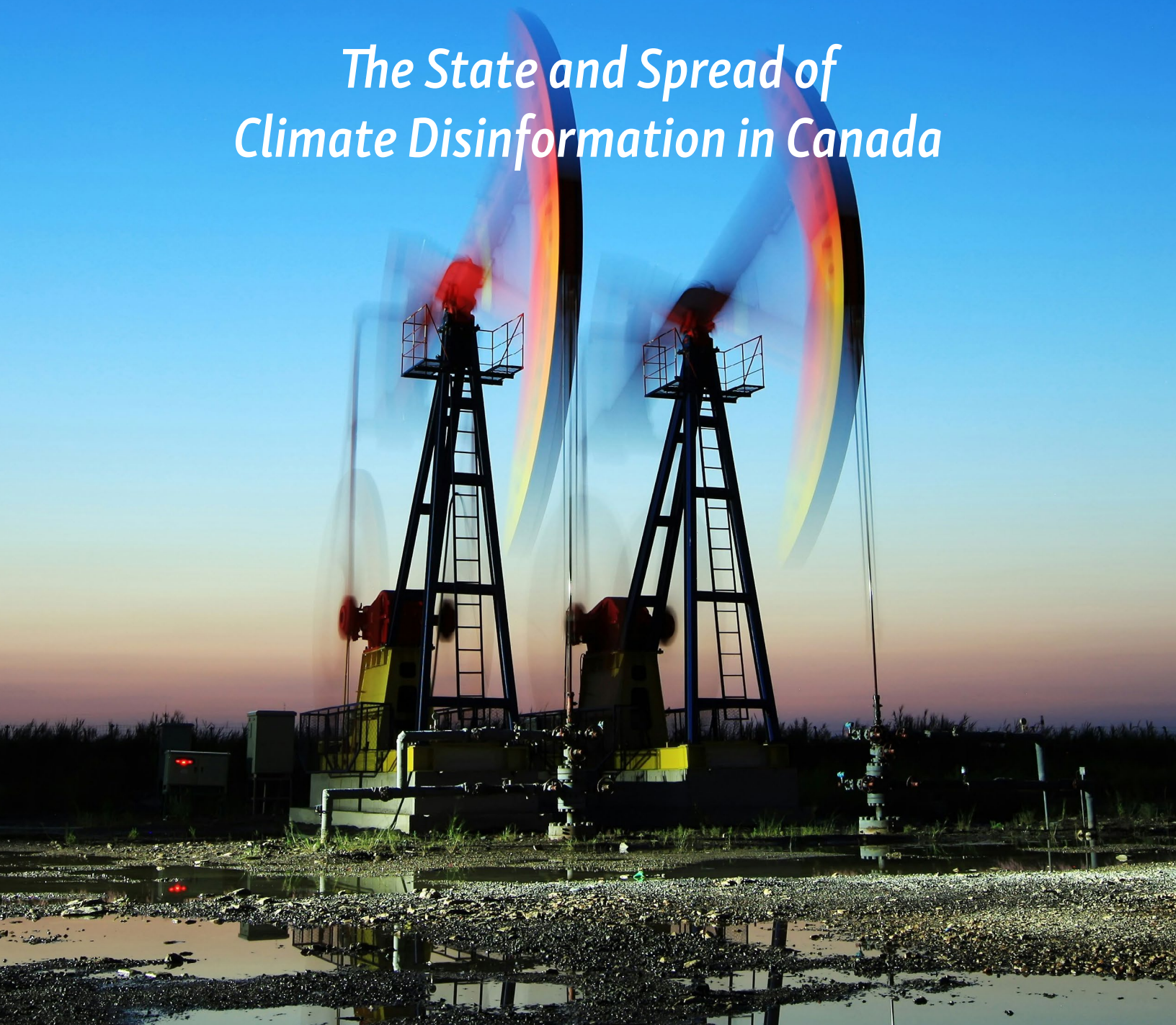


Climate Obstruction

*The State and Spread of
Climate Disinformation in Canada*



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The State and Spread of Climate Disinformation in Canada

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The Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy is an interdisciplinary research organization housed at the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. Its work is dedicated to understanding and responding to the social, political, and policy challenges posed by the evolving information ecosystem and digital technologies.

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Executive Summary

Between the 1980s and early 2000s, fossil fuel companies like Exxon Mobil ran extensive, multi-million dollar disinformation campaigns aggressively downplaying the realities of climate change. But while climate denial historically defined opposition to climate action, the discourse is increasingly shifting into new territory online: **climate delayism**. These delay tactics leverage discourses that *accept* the existence of climate change, but nevertheless downplay its urgency and sow doubt in potential solutions. What's more, the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation online—and platforms' inability and recent overt unwillingness to regulate it—has supercharged these climate delay narratives. But climate disinformation is not just a social media problem: it operates through a complex and historically situated network of powerful actors with vested interests, and is woven into the fabric of Canadian nationhood and identity itself. We need to understand how climate delay and disinformation narratives circulate and find resonance in our broader information ecosystem. To that end, this report analyzes Canadians' response to prominent climate delay narratives and presents key findings and policy implications for the burgeoning problem of climate disinformation in Canada.

Part I of this report traces the distinct history and development of Canadian “petroculture,” and the regional and national identities that have formed around it. Part II examines the key players active in Canada's climate (dis)information ecosystem, while Part III evaluates trends in the Canadian public's resonance with five prominent climate delay narratives. The report employs a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis to probe Canadians' attitudes toward climate delay narratives *and* climate solutions.

Canadians' Uptake of Five Prominent Climate Delay Narratives

Delay Narrative	Description	Level of agreement with the narrative
Hypocrisy and Elitism	The claim that those pushing for climate change action are elitist, hypocritical, and thus illegitimate.	67%
Absolutionism	The idea that a given country or region should be absolved of climate action because other countries or regions bear more responsibility for addressing their outsized impact.	53%
Unreliable re-newables and ineffective electric vehicles	A concern around the viability and effectiveness of renewable energy and electric vehicles.	41%
"Ethical" oil	A narrative that justifies extractivism by promoting Canada's oil as more "ethical" than oil produced in countries with poor environmental and human rights frameworks.	54%
Indigenous involvement	A narrative that positions Indigenous participation in fossil fuel extraction as a form of economic liberation and reconciliation.	40%

SURVEY INSIGHTS:

- **Our survey identified a prominent "impact gap":** Most Canadians believe in climate change, yet less than half believe they are currently impacted by climate change.
 - ▶ While most respondents (74%) agreed that climate change is real, less than half believed they are currently being impacted by climate change.
- Partisanship overwhelmingly predicts individuals' feelings toward carbon pricing: individuals who were Conservative-partisan were *over three times more likely* to be against carbon pricing than Liberal or NDP partisans.
- All tested climate disinformation and delay narratives had high resonance among Canadians:
 - ▶ Hypocrisy and elitism emerged as the most persuasive delay narrative (67%), suggesting discontent in governmental action and distrust of politicians' sincerity.
 - ▶ 53% of respondents resonated with "Absolutionism" narratives, which offload responsibility elsewhere, posing a challenge for unified, global action on climate change.



- ▶ More than half of respondents agreed with the “ethical oil” narrative, indicating that Canadians’ perception of their national identity and moral standards are intertwined with fossil fuel extractivism.
- ▶ 40% of respondents believed in the Indigenous empowerment narrative, suggesting that ideas about Indigenous empowerment may be leveraged and co-opted to foster wider support for oil and gas projects.
- ▶ 41% of Canadians agreed with the unreliable renewables and ineffective electric vehicles narrative, but almost all were still likely to support investment in renewables as a form of government action, as opposed to alternatives such as carbon tax.
- Respondents were more likely to prefer climate action at the government or corporate level as compared to the individual level, and preferred climate action that they perceived would have the least impact on their economic wellbeing.

