WILDFIRES AND CLIMATE PREFERENCES IN CANADA

Politics Matters More Than Disruption

Empirical Intelligence | September 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nationwide survey of 1,004 Canadian citizens aged 18 and over asking about wildfire disruption and allocation of tax dollars to policies to fight wildfires.

48%

Percentage of Canadians who reported being forced to change their daily plans at least once during the summer.

$2.42

Canadians who experienced wildfire-smoke disruption allocated $2.42 more of a hypothetical $100 wildfire budget to climate mitigation than those who did not.

$11.60

How much less Conservative voters allocated to climate change mitigation compared to other Canadians.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Nearly half of Canadians were forced to change their daily plans at least once during summer 2026.
- Climate spending preferences were weakly associated with reported wildfire disruption.
- Climate preferences were more strongly associated with the political party Canadians support.

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Introduction

Wildfires have become an increasingly visible feature of Canadians' experience of summer. Beyond the immediate effects of wildfires on communities, wildfire smoke can affect everyday activities and expose Canadians to the consequences of a changing climate. This raises an important question: does experiencing wildfire disruption translate into greater support for climate mitigation?

Previous research provides mixed evidence on whether personal experience with extreme weather changes climate attitudes and support for climate policy (e.g., Demski et al. 2017). Some studies find that exposure to wildfires or other extreme weather can increase climate concern or support for climate action, while others find limited or short-lived effects (e.g., Gärtner and Schoen 2021; Visconti and Young 2024). Research also suggests that political ideology can shape how people interpret and respond to extreme-weather experiences (e.g., Zanocco et al. 2019).

This report examines whether Canadians who experienced disruption from wildfire smoke during summer 2026 differed in their preferences for government spending on wildfire response, prevention, and climate change mitigation. It also examines whether these preferences vary by political affiliation.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How did climate spending preferences vary with wildfire disruption and political affiliation during summer 2026?

