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MIPP COVID-19 RESEARCH BRIEFING

Purpose of the Note

This briefing note examines how the emergence of COVID-19 influenced media coverage of selected environmental issues. We compare media coverage six months prior to the crisis, which includes the time of the Canadian federal election, to six months after the onset of COVID-19. This briefing note focuses on selected terms; it is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the issues.

This note represents one aspect of a larger research project we are undertaking. For more context on the emergence of COVID-19 and the response of the Government of Canada, please refer to Appendix 1. For more information about the framework we used, please see Appendix 2.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada:
Environmental Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic

Key Observations and Recommendations

- Reporting on climate change dropped significantly during the pandemic. The number of articles mentioning oil, however, did not change as a result of the crisis. Pipeline references featured prominently during the election and had a second spike during the Wet'suwet'en protests.

- Historically, concern over the environment has gone up and down, often depending on the state of the economy. Traditionally, when the economy is performing poorly, environmental issues feature less prominently.

- Polling data suggests Canadians continue to be concerned about climate change and believe the economic recovery plan should include climate change considerations.

Methods

We identified media articles in which the following terms appeared in the title or body: carbon tax, climate change, oil and pipeline. We selected these terms because they featured prominently in the 2019 Canadian federal election and they continue to be central concepts in climate and energy policy debates.

For the period of July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, we accumulated articles published in the front-sections of the *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, and by CBC News using the database NexisUni and analyzed them using Excel. We excluded Business, Economy, Lifestyle, Culture, Entertainment, Art, Travel, and Weather. Due to the large number of published articles, we did not conduct content analysis of individual articles.

Observations and Analysis

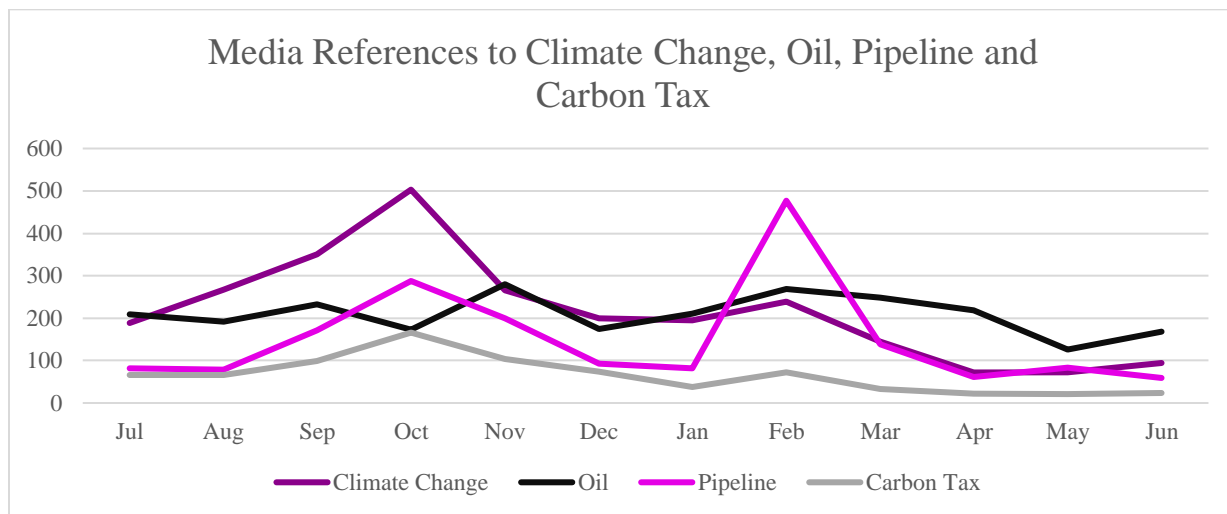Media References to Climate Change, Oil, Pipeline and Carbon Tax

Figure 1: Number of articles mentioning the terms climate change, oil, pipeline and carbon tax published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 1: Articles mentioning carbon tax, climate change, pipeline and oil published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Carbon tax	574	209	783	-64
Climate change	1774	817	2591	-54
Pipeline	909	901	1810	-0.9
Oil	1260	1240	2500	-1.6

Media focus on climate change issues dropped as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change was one of the most important issues of the 2019 Canadian federal election (Turner, 2019); according to an IPSOS survey conducted in September 2019, 25% of Canadians considered climate change to be one of the top three issues that determined who they planned to vote for (Bricker, 2019). The media featured the issues prominently in the run up to the federal election (See Figure 1).