Climate action in Canada and abroad faces an uphill battle, and understanding how climate delayism shapes our information ecosystem and influences support for climate action will be crucial to effective policymaking. As platforms become increasingly unwilling to address the known impacts and harms of climate disinformation online, robust accountability mechanisms through government regulation will be needed to address the spread of climate obstruction online. While the fate of online harms legislation in Canada is up in the air, future efforts could focus on reforming online advertising models, improving algorithmic transparency and access to data, and cracking down on greenwashing. It is crucial to situate climate disinformation and delay narratives within the broader context of climate obstruction, because ultimately, climate obstruction is a systemic issue, and its solutions should be too.

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Introduction

The fight against the climate crisis has entered an insidious new era. While outright climate change denial historically defined opposition to climate action, a new tactic is increasingly on the rise: **“climate delayism.” This tactic leverages discourse that at once accepts the existence of climate change, but dulls the urgency of the climate crisis, and builds skepticism into climate solutions.**¹ In adopting select progressive language and rhetoric, but not serving those ends, climate delayism ultimately justifies inaction and supports the continuation of the fossil fuel industry (see Fig. 1). Delay tactics are not just rhetoric: they are a new front in the battle against climate disinformation—a battle for our future.

The rise of powerful Big Tech platforms and popular social media platforms have complicated—and in some ways, supercharged—narratives about the climate crisis in a way that directly impacts both public understanding of and policy solutions to the climate crisis. Climate mis- and disinformation, originating from a wide variety of political, corporate, and private interest groups, has a particularly adverse impact on these discourses. In the last few years, climate disinformation has burgeoned on social media platforms. In 2022, the year Elon Musk took over Twitter, the platform saw a 300% increase in climate denialist content.² Known climate conspiracies routinely circulate on Meta, particularly during key moments such as the annual COP meetings, while Google continually profits from climate denial advertising.³

There was once a time that platforms seemed up to bat in the battle against mis- and disinformation online. In 2020, for example, Meta launched its Climate Science Information Center on Facebook in an effort to curb climate misinformation. But in January 2025, the company announced it would be ending its long-standing fact-checking program in the US, starting March. Meta’s announcement was one of many in recent years that signalled tech’s shift toward the political right. The ideological pendulum increasingly swinging toward conservatism makes the task of addressing climate mis- and disinformation online even more urgent. Policymakers around the world are beginning to address the impacts of climate change communication online, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), who recently highlighted the effects of climate change rhetoric and polarization for the first time, noting that the politicization of climate change science has impeded climate policy and action, especially in North America.⁴

The emergence of climate delayism in Canada poses a variety of important questions as to how Canadians perceive and respond to climate communication more broadly. Today we observe oil and gas stakeholders framing climate change narratives alongside broader political issues to elicit emotional responses and trigger shifts in opinion that align with opposition to climate action.⁵ But while mis- and disinformation proliferates rapidly online, it extends beyond platforms as part of a broader framework of **climate obstruction**: the intentional slowing or blocking of policy or action on climate change that is commensurate with the current scientific consensus of what is necessary to avoid dangerous human-caused interference with the climate system.⁶

These delay tactics impact individuals' perception of the urgency of the climate crisis, as well as their feeling toward individual, corporate, and governmental responsibility to address it. As the clock ticks on climate action, understanding Canadians' susceptibility to—and demand for—these narratives is paramount.

To that end, this report evaluates trends in the Canadian public's understanding of and response to climate delay narratives. It primarily evaluates the Canadian climate information landscape while also drawing on the narratives already identified in the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's Deny, Deceive, Delay reports. The report begins by tracing the history of the international and Canadian climate action and details the various political, economic, and social factors that drove those movements in the 21st century. The subsequent section analyzes the Canadian information ecosystem, highlighting where climate information and mis- and disinformation arises, and how it is disseminated. In the final section, we present an analysis of our survey findings that probe factors influencing Canadians' attitudes toward various climate solutions being pursued by public and private actors. We conclude with future implications for policy as policymakers around the world begin to grapple with this specific kind of climate content online.

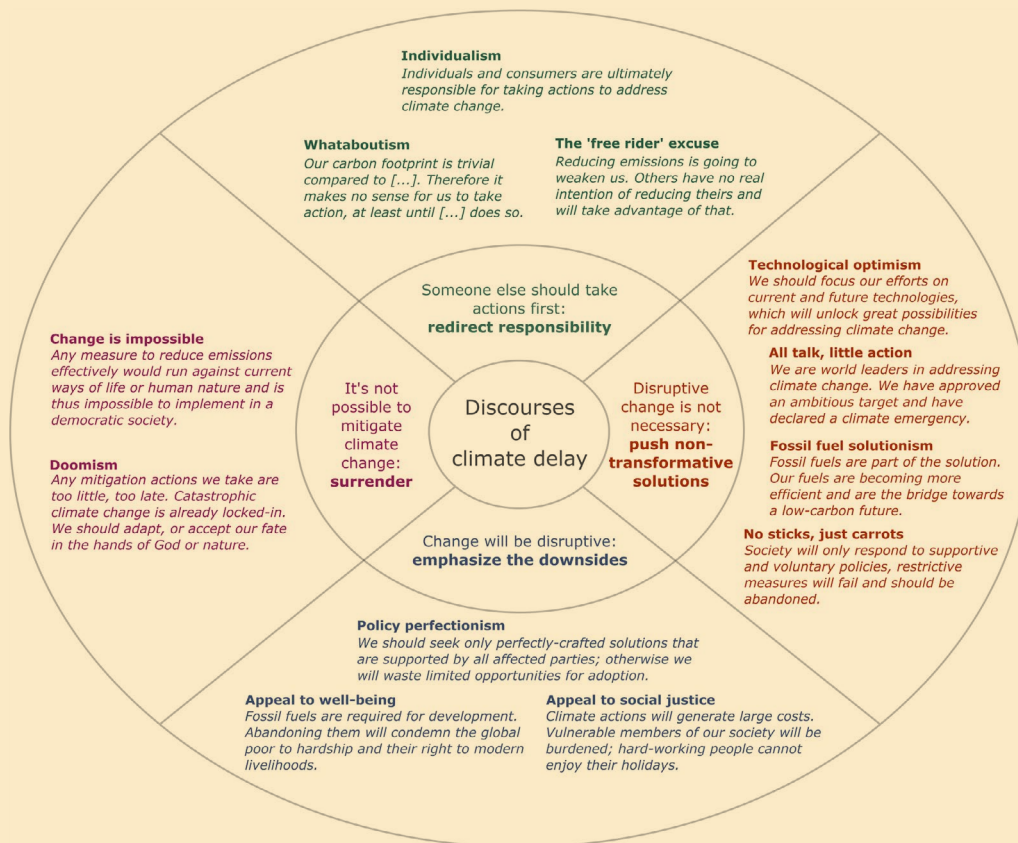


Figure 1: Taxonomy for 'Discourses of Delay' from Lamb, W., Mattioli, G., Levi, S., Roberts, J., Capstick, S., Creutzig, F., . . . Steinberger, J. (2020). *Discourses of climate delay*. *Global Sustainability*, 3, E17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13>. Figure licensed under CC BY 4.0.



