

Pipelines and politics: Where do the parties meet?

After the recent election of a minority Liberal government, advocates of the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project have expressed concern about the fate of the project. With only a minority in Parliament, the Liberals will need support from another party to remain in power. Consequently, some advocates are fearful that TMX may become a bargaining chip in Liberal negotiations with the NDP and/or Green Party.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has declared his support for TMX and, faced with Kinder Morgan's decision to abandon the project, his government purchased the existing Trans Mountain line with the intention of seeing the expansion through to completion. Nevertheless, Mr. Trudeau's political opponents have raised doubts about the government's commitment to completing the project, particularly in light of the current political situation.

Given the importance of this issue to the oil and gas sector and the broader Canadian economy, it is worth taking a look at where Canadians stand on energy issues, and how the supporters of the different regions and parties align.

Over the past few weeks, Environics has updated its tracking of these issues. A key finding is that a majority of Canadians continue to support the development of the oil sands (56 per cent) and the construction of pipelines to move product both west (54 per cent) and south (56 per cent). These levels are essentially unchanged from a year ago.

As in the past, support for the oil sands development and pipelines is strongest in Alberta and lowest in Quebec. And perhaps not surprisingly, it's strongest among supporters of the Conservative Party and lower among Green and NDP supporters. On TMX specifically, 6 in 10 Liberal partisans support the project, compared with 8 in 10 Conservatives and about 4 in 10 NDP or Green supporters.

Similarly, when asked about the economic impact of the lack of pipeline capacity, a small majority of Canadians recognize the negative consequences, including just more than half of Liberal supporters and just less than half of NDP and Green partisans. By contrast, two-thirds of Conservative supporters believe the lack of capacity to get the oil sands product to market is bad for the national economy.

There are two areas, however, where the partisans share similar views: the belief that Canada should stop importing foreign oil and support for an energy corridor. When asked whether "Canada should stop importing oil from other countries and rely instead on the oil we produce ourselves," a large majority of almost nine in 10 Canadians agree. And that sentiment is shared across the party spectrum, enjoying broad support from Conservatives (90 per cent), Liberals (86 per cent), NDP (86 per cent) and Green Party supporters (87 per cent).

We also asked Canadians whether they support or oppose a cross-Canada energy corridor, which was described in the survey as "a path for rail lines, power lines and pipelines from coast-to-coast ... which would allow oil produced in Alberta and clean electricity produced in B.C., Manitoba and Quebec to be distributed to other parts of the country."

These results are also quite consistent. Eight in 10 Canadians support the energy corridor, including over 9 in 10 Conservatives and more than 8 in 10 Liberals. Among NDP and Green partisans, support for a cross-Canada energy corridor is in the 70s. While not quite unanimous, this is a strong endorsement across party lines.

If Canadians recognize the economic benefits of the oil sands development, would prefer to stop importing oil and can accept the need to move energy products across the country via a corridor, perhaps an agreement on getting the TMX built is more likely than its advocates fear. One place the Liberals are unlikely to find support, however, is with the Bloc Québécois. That party's supporters are opposed to oil sands development and new pipeline construction, although almost half of them do recognize the negative economic consequences of the lack of pipeline capacity and a similar proportion support the energy-corridor concept. (There is no margin of error for the online surveys.)

Despite the heated rhetoric of the recent campaign, there is plenty of nuance in Canadians' opinions on the country's energy resources and there's much for the parties to consider as the minority Parliament situation unfolds. If those discussions are focused on areas of agreement across party lines, perhaps progress can be made on getting Canadian bitumen to market and improving the country's economic prospects. This certainly would be a welcome development in Alberta, where the economic downturn has caused the most pain.

*Tony Coulson is group vice-president, corporate and public affairs, at Environics Research
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