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Canadians' support for infrastructure is high – unless it's where they live, study says

By ANDREA WOO

Study for Innovative Research Group finds 59 per cent support more projects than they oppose, but when it comes to local projects, that drops to 45 per cent

Most Canadians generally support most types of major infrastructure projects, but support for local projects remains significantly lower, according to a new poll on NIMBYism.

The aim of the national tracking survey, conducted by Innovative Research Group,¹ is to take Canadians' temperatures on major infrastructure – and particularly energy infrastructure – projects, comparing and contrasting their support for projects both locally and elsewhere in their provinces.

It found 59 per cent of people polled generally support more projects than they oppose, while only 15 per cent oppose more than they support.

"I was really surprised when I first got into this to find out most things are approved by most people most of the time," said Innovative's president, Greg Lyle. "That sort of knocked me back, because the only time that I would tend to be hired, or hear about something, is with a project that was not going well. I sort of had the assumption most projects were opposed most of the time, and that just isn't true."

When it came to local projects, however, the figures dropped to 45 per cent supporting more than they oppose and 27 per cent opposing more than they support. Alberta (minus Calgary) and Saskatchewan had the highest tendency to support projects provincially, at 73 and 70 per cent net support respectively, while Quebec (minus Montreal) and Vancouver Island were least likely to support such projects, at 35 and 34 per cent net support respectively.

B.C.'s interior and north had 58 per cent net support for projects in the province, B.C.'s Lower Mainland 39 per cent and Toronto 36 per cent.

The projects ranged from wind farms and hydro power from dams to pipelines and nuclear plants.

Doug McArthur, public policy professor at Simon Fraser University, said support generally tends to be stronger in regions where people see themselves as the major economic beneficiaries of these projects – particularly when the projects aren't developed in their communities.

"The negatives tend to arise when people see these projects as having major effects on them, potentially," he said. "They're afraid of them to some degree."

However, he called it "a bit problematic" to label this reluctance as NIMBYism.

"NIMBYism is generally associated with when fairly privileged people don't want to have their amenities affected by these kinds of things and so want to see them shifted off to other places," Mr. McArthur said. "Where people have concerns, these are people who have very real environmental and other socio-economic concerns. I think that's where you see the opposition rise, where people feel, 'Hey, we don't really trust these projects.' "

While 42 per cent of respondents said they support projects in their province but not in their communities – in other words, are NIMBYs – that figure has dropped since the first few years of the survey, which began in 2007 and had some degrees of NIMBYism as high as 50 per cent, the poll found.

This suggests it has, in recent years, gotten "a little bit easier, not a little bit tougher" to move forward with major infrastructure projects – if they are presented and managed properly and there is proper consultation, Mr. Lyle said.

"When you look at a particular project, you end up with some people that support it, some people that are opposed and most people are what we call the persuadable public – people who want to hear the details," he said.

If a proponent can satisfactorily answer questions including "why" and "why here," treat people fairly and minimize both the number of people affected and the impact on said people, most projects have a good likelihood of being built, Mr. Lyle said.

Mr. McArthur noted there is more trust in some regions and provinces than others. The challenge for proponents, he says, is to make it believable that they will not proceed with major projects should strong opposition arise during the consultation process.

"For instance, my sense of Vancouver Island and coastal B.C. is that people just don't really believe governments and companies are sincere when they say, 'Oh, we'll consult with you and we won't build it if it proves to be to your detriment,' " he said.

The survey of 2,251 adult Canadians was conducted online between Oct. 28 and Nov. 13 using Innovative's national research panel. The final weighted sample was 1,500.

References

1. www.innovativeresearch.ca

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