SECTION I

THE MOVE FROM DENIAL TO DELAY

Climate Misinformation and Disinformation

Climate mis- and disinformation is defined in a variety of ways by scholars and climate activists, but **intent** often distinguishes the two terms. Where misinformation refers to information disseminated accidentally or without knowledge of its falsity, disinformation is spread with the intention to deceive or mislead.⁷ Historically, both climate mis- and disinformation have been used to embolden the outright denial of climate change, and neither concept is new or driven exclusively by technological change. What this report illustrates, however, is that actors and interest groups spread disinformation to stall progress on climate change even as they accept and validate climate change and its impacts. In this context, actors obstruct or delay climate action by shifting attention to the potential negative social effects of climate policy and the perceived ineffectiveness of climate solutions—the new narratives and ideologies of delay.⁸

Climate disinformation is not new, nor endemic to our digital ecosystem. Before climate change gained mainstream attention, climate disinformation efforts largely pushed climate denial, attempting to sow doubt in anthropogenic climate change and climate science.⁹ Major oil and gas corporations, like Exxon Mobil, ran extensive, decades-long disinformation campaigns, knowingly withholding information and promoting skewed data between the 1980s and the early 2000s.¹⁰ Exxon's climate denialism was supported by a massive public relations (PR) campaign, in which they and other oil companies poured millions of dollars into political lobbying, industry-led studies, and corporate media.¹¹

The rise of social media platforms and our digital ecosystem more broadly has radically changed the way that disinformation spreads and compounds. In particular, online discourse takes place within the illusion of a digital public square, an imagined common online ecosystem where individuals openly and democratically share ideas. An illusion, because fossil fuel advocates have capitalized on online platforms' inability or unwillingness to moderate climate content they host to dominate online discourse.¹² Indeed, this form of climate disinformation—which often takes the form of paid advertisements by fossil fuel companies, industry groups, media channels, or influencers—outperforms the volume and engagement of verified, pro-climate content on major social media platforms like Facebook.¹³ In one striking example, Avaaz found that during COP26 in 2021, Facebook failed to label 88 per cent of climate-denying posts as misinformation, content which reached approximately 6.9 million users.¹⁴

Today, the proliferation of disinformation extends across platforms, as influencers and public commentators like Jordan Peterson leverage their academic credibility to garner massive online followings, and advance climate mis- and disinformation online. With online disinformation rising in an online ecosystem wholly unprepared—and unwilling—to tackle it, the resulting loss of trust in climate science makes international cooperation on climate change far more complex and urgent.¹⁵

The Move to Climate Delay

As publics around the world have increasingly come to accept the gravity of the anthropogenic nature of climate change, polluting industries and net exporters of fossil fuels have moved away from tactics of denial, to tactics of *delay*—ascribing responsibility elsewhere or distracting the public from the impact of climate change and the fossil fuel industry. These delay efforts often frame extractive practices as “green,” and appeal to free market logic and fiscal conservatism—all while speaking the language of individual liberty.¹⁶ In particular, industry actors often link threats to the fossil fuel industry to assaults on individualism and private interest, associating individual freedom with the flourishing of the market.¹⁷

Delayism can manifest in stakeholders' attempts to shift the responsibility of climate action elsewhere by pushing the idea that the impacts of climate change are inevitable, or promoting solutions that lack transformative power. By these logics, climate denial can be said to be “implicatory,” as the issue is less the denial of information, but instead “the failure to integrate this knowledge into everyday life or to transform it into social action.”¹⁸ Thus individuals living through the climate crisis may suffer the “absurdity of the double life,” where they may be aware of the threat of climate change while also being numb to it—and thus may not question their carbon-intensive lifestyles.¹⁹

The shift from denial to delay is ultimately shaped by disinformation narratives pushed by fossil fuel corporations and climate disinformation actors, and sustained by a public demand informed by a complex combination of personal, economic, and social interests.



SECTION II

HISTORIES OF CANADIAN CLIMATE DISCOURSES

Canadian climate discourse reflects the country’s unique historical, cultural, political, and economic context, and is significantly shaped by the oil and gas industry’s competing priorities. More concretely, the fossil fuel industry in Canada is tied to longstanding petro-nationalist and extractivist tropes—tropes that promote extractivism as a public good, and emphasize the ownership and development of oil and gas as a central part of Canadian identity.²⁰ Within the context of the politics of reconciliation, however, these narratives increasingly include Indigenous support (often framed in terms of “economic reconciliation”).

Major oil and gas actors, such as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), play a key role in propagating and maintaining these pro-oil narratives in the country.²¹ As a result of concerted efforts like these, the fossil fuel industry in Canada is centrally intertwined with the imagery of the Canadian nation—better known as Canadian “petroculture”—which is steeped in the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of nation-building.²²

History and Development of Canadian Petroculture

Petroculture refers to the ways that oil dependence has influenced not just modern economies—which have long been shaped by a reliance on “fossil capital”—but also citizens’ political and cultural lives.²³ Western industrialization and imperialism were built on, and continue to rely on, fossil fuels: as Wilson, Szeman, and Carlson put it, “oil has made us who and what we are, shaping our existence close at hand while narrating us into networks of power and commerce far, far away.”²⁴

Today, Canadian petroculture is formed around the entitlement to extractivism and

“extractive populism.” The rhetorical sleight of hand in calling Canadian oil “our oil” bolsters public support for extractivism and turns oil into a political right and public good.²⁵ This rhetoric gets pushed through more complex frames too: Massie and Jackson discuss how pro-oil and gas Facebook groups position oil as Canada’s “lifeblood” describing it as an “all-encompassing, unavoidable, but benevolent force” central to the Canadian economic core and its nationhood.²⁶ This discourse can evoke “petro-nostalgia” for a prosperous, patriarchal middle class supported by the fossil fuel industry—a lifestyle oriented around white male workers, idealized by cars, suburbs, and the nuclear family.²⁷

Another mainstay of the discourse is the “ethical oil” frame, a rhetoric originally popularized by *Rebel Media* founder Ezra Levant.²⁸ This frame shifts focus away from Canada’s environmental record and toward its human rights record, arguing that the latter makes the tar sands oil produced in Canada a more “ethical” product than that of its competitors with poor human rights policies, namely Saudi Arabia. Such rhetoric preserves not only petro-culture, but the economic ideology that favours it: as Jordan Kinder puts it, the ethical oil framing “explicitly frames oil, and other fossil fuels, as the only realistic energy source now and in the future and, implicitly, neo-liberalism as the only realistic economic mode, in turn relegating the possibilities of economic and energy transition to the realm of fantasy.”²⁹

The ethical oil frame is also linked to the extractive populist frame: age-old ideas of Western superiority merge with Canada’s national identity to position Western oil producers as the arbiters of morality, further reinforcing a neo-colonial relationship. In doing so, the “ethical oil” frame seeks to focus on the politics of oil production rather than production itself, while simultaneously rationalizing the continuation of extractivism in Canada. In this way, the “ethical oil” and “our oil” framings reinforce each other.

In Canada, fossil fuel industries have been a long-standing economic staple and symbolic force in Canada.³⁰ It is no surprise then that industry actors have taken advantage of the tight link between oil and Canada’s national prosperity to benefit in times of economic crisis—including through Canada’s affordability crisis, one of the foremost political issues in the Canadian public interest of late.³¹ In recent years, we have seen sweeping attacks on initiatives like the carbon tax and other green measures, most rooted in the premise that they are economically unviable, and even injurious, to the average Canadian. By tying economic security and affordability to the extractive state, Canadian petroculture narratives, which serve as narratives of climate delay, have more bite.

Identities within Petrocultures

New narrative fronts are emerging beyond economic security, however: the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has warned that “environmentalism has gradually become enmeshed in broader identity and grievance politics and emerged as a vital new front in the culture wars.”³² Increasingly, climate obstructionists seek to cast climate action as posing a threat to certain cultures, ideologies, and ways of life, particularly those reliant on the fossil



fuel industry, like workers in Alberta for example.³³ Set up this way, an attack on fossil fuels becomes an attack on identity—and a transition away from fossil fuels and existential threat.

In the Canadian context, far-right groups draw on attachments to Canadian nationalism and “construct a momentary and seemingly unified imaginary about their victimization by the nation state”—in this way, these “enemy imaginaries” allow far-right anti-climate actors to position themselves as both the victim and defender of the nation-state.³⁴ The construction of these enemy imaginaries utilizes “identity propaganda,” weaponizing marked differences between individuals based on intersecting structures of power, including race, class, and gender to “maintain existing hegemonic social orders and/or undermine challenges to extant political power.”³⁵ Notably, the weaponization of identity politics in climate disinformation in Canada is marked by unique regional tensions and relations with Indigenous communities.

