Which Canadians support a green (and just) recovery?

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Contents

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the health, prosperity, and overall well-being of people in Canada. It has also led to opportunities for making changes that not only limit the spread of disease but also help address long-standing environmental and social issues such as climate change and rising inequality.

This brief examines public support for a green economic recovery in Canada. The analysis draws on the 2020 Climate of Change Survey administered by telephone between October 17th and November 7th 2020 to a random sample of Canadian residents.[1] Overall, we find that respondents were split on what government should prioritize in its pandemic-relief spending, but that there are certain demographic and psychographic characteristics associated with greater support for a green economic recovery.

Specifically, we find that:

1. A large proportion of respondents state a preference for prioritizing green initiatives in pandemic-relief spending. Nearly half (45%) of respondents stated a preference for prioritizing a green recovery, while 55% gave priority to getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet as quickly as possible. While this indicates divided public opinion, the level of support for green initiatives in pandemic-relief spending is remarkable in light of the well-known psychological costs of the pandemic, and the understandable desire to get back to normal as quickly as possible.

2. Pandemic-relief spending preferences are consistent across the country, with the exception of Alberta, where we find substantially less support (32%) for giving priority to a green recovery.

3. Support for prioritizing a green recovery is greatest among supporters of the federal NDP (67%), those on the political left (65%), those with university educations (51%), women (49%) and those living in a less competitive electoral district (48%).

   a. Meanwhile, we find significantly less support for prioritizing a green economic recovery among supporters of the federal Conservative Party (CPC) (21%), those self-identifying on the political right (26%) and political centre (38%), people living in competitive electoral districts that can potentially swing (37%), those without a university degree (38%), and men (41%).

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1   The survey did not ask about citizenship; therefore the title of this brief uses "Canadians" as a short form for "residents of Canada."

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4. Not all supporters of the CPC are equally opposed to prioritizing a green economic recovery. In particular, women supporters of the federal Conservatives are just as likely to support using the pandemic as an opportunity to diversify the economy (investing in innovation, clean energy, and more resilient communities), as women supporters of the federal NDP and LPC.

5. Skepticism about government redistribution programs, as well as the ability of governments to steer society toward a low-carbon future are two psychographic characteristics that are strongly associated with less support for prioritizing a green economic recovery.

6. Although the effects of language when communicating pandemic-relief spending are muted (likely because of the large public appetite for an economic recovery, no matter how it is framed), we find that support increases among some audiences (e.g. NDP) when a "green and just recovery for all" is used.

Here is a summary of our recommendations (see Recommendations section for details):

1. Target key audiences.

   a. Mobilize support for a green economic recovery among Canadian residents who are left-leaning, university educated, and women.

   b. Build support among Conservatives by reaching out to women in this large demographic segment.

   c. Focus communications in the run-up to the next federal election on potential swing ridings (where residents express lower-levels of support for a green recovery) while targeting women (who tend to be more supportive). See the Appendix at the end of this document for a list of key swing ridings.

2. Hone your message.

   a. Communicate about the virtues of a green economic recovery *and nature-based solutions*. This wording, among other tactics, could counter, or not trigger, the scepticism of many about government redistribution programs and the ability of governments to decarbonize the economy.

3. Use inclusive language.

   a. Field test framing around a "green and just recovery for all," rather than the shorter "green recovery." Also note that investments in a green recovery boost environmental protection and/or green technology and focus on broader concerns around reducing inequality, helping others in our communities, and building a more fair and just society for all.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the health, prosperity, and overall well-being of people across the country. It has also led to opportunities for making changes that not only limit the spread of disease but also help address long-standing environmental and social issues such as climate change and growing inequality. The federal government's Speech from the Throne ("A stronger and more resilient Canada") in Sept. 2020 devoted an entire section to "Building back better — a resiliency agenda for the middle class" (Government of Canada, 2020). This reflected calls from some to make major investments in social and green initiatives, while also being contested by others (including members of the federal Liberal caucus, who worry about other priorities and overly ambitious spending for a green economic recovery).