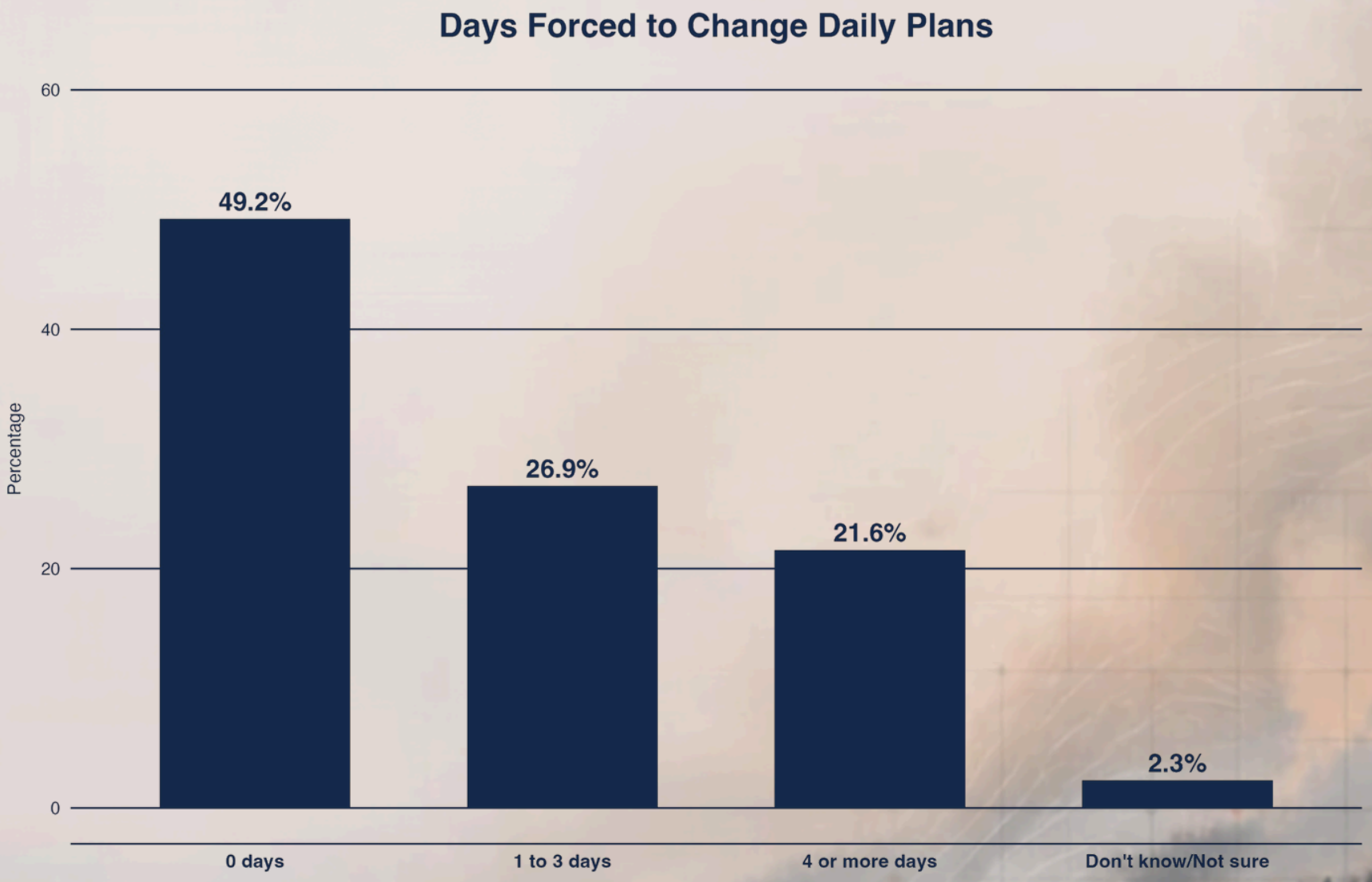
METHODOLOGY

SAMPLE SIZE	*1,004. If the results were from a probability sample, the margin of error would be 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.*
SURVEY METHOD	*Online survey, sample recruited from online panels through Cint Exchange. Quotas for age, gender, education, and region.*
FIELDWORK DATES	*August 21-23, 2026*
POPULATION	*Canadian citizens 18 and over*
WEIGHTING	*Weighted to census benchmarks for age, education, gender, and region using iterative proportional fitting (IPF). In addition, weighted halfway to the 2025 election result using recalled vote. This helps correct for nonresponse bias, while avoiding bias due to measurement error in 2025 vote.*
LIMITATIONS	*The analysis relies on self-reported wildfire smoke disruption, which may partly reflect climate preferences.*
STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE	*Differences by party affiliation were statistically significant ($p < .05$). The difference in climate mitigation spending by disruption status did not reach conventional significance ($p = .054$).*