The ease of spreading these salient, identity-based climate delay narratives online deepens their impact, especially considering that disinformation at large typically draws on aspects of identity to elicit emotional reactions, establish collectivity, and generate loyalty.³⁶ More specifically, however, the link between fossil fuels and threats to identity may deepen the threat of disinformation, as research shows that the greater the desire to resist change—both social and environmental—the more incentive there is to believe ideologically-driven disinformation campaigns.³⁷

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Provincial and regional affiliations serve as key markers of identity in Canada. A regional political culture has formed in carbon-producing and fossil fuel-reliant provinces—namely, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia—around autonomy over extractivism for economic prosperity.³⁸ This regional political culture is further complicated by federalism: although the federal government is responsible for environmental policy, it requires high levels of coordination with provinces who hold jurisdiction over natural resources.³⁹ Consequently, conflict between federal environment policy and regional or provincial autonomy over fossil fuel relations can serve to harden those regional identities.

These regional identities, and the corporate entities they protect, play on themes of isolationism, a framing that has spurred regional grassroots support for the fossil fuel industry. This rhetoric is double sided, however, as it “allows for petroculture as a part of Canadian cultural identity to be simultaneously both dominant and marginalized,” which ultimately raises barriers toward inter-governmental climate action.⁴⁰

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CANADIAN PETROCULTURE

Climate disinformation can also serve to further support longstanding legacies of colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism. Over centuries, Canada’s settler population established institutions and ideologies around the principle of *terra nullius*—translated from Latin as “land belonging to no one”—using it to claim territory despite the existence and livelihood of Indigenous peoples on the land. The shadow of the colonial past continues to loom over climate disinformation discourse today, with actors pushing a rhetoric of “Indigenous resentment” to position Indigenous groups as hindering economic growth and progress through their claims to land. For instance, Land Back movements and claims, which have been integral to protecting Indigenous land and water rights across Canada, have been blamed for stalling progress on mining, oil and gas, and other projects. The Indigenous resentment rhetoric is fundamentally predicated on the desire to “protect the in-group and its interests as a force independent of out-group prejudice,” all of which is positioned within colonial settler identity.⁴¹

Conversely, Indigenous sovereignty and self-governance interests are also used to leverage wider support for oil and gas projects. The Canadian fossil fuel industry positions continued extraction as beneficial to Indigenous communities, through what is increasingly referred to as “economic reconciliation.”⁴² In this way, “reconciliation gets redefined in narrowly economic terms by the agents of Canada’s fossil economy,” and land and resource extractivism gets positioned as a form of economic self-determination—all despite the fact that the industry and practices are still held firmly within the control of the settler-state.⁴³ Indeed, linking corporatist extractivism as essential to Indigenous self-governance dismisses the distinct rights and entitlements Indigenous Nations and communities have in these projects. This is perhaps why Shane Gunster et al. find little mention of Indigenous groups outside of industry-supporting frames in their study of Canadian oil and gas.⁴⁴



SECTION III

CANADIAN CLIMATE DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

A diverse array of actors are behind the shift from denial to delay within the unique history of Canadian petroculture, and their impact reverberates across the entire political and information ecosystem. In this section, we evaluate key players and interest groups who contribute to narratives of climate delayism and obstructionism in Canada. This includes: 1) fossil fuel industry actors that heavily lobby public officials while “petroturfing” online campaigns; 2) alternative media influencers that shape public discourse; and, 3) political elites with varying public policy agendas.

PR and Astroturfing Campaigns

Major fossil fuel industry actors have sought to eliminate stigma against the public defence of oil and gas extractivism, with a focus on “social media as a space where supporters could envision themselves as a part of a broader political movement.”⁴⁵ For instance, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers’ (CAPP) social media campaign paints the industry as inclusive, family-forward, and one that advocates for everyday citizens.⁴⁶

Corporations frequently adopt online “petroturfing” strategies, creating artificial grass-roots social movement campaigns online to give the appearance that support for fossil fuels arises organically in the public interest.⁴⁷ For example, in March 2020, fears of a “climate lockdown”—a conspiracy theory that the government would implement pandemic-like restrictions on human movement to curb the effects of climate change—began to spread in Canada. It was no surprise that these discourses coincided with right-wing rhetoric about quarantine restrictions and public health measures for the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁸ The

association between the public health measures and climate lockdowns were first spread through social media forums, and only gained traction when major media outlets, like the Guardian, and organizations, like the World Economic Forum, took notice.

Industry Players and Trade Associations

Six large oil and gas companies and one industry group, CAPP, dominate the fossil fuel industry in Canada and are equally powerful in guiding public discourse.⁴⁹ Their campaigns often champion greenwashing buzzwords like “net-zero,” and highlight how their “green initiatives” and “clean oil and gas” will work toward climate activism while sustaining Canadian jobs and the economy.⁵⁰

Consistent with the industry at large, Canadian oil and gas actors have shifted from climate denial to tactics of deceit and delay. Where corporations once claimed that “uncertainty exists” around the realities and impact of climate change, these very same actors have developed new rhetorical tactics in line with the times.⁵¹ Accepting the basic tenets of climate change and the need for decarbonization, they position oil and gas as central to energy security and the transition toward green technology.⁵² A recent study from *Re.Climate* showed that this strategy is having an impact, with many Canadians indicating strong support for energy transition while simultaneously viewing the continued production of oil and gas as a necessary part of Canada’s energy future.⁵³

Indigenous Interest Groups

Indigenous communities’ participation in the oil and gas industry represent diverse interests that can be both complementary or competing. This is, in part, because Indigenous communities have varying interpretations of what economic self-determination should look like in the 21st century.⁵⁴ Take, for example, a group like the First Nations LNG Alliance, which emerged to represent new players in the resource industry. Likewise, since May of 2020, the Indigenous Resource Network has “provide[d] a platform for Indigenous workers, business owners and leaders who support Indigenous engagement in the resource sector.”⁵⁵ Although the latter group’s messaging stresses the necessity of “environmentally responsible projects that have the consent and involvement of the communities most affected,” they are also against a federal emissions cap.

The question of economic reconciliation and self-governance between Indigenous communities and the settler colonial state is complex, especially when positioned in the context of the oil and gas industry and its economic potential in Canada. Evidently, there is no one apparent narrative nor solution to prescribe Indigenous relationships with the fossil fuel industry and with the colonial state.



Alternative Media and Online Influencers

Non-industry actors like conservative and right-wing media news outlets also contribute to the amplification of climate delayism in Canada. These news outlets, such as Rebel News, True North, and the Post Millennial, frame climate change as a socio-political, rather than environmental, issue and frequently politicize climate change science or solutions to delay climate action.⁵⁶ These alternative media platforms often feature prominent public figures, many of whom have or are gaining massive online followings. Influencers like Jordan Peterson, who boasts over 8.5 million followers on YouTube, circulate climate denial and delay narratives on social media, exercising substantial influence over public discourse around the climate crisis.⁵⁷ Likewise, Ezra Levant, media personality and author of the book “Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada’s Oil Sands,” has been central to laying the foundation for the conservative defence of Canadian ethical extractivism.

Alternative media influencers like Peterson and Levant have increasingly integrated climate delay narratives into their social and political platforms. They have in turn led a populist charge against legacy media, calling it a purveyor of “misinformation” and associating it with “political elites.”⁵⁸ These narratives characterize climate action as coming from an elite class of hypocritical politicians, and ultimately sow greater discord and polarization on the topic.

Political Systems and Politicians

In some ways, the Canadian partisan landscape enables narratives of climate delayism. While the Canadian Conservative Party is unlikely to explicitly deny climate change and its anthropogenic origins, they mobilize narratives that focus on environmental, social, and economic issues to justify inaction. There are, however, shifting political ideologies in the party: former federal Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole, for example, put a green spin on the party when he ran against Trudeau in the 2021 election, while current leader Pierre Poilievre strongly opposes climate policies like the consumer carbon tax and other clean fuel regulations.

The federal Liberal Party is consistently criticized for not prioritizing sustainable and renewable projects, but also faces mounting pressure by opposition parties and the public to support the oil and gas industry. Despite this, the Liberals are less likely to engage directly with climate obstructionist speech, and more likely to advance neoliberal economic principles that justify continued investment in oil and gas. The NDP and Green Party establish much more progressive environmental party platforms that are largely central to their established ideologies.

