EcoA Research Nutshell
Powerful words for climate action

EcoAnalytics

Key Details

Key terms: public health, political priming[1], carbon pricing

Demographic profile: Conservatives, Liberals, NDP, regional (Québec, Alberta, British Columbia)

Source: Climate of change survey (2018)

In this report:
Know your audience
Narrative frames
Trusted messengers

1 Definition: media attention on certain issues alters the ways in which voters evaluate political candidates.
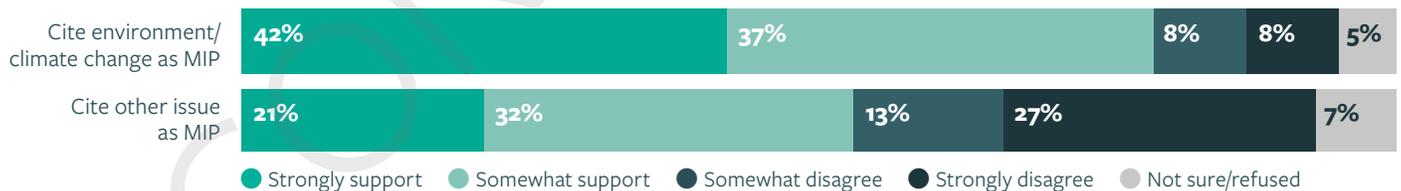
This report examines the role of the media in shaping attitudes, Canadians' views on the carbon tax, as well as framing climate change in relation to health. It draws primarily from the *Powerful Words* analytical brief from 2018 and features data from the latest Climate of Change Survey (2020) to contextualize and update the recommendations from that report. At the bottom of the document, you'll find an index of the *Powerful Words* analytical brief to guide you.

Key findings

1. **Media:** Evidence suggests that what people see and hear in the news impacts how important they perceive an issue to be. Québec residents are more likely than others to cite climate change as the most important issue facing the country.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** In surveys, respondents identify the "most important issue" (MIP) facing Canada, revealing perceived public priorities. Responses to this question depend on the context, and therefore change over time. For example, in 2017, the economy and jobs topped the charts, while in 2018, respondents cited environmental concerns. In 2020, the pandemic and the economy outpolled climate change, though climate change came third, which is significant given the magnitude of the healthcare and economic crises facing Canada. The MIP is context-specific, yet it speaks directly to the agenda-setting role that eNGOs and scientists can play by working with print and broadcast media, as well as through their own media channels, in keeping climate change salient and accessible in the minds of Canadians.

Difference in support for taxing fossil fuels across respondents who cite, or do not cite, the environment or climate change as the most important problem

Cite environment/climate change as MIP: 42% | 37% | 8% | 8% | 5%
Cite other issue as MIP: 21% | 32% | 13% | 27% | 7%

● Strongly support ● Somewhat support ● Somewhat disagree ● Strongly disagree ● Not sure/refused

Question wording: In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Canada today? And; Based on what you know, do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose putting a price or tax on fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas in order to reduce carbon emissions in Canada?

2. **Issue salience:** Despite the increasing salience of climate change as a public issue, this has not necessarily led to a collective urgency to act. Nonetheless, those who perceive climate change to be the most important problem (81%) are more likely than those who do not (54%) to discuss this issue with family and friends and to say that climate change will harm them personally.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** We did not ask about perceptions of climate change risk or conversations with loved ones in the 2020 Climate of Change Survey. We do know that there were no significant changes in perceptions of personal harm.

3. **Carbon pricing:** Whether or not Liberal or Conservative party supporters had already heard of carbon pricing impacted their support for the policy, which was not the case with other voters (other parties and undecided voters). This indicates that while LPC and CPC are reaching their respective audiences, there is an opportunity to engage other voters on this issue and build support.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** Support for a carbon tax remains polarized with roughly equal proportions of Canadians strongly supporting or opposing it (LPC support and CPC opposition have remained virtually the same). Since 2014, however, total support for the tax has risen from 48% to 56%, a positive, though gradual, trend.

Key recommendations

1. Keep climate top of mind

a. **Turn up the heat**: Work with trusted sources such as scientists, health professionals, community leaders, and other eNGOs to increase the frequency of messaging in the media about the dual threats of climate change and environmental degradation.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** Issue salience is still highly relevant, and making connections between different issues Canadians care about can help you put climate change and the environment top of mind among audience members.

b. **Emphasize preparedness:** Be cautious about communicating the severe risks of extreme weather: people may resist attributing local catastrophes to climate change, and this may create narratives of grief, suffering, and blame. Rather than talk exclusively about threats, groups should also communicate messages of empowerment and future preparedness.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** Note: Based on 2020 data, Climate Access recommends (Mar. 2021), wherever possible, naming the problem (global warming caused by burning fossil fuels) and naming the solution (transitioning to more popular renewable energy).

c. **Love**: Talk about the benefits of climate action for the places and things Canadians love most. "This is for the love of..." campaign must be non–partisan, apolitical, balance concern and hope, and emphasize the benefits of acting now: e.g. healthy communities, healthy forests, clean lakes and rivers, enhanced prosperity, public health, etc. The goal is not to convince. Canadians already know that this is an issue—focus on making it a salient issue.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** Values are slow to change, and Canadians' love for the environment is one of them. This recommendation is still fresh—leverage Canadians' appreciation of nature to engage them on climate action.

