

ADDRESSING POLARIZATION: WHAT WORKS? CASE STUDY: THE JUST TRANSITION TASK FORCE

Author

Brendan Frank, Interim Research Director and Senior Research Associate, Positive Energy, uOttawa
Sébastien Girard Lindsay, Doctoral Candidate and Research Assistant, Positive Energy, uOttawa

Study in Brief

The phase-out of coal-fired power was agreed to by federal, provincial and territorial governments under the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change. Under this policy, Canada will eliminate coal-fired electricity by 2030. The phase-out affects four provinces: Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In 2018, the federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change commissioned Canada's Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities (the Task Force) to engage stakeholders affected by the phase-out and to provide policy recommendations to the federal government based on what it heard.

The primary aim of this case study is to identify specific attributes of the Task Force conducive to depolarizing debates over energy and climate issues in Canada, and the coal phase-out in particular. It uses the concepts of 'procedural justice' and 'distributive justice' to explore the relationship between decision-making processes and outcomes. The study is part of a series of case studies of "What Works?" when it comes to addressing polarization over energy and climate change.

The study uses both primary and secondary sources: official government documents, a media analysis of the Task Force's activities, a review of ENGO and labour organizations' responses to Task Force activities and in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the Task Force (4) and the mayor of a town that participated in consultations (1). This study is not intended to be exhaustive or conclusive, but a qualitative exploration of the Task Force and its activities.

Key Findings

To more equitably distribute the costs associated with the shift to a low-carbon economy across affected communities and society at large, it is vital that affected individuals have the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process. This is referred to as procedural justice. The Task Force was established in large part to provide communities affected by the coal phase-out with this opportunity.

Observing norms of procedural justice can reduce the risk of polarization over controversial policy choices. We identified several aspects of the Task Force's work that were consistent with the norms of procedural justice. They include a flexible, dynamic approach to consultations; going beyond technocratic dimensions of the policy problem; engaging with stakeholders in informal settings as well as formal settings; and providing a neutral, non-partisan forum for stakeholders. This final point is crucial. Positive Energy's ongoing public opinion survey research suggests that polarized opinions over energy and climate issues emerge most frequently along partisan lines. All reasonable actions to depoliticize and remove perceptions of partisanship are vital to building public trust in decision-making for energy and climate issues.

IN BRIEF

We also identified key aspects of the Task Force's work that may have increased the risk of polarization. The composition of the Task Force was vocationally representative but not geographically representative of the communities and groups with which it consulted. The Task Force's work also involved areas of both federal and provincial jurisdiction, which complicates the implementation of some of its recommendations. Lastly, the Task Force was not responsible for implementing its own recommendations. As such, its ultimate effect on polarization rests in part on what Ottawa does or does not do in response to these recommendations.

Discussion and Implications

Future applications of the task force model may help to reduce the risk of polarizing energy and climate issues in Canada. When individuals are dissatisfied with the outcome of a decision-making process, they may be more likely to accept the decision if they perceive the process used to arrive at it was fair. The opposite can also be true. Participants may be satisfied with the outcomes of a formalized process even if the process itself was not procedurally just. In situations where the procedure and the outcomes are not viewed as just, the risk of polarization is highest.

In the case of coal-fired power, a just phase-out means that the families and communities reliant upon coal do not assume a disproportionate share of the costs associated with the transition *and* have a chance to meaningfully participate in the process. The Task Force offered a road map, but ensuring a truly just transition away from coal is highly dependent upon the future actions that governments, unions, communities, and businesses alike take in response to the Task Force's recommendations.

Relevance for Decision-Makers

Procedural justice offers a useful tool for decision-makers and policymakers hoping to depolarize aspects of Canada's energy and climate dialogue. Any deliberative body seeking to inform policymaking on climate and energy issues should incorporate aspects of procedural justice into its work. Most importantly: considering the human dimensions of the policy problem in addition to its technocratic dimensions, engaging with stakeholders in both formal and informal settings, ensuring that the task force or organization is geographically and vocationally reflective of the groups it is consulting, and, critically, avoiding perceptions of partisanship or politicization.

Next Steps for Positive Energy

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

For more information, please contact Brendan Frank, Interim Research Director, Positive Energy:

Brendan.Frank@uOttawa.ca