

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

COVID-19 is intensifying divisiveness over Canada's approach to climate change

The pandemic is leading to increased polarization among Canadians on whether the environment or economy is paramount. Polling shows a third of us say now is the time to act on global warming, but just as many say recovery should be our focus

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, a senior fellow at the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy Initiative and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail.

There's a school of thought that, when it comes to fighting climate change, the notions of a greener future and strong economic growth are irreconcilable. These are the people who insist you can't have your cake and eat it, too. Others insist you can have it all, and that it's indeed possible – if not paramount – to have both a healthy planet and a healthy economy.

During the first 60 days of 2020, before the pandemic effectively closed the economy, Canadians said their most important issue of concern was the environment. Now, Canadians are not only more concerned about the pandemic (28.7 per cent), but also the state of the economy and the job market (20.8 per cent) and health care (9.6 per cent). Just 6.1 per cent of Canadians cite the environment.

However, the environment still looms as a longer-term issue that demands action. It is the

timing and nature of this action that divides Canadians.

In a new survey by Nanos for the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy initiative, by a margin of 1.5 to 1, Canadians felt now is a good time for Canada to be ambitious in addressing climate change, even if there are costs to the economy. Forty-five per cent of Canadians rated it either a 7, 8, 9 or 10 on a scale out of 10, where 10 was absolutely the best time. Meanwhile, 29 per cent of Canadians rated it a 0 to 3, where 0 is absolutely the worst time.

This means that, even though a plurality of Canadians currently tilts toward environmental ambition, it remains an extremely divisive issue with only about one out of four Canadians with an ambivalent opinion.

A look at the distribution of opinion suggests that one-third of Canadians are polarized at both extremes, with just as many Canadians thinking it is absolutely the worst time as Canadians thinking it is absolutely the best.

Canadians are also very divided by region. Quebec and the Prairies are polar opposites, with people in the Prairie provinces much more likely to say it is absolutely the worst time to address climate change, while Quebecers are most likely to say it is the best time.

About two out of three Canadians believe the federal government, not the provinces, should lead decision-making when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This is true in every region, except the Prairies.

When asked to explain, Canadians who wanted to wait asserted that no action should be taken until the economy has recovered, and that there were other more important priorities such as health care and finding a vaccine for COVID-19. Those seeking immediate action believe that addressing climate change can't wait and that the

pandemic is a good opportunity for change.

The research suggests the pandemic has had a material impact on the views Canadians have on what is more important – protecting the environment or growth and creating jobs. Nanos tracking for the University of Ottawa reveals that, in March, 2015, 67 per cent of Canadians felt that “protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs,” whereas 24 per cent said “growth and creating jobs should be the top priority, even if environment suffers to some extent.” In July, 2020, those numbers had narrowed dramatically – 49 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively.

When it comes to striking a balance and coming up with solutions to support both the environment and the economy, most Canadians believe the federal government should take the lead. About two out of three Canadians believe the federal government, not the provinces, should lead decision-making when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This is true in every region, except the Prairies.

These are the views based on research conducted during the pandemic. And they contrast

with the views held before the pandemic. The question now is: How will changes in the economy, and the fight against COVID-19, continue to influence the views of Canadians as to whether this is a good time to be more ambitious on the environment?

Canadians are gripped with economic uncertainty because of the pandemic. This is increasing their polarization when it comes to reconciling the environment and the economy. The record-high identification of the environment as a top issue of concern coincided with an exceptionally low unemployment rate and a steady economy.

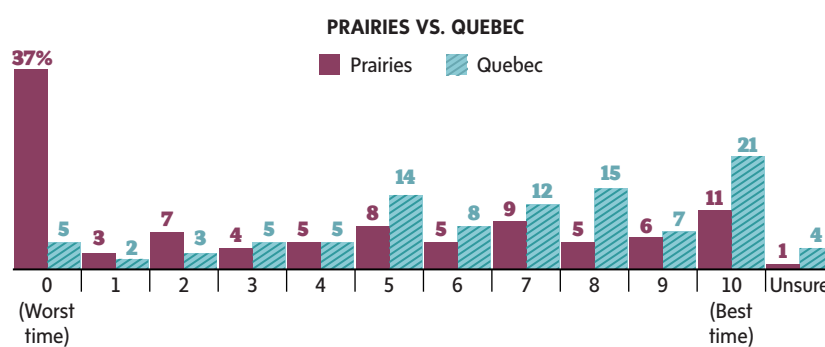
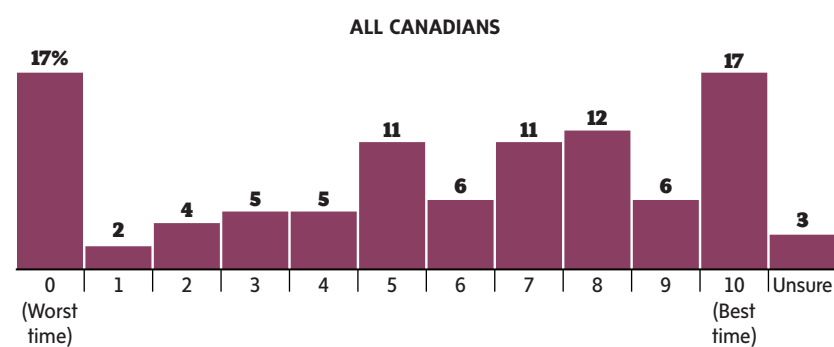
In this moment of fragility, our ability to restore economic prosperity may be a key factor in determining whether Canadians support immediate action on the environment. It's too early to tell whether Canadians can have their cake and eat it, too.