Approaches to climate action differ across the provinces. In British Columbia, West Coast Environmental Law is leading a class action lawsuit against “Big Oil,” attempting to enlist British Columbia municipalities as financial backers.⁵⁹ In fact, the opposite has happened, as the Quebec provincial government is facing lawsuits for rejecting fossil fuel projects under a provision (previously the North American Free Trade Agreement).⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the Alberta government has taken a militant pro-oil and gas stance. Under Jason Kenney, Alberta launched an “energy war room” tasked with defending the province’s natural resource industry from critics. The \$30-million dollar Canadian Energy Centre spews climate propaganda emphasizing the necessity of Canada’s oil and gas, as well as the industry’s leadership on green technology, First Nations governance, and emissions reductions. They also emphasize the job losses resulting from policies advancing a “just transition” away from fossil fuels.⁶¹ Current Alberta Premier Danielle Smith has continued this tack, advocating for “aggressively advancing emission reducing technologies in Alberta...while simultaneously increasing export of LNG.”⁶²



SECTION IV

SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

How do Canadians experience and respond to the various social, political, and economic factors outlined above? Despite the fact that social media platforms enable the Canadian fossil fuel industry to amplify climate change disinformation and delay narratives, the salience of these narratives remains understudied. In this study, we examined how climate disinformation requires buy-in, where individuals choose to accept the premise of the disinformation being conveyed and integrate it in their daily processes, beliefs and cultural frames.⁶³ These delay narratives take many forms. For one, the Canadian public understanding of climate change is intertwined with considerations of identity politics, including regionalism and Indigenous politics. Current anxieties related to economic stability also shape how climate change narratives are presented and impact the Canadian public.

Given that social media users often share information based on “emotional evocativeness, informational value, and importance/impact” rather than accuracy, climate and fossil fuel industry actors influence climate buy-in and generate demand for climate disinformation by driving affectively-charged narratives about the personal implications of climate information.⁶⁴

Using a survey analysis, this study evaluates how climate change delay narratives are understood by Canadians; how public demand and preferences for climate solutions are shaped by perceptions of government and corporate action; and how Canadians understand their own personal climate impact and capacity for individual action. We also explored the demand for these narratives by surveying how other factors, including economic well-being impact perceptions of climate change.

Methods

This report took a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis to examine the spread of five climate delay narratives and Canadians' susceptibility to them.⁶⁵ While researchers have identified dominant climate delay narratives, the Canadian public's attitudes toward them remain understudied. We hope this novel dataset will contribute toward developing a more comprehensive understanding of Canadians' engagement with climate delay narratives.

For the quantitative analysis, we surveyed approximately 2,000 Canadians. A key focus of the survey were questions about four established global climate delay narratives, derived from the monitoring done by the Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) network in partnership with the Institute of Strategic Dialogue.⁶⁶ These narratives were identified through an analysis of social media activity over an 18 month period, particularly during the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP26, where they gained significant traction and exposure. Given the historical context of our respondents and the longstanding history of colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism in Canada, we hypothesized a fifth climate delay narrative: "Indigenous involvement," to explore if and how narratives about Indigenous values and participation in the fossil fuel industry informed the debate around climate change and delay. The five key narratives include:

Hypocrisy and Elitism	This narrative bolsters the idea that those propagating climate change solutions and action are elitist (rich and powerful), hypocritical (show contradictions in personal consumption and values) and thus illegitimate (negotiations such as COP26 should be discounted).
Absolutionism	This narrative absolves a given country from climate action by comparing it to the outsized impact and responsibility of other countries, provinces or groups.
Unreliable renewables and ineffective electric vehicles⁶⁷	This narrative questions the viability and effectiveness of renewable energy and electric vehicles.
"Ethical" oil	This narrative justifies extraction by promoting Canada's oil as more "ethical" than oil produced in countries with poor environmental and human rights frameworks. It ultimately positions environmental extraction as a moral, national exercise. In Canada, the frame of "ethical oil" often works in tandem with other delay tactics including "absolutionism."
Indigenous involvement	This narrative positions Indigenous participation in fossil fuel extraction as a form of economic liberation and reconciliation.

The survey enabled us to assess respondents' susceptibility to these claims, including their likelihood to agree with news articles promoting these narratives. The survey also investigated the levels of responsibility attributed to government, corporate, and individual actors. It presented questions about attitudes toward personal impact as a result of climate change, both presently and in the future. It also assessed whether economic insecurity influences Canadians' attitudes toward climate change impact, urgency, and mitigation. This framing allowed us to examine perceptions of economic insecurity, carbon pricing, and ideological variation concerning climate solutions, particularly about investments in renewable technologies. Lastly, we presented survey questions that evaluated the political landscape and connections between partisan identification and attitudes toward climate change narratives.⁶⁸

Findings and Analysis

KEY FINDINGS

We identified significant levels of agreement with the five established climate change delay narratives, demonstrating both supply and demand. Respondents were more likely to endorse corporate and government responsibility for climate action over individual action. Interestingly, while most respondents (74%) agreed that climate change is real, less than half believed they are currently being impacted by climate change. We identified this major discrepancy as an “impact gap” that describes how individuals often associate the realities and consequences of climate change with major disaster events, rather than everyday changes. On the issue of economic stability, respondents adopted competing cognitive framing related to climate change: while acknowledging the harms of oil and gas, this industry is still associated with both individual economic stability and the country's well-being. This might explain why respondents were particularly adverse to carbon taxation, as it is more closely associated with direct personal impact. Lastly, climate skepticism was evident across the partisan landscape, and is denoted through varying narratives.

Impact Gap: Most Canadians believe in climate change, yet less than half believe they are currently impacted by climate change.

Narrative Analysis

HYPOCRISY AND ELITISM

The hypocrisy and elitism narrative focuses on how political elites and government officials advocate for climate change while contradicting their endorsement by their personal consumption patterns and behaviours. While hypocrisy in politics is not new, Gunster and Paterson argue that conservatives in particular employ emotionally-charged rhetoric to highlight lifestyle and institutional hypocrisy as part of anti-climate change discourse. In ascribing a negative moral character to their political opponents they simultaneously instill greater institutional

distrust in climate action.⁶⁹ These narratives ultimately work to delay climate action and policy by discrediting and delegitimizing those proposing solutions. In Canada, legacy and alternative media often highlight how politicians advocate for climate change action while simultaneously engaging in actions that harm the environment.⁷⁰

In the survey, there was an overall level of agreement with the hypocrisy and elitism narrative, *with 67% of respondents agreeing with a statement that climate delegates often use their wealth to partake in individual actions that contribute to the continuation of the climate crisis, such as taking private jets to the COP27 conference.* Survey respondents shown this narrative also perceived Canada as having a slightly slower energy transition. A perception of elitism and hypocrisy also can generate discontent in governmental action toward climate change policies, and foment distrust of politicians' sincerity.

ABSOLUTIONISM

Absolutionist narratives seek to absolve a given region from climate action by comparing it to the outsized impact and responsibility of other countries, provinces or groups. In doing so, these narratives attempt to abdicate responsibility for climate action by shifting the burden of responsibility to other nations or groups. In Canada, this narrative highlights how certain nations, such as China and Russia, are not adequately held accountable for their disproportionate extractivism and pollution—and seeks to redirect responsibility away from Canada.⁷¹ This narrative focuses on blame avoidance and passing the buck to alleviate domestic criticisms of extractivist activities. The re-direction of blame through this narrative to other international actors seems to have a shorter span of influence as *53% of all respondents still believed that the governments should be the ones responsible to address climate change instead of international actors.* In our survey, respondents indicated their belief that Canada's energy transition is slow. However, respondents exposed to the absolutism framework perceived Canada's energy transition to be faster than the control group, which perceived a much slower transition.

