



BRIEF

Messaging energy affordability

April 2023 | Compiled by Dr. Louise Comeau, director climate change solutions at the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, and Trevor Melanson, communications director at Clean Energy Canada

Summary

Given affordability ranks in numerous polls as the number one concern of Canadians at present, advocates of climate action would likely benefit from linking it positively to clean energy—or, conversely, may see their efforts suffer when the link being made is negative.

In a [December 2022 poll](#) from Abacus Data for Clean Energy Canada (CEC), 64% of Canadians believe a clean energy system would be more affordable overall going forward compared to a fossil fuel one. At the same time, in a qualitative study of 50 Ontarians (also by Abacus), most respondents felt that “the transition to clean energy would cost them more in [their] day-to-day life” despite having an overall positive impression of clean energy.

Rising cost concerns may colour Canadians’ perceptions: Clean energy is preferable to fossil fuels, but everything is getting more expensive—and clean energy will be no exception. This interpretation is supported by recent [U.S. research](#) by [Potential Energy](#) showing Americans believe clean energy is more expensive as a layperson likely won’t distinguish the cost trend of renewables from the overall increase in energy prices that people are experiencing in their day-to-day lives. These researchers found that the “best way for people to understand the economic value of clean energy is not to just assert that it is lower cost, but rather to teach people that it is abundant and limitless, and therefore becomes less expensive over time.”

A national October 2022 [survey](#) by Abacus Research for the Conservation Council of New Brunswick (CCNB)

tested public support for the federal government’s plan to regulate electricity suppliers so that they produce little to no GHGs by 2035. Framing experiments showed that energy security framing was favoured over electrification framing, and that affordability frames most positively influence perceptions of fairness and acceptability of a clean electricity regulation.

A late [November 2022 survey](#) for EcoAnalytics by Erick Lachapelle at the University of Montreal tested specific supply-mix solutions to a clean electricity regulation and their influence on perceptions of affordability, benefit to the environment, effects on energy security, and likelihood of success. Lachapelle found that a clean energy mix (wind, solar, hydro with storage, compared to a mix including small nuclear reactors and fossil fuels like natural gas, with some renewable energy) is preferred (62% compared to 54%), is slightly more likely to be perceived as more affordable (37% compared to 34%), and is better for the environment (51% compared to 44%). Importantly, Canadians at this point see no difference in economic advantages or feasibility between the two versions of a clean electricity system. Consistent with energy security results from other surveys, Lachapelle found that 42% of Canadians believe that it is mostly or completely true that renewable energy prices are more stable and predictable than are prices for oil and gas.

Finally, two additional insights from Clean Energy Canada's Abacus research help direct our thinking on effective frames:

- Electric vehicles remain the most visible, understandable, and perhaps clearest case of clean energy saving people money. Six in 10 Canadians (and 63% of Ontarians) already believe EVs will save them money over their lifetime, while support for government incentives (rebates, charging infrastructure) is strong.
- Canadians don't expect the clean energy transition to happen overnight. While urgency is important, it may be helpful to emphasize that people will upgrade to a clean energy lifestyle as it makes sense (ie. getting an EV when you were thinking of buying a new car anyway, a heat pump instead of an air conditioner).

How might we operationalize these survey results given two critical contextual realities? First, we see high levels of uncertainty, often exceeding 30% of survey responses. Second, proponents of a clean electricity regulation are messaging into a contested communications environment, with conservative political leaders and regulation opponents framing climate action as adding to Canadians' financial burdens and increasing the cost of living, increasing their sense of loss of control, and that as a result, Canadians are less safe due to bad policy. Energy affordability generally—and in the Atlantic specifically, energy poverty—is the contested ground on which climate action, and the clean electricity regulation specifically, will be fought.

The communications challenge is to engage the unsure and to build confidence among supporters that the energy transition is a story of abundance, security, affordability, and fairness (a key metric through which people evaluate policy).

Frames to use

- 1 **Where appropriate, compare and contrast clean energy with fossil fuels, as the negatives of fossil fuels are familiar and compelling reasons for people to embrace clean energy.**

ENERGY SECURITY

- Renewable energy prices are stable; fossil fuel prices are unstable (unpredictable, volatile, vulnerable to price spikes).
- Solar and wind energy is abundant and limitless and has become less expensive over time; fossil fuels are vulnerable to unpredictable geopolitical events like war and producer market manipulation.