To be sure, with governments investing unprecedented amounts for pandemic relief, the idea that a well-designed economic recovery can lock-in a trajectory of increased clean energy generation over the next decades has gained currency. A recent study published in the journal *Science* suggests that if only a small fraction of the $12 trillion invested by governments in the economic recovery so far went to clean energy and energy efficiency, the world would be on track to meet its Paris Climate Agreement targets while creating jobs and improving public health (Andrijevic et al., 2020). Meanwhile, a number of environmental groups have developed campaigns to "build back better" and promote a "green (and just) economic recovery." However, it is unclear just how effective these campaigns are in terms of building public support, and for which audiences. A study in *The Journal of Environmental Psychology*, for instance, suggests that positive framing of the pandemic as a "trial run" for the climate crisis fails to increase climate concern or mitigation support, while negative framing of the pandemic as a reason to put the environment on the "back seat" reduced people's support for climate action (Ecker et al., 2020). While not a direct test of the green recovery frame *per se*, this points to the challenges of communicating about the need for action on climate change during a global pandemic.

Question and methods

In this analytical brief, we examine the preferences of residents regarding pandemic-relief spending, to answer the following question:

Which Canadians show greater support for prioritizing green initiatives in the recovery?

We answer this question by examining data drawn from EcoAnalytics' 2020 Climate of Change Survey. Specifically, we focus on the question "Change," a forced question in which we rotated the order of response options to guard against response-order effects.

Q1. Change.

There has been some talk of what Canada's governments should prioritize in the COVID-19 recovery. Some people [Others] say...

...that Canada should use the recovery to diversify its economy by investing in innovation, clean energy, and more resilient communities.

...that Canada should focus on getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet as quickly as possible and go back to life as it was.

Which is closer to your opinion? A green economic recovery should be the priority? Or, Getting existing industries and business back on their feet should be the priority?
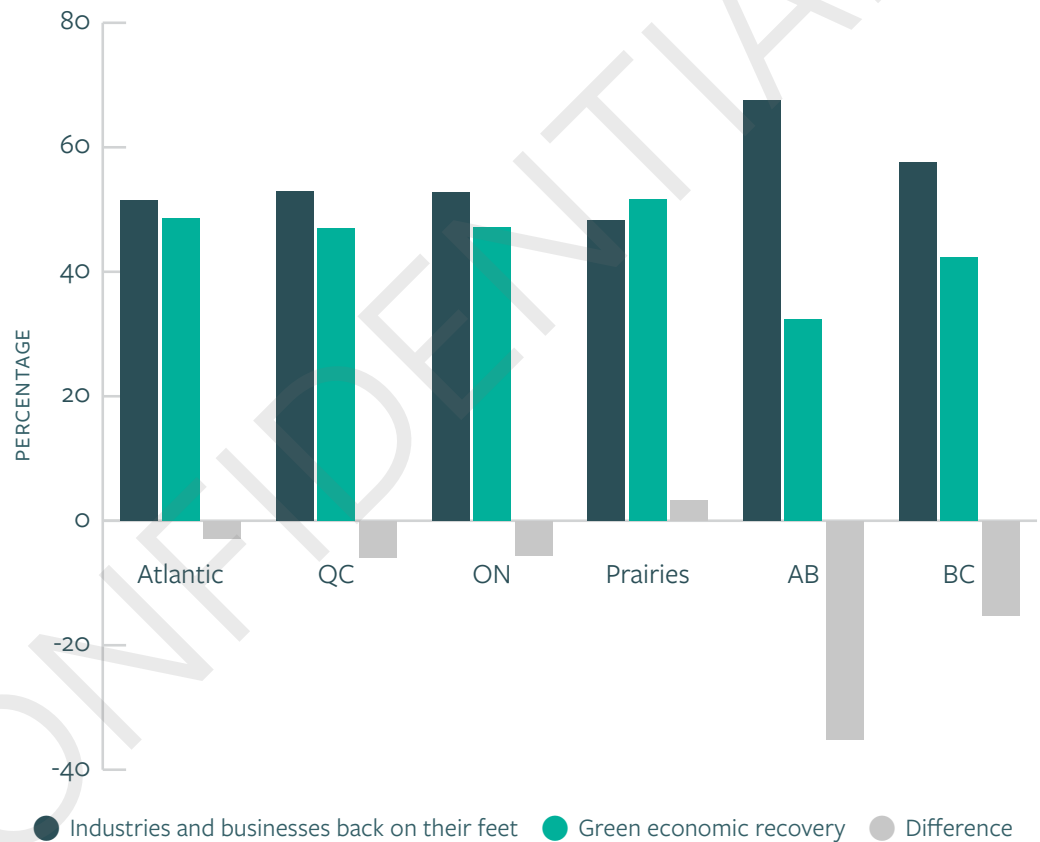
The 2020 Climate of Change Survey used random digit telephone dialing (RDD) to reach a sample of 1,000 residents of Canada, 18 years and older. An overlapping dual-frame (landline and cell phone) sample was used. Quotas were set to ensure 400 surveys were completed with respondents via cell phones and 600 with landline. Interviews were conducted from October 17 to November 7, 2020 and averaged 17 minutes in duration. To ensure that the data collected were representative of the Canadian population, a weighting factor based on region, age, and gender was employed. The AAPOR response rate was 10%. Based on a sample of this size, the results can be considered accurate to within ±3.10%, 19 times out of 20.

