EcoA Research Nutshell
Things to know about trust

How is trust measured?

Qualities we look for when deciding whether to trust a person or institution, according to recent research. (Poortinga 2017, Kitt et al 2021)

Objectivity and integrity: are they honest and unbiased?

Fairness: do they take into account all points of view?

Consistency and predictability: what is their track record like?

Faith: are they acting in our best interest?

Commitment: how committed to the mission, goal and fiduciary obligation are they?

Competence: are they experienced and knowledgeable enough to make good decisions and implement them?

Caring: do they actually care?

Similar values: do their values align with my own?

This briefing summarizes research and recommendations on building audiences' trust in government and other institutions critical to protecting the environment. It also touches on the inter-related aspects of personal trust and how we can respond to these, and draws on a variety of sources including EcoAnalytics' research, research advisors' work and external resources.

What do we mean by trust and why does it matter?

Trust is often considered a predictor of support for policies, projects and public engagement. Studies of this mostly focus on our trust in governments, institutions, non-profit organizations and industry.

Generally, it is true that trust in government, and in particular in the competence of government to implement effective policies, correlates to support for climate policies around energy related taxes, mandates and incentives. Competence-based trust in the federal government has been relatively high in recent years, while "integrity" and similar "values-based trust" is low. (Kitt et al 2021) See sidebar for description of these measures of trust.

Trust also plays a key role in public engagement processes for proposed resource projects. High levels of trust in government, however, may correlate to low participation rates in public planning processes, contrary to what one might assume.
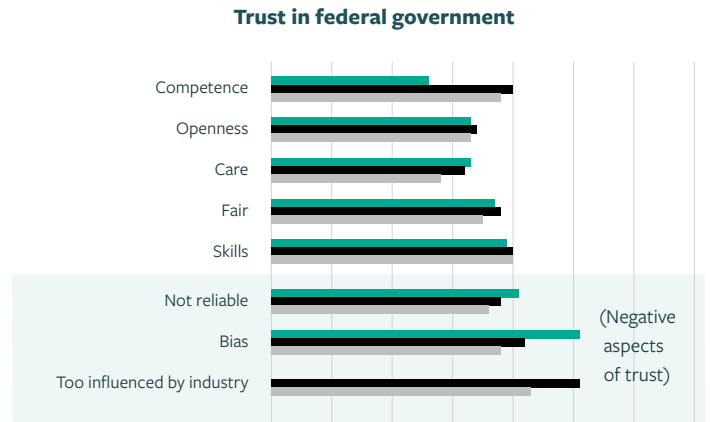
A recent study by a group of Canadian and US researchers, including EcoAnalytics Research Associate Dr. Louise Comeau, sheds light on this phenomenon, looking specifically at energy transition projects. This work shows that a combination of general trust and skepticism is positively associated with public engagement and confirms that at least some concern regarding credibility, bias, and vested interest can motivate public engagement (Parkins 2017).

We can cultivate this skeptical trust through fair-minded treatment of government action, acknowledgment of the complexity of issues and accountability. As Comeau states in a recent piece of communications guidance ("Tip 1 Cultivate trust and skepticism," EcoA Tips Feb 2022), "Trust is an indicator of people's sense of agency, so it's a bad idea to simply slam governments."
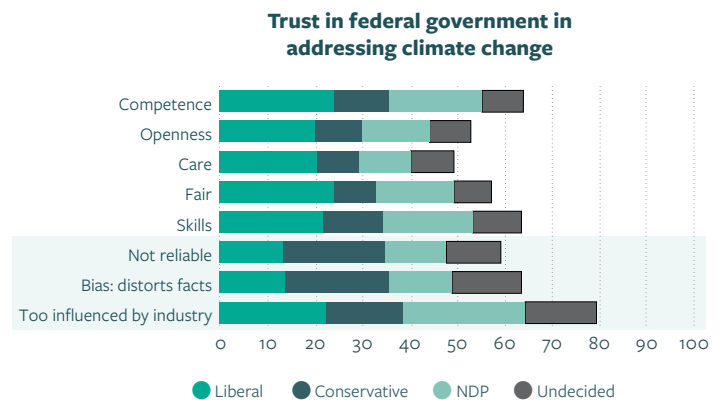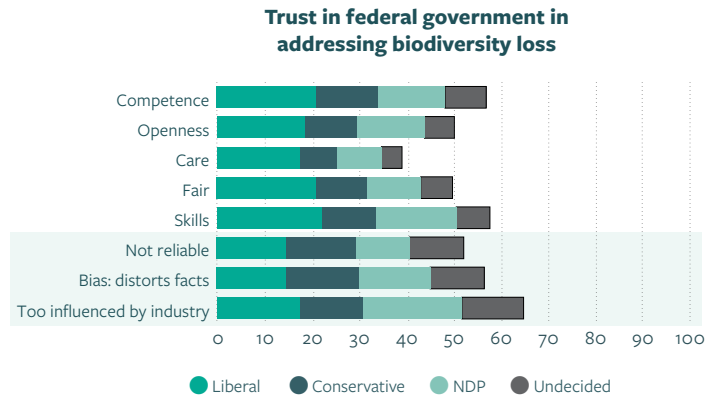
Types of Trust

Trust in government

Our trust in institutions and sectors can be broken down into different types: we may trust the competence of a government, but be less trusting of its openness or fairness. As can be seen in this chart, the level of trust Canadians express in different aspects of the federal government with regards to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, varies—and is not high. The graph shows aspects of trust related to competency and integrity, using data from the Climate solutions policy bundling, Quantitative Summary, Nov 2021 and National Omnibus survey, Summary, April 2022. The bottom three aspects of trust are negative.

