

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Canadians support proof-of-vaccination requirements – they just don't want to make things awkward

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, a research professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

There's a new complication to deal with in our schools, workplaces and public gathering spaces: what to do about the willfully unvaccinated. For people who could get vaccinated but are either hesitant or resistant, their personal choice to abstain is impinging on the opinion of the majority.

Self-isolation, physical distancing and telework have acted like buffers, allowing social interactions to remain cordial between friends and family members with differing opinions. However, as efforts begin to return to some form of normalcy, those buffers are thinning out.

A recent survey by Nanos suggests that there is strong support to require proof of vaccination in a number of settings, but the majority of Canadians are "social avoiders" when it comes to disagreements with the other side.

Asked what they would do if a good friend disagreed as to whether people should get vaccinated, the top response was to avoid the topic of vaccinations and continue to hang out (46 per cent), while another 34 per cent said they would avoid seeing the friend in person but remain friends. A little less than one in 20 would stop being friends (4 per cent).

In our interactions with friends, we are polite. However, as private citizens, very substantial majorities of Canadians want to drop the vaccination hammer and are uneasy about stepping into places where people are not fully vaccinated. They want proof of vaccination to engage in activities such as travel and large-scale sporting or arts events.

The return to schools in September will see the first wave of vaccination challenges, heightened by the fact that children under 12 do not have the option of getting vaccinated. Research suggests that about seven in 10 Canadians are uncomfortable (45 per cent) or somewhat uncomfortable (26 per cent) sending students to school if some teachers

The return to schools in September will see the first wave of vaccination challenges.

are not fully vaccinated. Perceptions are directly related to age. About 55 per cent of Canadians under 34 years of age are uncomfortable to one degree or another. This discomfort jumps to 84 per cent among those 55 and over.

The vaccination appetite for teachers also extends to students. More than six in 10 Canadians (64 per cent) are not keen on sending students in person if some students are not fully vaccinated. The key takeaway is that the desire for action includes both teachers and students.

When it comes to other public settings, the concern about returning to in-person interactions where folks might not be vaccinated remains significant. More than seven in 10 people are uncomfortable (48 per cent) or somewhat uncomfortable (25 per cent) visiting a hospital if some health care workers are not fully vaccinated, and two of three Canadians would have some concern showing up to work if colleagues are not fully vaccinated.

Proof of vaccinations would be welcomed by very strong majorities of Canadians. For example, more than eight in 10 Canadians are comfortable (76 per cent) or somewhat comfortable (9 per cent) requiring proof of vaccination to take air travel, with very similar views around taking a long-distance train or attending a large-scale in-person sporting or arts event.

The challenge for public-health officials is that the silent majority of people are more likely to prefer avoiding conflict with their unvaccinated friends, neighbours and co-workers. In politics, the squeaky wheel gets the attention. This explains why some politicians have been hesitant to take a hard position on the minority choosing to be unvaccinated.

On the one hand, there is a minority that feels the pressure to be vaccinated and sees their free-

dom of choice under siege. On the other hand is the silent majority that feels the unvaccinated are a risk to their, or their children's, health and freedom.

Most Canadians have indicated that they would rather avoid conflict on this very touchy topic. A paltry 4 per cent of Canadians said they would discuss vaccinations with a good friend if there was a disagreement. But the research shows that they would welcome a harder position by health authorities and politicians.

Is choice a valid consideration in the development of vaccination policy? Yes.

Does the freedom to not be vaccinated automatically override the public good? No.

Our social contract as citizens is based on the recognition of a diversity of opinion but within the context of the broader public good. One's right to throw a punch ends where the other person's nose begins. Setting aside individuals who have medical reasons to be unvaccinated, the consequences of remaining unvaccinated should be clear.

Canadians understand that vaccinations help manage the spread of the virus and minimize the seriousness of any future infection. As the path to normalcy gets slowed because of surges in infections and hospitalizations primarily among the unvaccinated, the patience of Canadians might start to wear thin with loved ones, friends and neighbours who have not been voluntarily vaccinated – and our politicians who resist taking a stand.

Our political leaders should take note of the views of Canadians. Very strong majorities support proof of vaccination for travel and large gatherings. Many Canadians are uncomfortable with the risk of being exposed to unvaccinated individuals whether it be at school or in hospitals. They are looking for leadership to spare them from the uncomfortable conversations.