Results

Preference by region

We begin by looking at the distribution of responses overall, as well as across regions. For this analysis, we remove "not sure" and "don't know" responses, leaving a sample of 936 respondents who expressed a preference regarding pandemic-relief spending.

Figure 1: Economic recovery preferences, by region

● Industries and businesses back on their feet   ● Green economic recovery   ● Difference
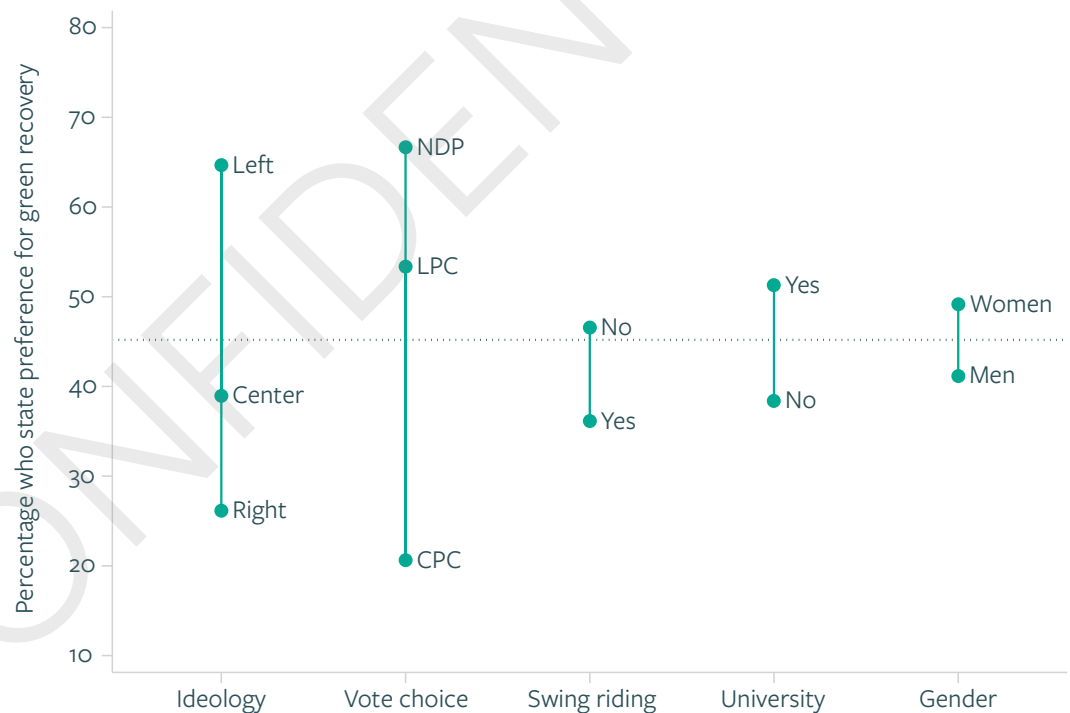
The first thing to note in Figure 1 is that overall, we find roughly equal proportions of respondents who support prioritizing a green economic recovery as we do for those prioritizing an economic recovery focused on existing industries and businesses. Of those who offered an opinion on this forced-choice question, about 55% prefer getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet as quickly as possible, compared to 45% who prioritize a green economic recovery. The "net difference" (grey bars) indicates the percentage gap between the two response options. At the national level, we see about 10% less support for prioritizing a green recovery than for prioritizing spending to get existing industries and businesses back on their feet.

