

Why is B.C.'s carbon tax suddenly so toxic?

By Rochelle Baker | Analysis, Politics | April 11th 2024



Federal Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre speaking at a rally in Edmonton on March 27. Photo by: Megan Albu / National Observer

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B.C.'s carbon tax has been on the books for more than 15 years and largely flew under the radar of public outrage.

But it is rapidly turning to political poison as populist politicians attack, using the affordability crisis to their advantage and capitalizing on public misconceptions, climate experts say.

The carbon tax was crafted and championed by the business-friendly BC Liberals during the 2008 recession, [despite unease from the private sector](#). The province went on to [lead economic growth over the next decade](#), while also managing to reduce fuel use and emissions from people's personal vehicles. The climate policy is widely lauded as a successful case study [for carbon pricing](#).

Yet, B.C. residents are increasingly buying into the federal Conservative Party's successful campaign that [recycles the populist argument](#) falsely claiming that carbon taxes — not a post-pandemic spike in global inflation — are escalating the costs of food, housing and heating that working families are struggling to afford, said Kathryn Harrison, a political science professor at the University of British Columbia.

Affordability, tied to housing in B.C., remains the top political concern, along with health care across the country, Harrison noted.

Frustration with the cost of living means Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre's current "axe the tax" campaign at the federal level is making waves provincially, with 56 per cent of British Columbians now supporting the idea, [a recent Leger poll shows](#).

It's also boosting support for the fledgling Conservative Party of BC, which has adopted the rhetoric of its federal counterpart. The provincial Conservatives have now eclipsed the BC United party (formerly, the BC Liberals), which traditionally garnered the support of right-of-centre voters.

The BC Conservatives currently sit second, with 26 per cent of voter support after the NDP with a comfortable lead of 43 per cent. The BCU is trailing at 18 per cent while the BC Greens currently sit at 11 per cent.

The immediate visibility of the carbon tax at the gas pump, compared to rebates which arrive later, makes people skeptical, especially conservative voters, Harrison said. They also tend to overestimate the tax costs and underestimate rebates more than NDP or Liberal voters, she said.

Especially sensitive to tax increases and spikes in the cost of living, Conservative voters are half as likely to view climate change as an important issue compared to other voters, [election polls show](#).

Despite enjoying moderate political support for the carbon tax in the past, the BCU is now ditching any allegiance to the policy championed by former leader Gordon Campbell, who enjoyed widespread support from conservative voters.

Public and political backtracking on the carbon tax is no surprise, said climate policy expert Katya Rhodes at the University of Victoria.

They may be the cheapest, most efficient way to reduce emissions from an economic standpoint but fuel taxes are universally disliked by voters, leaving politicians very skittish about them as a tool to meet climate targets, Rhodes said.

Varying levels of [trust in government](#), political orientation, shared values or identity, education levels, and the rural and urban political divide are factors that contribute to polarization around the carbon tax, [research](#) shows.

The fact that Campbell, who had the unquestioned support of business and conservative voters, was even able to implement the carbon tax during an economic downturn was largely an accident of history, Rhodes said.

“It was quite a fluke, to be honest,” she said.

“British Columbians preferred to have a Liberal government in place that balanced budgets better than the NDP.”

Former NDP leader John Horgan originally coined the “axe the tax” slogan and campaigned against the carbon levy. The party has since backed it and deserves credit for remaining committed to the carbon tax despite its current unpopularity, she said.

“I feel for [Premier] David Eby. He has a really hard job right now.”

The tax is a hard sell because people tend to see it as punitive and unfair at an individual level while buying into messaging from both sides of the political spectrum that other bad actors like urban elites or big industrial polluters aren't paying their fair share, Harrison said.

Rural residents, who already lean conservative, and suburban drivers with long commutes, often equate the carbon tax with higher gas prices. Despite [evidence to the contrary](#), rural people assume they'll pay more with a carbon tax than city dwellers because they must drive greater distances and require bigger vehicles like trucks, Harrison said.

This accounts, [in part, for Poilievre's](#) laser focus on rural communities in B.C. that he believes will be receptive to his "axe the tax" mantra at the expense of the federal and provincial NDP.

Two-thirds of B.C. residents — particularly female, urban and younger voters — consistently identify climate change as a concern. But [perceived pocketbook concerns tend to trump any personal economic sacrifice for the environment](#).

Even while [Canada's worst wildfire](#) season wound down in September, B.C. residents were split down the middle at 39 per cent each about whether they'd take on any extra costs to fight climate change. The remainder surveyed didn't know or didn't answer.

Despite costing more than the climate tax, voters prefer policies that involve climate-action subsidies and incentives, like heat pump rebates, paired with “upstream” regulatory measures that focus on producers or industry, rather than “downstream” measures impacting consumers, Rhodes said.

B.C.’s zero-emissions vehicle sales mandate and rebates, the low carbon fuel standard paired with credits, and clean electricity regulations are less visible to the public, draw much less opposition and can still significantly reduce emissions, she said.

However, increasingly stringent regulations or carbon pricing need to be baked into the design of flexible regulations to ensure emissions reductions occur, she said.

Though less economic than the carbon tax, the higher price tag for “flex regs” is far cheaper than inaction and dealing with the massive mounting costs of climate change, she said.

Harrison agreed, noting voters and politicians alike need to accept that defending the status quo isn’t viable as the planet keeps heating.

“The choice we have is between different futures. Making investments today to have a safer future or not making those investments and having a worse future.”

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