This column was based on a survey sponsored by Nanos Research. The RDD dual frame hybrid telephone and online national random survey of Canadians conducted between July 30 and Aug. 2, 2021, and was comprised of 1,002 individuals. This study is accurate 3.1 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20. The report with full methodologies and their technical notes are posted at nanos.co.

If you drive a Tesla, you're probably doing more harm to the environment than good

JOHN RAPLEY

OPINION

Political economist at the University of Cambridge and the author of *Twilight of the Money Gods: Economics as a Religion and How It All Went Wrong*

In my college days, I had a friend who could polish off a dozen donuts at a go. Afterward, he'd order a Diet Coke, whereupon the counter attendant invariably told him he was wasting his time; the caloric damage had already been done.

Earlier this month, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a bombshell report that declared "warming of the climate system is unequivocal, human influence on the climate system is clear, and limiting climate change will require substantial and sustained reductions of greenhouse gas emissions." The report comes at a time when governments are making bold pledges to create sustainable growth, investors are pushing firms to phase out fossil fuels, and some consumers are rushing to substitute "green" products such as electrical vehicles for the dirty old technology.

Unfortunately, most of this amounts to the climate equivalent of capping a 3,000-calorie binge with a diet drink. That humble soda reveals why technology can't save us from a system overload. The creation of artificial sweeteners improved the efficiency of flavouring, allowing us to produce more or less the same taste but with fewer calories. Electric vehicle manufacturers such as Tesla do the same thing for car engines: same energy, less carbon.

Even before the invention of electric vehicles, automobile efficiency had been improving at a terrific pace. Anyone familiar with vintage cars recalls the "boats" from the fifties that got a dozen or so miles to the gallon. Today, even SUVs can get a good four times that. So it goes for all manner of other technologies, from refrigerators to televisions, their relentless gains in efficiency being what gives tech entrepreneurs and politicians the faith that we can beat climate change with ingenuity.

Except we aren't. For all those improvements, our carbon emissions have only gone up. It's not the fault of technology, which has been doing a good job of reducing our waste. It's the fault of the users – of us. As our cars used less fuel, that left more for other purposes. Like flying, for instance. We've been doing it with abandon, the number of international travellers, the vast majority of them from Western countries, doubling each decade. Back in the days of clunky cars, hardly anyone flew abroad. Today, many of us think nothing of hopping a plane across the world for a week or two in an Airbnb.

Just as some of us use diet soda as a balm – one that enables us to push off the guilt of over-eating – so too do we use "sustainable" technologies to paper over our waste. Take recycling, for instance. In theory, putting stuff back into the product cycle reduces our waste. In practice, the opposite often happens. Research shows that recycling can actually lead people to buy more stuff, because they feel they're no longer producing waste.

Which brings us to Tesla. Don't get me wrong: Since they reduce carbon emissions, the vehicles themselves are a good thing. The problem? Well, let's picture the stereotypical Tesla buyer, he of the marketing literature: a virtuous and healthful middle-aged man who scoffs at the climate destruction wrought by the ignorant, climate-denying Trump voter, the sort of voter who'll drive a gas-guzzling pickup to a rally to hear the former president mock global warming. What our Tesla buyer doesn't know, though, is that, of the two, he's the one doing more harm to the climate.

That's because while the typical pickup driver has an income that hovers around the median, the typical Tesla owner has an income twice the average – and the strongest predictor of a person's carbon emissions isn't what he buys, but what he spends.

The simple fact is that being rich is bad for the environment. Statistically in the 1 per cent, Tesla owners belong to a global elite who produce a sixth of the planet's carbon and half of its flying emissions. Lest we get too righteous about their profligacy, though, they're merely charting the way for the rest of us. Although we in the West comprise less than a fifth of humanity, we produce more than two-thirds of its carbon emissions.

George Carlin nailed it long ago when he said humans had no business trying to save the planet – Earth preceded us, it'll survive us. Instead, the race to tackle climate change is about saving ourselves, by preserving an environment that keeps the planet habitable for our descendants. On current trends, prospects look bleak. This summer, amid brutal heat waves in the West and devastating floods in Europe, and one climatologist noting that we've now literally reached the hell-and-high-water stage of climate change, we're trying to "return to normal." Indeed, this summer, as we got back on the road and into the air, our fuel consumption set new records.

