



climate confusion

The introduction of the Federal Government's carbon tax is currently the hot issue in Australian politics. The most recent polls all suggest that the majority of the community does not support the carbon tax. But does this mean they no longer support action on climate change?

Failure to deliver appropriate action on climate change has already been influential in the fall of two Australian prime ministers and many media commentators and political strategists are now predicting the Labor Government's carbon tax could claim another prime-ministerial scalp.

'These polls feed the growing political editorial, opinion and commentary that fill our newspapers,' says Jim Reed, research director at CrosbyTextor. 'No longer are political strategies and the views of voters discussed behind party room doors. They are on the front page for everyone to see, and are ignored at the politicians' peril.'

Reed believes what he calls 'news cycle polling' – the cycle of poll reporting, media comment and public opinion shift – is perhaps best demonstrated by the longer term trends in public sentiment about the government's climate change policies.

But is it even possible to compare attitudes to the carbon tax with attitudes to an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), or the Labor Government's earlier policy, the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS)? What research questions really get to the heart of the public's attitudes to taking action on climate change?

What do the latest polls tell us about the 'plan in front of us'?

A Newspoll conducted on 8–10 July 2011 found that only 30 per cent were personally in favour of the carbon tax, while 60 per cent were against and 10 per cent were undecided.

A Nielsen poll released on 18 July found previous low levels of support for the carbon tax policy had not changed, with 39 per cent backing the package and 52 per cent opposing it.

A JWS Research poll of 3,122 voters in 59 key and marginal seats, conducted by automated polling technology on 13 July, found that 56 per cent of voters said they were unhappy about a carbon tax being introduced and 30 per cent said they were happy, with the remaining 14 per cent saying they 'don't really care'.

A Roy Morgan Research telephone poll conducted on 13–14 July found that 37 per cent supported the carbon tax, 58 per cent (up 5%) of Australian electors opposed it and five per cent couldn't say.

An Essential Poll released on 18 July found that 39 per cent supported the carbon tax, 49 per cent opposed it and 12 per cent were undecided. Interestingly, this compares with 35 per cent who supported the tax, 48 per cent opposed it and 18 per cent were undecided in a poll conducted on immediately before the prime minister

announced the details of the scheme, suggesting some small gain in support once the details were available for scrutiny.

Support for Julia Gillard as prime minister and the Labor Party's primary vote has also plunged. While pollsters aren't typically willing to predict election defeat, several have boldly stated on the record that the Labor Party, and Julia Gillard's leadership in particular, is in serious trouble – with support for the government slumping to new depths in the history of opinion polling.

All of the opinion pollsters agree that there is a strong correlation between political preference and support for the carbon tax. A CSIRO report titled *Australians' views of climate change*, released in March 2011, also found that attitudes to climate change were strongly linked to political preference.

Randall Pearce, who is managing director of Think: Insight and Advice and co-founder, with Phillip Mitchell-Taverner, of the Thermometer Survey, says, 'In Australia, we've had an unrelenting campaign by Tony Abbott to politicise this issue. Virtually nowhere else in the Western world is action on climate change politicised to the same degree as it has been here in Australia. As Ross Garnaut has recently pointed out, conservatives in other countries like the UK and Germany are strong proponents of action on climate change.'

Newspoll CEO Martin O'Shannessy says it is possible to track longer-term trends in public sentiment.

'When Kevin Rudd was flying high, around six in 10 supported the CPRS, the plan that was in front of them at the time. A similar question we asked, that I think is very tied up with the question about the plan, is "would people be prepared to pay more for their energy sources if it would help ameliorate climate change?" Those two questions go together, that is, "do I support the exact plan I've got in front of me" and "would I be prepared to pay more?" and what we find is that both these measures have gone down over time.'

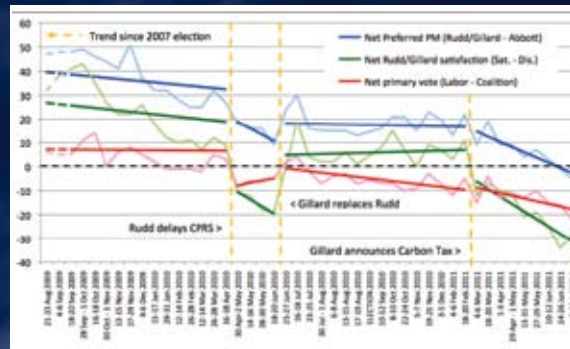
However, O'Shannessy stresses that the polls show these falls in support for specific approaches to action on climate change appear to be related to political leadership.