UNRELIABLE RENEWABLES AND INEFFECTIVE EVS

*The “unreliable renewable” narrative draws on common climate-skepticism and delayism tropes which encourage caution and highlight the potential risks in the transition to renewable resources, and in particular dramatize the perceived unreliability of non-fossil fuel resources in sustaining everyday energy use.*⁷² In Canada, this rhetoric is used to portray wind and solar power as threatening Canadian energy security due to its potential scarcity and high cost.⁷³

Electric vehicles (EVs), as an alternative to replace gas or diesel options, have also come under attack, with critics framing them as elitist and inaccessible to everyday Canadians.⁷⁴ As a result, climate action projects related to EV infrastructures are often saturated with discourses around their ineffectiveness, unreliability, and costliness, as well as around the familiar refrain that renewables are “just not there yet.” In our survey findings, *this narrative*

had 41% of respondents agreeing to the unreliable renewables narrative. Similarly, respondents who agreed with this narrative comparatively were more likely to identify Canada's energy transition as slightly slower, as compared to respondents who did not agree with the unreliable renewable narrative.

ETHICAL OIL

As previously discussed, the “ethical oil” narrative presents a justification for extractivism by promoting Canada's oil as more ethical than oil produced in countries with poor environmental and human rights frameworks. The majority of respondents ranked Canada's oil and gas industry as the most ethical when compared with the United States, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China. Our survey results suggest that the “ethical oil” narrative was effective in influencing the Canadian public opinion, *carrying around 54% of support among responses.* This perception dominated across the spectrum of employment sectors in Canada, as more than 80% of respondents have never worked in the oil, energy or gas industries, or knew someone who works in these industries. This result further illustrates that respondents do not need first hand experience or relational closeness to the oil and gas industry to have a strong perception that Canada sets an example for ethical oil practices.

INDIGENOUS SUPPORT

This narrative positions Indigenous participation in fossil fuel extraction as a form of economic liberation and reconciliation. Climate delay narratives and disinformation can make use of strategic Indigenous identity framing, such as the pursuit of economic empowerment and resource autonomy through the oil industry, in order to garner support for continued oil extractivism.⁷⁵ This narrative reinforces climate delayism by furthering unfounded assumptions about industry's positive economic and political benefits. Our survey indicated *40% of respondents agreed that the oil and gas industry empowers Indigenous communities through economic benefits and by providing job opportunities.* While this demonstrates support for the narrative of Indigenous empowerment, it also exemplifies the co-optation of Indigenous values and principles to gain wider support for oil and gas.

Responsibility for Climate Action

On average, survey respondents agreed that individual responsibility and action must be taken to address the climate crisis. However, respondents were more likely to prefer climate action at the government or corporate level, as compared to the individual level. At the corporate level, individuals favoured the use of energy-efficient technology by corporations. A majority somewhat or strongly agreed that governments should take climate change actions, except for taxing carbon, which had 45% agreement with the policy. This endorsement of government action is quite encouraging given that shared opposition to government

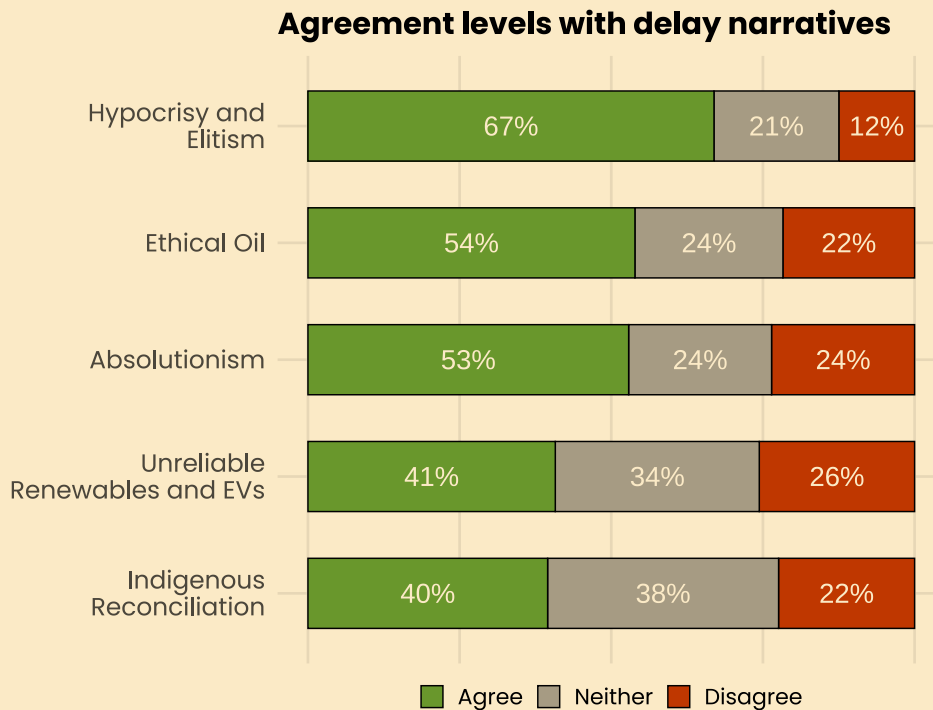


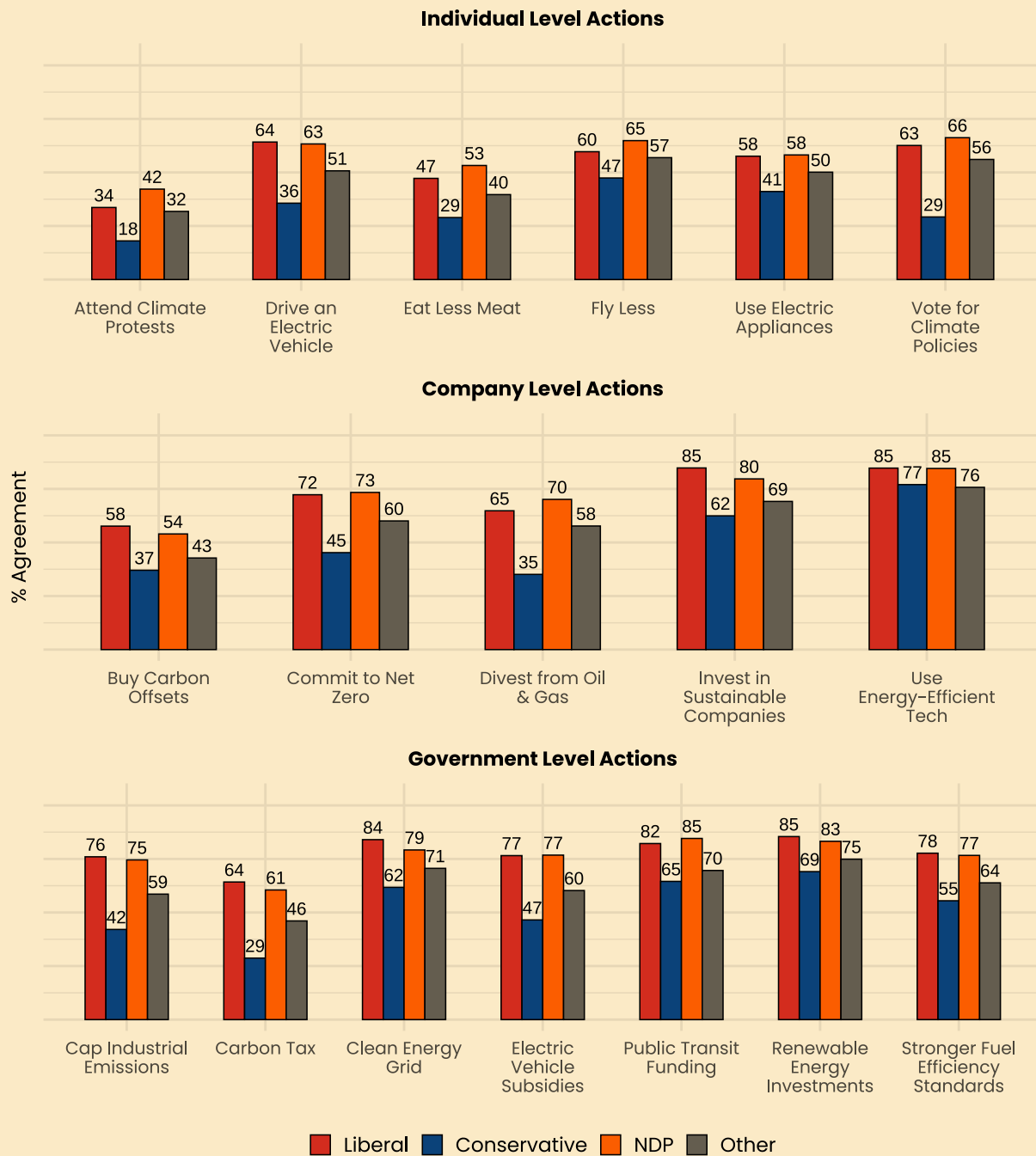
Figure 2: Survey findings of five major climate delay narratives in Canada.

