

ALBERTA'S CLIMATE LEADERSHIP PLAN

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Study in Brief

The purpose of this study is to analyze the factors and processes by which Alberta's Climate Leadership Plan (CLP) was created, why it was partially destroyed (substantively and rhetorically), and to identify its legacy. This case study, which is part of a series of case studies on "what works" when it comes to addressing polarization over energy and climate change, touches on three core aspects of Positive Energy's research: climate change, polarization, and federalism.

This study relies on official documents from Alberta's New Democratic Party and United Conservative Party governments. Public opinion survey data, both commissioned by Positive Energy as well as other pollsters, was also utilized. These documents were supplemented by important secondary material from books, academic articles, and news pieces. This study also includes 14 semi-structured interviews with the architects, participants, and observers of the creation of the CLP, as well as its dismantlement.

The Alberta Climate Leadership Plan was a big and bold strategy undertaken by the Notley NDP government to institute fundamental change to Alberta's energy and environment policy. In addition, it was an attempt at reducing polarization over energy and environment policy in both Alberta and the rest of Canada. Unfortunately, the case is a mixed bag in terms of success. When it comes to its policy legacy, much of the CLP has remained in place despite the switch in provincial governments. Just as importantly, Notley greatly influenced the Trudeau government's energy and environment policy. However, the Plan largely failed at reducing polarization. While polarization at the expert level in Alberta was reduced, polarization was exacerbated in three respects: the mass public level in both Alberta and Canada, among political parties in Alberta and Canada, and between Alberta and the rest of Canada.

Key Findings

A window of opportunity is required to undertake a dramatic shift in energy and environmental policy. In 2015, there was a window of opportunity to introduce a robust climate change strategy in Alberta. There was the election, after 44 years of Progressive Conservative party dominance, of a new social democratic government in Alberta that wanted to do something big on energy and the environment. This was quickly followed up with the federal election of Trudeau who also committed himself to action on climate change. Importantly, Trudeau won the most Liberal seats in Alberta in 2015 since his father's first election in 1968. In addition, the newly elected Notley government benefited from the important groundwork for a climate plan in Alberta laid by Premier Jim Prentice. The CLP also shows that a controversial policy can still be resilient. After all, despite promises by the UCP government to repeal the CLP, all of its elements remain in force in some respect. However, introducing a controversial energy and environmental plan, can lead to more, not less, polarization.

IN BRIEF

The CLP process helped to create an expert consensus in Alberta, which helps to explain the CLP's policy resilience; it also exacerbated polarization at the mass public level in both Alberta and Canada, and heightened polarization between Alberta and the rest of Canada.

Several key ideas/recommendations for decision-makers grappling with energy and climate issues emerge from the CLP experience:

1. Developing a plan requires expert consultation with government, energy companies, environmental organizations, and Indigenous peoples;
2. Public consultation is also required, and
3. Creating a policy is not sufficient: an implementation plan (including communications) is necessary.

Discussion and Implications

Despite the best efforts at constructing a comprehensive energy and environmental policy, the CLP shows that there could be a backlash due to internal mistakes as well as external forces. The CLP created a large backlash in Alberta and was a major reason why the NDP lost power in 2019. This backlash was due to several reasons: a high degree of anti-tax sentiment in Alberta (the only province without a sales tax), a major economic recession in Alberta, a split between the oil and gas companies and the environmental organizations who supported the CLP and those that did not, delays in the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project, policies of the Trudeau government perceived to be anti-energy, challenges in properly communicating the CLP, the existence of a minority of Albertans who doubted the science around climate change, and the twin elections of Donald Trump in the United States and John Horgan in British Columbia.

But the CLP was also very influential in the federal government's climate change strategy. This meant that when there was a change in government in Alberta, the federal policies, which were designed as a backstop, kicked in. The CLP not only shaped Alberta's energy and environmental policies, but Canada's as well.

Relevance for Decision-Makers

Fundamental change in energy and environmental policy is possible, but it is hard work. It requires a window of opportunity, negotiations with both experts and the public, and cooperation with other orders of government. Even if a plan succeeds in some respects (policy legacy and expert consensus), the failures stand out more (higher polarization among mass public in Alberta and Canada, higher partisan polarization, and higher polarization between Alberta and the rest of Canada). More importantly, the Notley government was soundly defeated in the 2019 Alberta election. Is this a price that other political leaders will be willing to pay?

Next Step for Positive Energy

Positive Energy will be releasing additional case studies on institutional models of depolarization in the coming months.

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