'There have been a number of falls in support for these propositions and they appear to correlate with the falls in support for the leaders who propose them. The first major fall in support for Kevin Rudd and for his CPRS happened when in November 2009 he started talking down Copenhagen. The next big fall in support for Rudd happened when he said we were not going to have an ETS at all.'

Reed has reached a similar conclusion after analysing Newspoll's preferred leadership and primary vote figures over the past few years.

'The polling "noise" has been removed [in Chart 1] by highlighting the longer-term linear trends associated with voters' preference for prime minister, their satisfaction with the Labor leader and voting intention,' he explains. 'In each case I have used a relative net figure for simplicity; Labor minus the Coalition on primary vote and preferred prime minister, and satisfaction minus dissatisfaction for the Labor leader in isolation.'

'Rudd had already begun to decline on his personal ratings at the start of 2010 as a result of many factors; notably the mining tax and immigration. However, it was the delaying of his CPRS in reaction to public opinion that caused an immediate slump in support in the second of our trend periods.



'Labor turned to Julia Gillard in June 2010. We can see that her personal ratings were stable and positive throughout the third period, but Labor's vote was damaged to the extent that they had to form a minority government with the Greens and independents. The cost of their support was to introduce the carbon tax that Gillard had overtly ruled out.

'The chart now shows Gillard to be in negative territory on all political measures, and the straight line trend is still dropping despite her explaining the detail of the carbon tax.'

Similarly, O'Shannessy says there is a clear correlation between the fall in support for pricing carbon and Gillard being dubbed 'Ju-liar' when she announced that the Labor Party would introduce a 'carbon price' on 24 February, only six months after she campaigned on a 'no carbon tax' platform in the August 2010 election.

Chicken or egg?

When asked whether the public's attitudes to the carbon tax weakened overall support for action on climate change, Michele Levine at Roy Morgan Research says her research shows that concerns about the environment and climate change started to fall away well before the carbon tax.

'Causation is the other way around. Our research shows that the environment was becoming a more and more important issue until the end of 2008, when it started to taper off ("kind of" coinciding with the GFC) and the numbers who believe "concerns about the environment are exaggerated" started to increase.'

The Morgan Poll conducted over 13-14 July found 37 per cent (up 5%) of Australians when asked for their view of global warming believed 'concerns are exaggerated', 46 per cent (down 4% from June 2011) said 'if we don't act now it will be too late' and 14 per cent (down 1%) say 'it is already too late'.

David Stolper at Auspoll, which has conducted research about climate change for the Climate Institute, the Clean Energy Council and WWF, also believes that, along with the loss of bi-partisan support for action on climate change and an unrelenting campaign on talkback radio to discredit the science, the GFC has been key in shifting the focus away from the environment to the economy.

However, Randall Pearce, who is also one of Al Gore's 'Climate Messengers', says the link between the GFC and shifting attitudes to taking action on climate change is not as clear-cut.

He points to the Thermometer Survey that was conducted in September 2008 and updated in February 2009, which found that nine in 10 Australians were resolved to act on climate change in the face of deteriorating economic conditions.

'Support remained strong until at least March 2009,' he says. "'Climategate" at the end of 2009 was certainly a factor.



MICHELE LEVINE (ROY MORGAN)



PETER LEWIS (ESSENTIAL MEDIA)



MARTIN O'SHANNESSEY (NEWSPOLL)



RANDALL PEARCE (THINK INSIGHT & ADVICE)



JIM REED (CROSBY/TEXTOR)



JOHN SCALES (JWS)



DAVE STOLPER (AUSPOLL)

The other factor was that forces who are anti action on climate change rallied in advance of the Copenhagen meeting in late 2009 to ensure that a global agreement would not be struck. That just didn't happen by accident. There are well-organised and monied interests who are out there to change opinion on this issue. Those two things have certainly had an impact on overall willingness to act on climate change.'