regulatory efforts is the “glue” between various actors across the network of climate obstruction who often have differing or even competing motivations and claims.⁷⁶

The Climate Impact Gap: Assessing Connections Between Personal and Future Impact Together

PERSONAL IMPACT

While most respondents agree that climate change is real, only half agreed that they have been personally impacted by climate change. Respondents were more likely to believe that they will be impacted by climate change in the future, or that other people are more likely to be impacted than they currently are, echoing established patterns of perception around climate change which abstract justice and action away from the present moment. We suggest that respondents’ limited personal experience with the impact of climate change challenges, and perhaps delays, perception of urgency and individual responsibility. In other words, though individuals are aware of the climate crisis, because they purport not to feel the current impact of climate change, they may not feel an urgency to change their personal behaviour to address it.



Values are the weighted percent agreement level for each major party (and all others). Original question phrasing includes range of 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'.

Figure 3: Support for Individual, Company and Government Action

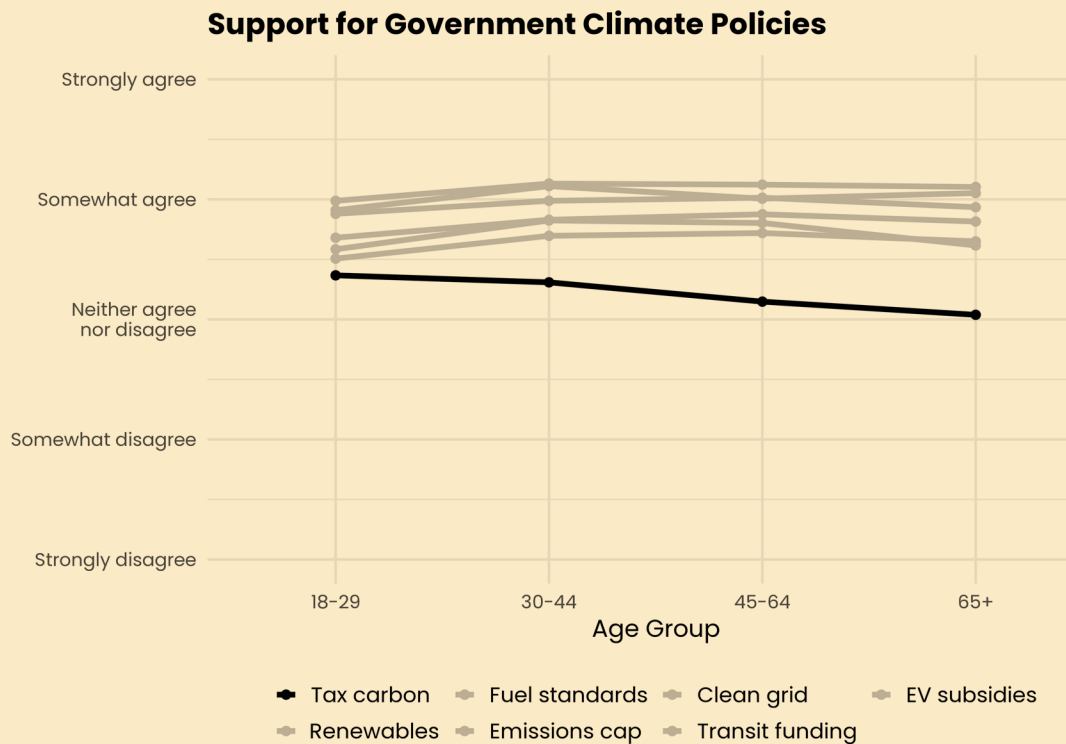


Figure 4: Support for Government Climate Action.

FUTURE IMPACT

Respondents were more likely to believe that they will be impacted by climate change in the future, than they are currently. These individuals subsequently are more agreeable to climate solutions at the individual, corporate, and government level. In contrast, individuals who believed they would not be impacted by climate change in the future were more likely to disagree with climate solutions. In particular, these individuals showed a proportionally larger level of strong disagreement toward corporate action and government action.

THE “IMPACT GAP” POPULATIONS

In contrast, a small subset of respondents (9%) believed that they do not currently feel the impact of climate change, nor anticipate that they will feel its impact in the future. As compared to all other population samples, this subset notably demonstrated exceedingly high degrees of strong disagreement toward any form of individual action. Endorsement of corporate and government climate action was also incredibly low as compared to other populations.

While significantly minimal, those who believed in the existence of climate change *yet did not* believe they will feel the impact of climate change currently *or* in the future

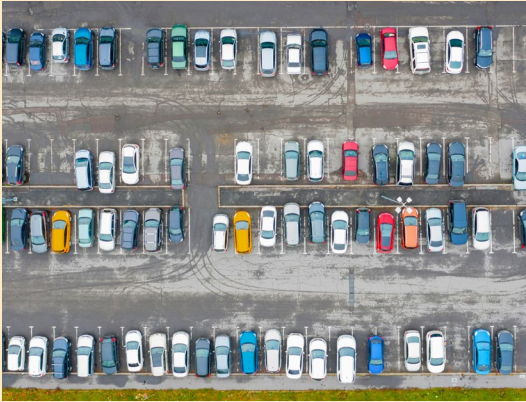
demonstrates the existence of an “impact gap.” While scholars often relate the gap between climate belief and inaction to factors like anxiety or the overwhelming realities of climate change, this margin of individuals represents the “impact gap” in Canada: individuals who believe in the anthropogenic nature of climate change, yet have little grasp on what climate impact on their daily lives may resemble.⁷⁷ This inability to relate the climate crisis to everyday life may lead individuals toward climate inaction. As stated, individuals are more likely to believe that communities elsewhere are more likely to be impacted by climate change than themselves.

This “impact gap” may be partially due to a sensationalist expectation of climate change as major disasters or events that occur outside of their communities. For example, in BC, individuals may not necessarily attribute worsening health or changing temperature conditions to climate change as wildfires are understood as seasonal or incidental, rather than as a result of climate change. In this way, climate change narratives that obfuscate the links between environmental, socio-political, or economic factors can widen the “impact gap” by positioning adverse events as distinct from climate change.

In focusing on this “impact gap” population—individuals who do not believe climate change will impact them now or in the future—it is clear that individuals are more reluctant to change their individual behaviour in a way that impacts immediate personal circumstance. On the other hand, this group may feel that corporate and government climate actions will have less direct cost to individuals and their economic well-being. Given these findings, climate disinformation narratives that frame fossil industry activities through the lens of their impact on individuals may shape individuals’ perception of impact.

Economic Well-being and Economic Framing of Climate Solutions

Environmental goals are often pitted against other economic, social, and political goals, where the cost of investment in renewable energy or other climate solutions is evaluated against the “cost of inaction.” As a result, “environmental values and goals frequently are subsidiary...when people are asked to rank the importance of climate change against that of other problems or concerns: they assign climate change low importance.”⁷⁸ Disinformation narratives that centre economic insecurity suggest that inflation, the high cost of living, and the expensive yet unreliable alternatives such as renewable energies and electric vehicles may lead individuals to reject climate action. To test the salience of this narrative in Canada, survey respondents were asked to evaluate the state of their economic security and well-being, linked to climate change preferences. 41% of individuals stated that they are “getting along” the same this year as compared to the last. Around 38% of individuals stated that they are financially worse off than last year. In relation to climate change, most felt it was likely that climate change will impact their economic stability in general. Despite variations in economic well-being, individuals’ preferences for climate solutions, across the individual,



government, and corporate level, remained relatively stable. More than half indicated support for imposing emissions caps on the oil and gas industry.