Figure 1 also shows the distribution of responses across major regions. Here, Alberta stands out as the only region with a significantly smaller proportion of the population (32%) stating a preference for prioritizing a green recovery relative to the average across all other provinces (48%). Moreover, we find similar support across the two response options in each province, with roughly equal proportions supporting a green recovery as getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet, except in Alberta, where the public is twice as likely to support prioritizing existing industry (68%) relative to using the recovery to diversify the economy (32%).

Demographics of support

**Figure 2: Support for a green economic recovery,
by key socio-demographics**

We examined socio-demographic characteristics that are most correlated with support for a green recovery. Figure 2 plots the percentage of respondents belonging to key demographic sub-categories with a preference for a green economic recovery. Differences across other socio-demographic groups are less pronounced and not significant, statistically, so we do not present them here.

Across the sample as a whole, the average level of support for prioritizing a green recovery is 45%, indicated by the dotted line in Figure 2. Against this national

baseline, Figure 2 shows that supporters of the federal NDP (67%) are most likely to support a green economic recovery, followed by those self-identifying on the political left (65%), those with university educations (51%), women (49%), and residents of Canada living in an electoral riding with a relatively "safe" parliamentary seat (48%). In contrast we find significantly less support for prioritizing a green economic recovery over getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet among supporters of the federal CPC (21%), those self-identifying on the political right (26%) and political centre (38%), people living in a more competitive, or "swing," electoral riding (37%), those without university degrees (38%), and men (41%).

Political and gender influences

Partisan political preferences provided the strongest zero-order correlation (i.e. the simple correlation between two variables without controlling for the influence of other variables); so we looked more closely at the potential for variation within these groups. This involved looking for differences within partisan groups to see if all voters of a particular political stripe feel the same about a green recovery. We found that within blocs of voters, people of different characteristics tended to have similar opinions about a green recovery, with one exception.