If technology won't reduce our carbon emissions, then, what will? The good news is that we know the answer. Recently, for example, the planet experienced the largest drop in greenhouse-gas emissions since the Second World War and it resulted from, wait for it, the COVID-19 pandemic. That's not rocket science. We've known a long time that recessions reduce carbon emissions. But rather than retain the kind of lifestyle changes we began experimenting with then, too many of us persist in the delusion that buying and investing "green" will save us from hell on Earth as we resume old ways, much as medieval Europeans imagined that buying indulgences saved them from hell in the after-life.

Technology can facilitate our transition to a more sustainable way of life – think how video calls enabled us to slash travel and commuting during the pandemic. However, it can't actually substitute for that change.

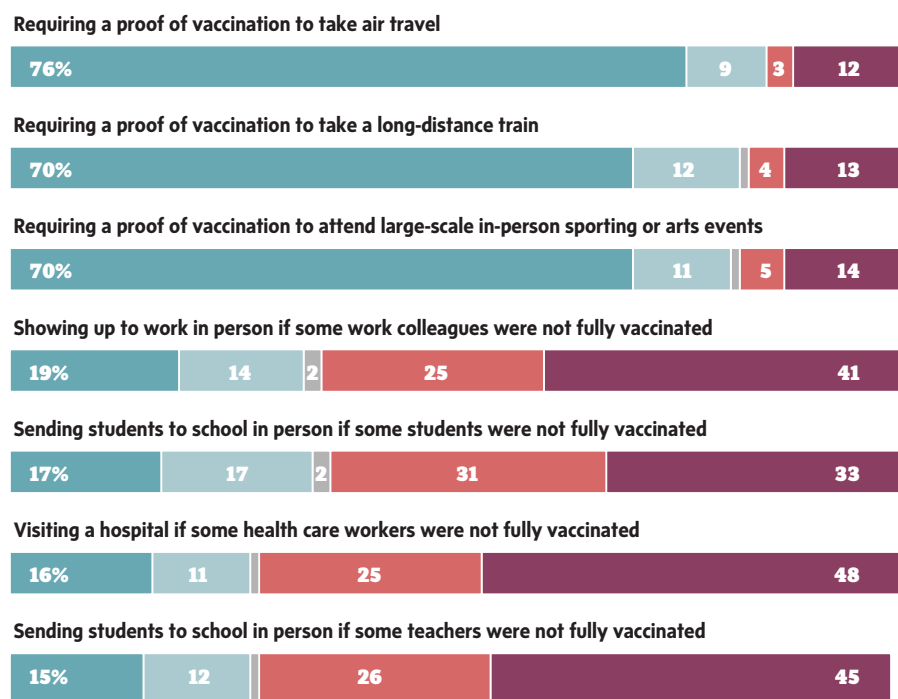
As Canadians head to the polls, they might want to contemplate the existential choice they now face. Either we can continue living in the style to which we've grown accustomed, or we can bequeath a planet to our descendants that is habitable.

Those of us who have children in our lives might consider having that conversation – of telling them, openly and frankly, which option we've decided on.

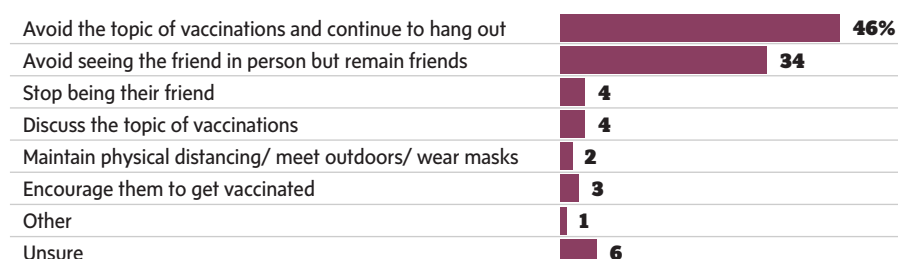
Canadians on being vaccinated

LEVEL OF COMFORT IN CERTAIN SCENARIOS RELATED TO VACCINATIONS

● Comfortable ● Somewhat comfortable ● Unsure ● Somewhat uncomfortable ● Uncomfortable



DISAGREEMENTS WITH A FRIEND OVER VACCINATION



Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 because of rounding.