

▶▶ IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE CLIMATE DEBATE

Climate policy in Canada, and in most other countries, has become trapped in an unproductive and distracting rhetorical debate. For some unfathomable reason, scientific and policy communities everywhere seem to believe they need to convince *everyone* of the merits of the scientific case underlying the need for policy action.

What people in the policy debate seem to be unwilling to recognize is that climate science has made a compelling and, more importantly for policy, an almost universally-accepted case that the accumulating emissions of carbon and other greenhouse gasses is either totally, or at least partially, the result of human action.

Climate change is now firmly fixed in the public consciousness. A recent YouGov survey of 30,000 people in 28 countries and regions revealed the vast majority of people—in every country surveyed—believe human action is partly or totally the cause of climate change.

The balance between those who see climate change as totally anthropomorphic (caused by humans) and those who see human activity as an important contributor to, but not the only source, varies across the countries surveyed. However, a strong majority believes climate change is here and it is a problem of our own making. In aggregate, the lowest level of support for human responsibility for climate change was 71% in Saudi Arabia and 75% in the US, with the highest support for human responsibility above 90% in more than half the countries surveyed.

Canada was not surveyed in the YouGov poll, but an EcoFiscal Commission commissioned a poll in 2018 that delivered consistent results. It showed 88% of Canadians agreed the climate is warming, with residents in every province

overwhelmingly convinced. Similar to the US, only about 70% were convinced it was due to human activity. Every province reported a majority acknowledging human responsibility, with ranges from 82% in Quebec to 54% in Alberta.

In almost any other policy space, this level of agreement would provide overwhelming support for action. But the media and policy system seems to be fixated on the so-called climate-change deniers, who represent a vanishing small but often vocal portion of any population.

A poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre in the US has the highest number of people, 9%, who accept the climate is changing but are unwilling to assign any blame to human development and only 6% who are true deniers that the climate is changing. To put this in context, a poll in 1997 reported about 16 million American adults were convinced Elvis Presley was alive—a full 20 years after his death. The poll found 6% of American adults agreed there was a possibility Elvis was still alive and 5% were unsure. Clearly some people will never accept certain things.

It's time to move on to action. Changing the opinion of the few remaining skeptics is a fruitless exercise that distracts everyone from the task of actually acting. Proponents in few other policy fields feel the need to get universal acceptance of the underlying rationale for action. While it might be comforting to have everyone agree, it is far from necessary or feasible.

Few policy spaces could muster such strong support for action. Most other contentious policy spaces—including poverty, public health, tax reform, gun control, contraception,

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gender and end-of-life choices—have much higher rates of skepticism or denial and still have seen decisive policy action.

Moreover, people adapt regardless of what they believe. Most people, whether they conform with the majority or not, can find something they support or can participate in as we develop plans and actions to lower carbon emissions, build more resilient economies and communities and pursue green growth.

The continued effort of the many to convince the few of their errors is a waste of time and simply dissipates attention and energy. It's time to move the debate to the options and strategies.

References

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