He adds, 'When people say support for climate change is dropping, what they're really saying is support for paying a particular price for climate change is dropping because that is what is being asked in surveys.'

O'Shannessy also believes the issue is far more nuanced: 'Given Rudd's fall, Abbott's "license to doubt" and the GFC, the electorate appears to have a remarkable resolve to do something. Support for the CPRS as proposed only fell 15 points – far less than Rudd's own ratings!'

Essential Media Communications director Peter Lewis says that if you take the story back to 2007, when there was about 70 per cent support for the CPRS, the big myth is that people immediately moved from supporting putting a price on carbon to opposing it.

'There was a period throughout 2008 and 2009, when the debate turned into a very technical, mechanical debate about the workings of the market mechanism and people got confused and lost. The number of people who started saying "don't know" increased from around 10 to 15 per cent to around 40 per cent by the end of 2009. It was in this climate of confusion that the negative "great big tax" campaign bit and there was a transfer out of the "don't know" column into the "opposition" column once Abbott was in and that's really set the dynamic. But it wasn't a straight shift from support to opposition.'

The CSIRO, in a review of 22 studies conducted both in Australia and overseas, concluded in the report, titled *Australians' views of climate change*, that fewer people now believe that climate change is attributable to human activity.

However, O'Shannessy says the Australian population's underlying belief that climate change is caused by human behaviour has remained constant over the past four years.

O'Shannessy says the CSIRO report reaches the conclusion that belief in climate change is waning by comparing Newspoll data from 2008 with data from March 2010. It does not canvass the data from more recent polls.

'Without this later data, the analysis covers only the period when we were first given a "license to doubt" by Tony Abbott, who became opposition leader about that time, but no further. We have a number of measures that post-date the data and they show that the proportion who believe in anthropogenic climate change has stabilised at about seven in 10. So, the first and main finding

here was true in March 2010 but the longer trend nearly a year and a half later shows us a stabilisation in the underlying belief numbers at about 70 per cent.'

O'Shannessy says people have moved on from doubting the scientific evidence that climate change is caused by human activity and that the main political debate now centres on which scheme will be most effective.

'People are saying, "the scheme in front of me is flawed and I don't support it" and therefore the related question, which is "are you prepared to pay more?", is getting some Halo negatives. These two numbers go together, whereas the underlying belief numbers are pretty steady. We are getting a bit of a Halo effect, which is pulling the preparedness to act figures down. I think people's readiness to act would be quite high if we had a scheme that people believe will be effective and will actually save the planet. I just don't think it's there yet. Even after one week of explaining the detail, what do you know about how it's going to affect you personally or how it's going to impact on the planet?'

Scales believes that the increasing opposition to a carbon tax is impacting negatively on people's desire to see the government respond to climate change. Scales also believes that 'we are all talking about something that the electorate is becoming largely disinterested in due to it reaching saturation point and taking away focus from the issues people are more concerned about'.

An Essential poll released on 20 June found that 32 per cent agreed that the 'current public campaign against action on climate change in Australia was undermining the credibility of scientists and science research in general' (23 per cent disagreed, 30 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed and 15 per cent didn't know). The most recent Essential poll found that only 50 per cent believed that climate change is caused by human activity while 39 per cent believed 'we are just witnessing a normal fluctuation in the earth's climate'. However, a poll released on 20 July found that 46 per cent say they have become more concerned about the effects of global warming over the last two years, while only 11 per cent are less concerned and 40 per cent say they feel about the same.

All in the wording

When the Lowy Institute released its annual survey [conducted between 30 March and 14 April this year] that concluded 'support for taking tough action on climate change continues to erode', those opposing the Gillard Government's policy celebrated the results. However, some researchers told *Research News* they were outraged when the mainstream media focused on minority viewpoints in headlines, conveniently ignoring the fact the majority of Australians still supported taking action on climate change and that a significant number were still willing to pay for it.

The Lowy Institute survey found that tackling climate change was considered very important by only 46 per cent of Australians and that support for the most aggressive form of action to address global warming slipped five points from last year, with 41 per cent saying global warming is a serious and pressing problem and that we should 'begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs'.