WILDFIRE SMOKE DISRUPTION

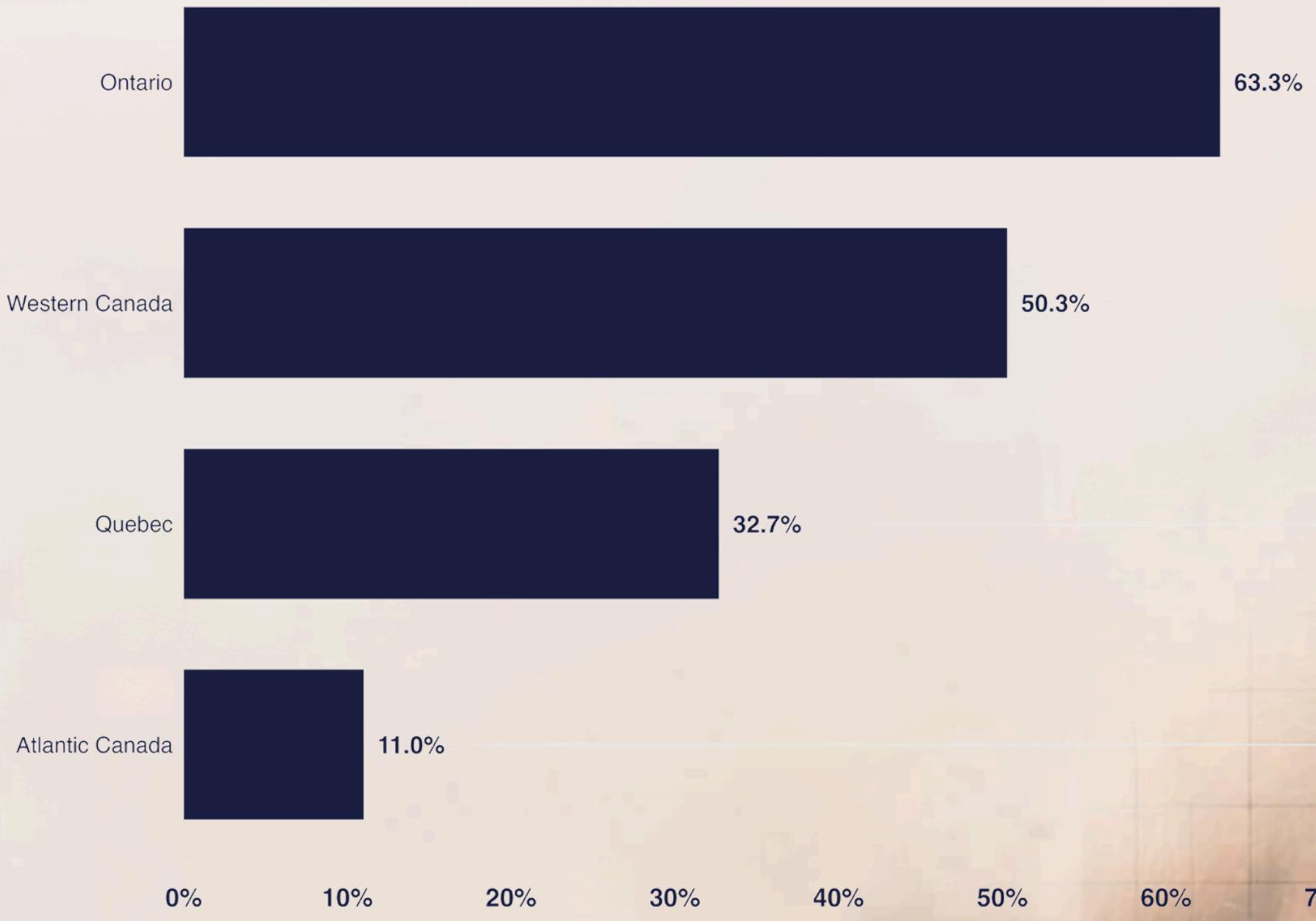
48%

Nearly half of Canadians were forced to change their planned daily activities at least one day this summer.