- Investments in abundant, flexible, and reliable electricity grids will support energy security; investments in dirty fossil fuels will destabilize the climate and make us less safe.

An overarching energy security narrative

Relying on oil and gas is driving up our bills, making it harder to provide for our children today, while worsening climate change and threatening their future. Renewable energy like solar and wind is abundant and the cost is declining. The best way to be free of unpredictable energy prices is to move away from volatile and polluting gas and oil and towards limitless and cleaner renewables to power our lives.

2 **Frame energy affordability in concrete terms that reflect lived experience.**

Affordability messaging is most believed when delivered by neighbours, friends or family who have firsthand experience with the solutions (e.g., electric vehicles, home retrofits). Messaging should speak to the needs of low-to-moderate income households (not just low-income households). Pain points to remember are that we remain vulnerable to the higher upfront cost of EVs, heat pumps, and retrofits. Incorporate CEC studies on the affordability of EVs, the Canadian Climate Institute study on the potential to lower household bills, and EcoAnalytics' advice to provide specifics to help people navigate barriers to affordability (see example from CCNB). When speaking to the media about incentives and why we need them, focus on accessibility (EVs already save people money, but rebates help ensure Canadian drivers of all income levels can access them and their cost-saving benefits).

ENERGY AFFORDABILITY

- The average electric vehicle driver will save about \$10,000 to \$20,000 over the life of the vehicle, compared to driving an equivalent gas vehicle.
- Energy-efficient buildings and household appliances significantly reduce energy waste, as do electric vehicles.
- Research shows that, as we transition to clean energy, household energy bills will actually decline overall thanks to the fuel savings of EVs and improvements in energy efficiency.
- The price of solar has dropped 90% in 10 years, while the price of wind power has dropped 70%.
- Canadians living in provinces powered by renewable hydroelectricity have the lowest electricity rates in the country.

- EVs, heat pumps, and energy efficient retrofits are lifetime cost-savers for families, but we must recognize not everyone has access to the money needed upfront to make these purchases. This is an important role for governments: improving the accessibility of money-saving clean energy solutions.
- A heat pump can lower your power bill by 30 to 40 per cent and doubles as an air conditioner; incentives help make them more affordable.
- A fair energy transition is one that makes sure low-to-moderate income households get the help they need to retrofit their homes and switch to electric transportation.

An overarching energy affordability narrative

Affordable electricity is essential to our quality of life, health and safety. We will use more electricity to power our lives as we transition away from climate-polluting fossil fuels. Growing the electricity system with more solar, wind and hydro technologies needs to happen along with programs to protect low-to-moderate income households with support to retrofit homes and electrify transportation. We can invest for the long-term and ultimately make household bills more affordable if we do this right.

3

Situate electrification and electricity investments as an investment with longer-term benefits.

In focus groups, CEC and CCNB have found a willingness to pay more today if these investments lead to lower, more stable costs in the future.

- Investing now to clean up and expand our electricity system will save us money because renewable energy costs less to operate, giving us more stable bills in the long run.
- Creating a zero-emitting electricity grid in Canada by 2035 requires national cooperation. This is a big opportunity for provinces and territories to work together.
- Like the railways that helped connect Canada, building a zero-emitting electricity grid by 2035 is a national unity project Canadians can get behind.

An overarching energy affordability narrative

The more we invest in renewable energy, the less expensive it becomes. If we invest now to replace climate-disrupting fossil-fuel power plants with renewable energy, we will benefit in the future from lower costs and more stable rates. That's because power from the sun, wind and water costs little to operate.

Areas of further study

Environics for EcoAnalytics will soon be in field testing arguments/frames, including the cooperation and national unity frames above. Other themes with frames to be tested include:

- Opportunity to showcase Canada's innovation/ leadership
- Environmental impact
- Fair/equitable access to electricity
- Affordability

Results will be shared by June. Clean Energy Canada and the Conservation Council of New Brunswick also have the opportunity to test frames through omnibus polls and oversampling in regions (e.g., Atlantic). Future research and analysis could also explore perception differences based on income levels.