Figure 3: Effect of vote choice on recovery preferences, conditional on gender
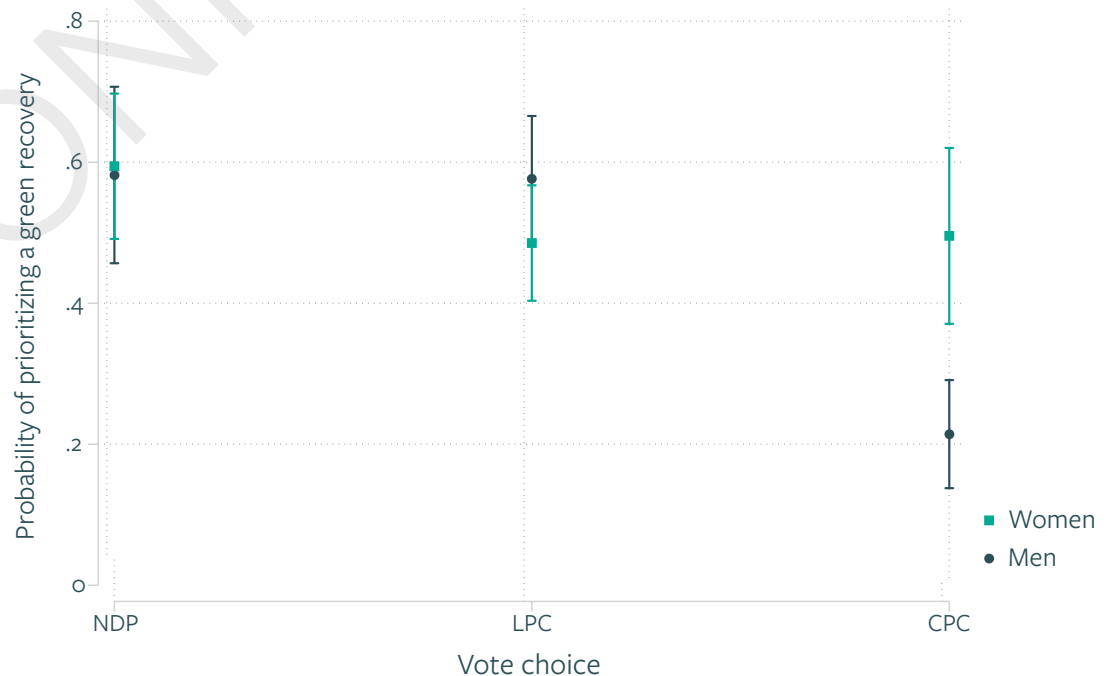
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Figure 3 illustrates the one area in which political preference is not uniformly predictive of preferences for a green economic recovery. Our analysis here is based on a multivariate logistic regression model[2] that predicts the probability of support for a green economic recovery conditional on predictors such as vote choice and gender. Looking at the data through this lens offers a bit more nuance. While vote choice continues to be a powerful predictor of pandemic-spending preferences, we see that gender is also a factor. Indeed, as shown above, while men and women who support the federal NDP and LPC are statistically indistinguishable in terms of the probability of stating a preference for a green economic recovery, we find that gender conditions the role of partisan preferences in shaping attitudes toward pandemic-relief spending among federal Conservatives. Women supporters of the CPC are more than twice as likely as males to prioritize green economic initiatives in pandemic-relief spending. Moreover, there is no difference in the probability of supporting a green economic recovery between women supporters of the CPC, on the one hand, and women supporters of the federal NDP and LPC, on the other. Thus, not all Conservatives share the same opinion of investments in a green economic recovery.
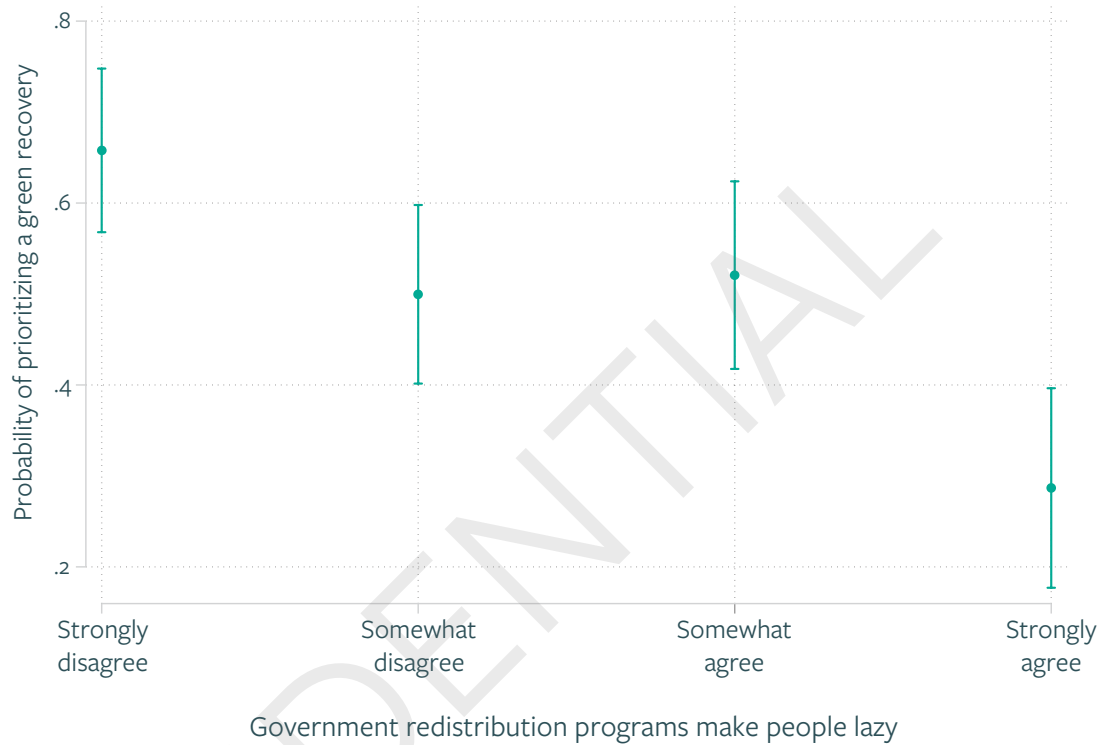
Psychographic predictors

We also looked to see whether particular psychographics were predictive of attitudes toward pandemic-relief spending. We tested all variables available in the data set. The two most important predictors of economic recovery preferences were attitudes around government redistribution programs and government efficacy.

Figure 4 illustrates the first of two psychographic characteristics that we identified as powerful predictors of attitudes toward the green economic recovery. Specifically, we focus here on agreement with the statement that "Government redistribution programs make people lazy." This question is related to ideology in that it speaks to an important dimension on the left-right spectrum of political debate; namely, the role of government in redistributing wealth and supporting the welfare of its citizens. It is also highly salient in a pandemic context of extensive government spending and economic support programs. Indeed, this particular survey item was selected because it is highly discriminant, producing substantial variation across respondents who are evenly split (45%/46%) in agreement and disagreement. We also find that the general belief that government assistance makes people lazy has gained ground since we last asked about it in the fall of 2019, presumably in response to increased debate during the pandemic about the effects of government assistance on the labour market.