WILDFIRE SMOKE DISRUPTION BY REGION

Wildfire smoke disruption during summer 2026 was greatest in Ontario

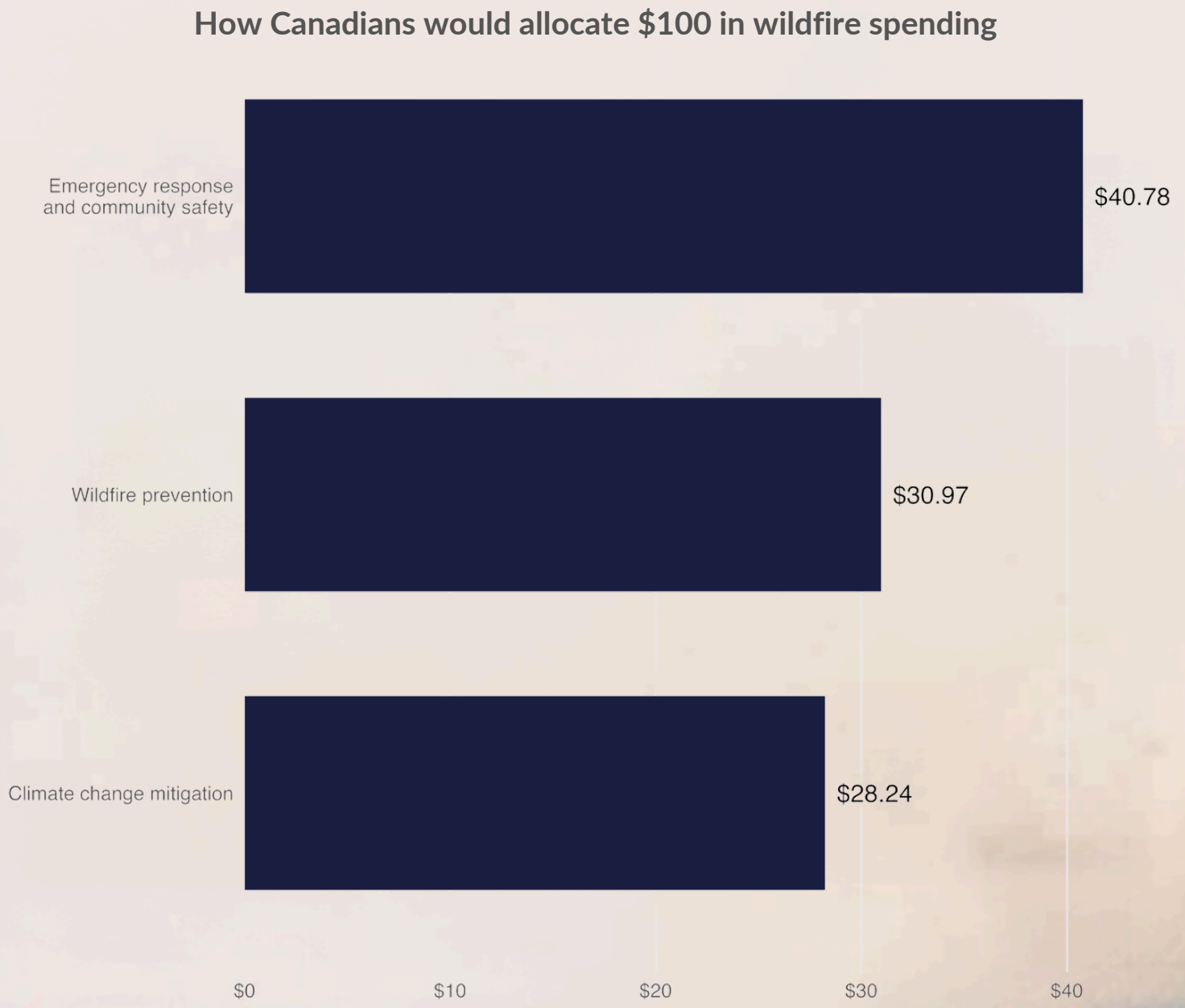


Percentage who were forced to change plans on at least one day.

Western Canada includes British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba
Atlantic Canada includes New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador

CANADIANS PRIORITIZED EMERGENCY RESPONSE OVER PREVENTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION

Nevertheless, respondents allocated nearly 30% of a hypothetical wildfire budget to climate change mitigation.



Average amount allocated to each priority area by survey respondents

Note that the survey question did not include a default response. It also allowed respondents to allocate all the funds or none of the funds to a particular area. The only constraint is that the total had to sum to $100.

CANADIANS WHOSE PLANS WERE AFFECTED BY WILDFIRE SMOKE ALLOCATED SLIGHTLY MORE TO CLIMATE MITIGATION

Allocation of $100 wildfire budget by whether respondent had to change their plans on at least one day during summer 2026

Average amount allocated to each priority area by survey respondents

Note: The difference in climate change mitigation spending did not reach conventional statistical significance (p = .054)

CONSERVATIVE VOTERS ALLOCATED $11.60 LESS TO CLIMATE MITIGATION THAN SUPPORTERS OF OTHER PARTIES

Allocation of $100 wildfire budget by vote intentions

Average amount allocated to each priority area by vote intentions.
Note: “Other Parties” includes all likely voters who did not intend to vote Conservative.

CONSERVATIVE VOTERS ARE OVER THREE TIMES MORE LIKELY TO ALLOCATE $0 TO CLIMATE MITIGATION

Nearly three in ten Conservative voters allocated nothing to climate mitigation, compared with fewer than one in ten other Canadians

LIMITATIONS

Self-reported responses

Findings may be affected by recall or response bias. In particular, the gap in climate mitigation spending preferences by disruption may be caused by respondents who prefer less climate spending underestimating wildfire disruption.

Cross-sectional evidence

The results describe preferences and experiences at one point in time; they do not establish how preferences change over time.

