research highlights

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Trust and scepticism

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Successful transition to a low carbon future will require public engagement to ensure that policy decisions are in line with public interests and to motivate community support. Trust between stakeholders is critical in this regard, as it facilitates openness and cooperation between institutions and the public they serve. However, if trust promotes uncritical acceptance, the perceived need to engage may be diminished, reducing dialogue, and thereby undermining these goals. In light of this complexity, John Parkins and colleagues from the University of Alberta, the University of New Brunswick, and Cornell carried out a survey to examine the role of trust in public engagement on energy issues in Canada.

The national survey revealed that public engagement on energy issues was negatively correlated with trust in the provincial government's ability to manage energy development, and positively correlated with scepticism that the provincial government was unbiased on these issues. Subsequent binary probit models showed that even when trust on its own was negatively correlated with public engagement, the interaction between trust and scepticism was positively associated with public engagement. This suggests that a balance between trust and scepticism — what the authors call critical trust — is key to fostering public engagement. These results raise questions about how to promote the appropriate amount of scepticism required for critical trust in way that is helpful for achieving democratic outcomes.

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