Trust in federal government

Percentages represent respondents who 'agree or strongly agree' (5-7 on a 7 pt scale) with the statement regarding type of trust in government. Full statements can be found here.

Partisan trust

Digging deeper into demographic results for the Omnibus Survey, April 2022, we can see that political partisanship influences levels of trust, with supporters of the Conservative Party of Canada showing low trust in the competency and integrity of the Liberal government. In terms of the federal government's climate policies, supporters of all political parties show relatively high distrust in terms of beliefs that may be biased and/or favour industry. Again, the last three aspects of trust are negative indicators.

Trust in federal government in addressing biodiversity loss

Trust in federal government in addressing climate change

Percentages represent respondents who 'agree or strongly agree' (5-7 on a 7 pt scale) with the statement regarding type of trust in government. Full statements can be found here.

Trust in environmental groups

EcoAnalytics' national Panoramic Survey (Spring 2018) asked respondents about trust in a variety of different institutions. Environmental groups ranked reasonably high, with only university scientists holding more trust. Corporations and both local Federal and provincial governments ranked quite low.

More recent polling from [Edelman's Trust Barometer 2021](#) suggests trust in NGO's (including ENGO's) decreased slightly from 2020-21, but they are still "trusted", along with government, business and media by the "informed public", whereas no sector is trusted by the "mass public".

(Edelman defines "informed public" as respondents aged 25-64 who are college-educated, in top 25% of household income per age group, and report significant engagement in public policy and business news.)

Trust by sector

	No trust at all (1–2)	Neutral/ Moderate (3–5)	Great deal of trust (6–7)
Environmental groups	15%	55%	25%
Federal government	27%	53%	15%
Provincial government	25%	57%	14%
Corporations/industry	30%	55%	10%
University scientists	7%	48%	39%
Local utility	19%	58%	15%
Economists	17%	60%	16%

Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding; "not sure" responses removed

In the analytical report on EcoAnalytics' 2018 Panoramic Survey, "[Shifting perceptions, influential values and the power of trust](#)," authors Louise Comeau and Erick Lachapelle looked more deeply into why Canadians trust or distrust environmental NGOs. Trust related to a perception that ENGO's have expertise, and distrust related to a perception that they are too radical and distort the facts. The chart at right reveals some nuances about why Canadians trust and distrust environmental groups.

Aspects of Trust in ENGO's

	Disagree	Moderate/ Neither agree/ disagree	Agree
Are competent to educate Canadians about the energy transition	12%	56%	27%
Have skilled people	10%	56%	26%
Distort facts about effect of fossil fuel impacts	14%	51%	28%
Are too influenced by radical interests	10%	53%	31%
Act in public interest	10%	54%	32%
Listen to ordinary people	18%	56%	21%
Know what they are talking about	10%	56%	28%
Help people use less energy	8%	53%	34%

Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding; "not sure" responses removed

Personal trust

How we build trust in others also plays an important role supporting government actions, climate policies and environmental behaviours. Social or generalized trust refers to our trust in others, including those who are different from us. High social trust suggests a broader and more inclusive moral community marked by a sense of shared values (Uslaner, 2002). It is stable and strongly shaped by our early socialization and correlates with optimism. Social trust has strong effects on support for climate policies

and environmental behaviours. One reason for this is that a strong sense of shared values is an important foundation for policies that address problems, whose solutions require collective action. Particular trust is trust in other individuals who are members of our "in-group". Inequality and economic insecurity are linked to lower levels of *general trust* and higher *particularistic trust*. (Dr. Lori Thorlakson, Five things you need to know about trust, 2022)

Takeaways

So, what does this mean for public engagement in support of the positive changes that we need: e.g. electrification projects, industrial policies for a just transition, meeting conservation targets and other solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss?

Ensure fairness

Cynicism and skepticism are not barriers to political and public engagement; research suggests the contrary: they may actually encourage people to participate in planning processes and engage in public discourses, producing more democratic outcomes. However, care must be taken in the process and planning of projects, communications and engagement; and emphasizing the fairness of policies and projects is important as perceptions of fairness are key to building community trust in projects. Leverage this skepticism in encouraging audiences to participate in planning processes and provide them with tools for effectively engaging with these processes. At the same time, we need to be careful: polarizing language risks eroding general trust, which can undermine the moral foundation of collective action.

Build credibility

As Canadians exhibit low levels of trust in governments, be sure to celebrate wins and give governments credit where credit is due. Interdisciplinary partnerships and alliances between sectors can also help to (re)build trust in government and other agencies and broaden audiences, if done carefully.

Demand accountability

Build credibility, but also hold governments accountable. As our recent Policy and Efficacy qualitative research 2022 indicates, Canadians expect the government to be the *adult in the room*, ensuring industry is held accountable.

Be transparent

With declining levels of trust all around (Edelman Trust Barometer 2021), based on perceptions of the integrity of media and government, as well as scientists, NGOs and industry, it is particularly important to:

- demonstrate the benefits (and risks) of projects and policies and

- ensure transparency, honesty, fairness and inclusion.

Foster trust and optimism

- Use language that supports, rather than erodes optimism: our belief that others will do the "right thing' is a powerful predictor of environmental behaviours.

- Social trust has strong effects on support for climate policies and pro-environmental behaviours. Protect it with language that avoids constructing in-groups and out-groups.

- Institutional trust can also boost support for climate policies. It is less stable than social trust, reflecting our recent evaluations of institutional competence or performance, but is more likely to be influenced by communication strategies.

- Be aware that contexts of economic insecurity and status loss may erode trust, undermining environmental support. Use language that is sensitive to these effects, and builds trust.