2. Powerful words: emphasize health and diversification

a. **Climate change as harmful to health**: Connect climate change to health, and emphasize the benefits of mitigating its impacts both for individuals and communities (e.g. exacerbating health issues such as heat exhaustion or stroke, or indirect benefits like cleaner water, air, etc.).

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** You can test the connection of biodiversity loss with pandemics (COVID or risk of future pandemics), for example.

b. **Climate change as a health emergency:** the findings in 2018 indicated that people were more responsive to climate change as "harmful to health" than as a "public health emergency". Move carefully when using the emergency frame, and be clear in distinguishing it from the current pandemic.
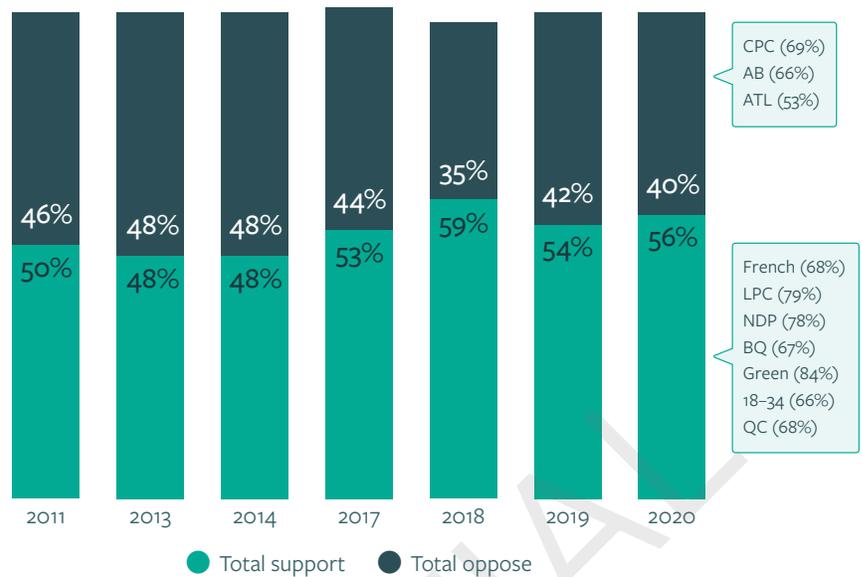
   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** Audiences are more accepting of the "climate emergency" frame now, than in 2018; but be careful, as many may not perceive climate change to be the same type of emergency as COVID-19 pandemic.

c. **Transition or diversification**? When speaking to supporters of renewable energy proponents, or most British Columbians, you can talk about an energy transition away from fossil fuels. But be careful as this language could alienate some audiences. Our analysis (as of 2018, at least) indicates that if you want to engage Albertans, talk diversification instead.

   ⭐ **2018 vs. 2020:** We did not test for different responses to these terms in the 2020 survey.

Q One way of reducing greenhouse gases and addressing climate change is to put a carbon tax on fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas.

Do you strongly / somewhat support, somewhat / strongly oppose this type of system?

	2011	2013	2014	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total oppose	46%	48%	48%	44%	35%	42%	40%
Total support	50%	48%	48%	53%	59%	54%	56%

CPC (69%)
AB (66%)
ATL (53%)

French (68%)
LPC (79%)
NDP (78%)
BQ (67%)
Green (84%)
18–34 (66%)
QC (68%)

● Total support ● Total oppose

3. Talking about the carbon tax

a. **Say pollution, not carbon.** Putting a "price on pollution" tested better (on average 15% more support) than introducing a "carbon tax". This is particularly the case among men, older generations, and Prairies residents.[2]

b. **Know your targets**. If the goal is to consolidate support, communications should be directed at segments with relatively large proportions of soft support for carbon pricing, such as youth, people with neither English nor French as their first language, and likely LPC, NDP, undecided, and Bloc Quebecois voters.

   ★ **2018 vs. 2020:** NDP, LPC, BQ, and Green voters as well as residents of Quebec indicated strongest support for a carbon tax in 2020.

c. **Don't forget Conservatives**. Our data clearly indicate that Conservative segments in Canada are not opposed to carbon pricing in principle. This may be an untapped source of support. At a minimum, an effort should be made to limit polarization on this topic by engaging Conservatives. Possible frames could be to show carbon pricing as a safety measure to protect Canadians, or as a benefit for consumers (e.g. making alternatives more affordable). Since O'Toole included the carbon tax in his platform, political parties of every stripe now support carbon pricing in some form.

★ **2018 vs. 2020:** We did not ask the same questions in 2020. However, we do know that CPC supporter support/opposition for a carbon tax has not changed significantly since 2018. The April 2021 climate plan of the CPC, however, calls for carbon pricing (or taxing, many argue). This opens the way for fresh message testing.

Other relevant research

Lachapelle, Erick and Louise Comeau (2018). *Framing the transition to renewable energy* — EcoAnalytics Panoramic survey analytical briefing.

2 Comeau, L., & Lachapelle, E. (2019). *Canadian Narratives Project: Integrated report of research findings*.

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