Polarization over Energy and Climate in Canada: Survey Results

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Outline

- Motivation and methodology
- Context
- Carbon pricing
- Pipelines
- Energy transition

- Energy mix
- Energy and climate change
- Role of nuclear
- Indigenous consent
Motivation

1. **Energy Conflict as Unique**
   - Long-term decisions, regionalized, high up-front capital costs, linear projects, linchpin for broader economy, high environmental impacts, social acceptance, etc.

2. **The Concern for Polarization in an Energy Context**
   - Polarization in general increasing; concerns for digital information (Hoberg 2018; Kevins & Soroka 2018; Johnson 2019).

3. **Canadian Context – Public Opinion:**
1. To what extent are attitudes – across a variety of different energy and climate issues – polarized in Canada?

2. Along what dimensions and in which sectors are Canadians most fragmented?

3. Are there energy and climate issues that Canadians agree on?

4. How does public opinion and energy conflict play with expectations for change in the energy sector?
Methodology

- Online survey via Qualtrics
- Dates: Sept. 9-19 for about 90%, complete by Sept. 29
  - Caveat 1: Election context
  - Caveat 2: Early analysis, simple cuts: much more to come, multivariate, etc.
- \( n = 2679; n = 500+ \) for 5 regional subsamples
- Margin of error not applicable for this kind of panel survey
- “Net Support”
  - (strongly agree + agree) – (strongly disagree + disagree)
- Age groups
  - Silent 1928-45
  - Boomers 1946-64
  - Gen X 1965-80
  - Millennials 1981-96
  - Gen Z 1997 onwards
What Do We Mean by Polarized Opinion?

- Each example graph shows the % of respondents choosing a Likert Scale number from 1 to 7 (e.g., from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”).
- Ex. 1 shows high polarization (inverted U shape), with opinion concentrated at the extreme ends of the scale.
- Ex. 2 shows opinion that is fragmented, but relatively few take extreme positions; Ex 3. shows opinion that trends toward strong agreement.
Second Example of Polarized Opinion

1. Polarized opinion

- Each graph shows public opinion across groups; these could be regions, age groups, community type, or partisan affiliations.
- The first chart shows highly polarized opinion; The second and third show fragmentation and agreement, respectively.

2. Fragmented opinion, not polarized

3. Opinion in agreement
How important or unimportant are each of the following issues to you personally?
When it comes to energy, which of these considerations is the most important to you? (Rank the items by dragging, most important first)

- Keeping prices as low as possible
- Increasing the amount of renewable energy such as wind, hydro, and solar
- Keeping greenhouse gas emissions low
- Protecting public and worker safety
- Providing day to day reliability of energy supply
- Promoting energy conservation

Sum of Choice 1+2+3 (out of 6)
General Beliefs about Polarization (Net Support)

You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics

-41%

My country is divided between ordinary people and elites

35%

The polarized and extreme views of powerful decision-makers in the news don’t reflect the opinions of people like me

46%
Take Note

• At time of survey, energy and natural resources not as salient for public as health and affordability.

• When prompted, strong support for things like renewables and less emissions-intensive energy, but desire to keep prices low is a priority.

• Relatively high levels of political tolerance, but perception of rift between public and elites.
Carbon Tax: Support Overall

Statement: Canada needs to have a carbon tax that applies across the country
Carbon Tax: Support by Party

Statement: Canada needs to have a carbon tax that applies across the country
Carbon Tax: Support by Age

Statement: Canada needs to have a carbon tax that applies across the country
Carbon Tax: Support by Region

Statement: Canada needs to have a carbon tax that applies across the country
Carbon Tax: Net Support by Community Type

Statement: Canada needs to have a carbon tax that applies across the country
Take Note

• More support than opposition for a carbon tax overall, yet opinion is polarized along partisan lines and tends more towards fragmentation along regional lines (except Prairies and to some extent Quebec).
• Millennials/Gen Z are less polarized than other generations.
• More support than opposition (i.e., positive net support) in large cities and suburbs, more opposition than support in regional cities and rural areas.
• 7 percent of respondents did not express an opinion (“don’t know”).
Pipelines: Support Overall

Statement: The economic benefits of building new pipelines in Canada outweigh the risks from potential spills, tanker traffic, and climate change.
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Overall Support by Age:

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Take Note

- Even spread of opinion on pipeline risks and benefits, though overall, more support than opposition for the view that benefits outweigh risks.

- Polarized views evident along partisan lines, but tend more towards fragmented along regional lines (except Prairies and Quebec).

