Polarization over Energy and Climate: Understanding Canadian Public Opinion

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Study in Brief
This survey research demonstrates the nature of public opinion across a range of energy contexts in Canada. We distinguish between fragmented opinion, where public opinion is split but views are not strongly held, and polarized opinion, where public opinion is both split and concentrated at the extremes. Across a range of energy issues, we find areas of fragmented and polarized opinion, but also areas of agreement. We are also able to demonstrate expectations in Canada for future changes in the energy sector.

The survey was conducted amidst growing concerns over polarization leading up to Canada’s federal election. A major concern for well-functioning democracies is the existence of a common set of values amongst the populace. While disagreement is to be expected in democratic systems, a public that is highly polarized (strongly divided, sharply contrasting sets of beliefs) reduces stability and creates potentially dysfunctional governance.

The survey was conducted online between September 9-29, 2019 using Qualtrics Services. We surveyed 2,679 Canadians with five regional subsamples of over 500 (BC, Prairies, Ontario, Québec, Atlantic Canada).

Key Findings
Our initial findings focus on six primary areas, measured using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Analyzing the data across several demographic categories (age, region of residence, partisan affiliation), we identify areas of moderate agreement (green), fragmented opinion (yellow), and polarized opinion (red).

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<tr>
<th>Issue Area</th>
<th>Overall Public Opinion</th>
<th>By Party Support</th>
<th>By Region</th>
<th>By Age</th>
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<td>Canada needs to have a carbon tax that applies across the country</td>
<td>(some hardening for those opposed)</td>
<td>(Prairies and PQ polarized)</td>
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<td>Economic benefits of pipelines outweigh environmental risks</td>
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<td>Pipelines are incompatible with emissions reductions</td>
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<td>Fossil fuel development and climate commitments are compatible</td>
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<td>Nuclear energy is one of the best ways to address climate change</td>
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<td>Indigenous consent is most important concern for energy project approvals</td>
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We also asked respondents whether they preferred an aggressive transition to renewable energy or a balanced, steady approach that allows for the continued production of oil and gas. 68% of respondents favour a balanced approach. We also asked how fast people wanted that transition to occur. Overall, nearly half of respondents want to see the transition occur within the next 10 years. This jumps to 70% for respondents indicating they want an aggressive approach. Meanwhile, those opting for a balanced transition have a window of 25 years.
There was consensus among respondents on the importance of renewable energy and oil & gas to Canada’s current economy. There was a broader range of net support for the importance of oil and gas across regions. Québec was the lowest at 44% net support, and the Prairies the highest at 80%. Conversely, we found disagreement in views about the importance of nuclear to Canada’s current economy. Ontario has strong net support (48%) but Québec had overall disagreement on this issue (-9%), and other regions showed only tepid net support.

**Discussion and Implications**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Canadian opinion across virtually all issues is polarized along partisan lines. The survey results reveal, however, that opinion at the national level is either fragmented or in agreement across a range of energy and climate issues. And it is not necessarily polarized along regional and generational lines.

For example, opinion on a national carbon tax is polarized along partisan lines, but it is fragmented in aggregate, and tends towards fragmentation – not polarized – along regional and generational lines (save in the Prairies and Québec, where it tends towards polarized). We conducted additional analysis on community size, and respondents in cities and suburbs are more supportive, with regional municipalities and rural areas more opposed. Across political parties, Green Party supporters were less enthusiastic than Liberal, NDP, or BQ voters.

There is some evidence of opinion inconsistency in our results, where respondents indicate desires that potentially conflict. For instance, while we find net support for the idea that pipelines are incompatible with carbon reductions, we also have consistent, moderate support for the idea that Canada can pursue oil sands development and climate commitments simultaneously.

**Relevance for Decision-Makers**

Decision-makers in Canada face a highly challenging situation for governance and the development of a national energy strategy in the age of climate change. This is perhaps by design, as parties seek to broaden support amongst core supporters, and clearly delineate themselves from other parties. Nonetheless, decision-makers at the national and provincial levels face enormous challenges in making energy decisions that routinely require cross-provincial cooperation. Further, our research shows that Canadians believe that elites, leaders, and decision-makers are exacerbating polarization, with strong support for statements about divisions between ordinary people and elites, and the idea that ordinary people are less polarized than leaders. Sharp partisan divisions in the survey findings underscore this point.

There are, however, areas of consensus, and areas of fragmented opinion that are not polarized. Further, our early results indicate that Canadians maintain high levels of political tolerance for those who hold different political views. Governance could focus on areas of consensus by developing policy that focuses on areas of support (renewables, detailed policy for simultaneous development of oil sands and climate commitments, balanced policy on nuclear energy and Indigenous consent). Finally, political narratives that focus on benefits and costs for all Canadians may address a fragmented or polarized publics differentiated across region, age, party, and community size.

**Next Steps for Positive Energy**

We expect to add significantly to this analysis in coming months, integrating more detailed statistical analyses, and adding data on values and political tolerance scores. Positive Energy also plans to replicate this survey in the future to gain better data on the process of polarization (and depolarization). This work drives directly into Positive Energy’s ongoing work to increase understanding about polarization in energy decision-making, and to explore options for institutional modernization and governance models for consensus building.

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