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2   Multivariate logistic regression is a statistical tool used to examine a series of variables to determine which ones best predict a particular outcome (e.g. support for a green recovery).
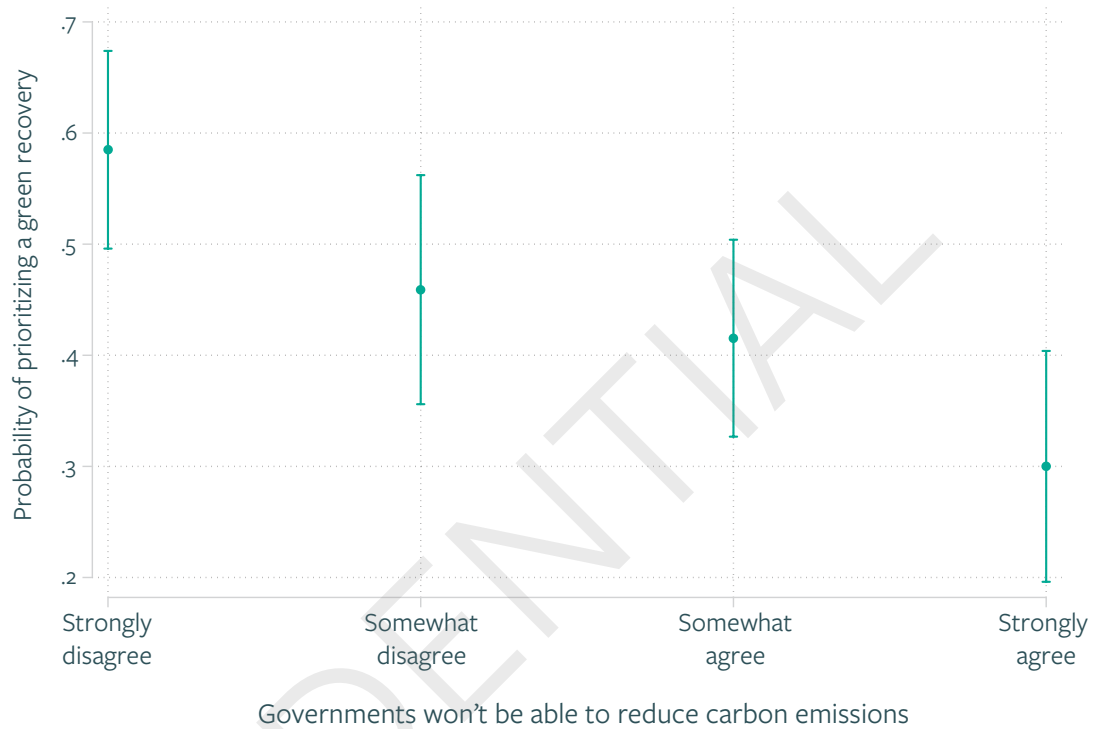
Figure 4: Effect of attitudes toward government redistribution on recovery preferences

Government redistribution programs make people lazy

As shown in Figure 4 above, there is a strong relationship between how one feels about government redistribution programs and support for a green economic recovery. Among those who strongly disagree with the sentiment that redistribution contributes to laziness, the probability of support is nearly 70%. In other words, seven in ten people who strongly disagree with the statement also support a green economic recovery. This decreases among those with softer opinions about this potential negative effect of government assistance, until ultimately reaching a low of 30% among those in strong agreement. Taking the difference between the two, we can say that those who are supportive of government redistribution programs are about 40% more likely to support diversifying and rebuilding a more resilient Canadian economy relative to those who believe government programs make people lazy.

Similarly, we found an additional psychometric characteristic to be strongly associated with pandemic spending preferences, and this adds to our understanding of why some may be skeptical of a green recovery. This has to do with the belief that governments are ineffective at reducing emissions.