- 7 percent of respondents did not express an opinion (“don’t know”).
Pipelines and Climate: Support Overall

Statement: Building new pipelines is incompatible with Canada’s obligations to reduce carbon emissions
Statement: Building new pipelines is incompatible with Canada's obligations to reduce carbon emissions
Pipelines and Climate: Support by Age

Statement: Building new pipelines is incompatible with Canada's obligations to reduce carbon emissions
Pipelines and Climate: Support by Region

Statement: Building new pipelines is incompatible with Canada’s obligations to reduce carbon emissions
Take Note

• Overall, fragmented opinion on compatibility of pipelines and climate change commitments.

• Notably, modal category is “Neither agree nor disagree,” with an additional 11 percent indicating “don’t know.”

• Among those with an opinion, some evidence of polarized views across partisans and regions.
Statement: Which of the following is closer to your view, even if neither captures exactly how you feel?

“Some people say Canada should aggressively phase out fossil fuels and transition quickly toward lower emitting forms of energy.”

“Others say Canada should take a balanced and steady approach that allows for the continued production of oil and gas while the country gradually moves toward lower emitting energy.”
Statement: Please indicate how quickly, if at all, Canada should transition away from fossil fuels towards 100% renewable energy
Statement: Please indicate how quickly, if at all, Canada should transition away from fossil fuels towards 100% renewable energy.
Take Note

- Majority prefer balanced transition, but one in three support “aggressive” action.
- Fragmented opinion has implications for preferred timing of transition.
  - Window of 10 years for majority of “aggressive” supporters.
  - Window of 25 years for majority of “balanced” supporters.
- Overall, close to a majority want transition to 100% renewable within next decade.
- Canadians aware of the need to transition and the challenge ahead; there is agreement here.
Energy Sector Importance by Region (Net Support)

Statement: How important are each of the following sectors to Canada's current economy?
Take Note

• Majority attribute value & importance of renewables across all regions of the country.

• Less consensus on importance of oil and gas across regions, but generally, most perceive this sector to be important to the current economy.

• Fragmented opinion across the country on importance of nuclear to Canada’s current economy.
Statement: Canada can continue to develop fossil fuels such as oil sands in Alberta and still meet its climate commitments.
Fossil Fuels and Climate: Support by Party

Statement: Canada can continue to develop fossil fuels such as oil sands in Alberta and still meet its climate commitments.
Statement: Canada can continue to develop fossil fuels such as oil sands in Alberta and still meet its climate commitments
Fossil Fuels and Climate: Support by Region

Statement: Canada can continue to develop fossil fuels such as oil sands in Alberta and still meet its climate commitments.
Take Note

- Overall, moderate support for ability to develop fossil fuels like the oil sands and still meet climate commitments.

- Regional and especially partisan differentiation on this issue is more polarized.

- 9.6 percent of respondents did not express an opinion ("don’t know").
Nuclear Energy: Support Overall

Statement: Generating more nuclear energy is one of the best ways of addressing climate change
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Statement: Generating more nuclear energy is one of the best ways of addressing climate change
Nuclear Energy: Support by Region

Statement: Generating more nuclear energy is one of the best ways of addressing climate change
Take Note

• Overall opinion on nuclear as a climate solution is fragmented.

• Views on nuclear solution to climate change are somewhat polarized along partisan and regional lines.

• Quebec stands out on this issue.

• 13.6 percent of respondents did not express an opinion (“don’t know”).
Indigenous Consent: Support Overall

Statement: The consent of Indigenous peoples is the most important consideration for deciding whether or not an energy project should be approved.
Indigenous Consent: Support by Party

Statement: The consent of Indigenous peoples is the most important consideration for deciding whether or not an energy project should be approved.
Indigenous Consent: Support by Age

Statement: The consent of Indigenous peoples is the most important consideration for deciding whether or not an energy project should be approved.
Indigenous Consent: Support by Region

Statement: The consent of Indigenous peoples is the most important consideration for deciding whether or not an energy project should be approved.
Take Note

• Overall opinion on Indigenous consent is fragmented.

• Indigenous consent is polarized by region, generation, and partisan lines.

• 5 percent of respondents did not express an opinion ("don’t know").
Future Work

• More surveys to assess polarization over time
• Extensive analysis of drivers of polarization

• Analysis of
  • Values
  • Ideology
  • Tolerance & trust
  • Political sophistication & education

• Multivariate analysis

Feedback or comments

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