However, Professor Joseph Reser at Griffith University criticised the Lowy Institute study [on the well respected online forum, The Conversation] for including 'poorly worded' questions. Reser argues that the question and response options were

not only 'double-barrelled' but also that they contained multiple and emotional 'button-pressing' matters and language.

Reser goes on to say, 'It is also not surprising that single item and variously framed complex questions, embedded in telephone surveys, addressing political and policy opinions, are somewhat unstable barometers, providing intermittently different pictures and interpretations.'

In the same article, he cites a survey conducted by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility that comprised more than 140 questions and took participants on average 30 to 60 minutes to complete (which would make most commercial market researchers shudder, given the AMSRS Guidelines on Interview Length).

However, Pearce points out that it is possible to go some way towards addressing the complexity of climate change, as he believes he did through the Thermometer Survey, a large mixed mode study into the subject. In the online quantitative survey component, Pearce explains that he and his research colleague, Dr Don Porritt of Taverner Research, created four scenarios that aligned with various parts per million points that Garnaut had identified in his first report.

'Basically, we said there are four paths that Australia could take to address climate change. Internally we called them "business as usual", "getting started", "getting serious" and "going for broke" and each scenario detailed what would be required. We asked participants what changes they would be prepared to accept in their lifetime, what changes they would be prepared to accept in their children's lifetimes, what action Australia would have to take with regards to the international community and what economic changes we would have to embrace and so on. People then chose one of the four scenarios. We then showed them on screen the consequences of their choice and explained "this is what would happen if every Australian chose this pathway in terms of the economy, agriculture and refugee movement" etc. We then asked them, "now that you have seen the consequences of your choice, would you like to change your choice?" What we found was that, overall, a net 15 per cent of the sample increased the level of action they were prepared to take to limit the effects of climate change by either one or two levels. This confirmed our qualitative finding that people have a very fuzzy notion of the consequences of not acting or the benefits of acting. So my gripe is with pollsters and researchers who fall into the trap of reducing something this complex to a single price. That is far too simplistic a way to look at something like climate change, because climate change is something that will have very far reaching effects and isn't something that can be reduced to a simple question about a price we might be willing to pay next week or next year. Politicians, like Abbott, will use that information to oversimplify the issue and mislead people about what is really at stake here which is really our collective environmental and economic future.'

The CSIRO report notes that responses to questions about climate change vary systematically with question wording and response formatting.

More research needed

The CSIRO report concluded, 'The influence of question wording on reported levels of attitudes and beliefs about climate change makes measuring and tracking Australians' views complex. The gathering of scientifically rigorous longitudinal data from multiple sources, and with multiple methods, should be encouraged and enhanced in order to reflect with accuracy the existing

and changing community sentiment. The effects of question wording and framing, as well as the impact of external context (e.g. "Climategate", local and global economic events, political events) warrant systematic inquiry.'

Lewis says the role of public opinion researchers is to test the way issues are being communicated. 'Bad research is about wanting a particular response. Good research is being curious about the answer.'

Levine says, 'Public opinion polls are incredibly important. We should be asking these questions, we should be giving the electorate a voice. It's always our intention to ask the right questions. We're never trying to ask a question that will support Julia Gillard or anyone else, we're trying to get to the heart of the matter.'

Few disagree that the Labor Party has failed dismally in communicating the need to act on climate change. As Pearce (who hails from Canada) says, it's like 'watching a ice hockey game when no one can skate'.

Some argue that researchers face the same challenge asking about attitudes to the policy that the Labor Party does in communicating it.

But Scales points out that it is not the role of the pollster to fill the void and educate the public.

'By providing additional information in the base question you are potentially biasing the result, so you need to be careful you don't stray too much and, importantly, know where you are straying from.'

'A pollster could ask additional questions about people's level of awareness and knowledge of a carbon tax and this could give further insight, but a person is not right or wrong on the issue because they are either well informed or not. This is straying into political strategy and tactics because a political party or otherwise interested group needs to work out what level of awareness and knowledge best suits their ends on a particular issue and shape their communications campaign to that end.'

The research industry prides itself on objectivity but perhaps there is a need to scrutinise whether a researcher's political preference is having any impact on the way they frame their research questions. The public opinion polls, by their very nature, can at least be scrutinised and thus can contribute to informed debate about how we can best respond to climate change.

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