Figure 5: Effect of attitudes toward government efficacy on recovery preferences

Like Figure 4, Figure 5 is based on a multivariate logistic regression model predicting the probability of support for a green economic recovery conditional upon a number of predictors. Specifically, we focus here on the relationship between support for a green economic recovery, and the strength of agreement (or disagreement) with the statement: "No matter how hard they try, governments won't be able to reduce carbon emissions." The relationship here is similar in size and direction: support for a green economic recovery is about twice as high among those who strongly disagree with this statement (59%) relative to those who strongly agree (30%). In other words, a stronger sense that governments can steer society on a path that reduces emissions is strongly associated with support for using the pandemic as an opportunity to diversify the economy by investing in innovation, clean energy, and more resilient communities.

Further analysis of these variables revealed that Conservative women voters are different from male voters in their propensity to hold these attitudes that are inversely correlated with green recovery preferences: relative to Conservative males, Conservative females are about half as likely to strongly agree that 1) government redistribution programs make people lazy; and half as likely to believe that 2) governments

are unable to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These psychographic differences between Conservative males and females may offer some explanation as to why Conservative females are more likely to support a green economic recovery.

Finally, the 2020 Climate of Change Survey also included a framing experiment to test different language when communicating about a green recovery. This involved randomly assigning each respondent one version of the following question: Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the government going deeper into debt to finance... [the economic recovery / a green economic recovery / a green and just recovery for all]? The idea behind this experiment was to test if the public reacted more positively to deficit spending when labelled "green" or "green and just" relative to the more neutral "economic recovery" baseline. Overall, we found no significant differences, with very similar levels of support (hovering around 60%) across the three wordings of the question. We interpret this as strong public sentiment for deficit spending to help the Canadian economy, regardless of how it is labelled or framed.

We then tested for differential effects of various wording of the question (language used) and support for deficit spending. Although we did not find any striking differences, we note that the "green and just recovery for all" outperforms the phrase "a green economic recovery" across a variety of audiences, including left-leaning NDP supporters. The differences are not large, but they are consistent, suggesting it is better to frame pandemic-relief spending around issues of justice and fairness than around, exclusively, decarbonizing the Canadian economy or other environmental benefits.

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Discussion and main findings

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions across the Canadian economy and society. It has also created an opportunity to accelerate Canada's transition to a low-carbon future. Our analysis of the 2020 EcoAnalytics Climate of Change Survey finds that an equal number of residents prefer prioritizing green initiatives in pandemic-relief spending and getting existing industries and businesses back on track. This is somewhat consistent with what EcoAnalytics found in focus groups conducted in 2020, which suggested that, when prompted, some participants saw the pandemic as an opportunity to hasten the transition to a low-carbon future, though many wanted details on how this would be done.

Our analysis is limited in several important respects. We conducted the survey in the fall, before the second wave of COVID-19 had reached its peak in Canada, a time when people were not as fatigued by the pandemic . It would be interesting to repeat the identical question now, in the midst of the pandemic's second wave, and several province-wide lockdowns, to see if a similar level of support is found for prioritizing green initiatives over getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet as quickly as possible. Second, the dichotomous forced-choice question is telling, though limited in terms of assessing the strength of opinions. If the question is repeated, researchers might consider expanding the number of response options (on a Likert scale) to assess opinion crystallization, though this would make the new data less comparable.

Despite these limits, our analysis has revealed a number of important findings, which we summarize here:

1. A large proportion of Canadian residents prefer prioritizing green initiatives in pandemic-relief spending. Indeed, we found nearly half (45%) prefer a green recovery, while 55% prioritize getting existing industries and businesses back on their feet as quickly as possible. While this indicates divided public opinion, the level of support for green initiatives in pandemic-relief spending is remarkable in light of the well-known psychological costs of the pandemic, and the understandable desire to get back to normal as quickly as possible.

2. Respondents' preferences regarding pandemic-relief spending are consistent across the country, with the exception of Alberta, where we find substantially lower (32%) support for prioritizing a green recovery.

3. Support for prioritizing a green recovery is greatest among those who vote for the federal NDP (67%), those on the political left (65%), those with a university education (51%), women (49%), and those living in an electoral district where one party tends to dominate elections (48%).

   a. Conversely, we find significantly less support for prioritizing a green economic recovery among supporters of the Conservatives (21%), those self-identifying on the political right (26%) and political centre (38%), people living in electoral districts where the vote swings from party to party (37%), people without university degrees (38%), and men (41%).

   b. Not all supporters of the CPC are equally opposed to prioritizing a green economic recovery. In particular, women supporters of the federal CPC are just as likely to support using the pandemic as an opportunity to diversify the economy (investing in innovation, clean energy, and more resilient communities), as are women supporters of the federal NDP and LPC.

