

## In climate policy, can public ignorance be bliss?

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A few principles are widely accepted as the foundation of good climate policy. The policy should be effective and efficient, putting us on track to meet our greenhouse gas reduction targets in a way that minimizes costs to society. It should also be relatively simple to implement, without imposing unfair impacts on some citizens.

Many climate policy advocates and academics argue that a national carbon tax meets those criteria. Yet the carbon tax remains toxic to those politicians and policy-makers who see it as a career ender. This impasse between theory and real-world politics frustrates many of us. Clearly, good climate policy must also follow one more principle: it must be politically acceptable. But what does political acceptability actually mean?

This was the impetus behind “Does Climate Policy Require Well-Informed Citizen Support?,” an empirical study undertaken by my colleagues and me that was recently published in the journal *Global Environmental Change*. We focused on one key component of political acceptability: public support. Looking through the literature, we found no consensus on what type of public support is required to secure implementation of a climate policy. Do citizens need to be well informed and actively supportive? Or can “support” still exist if citizens are passive, or perhaps even unaware of the policy’s existence?



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Some environmental groups and advocates view “active” citizen support as particularly important for climate policy, subscribing to the “knowledge deficit” model. The idea is that citizens do not prioritize climate change because they are uninformed about climate science, and ignorant about policy options. The implied solution is information provision: if knowledge can be provided to fill in the deficit, citizens will rally for effective climate policy. In other words, public support must be active, and can be generated by disseminating information.

Our empirical results provide evidence to the contrary.

We show that effective climate policy can and has been enacted without the public having any awareness of the policy or how it works. In fact, this lack of awareness may imply a broad level of support — that is, passive public support.

We focused our research on British Columbia, a region that implemented a suite of fairly stringent climate policies in 2008: a carbon tax, energy efficiency regulations for buildings, a low-carbon fuel standard, a clean-electricity standard and requirements for a carbon-neutral government. All of these policies have been in place for more than six years, making BC an ideal region in which to

study citizen perceptions. Using a representative sample of 475 BC citizens, we implemented a Web-based survey to assess awareness, knowledge and support of these existing policies.

As a starting point, we found that BC citizens are almost completely unaware of climate policies. In reply to an open-ended survey question asking “Can you name any existing climate policies?” just over one-quarter of respondents mentioned the carbon tax. The remaining policies were essentially unknown by 98 to 99 percent of the sample. For example, only 1 person in 475 knew that BC has a low-carbon fuel standard.

We tried again with a closed-ended question, more like a multiple-choice exam where we listed real and fake policies and asked respondents to select the policies that they thought actually existed in BC. The respondents were more accurate in this exercise. The carbon tax was again the most well-known policy. But the majority of respondents still could not correctly identify the other policies in place.

Despite this lack of awareness, the vast majority of respondents (80 to 90 percent) stated that they would vote in favour of four of the policies in a referendum. Only the carbon tax was controversial, though a slight majority were still supportive (56 percent). It is interesting to note that the most well-known policy — the carbon tax — was found to have the least support.

Finally, our survey tested the “knowledge deficit” model. After assessing respondents’ base level or policy awareness, the survey provided more information about the effectiveness of each policy in terms of emissions reductions. This information had no statistical effect on respondents’ stated support for three of the policies, and it significantly decreased support for the other two — the low-carbon fuel standard and the carbon-neutral government.

In other words, we found no evidence for the knowledge deficit model. In fact, information provision might actually reduce citizen support.

So what does this mean for climate policy? What is the role of citizen awareness and knowledge?

Let’s start by reconceptualizing what we mean by “public support.” What we find in BC could perhaps be called “passive” citizen support. Most citizens are unaware of most of the climate policies in place, probably because the policies are not particularly controversial to start with. Indeed, we find that once we explain the policies, stated support is very high. So a climate policy that is perceived as generally innocuous to citizens is not likely to enter the public’s consciousness. It is sim-

ply not memorable. We might say that such a policy is implied to be politically acceptable, even though citizen awareness is essentially nil.

Should we be concerned that widespread public ignorance is undemocratic? In an ideal world, we would like every citizen to be perfectly informed about every environmental problem, social issue and policy solution. However, in the real world, such broad awareness simply isn’t practical. Citizens have to filter and prioritize the information and issues they pay attention to.

Arguably, our modern media world ensures the public will become aware of the more controversial policies. For example, between 2007 and 2014, the carbon tax was mentioned 1,714 times in BC’s top two newspapers, while the low-carbon fuel standard was mentioned only 21 times. And recall that the carbon tax has become the most well-known and least supported of BC’s climate policies, while the opposite is true of the low-carbon fuel standard.

In this sense, citizen ignorance is perhaps an indicator of a politically acceptable policy design. These policies sit in the background, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, without upsetting citizens. BC’s climate policies are still transparent — the provincial government has freely posted and published information on all of its climate policies, with regular updates since 2008. Such government transparency is essential to a healthy democracy, to cultivate and maintain public trust. But in practice, while citizens are free to look and evaluate — most choose not to.

This is a significant finding for climate policy advocates. While the provision of information is still likely to play some positive role in general efforts to enact climate policy, perhaps it should not be the central strategy. Effort might be better directed to informing policy-makers that some effective climate policies are already politically acceptable.

For example, our research — both in BC and in an accom-

panying national sample — found broad public support for effective policies like the low-carbon fuel standard and the clean-electricity standard. If well designed, both policies can play strong roles in cutting greenhouse gas emissions, while also being fairly efficient.

The citizen ignorance we observe may still present an element of danger. If citizens are unaware of a given climate policy, it may be easier for future governments to “kill” or weaken the policy without generating public outcry. Perhaps climate policy advocates ought to serve as watchdogs — carefully observing the political atmosphere, and then launching a campaign to save a “forgotten” climate policy if needed.

But from the perspective of policy-makers who are genuinely seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Canada, it seems wise to prioritize the policies that are more effective and least politically controversial. This means that a strong national carbon tax probably won’t happen. But there are many other policy options that are likely to gain the “passive support” of Canadian citizens. In that way at least, perhaps climate policy ignorance can be bliss. ■

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## Small modular reactors

Canada’s next big idea

NEIL ALEXANDER

Consider three seemingly separate Canadian policy problems. First, the troubles at BlackBerry delivered another blow to the global reputation of Canadian high-tech, leaving a country that depends on international trade to fall back on natural resources like energy and forestry for the majority of its exports. Second, remote communities in the North and other parts of the country, many of them home to Aboriginal people, find it difficult and expensive to get fresh food, clean water and cheap, reliable power. And third, Canada routinely wins “dinosaur” awards from climate change activists for environmental policies that have delivered underwhelming progress toward reducing fossil fuel consumption.

What if there was a technology that could kill these three problematic policy birds with one stone?

There could be an answer in an unexpected place. The nuclear industry is on the cusp of a revolution that will change the basic technology at its core. There are innovations such as using molten salt instead of solid uranium as a fuel in traditional nuclear energy

