residents of Quebec and Ontario, Canadians 55 and older, and supporters of the Federal NDP and Green Parties. Opponents of a new agreement most likely to be upset include Albertans and Conservative Party supporters.

Public support for carbon-based pricing

A clear and growing majority of British Columbians endorse 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.

B.C. Carbon Tax. Arguably one of the most significant climate change policies in Canada to date is the carbon tax implemented in British Columbia in 2008, the first such direct carbon pricing measure in North America. The carbon tax has not proceeded without controversy, but it has withstood political attacks and is now firmly established.

Public support for the B.C. carbon tax has strengthened over the past year, with six in 10 now saying they strongly (25%) or somewhat (36%) support it (up from 58% in 2014, with a 7 point jump in the number who express strong support). This matches the highest level of public support for the BC carbon tax since it was first introduced in early 2008. No more than one in three B.C. residents now somewhat (15%) or strongly (17%) oppose the provincial carbon tax (down 6 points since 2014), also now at an all-time low.

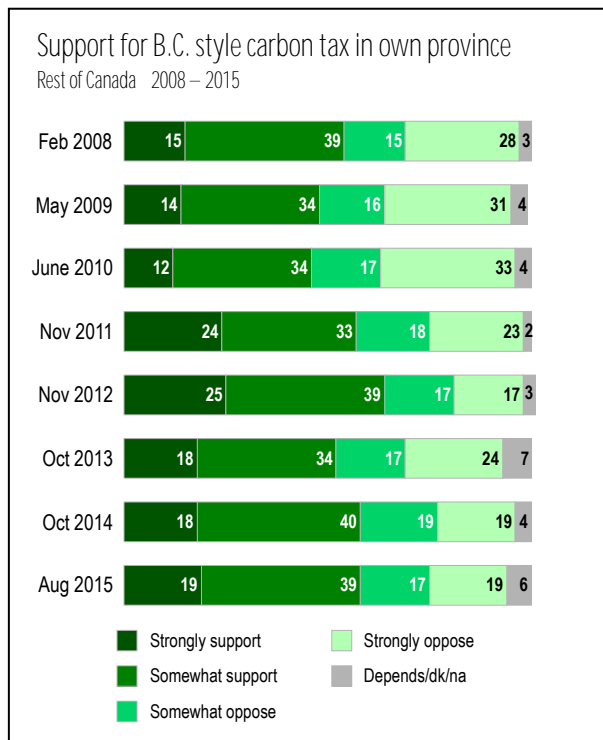


The size of the B.C. subsample limits the scope of subgroup analysis, but it is evident that public support for the carbon tax continues to be most widespread in the Vancouver metropolitan area, and is now also strongest among women (who account for all of the increase over the past year).

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 province? 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 for the second consecutive year, and is comparable to the views expressed in British Columbia.

Across the country (outside of B.C.), almost six in ten of citizens strongly (19%) or somewhat (39%) support a B.C.-style carbon tax for their province (up 2 points since 2014), while just over one-third somewhat (17%) or strongly (19%) oppose it (down 4 points).¹

Support for this type of carbon pricing is now strongest in Atlantic Canada (67%, up 6 points since 2014), among women (61%, up 4), Canadians under 35 (64%), university graduates (65%), and NDP supporters (73%, up 6). Increased support is also evident among Canadians 55 and older, Quebecers, residents of small towns and rural areas, and those without a high school diploma. Consistent with other opinions about climate change, support for a provincial carbon tax is weakest in Alberta (48%, up 2) and among Conservative Party supporters (42%, down 3).



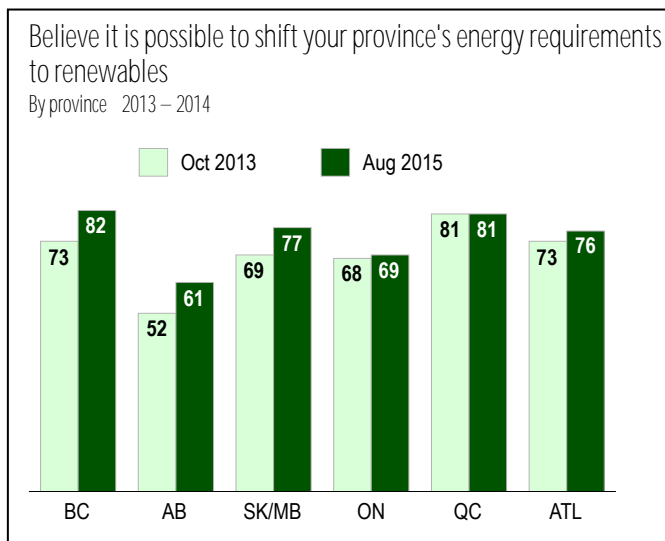
Shift to renewable energy

An increasing majority of Canadians believe it is possible for their province to shift its energy resources from fossil fuels to renewable power.

Because fossil fuel combustion is a major source of greenhouse gases, renewable “green” sources of energy, such as wind, solar, biomass, and run-of-river hydroelectric power, are now being actively developed across the country. These sources currently meet a modest percentage of the current energy supply, but Canadians express optimism that renewable power can replace much of the current reliance on fossil fuels.

Three-quarters (74%) Canadians say they believe it is possible for their province to shift most of its energy requirements from fossil fuels to clean renewable forms of energy, such as wind power, solar power and biofuels, up from 70 percent who expressed this view in 2013. One in five (20%) do not believe this can be done, while a handful are unable to say either way (7%).

Confidence in the future of renewable energy is the majority view in every identifiable group, and has increased in most parts of the country over the past year. Belief in the the possibility of a provincial green energy future is most



¹ 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.

widespread in Quebec (81%) and British Columbia (82%), as well as among Canadians aged 18 to 24 (87%), and supporters of the NDP (82%) and Green Party (90%). This view is least apt to be shared in Alberta (61%, but is up 9 points) and among Conservative Party supporters (56%, down 1). Across communities of different size, confidence in renewable energy is now strongest among rural residents (77%, up 6 points).

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, 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 about the David Suzuki Foundation's climate change work, visit www.davidsuzuki.org or contact Ian Bruce, Manager, Science and Policy, at 604-732-4228 or ibruce@davidsuzuki.org.