Associations, not causes

Observed differences between groups should not be interpreted as proof that one factor caused another.

These limitations do not invalidate the findings, but they define how they should be interpreted.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

WILDFIRE DISRUPTION IS WIDESPREAD, BUT IT ONLY MODESTLY DIFFERENTIATES CLIMATE SPENDING PREFERENCES; POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION IS A MUCH STRONGER DIVIDING LINE.

IMPLICATIONS

SUPPORT FOR BOTH EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND CLIMATE MITIGATION

Policymakers don't have to choose between responding to fires and addressing climate change.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

Canadians who experienced disruption due to wildfire smoke only wanted to spend slightly more on climate mitigation.

POLITICS MATTERS MORE THAN DISRUPTION

Climate policy communication should consider heterogeneity in response.

BUILDING BROADER SUPPORT

Policymakers need to find shared goals that appeal to Canadians across the partisan divide.

REFERENCES

1. Demski, C., Capstick, S., Pidgeon, N., Sposato, R. G., & Spence, A. (2017). Experience of extreme weather affects climate change mitigation and adaptation responses. *Climatic change*, 140(2), 149-164.
2. Gärtner, L., & Schoen, H. (2021). Experiencing climate change: revisiting the role of local weather in affecting climate change awareness and related policy preferences. *Climatic Change*, 167(3), 31.
3. Visconti, G., & Young, K. (2024). The effect of different extreme weather events on attitudes toward climate change. *PLoS one*, 19(5).
4. Zanocco, C., Boudet, H., Nilson, R., & Flora, J. (2019). Personal harm and support for climate change mitigation policies: Evidence from 10 US communities impacted by extreme weather. *Global Environmental Change*, 59.

APPENDIX

SURVEY QUESTION WORDING

Q1. Likelihood to vote

If there were a federal election tomorrow, are you...

1. Certain to vote
2. Likely to vote
3. Unlikely to vote
4. Certain not to vote
5. I am not eligible to vote
6. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

Q2. Vote intentions among likely voters

Which party would you vote for? SHOW IF Q1 IS 1 or 2, RANDOMIZE ORDER OF 1-5

1. Liberal Party
2. Conservative Party
3. New Democratic Party (NDP)
4. Green Party
5. Bloc Québécois (only in Quebec)
6. Another party (please specify)
7. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

Q3. Vote intentions among unlikely voters

If you did vote in a federal election, which party do you think you would vote for? SHOW IF Q1 IS 3 or 4, RANDOMIZE ORDER OF 1-5

1. Liberal Party
2. Conservative Party
3. New Democratic Party (NDP)
4. Green Party
5. Bloc Québécois (only in Quebec)
6. Another party (please specify)
7. Don't know/ Prefer not to answer

Q4. Wildfire smoke disruption

So far this summer (since June 1), on roughly how many days has wildfire smoke forced you to change your planned daily activities?

1. 0 days (Not at all)
2. 1 to 3 days
3. 4 to 7 days (about a week)
4. 8 to 14 days (1 to 2 weeks)
5. 15 days or more (more than 2 weeks)
6. Don't know / Not sure

Q5. Wildfire budget allocation

Imagine $100 of your annual federal taxes is dedicated specifically to addressing wildfire threats in Canada. How would you like the government to divide that $100 across the following areas? The total must equal 100. RANDOMIZE 1-3

1. $_____ Short-term wildfire prevention and forest management (e.g., prescribed burns, brush clearing)
2. $_____ Emergency response and community safety (e.g., firefighter staffing, evacuation planning)
3. $_____ Long-term climate change mitigation (e.g., cutting greenhouse gas emissions)

About Empirical Intelligence

Empirical Intelligence is a public opinion research firm based in Toronto, Canada. The firm conducts research on public opinion and policy in Canada, the United States, and other countries. Its research also uses advanced experimental methodologies, including conjoint analysis and other survey experiments.

Empirical Intelligence was founded by Eric Guntermann. Eric holds a PhD in political science from the Université de Montréal and was a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in political science at the University of California, Berkeley. He has published 18 peer-reviewed articles and his research has appeared in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. His research focuses on public opinion, political behaviour, and how citizens form preferences about public policy.