4. Skepticism about government redistribution programs, as well as the ability of governments to steer society toward a low-carbon future are two psychographic characteristics that are strongly associated with less support for prioritizing a green economic recovery.

5. Although the effects of language when communicating about pandemic-relief spending are muted (likely because of the large public appetite for an economic recovery, no matter how it is framed), we find that support increases among some audiences (e.g. NDP voters) when communicators refer to a "green and just recovery for all."

Recommendations

Based on these results, we offer the following recommendations for those striving to build support for a green economic recovery.

1. Target key audiences.

   a. Mobilize support for a green economic recovery among people who are left-leaning, university educated, and women.

   b. Build support among Conservative segments of the population, by reaching out in particular to women in these segments.

   c. Focus communications in the run-up to the next federal election on potential swing ridings (where green spending preferences tend to be lower) while targeting women (who tend to be more supportive).

   d. Hone your message.

   e. As skepticism about government redistribution programs and climate policy go hand in hand with an unwillingness to prioritize green initiatives in pandemic spending, seek ways to counter, or avoid triggering, this sort of skepticism. For example, communicate about the virtues of nature-based solutions that are part of "a green and just economic recovery"—language that is more likely to appeal to a broader spectrum of segments.

2. Use inclusive language.

   a. Though the evidence is not clear-cut, we do find that in some instances, framing around a "green and just recovery for all" is more powerful than framing around the shorter "green recovery." The pandemic has shone a harsh light on growing economic inequality, and Canadian residents are concerned about affordability and finances. If the environmental movement can link environmental initiatives to concerns around building a more fair and just society, this could be advantageous. At the same time, environmental communicators need to prepare for opponents of a green recovery aiming to exploit Canadian residents' financial concerns by characterizing green initiatives as detrimental to the needs of existing industries and businesses.

   b. Field test framing around a "green and just recovery for all" rather than the shorter "green recovery," focusing more on broader concerns around reducing inequality, helping others, and building a fairer, more just society for all.

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Appendix: Swing ridings

Respondents to the 2020 Climate of Change Survey (n=1000) resided in a number of highly competitive, swing ridings. Our analysis shows that 73 out the 130 respondents (more than half) who were living in a competitive district during the fielding of the survey, resided in one of the following 14 electoral districts:

Cumberland-Colchester (NS)

Windsor West (ON)

Gaspesie-Les Iles-de-la-Madeleine (QC)

Burnaby North-Seymour (BC)

Peterborough-Kawartha (ON)

South Surrey-White Rock (BC)

South Okanagan-West Kootenay (BC)

Cape Breton-Canso (NS)

Victoria (BC)

Miramichi-Grand Lake (NB)

Saint John-Rothesay (NB)

Brome-Missisquoi (QC)

Quebec (QC)

Bay of Quinte (ON)

The remaining respondents categorized as living in a competitive electoral district were in these ridings:

Davenport (ON)

Chicoutimi-Le Fjord (QC)

Flamborough-Glanbrook (ON)

Riviere-des-Mille-Iles (QC)

Niagara Centre (ON)

Windsor-Tecumseh (ON)

Winnipeg South (MB)

Longueuil-Saint-Hubert (QC)

Sydney-Victoria (NS)

Beauport-Limoilou (QC)

Argenteuil-La Petite-Nation (QC)

Berthier-Maskinonge (QC)

Chateauguay-Lacolle (QC)

Hochelaga (QC)

Longueuil-Charles-LeMoyne (QC)

Jonquiere (QC)

King-Vaughan (ON)

Shefford (QC)

Niagara Falls (ON)

Trois-Rivières (QC)

Richmond Hill (ON)

Kenora (ON)

Coquitlam-Port Coquitlam (BC)

Kitchener-Conestoga (ON)

Fleetwood-Port Kells (BC)

Port Moody-Coquitlam (BC)

West Nova (NS)

Fredericton (NB)

We had no respondents in the other five swing ridings (where the margin of victory in the 2019 federal election was less than 5%):

Sherbrooke (QC)

Northumberland-Peterborough South (ON)

Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill (ON)

Cloverdale-Langley City (BC)

Hastings-Lennox and Addington (ON)