This column was based on multiple research studies completed by Nanos Research. They were all national random surveys of Canadians composed of at least 1,000 individuals. Random studies of 1,000 are accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The reports with full methodologies and their technical notes are posted at www.nanos.co.

Canadians on climate change

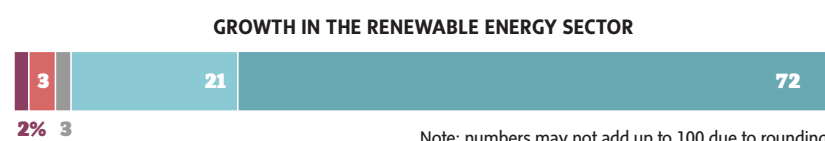
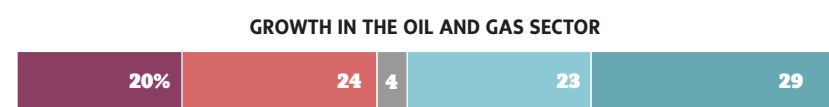
TIME TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

Is it a good time for Canada to be ambitious in addressing climate change?



SUPPORT FOR ACTIONS RELATED TO ENERGY IN CANADA

● Oppose ● Somewhat oppose ● Unsure ● Somewhat support ● Support



MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

Note: numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

If you find yourself starting to question pandemic measures, remember these four words

JILLIAN HORTON

OPINION

Canadian internist and writer. Her memoirs, *We Are All Perfectly Fine*, will be published next year.

As the COVID-19 crisis deepens around the world, I've noticed some graphics and dashboards using a subheading: situational awareness. The term has visceral significance to anyone who works in health care or the airline industry, because situational awareness can mean the difference between life and death.

Those of us who are interested in metacognition – how we think – tend to conceive of situational awareness as a learned ability to notice and interpret what is happening around us so we are prepared for what might happen next. Critically, it also allows us to anticipate and navigate common thinking and behaviour traps. The latter is especially important because our situational awareness in emergencies can be unduly influenced by the behaviour – including the underreactivity – of those around us.

What is situational awareness? Often, it's more helpful to begin by describing what happens when it is absent. Here's a tragic example. A healthy child is admitted to a hospital for an elec-

tive procedure. The child stops producing urine and soon his blood pressure is unmeasurable. The staff insist he is fine and that the machines are all malfunctioning. Instead of giving large volumes of fluid and sending him to intensive care, they scour the hospital for “working” blood pressure machines. While they are looking, the child suffers a cardiac arrest owing to shock and dies.

Or here's an example from the aviation world. A pair of commercial pilots are nearing the last leg of flight. They talk nonchalantly about ice on the wings, a potential sign of serious trouble. As they prepare to land, the aircraft experiences an aerodynamic stall. Two pieces of safety equipment activate, but both pilots respond incorrectly to the automated cues. All 49 passengers are killed when the plane slams into the ground.

Why did that young boy and those passengers die? Because the people in charge lacked situational awareness. They did not recognize or label their experiences as an emergency and, as a result, were unprepared for the consequences.

Sadly, when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders around the world are falling into this same trap – and so are citizens.

Why are our brains so vulnerable to this phenomenon? Some of the answer is rooted in our wir-

I don't want us to be tricked into the false belief that the situation in Canada isn't critical, because it could deteriorate in the blink of an eye.

ing. Our behavioural responses are both learned and dependent on our environment, and when we encounter unfamiliar situations we often revert to a default setting: looking at what others are doing. This concept is known as social proof. We're aware of the pandemic, but because people around us aren't wearing masks, we're tricked into thinking that what they're doing must be right. This problem is compounded by the fact that our perceptions

can also be heavily influenced by what we want to be true – a cognitive misstep known as affective error. It's less psychologically disturbing to conceive of a broken blood pressure machine than a child who is critically ill, or a bit of ice on the wings as a meaningless nuisance instead of a potentially life-threatening development. When I'm teaching medical learners about situational awareness, my focus is often on helping them realize how easily influenced our perceptions are by both of these things: how others behave and what we want to be true.

But here's one of the hardest things about situational awareness: It requires vigilance, and vigilance takes energy. We're all tired of the constant psychological assault on our sense of safety right now. So it's tempting to downgrade our original assessments of the threat, perhaps even to question the experts who are telling us to be worried.

This ability to recognize our knowledge limits is another aspect of situational awareness, by the way, so we don't waste precious time challenging those who best understand what is likely to happen next.

A recent study showed that even though our numbers haven't worsened dramatically, Canadians are more worried about catching COVID-19 than we were in the middle of April. Ini-

tially, this made me hopeful that we were developing more situational awareness about the pandemic in general. But recent clusters of cases in many provinces have me worried that we are losing that awareness, a shift that may cost us dearly.

In my clinical life, it's not uncommon that I meet a patient for the first time and have to tell them that they have widespread, incurable cancer. They say to me, incredulously: How did this happen so quickly? My sorrowful answer is always the same: This did not happen quickly. It started with a mutation in a single cell. That cell doubled and then those cells doubled. Eventually, that patient had symptoms – warning signs – that they often didn't recognize or ignored out of fear or denial or an inability to access care. And then there came a tipping point – but it was never all at once. That's why one of my axioms as a clinician is: Most disasters happen slowly.

I don't want us to be tricked into the false belief that the situation in Canada isn't critical, because it could deteriorate in the blink of an eye. So I want to teach you four behaviour-altering words that can activate the skills that ultimately allow doctors, nurses and pilots to override the false messages our brains send us, allowing us to save lives.

And here they are: This is an emergency.