Because individuals tend to assess climate solutions based on their immediate tangible impact to their economic well-being, they often conceive of climate change as intangible, lofty, remote, and removed from their everyday life. Climate delay narratives often capitalize on economic hardship by making salient the “costliness” and “unreliable” nature of a renewable transition.

Other commonly associated narratives exploited by disinformation actors include the lack of resilience around renewable energy infrastructure or the unreliable and costly nature of electric vehicles specifically. Despite these narratives, almost all survey respondents are still likely to support investment in renewables as a form of government action, as opposed to alternatives such as carbon tax. This underpins how individuals may be skeptical of investing in renewable energies because of narratives around infrastructural and economic insecurity, yet still prefer exploration of these alternatives over contesting the current fossil fuel industry which may be perceived to more directly undermine personal economic well-being.

Climate delay narratives and tactics illustrate disinformation as a “grey area” where facts are often leveraged to elicit emotional reactions that directly impact attitudes toward climate action. Tech industry solutions such as fact-checking are therefore always partial.

Carbon Taxing

Carbon taxing has been increasingly politicized in recent years. Perhaps unsurprisingly, individuals showed a relatively higher level of disagreement with carbon taxation compared to any other government solution. As established, respondents are largely supportive of climate action, though were less enthusiastic toward actions at the structural level. Carbon pricing is a perfect example of this effect. While carbon pricing is often hailed as the “most cost-effective” way to reduce emissions by economists, it is a politically unpopular solution.⁷⁹ First introduced in Canada at a national level in 2018, carbon pricing has lost support over

the years as politicians and media figures have demonized it for its association with high inflation and interest rates.

Carbon pricing and its complex benefit model has become a potent target for Conservative opposition parties. Partisanship overwhelmingly predicts individuals' feelings toward carbon pricing, much more than understanding of its economic impact.⁸⁰ In our survey, individuals who were Conservative-partisan were **over three times more likely** to be against carbon pricing than Liberal or NDP partisans. While the Conservative party has previously attempted to embrace a form of carbon pricing,⁸¹ under Poilievre, they have largely reverted back to opposing carbon taxation and have aggressively advanced an “axe the tax campaign.” The political messaging around carbon taxation could perhaps explain the notable outlier in our survey—that carbon pricing bucks the general trend of strong support when it comes to government-led climate policies.

While survey respondents were largely pro-climate action, particularly at the government and corporate level, our analysis demonstrates that there is a hesitancy toward climate solutions that would contest the economic stability of a carbon economy. This is indicated by a comparatively high degree of strong disagreement toward solutions that impose costs on the fossil fuel industry, as compared to actions that do not.⁸² Individuals may be hesitant about measures that shift the burden to the corporate or government level due to the potential trickle-down effects on consumers and citizens—like higher gas prices due to carbon taxation or grocery prices due to costlier transportation of goods and produce.⁸³ Because of the perceived link between a thriving fossil fuel industry and personal economic and financial well-being, it is no surprise that individuals exercise caution toward immediate action against the existing fossil fuel industry.

Partisanship Alignment with Climate Obstructionist Narratives

Across the partisan landscape in Canada, narratives fuelling “eco-anxiety”—a term used to characterize distress and existential fears about the climate crisis—and skepticism toward particular climate solutions abound. When survey respondents were asked about their emotional reactions to climate change, close to half felt worried, almost a third felt helpless, and less than 6% felt empowered. Survey respondents were also asked about their partisan preferences at the federal level, between the Conservative Party, Liberal Party, NDP, Green Party, Bloc Québécois, and People's Party.⁸⁴ Variance in party preference was used to assess differences in preference for climate solutions as well as the influence of climate change disinformation narratives.

Differentiation in partisanship preference can also be understood through a ‘backward-versus forward-looking’ climate change perspective.⁸⁵ Backward-looking perspectives focus on the existing financial investment into the fossil fuel industry, that would support preference for a reliable fossil fuel industry over unknown future investments.⁸⁶ Such perspectives

are also rooted in the Canadian nationalistic rhetoric about “our oil”: respondents at large were more likely to prefer alternative climate solutions ahead of divestment from the oil and gas industry, and were more likely to believe that oil pipelines are a good investment as a form of climate solution. Climate delay narratives that propagate economic incentives of extractive practices as “green” solutions are very convincing in Canada.

Nostalgia of Canada’s past (petro)identity echoes traditional values of the Conservative Party, which has long been the guardian of political tradition and cautious toward radical forms of change. In evaluating climate solutions, Conservative-partisan respondents were more likely than Liberal or NDP-partisans to believe that the federal government should support the energy sector, including in building oil pipelines. Conservative-partisan respondents are much more likely to support energy-efficient technologies (77%), than to support buying carbon offsets and divesting from the oil and gas industry as a form of corporate climate action. This reflects traditional conservative opposition to regulation more broadly.⁸⁷ While the Conservative Party positions itself as open to innovation, it frequently uses a technocratic lens to preserve the tradition of a carbon economy. In Canada, the Conservative Party has vehemently pushed back against the carbon tax and instead embraced alternative technologies—citing “technology, not taxes.”⁸⁸ In contrast, forward-looking perspectives to climate change narratives draw upon consumer eco-anxiety, fears of technological and economic instability, and “impractical” investments. Here, the economic insecurity framing is used in delay narratives in tandem with eco-anxiety to spur paralysis and inaction.⁸⁹

Policy Directions

Given the prevalence of climate delay narratives and climate obstruction more broadly around the world, including in Canada, robust accountability mechanisms are needed to keep platform companies from spreading and profiting from known climate disinformation and delay. Given platform companies reluctance—and recently, flat out refusal to deal with these problems despite our collective futures being at stake—regulation is needed to at least target the structural dimensions of climate obstruction online. The future of online harms legislation is ambiguous in Canada, but governments around the world have taken measures to address climate mis- and disinformation specifically, including mandating transparency and targeting the advertising model by banning “greenwashing” claims. For instance, both the European Union and United Kingdom have outlawed misleading environmental claims that pose serious implications for technology companies.⁹⁰ Policymakers cannot assess the environmental impacts without adequate transparency from technology platforms about the content, data and impact on lived communities. Human rights frameworks are needed to integrate and centre the real world consequences of not just extractive technological processes but also of climate mis- and disinformation, especially as climate obstruction has a direct impediment on both policy and the lives of those most adversely impacted by the climate crisis.

Conclusion

Climate action globally and in Canada faces numerous barriers arising from social, economic, and political forces. It is vital, then, to both recognize and understand the nuanced ways in which resistance to climate change action is reproduced and enabled through our information ecosystem. While the outright denial of climate change and its effects tends to gain the attention of sensational mass and social media, this report has investigated a more subtle, but equally destructive form of climate inaction and skepticism: climate obstruction through delayism.

Our analysis first explained the movement from denial to delay and offered a clear typification of the key components of the denialist movement. We then analyzed the considerations of delay unique to Canada, including the history of oil and gas, petroculture, regionalism, and economic development in the context of Indigenous empowerment and reconciliation. Finally, we provided an overview of the various key actors involved in the Canadian information ecosystem, and explained how they employ various strategies to spread climate delayism narratives and sow distrust in climate action.

The Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy's survey, which complements the above context, has shed light on previously understudied areas, notably how climate change is perceived and acted upon by the public who are exposed to known climate delay narratives. This primary data provided fascinating insights into several attending areas, including why individuals simultaneously believe in climate change but reject certain types of action, and how widely the Canadian public embraces certain climate delay narratives. While it is clear that platforms have failed to stop the spread of mis- and disinformation, it is crucial to understand that climate delayism is not just a social media problem: it operates through a complex and historically situated network of powerful actors, and vested political and economic interests. As the window for effective climate action shrinks, it will be essential to pursue multifaceted climate action and policy directives that are able to contend with the nuanced but highly destructive effects of climate delay, and climate obstruction more broadly.

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