The emergence of COVID-19 resulted in a significant decline in media coverage of environmental issues: references to carbon tax and climate change dropped by over 50% when comparing the last six months of 2019 to the first six months of 2020 (Table 1). Oil is the only key term that features regularly before and during the pandemic. Pipeline was featured prior to the election and then had a second spike during the Wet'suwet'en protests.

The decline in media focus on climate change in light of COVID-19 does not seem to reflect public attitudes: 64% of Canadians think that in the long term, climate change is as serious an issue as COVID-19, and 60% of Canadians believe the government's economic recovery plan from COVID-19 should prioritize climate change, noting that if the government does not act to combat climate change, it would be failing Canadian citizens (McLeod Macey, 2020). This sustained interest in climate change is arguably in contrast to historical patterns, which typically reveal a drop in concern over environmental issues when the economy is performing poorly (Burns, 2019).

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Appendix 1

On December 31, 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO); these are now known to have been caused by the novel coronavirus (or COVID-19). On January 3, 2020, WHO issued a public warning regarding the virus, and on January 30, it declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2020a). Canada first took action on January 15 when the Public Health Agency of Canada activated its Emergency Operation Centre to support the country's response to COVID-19 (Government of Canada, 2020a); by February 9, Canada had implemented screening requirements for travellers returning from all areas affected by the virus to 10 airports in 6 provinces throughout the country (Government of Canada, 2020a; Staples, 2020). On March 11, 2020, WHO declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Following this announcement, the Canadian Government advised Canadians to avoid all non-essential travel outside Canada, required all Canadian travellers entering the country to self-isolate for 14 days, and banned foreign nationals from all other countries, except the United States, from entering Canada (Government of Canada, 2020a). In response to increases in COVID-19 cases throughout the country, one after another, provinces began declaring states of emergency in mid-March (Dawson, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 in Canada was detected in Toronto, Ontario, on January 25, 2020 at which point there were over 1,300 cases confirmed globally. As of August 31, 2020, there have been 128,948 confirmed cases in Canada (114,227 recovered and 9,126 deaths), and over 25 million cases worldwide (848,203 deaths) (Government of Canada, 2020b).

Appendix 2

This briefing note is extracted from a larger research project examining the social and economic pressures exerted on government as a result of COVID-19. Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin (2001) hypothesize that social and economic context shapes the manner in which government regimes act. They define regimes as "the complex of institutional geography, rules, practice and animating ideas that are associated with the regulation of a particular risk or hazard" (p. 9). There are three lenses that Hood et al. use to explore context: (1) the market dynamics, which examine the law, insurance and information and opt-out costs (2) the public's opinions and media's coverage of the risk, which examine polling data and leading media coverage and (3) the role of interests, which examines the concentration of power and influence in affected sectors. The research in this briefing note examines aspects of the second lens, media and public opinion. According to this lens, we seek to determine the extent to which government reaction can be understood as a response to public preferences and attitudes.

More from the MacEachen Institute

The Institute is working to create resources and policy discussions around the COVID-19 crisis. These include briefing notes like this one as well as panel discussions, videos and media commentary. You can find all resources related to COVID-19 on our website.

Other briefing notes in this series

- Observations from Toronto's Tourism Recovery Post-SARS in 2003
- Labour Issues and COVID-19
- Quarantine and COVID-19
- People with Disabilities and COVID-19
- Health Care and COVID-19
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- Social Justice and COVID-19
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