OVERCOMING LIMITS TO CONSENSUS-BUILDING ON ENERGY AND CLIMATE

TOXIC PARTISANSHIP, US VERSUS THEM, FALSE POLARIZATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2015, no policy issue has enflamed political tensions quite like climate change. The emergence of a new but fragile consensus around "net zero by 2050" across partisan lines is a promising development. The lessons that decision-makers take from the past several years of climate and energy policy may prove decisive in meeting Canada's shorter and longer-term emissions targets. Can partisan politics play a more constructive role in this mission? How can non-partisan actors better facilitate consensus-building?

This study headlines Positive Energy's research on the models of and limits to consensus-building. It uses multiple data sources, including documentary analysis, literature reviews and in-depth interviews with 50 Canadian environmental and energy leaders to answer two research questions:

1. How did Canadian climate and energy issues come to be polarized along partisan lines?

2. What can be done to reduce, mitigate or navigate partisan polarization and enable/facilitate/build consensus?

Two major findings emerge from this study.

First, several compounding drivers have contributed to the polarization of various climate and energy issues along partisan lines. This study identifies 11 drivers under two broad categories.

Partisan/Political

- Canadian political leaders who wedged the environment against the economy, most notably during election campaigns

- The political influence of the United States, particularly altered policy priorities as a result of the 2000 and 2016 American elections

- The gap between public and decision-maker or "elite" opinion, which reduces representativeness in political decision-making and continues to add to the challenge of public confidence in energy and climate decision-making

- The hardening and fusing of political and social identities since the 1990s, resulting in better sorted, less ideologically diverse party bases and the clustering of party support by province, education, population density, etc.

- The rise of negative/toxic partisanship in Canada and abroad

- Negative polarization among the general public, broadly characterized by growing dislike for out-groups (including partisan opponents)

- False polarization, perpetuated by many of the above drivers

Socioeconomic, Cultural and Technological

- A growing misinformation ecosystem facilitated by digital technologies and Web 2.0

- The emergence of the oil sands as a symbol of the environmental costs of oil and gas production domestically and abroad

- Economic volatility in Alberta, particularly slowdowns that some Albertans view as attributable to federal policy

- The influence of global finance, academia and civil society, including growing calls for more aggressive climate action

On the question of when energy and climate change policy started to polarize, participants provided 16 unique answers. The most common answers, in order of priority, were the 2008 federal election, the National Energy Program, and the Kyoto Protocol. On the question of when polarization over energy and climate change policy *worsened*, participants provided 39 unique answers. The most common answers, in order of priority, were the 2019 Alberta election, the 2008 federal election, and the 2019 federal election.

The second major finding from this study identifies three common drivers of polarization that function as limits to consensus-building:

1. Toxic partisanship (dislike for partisan opponents to the point where civility and bipartisanship become difficult or impossible)

Our findings suggest that sufficiently strong partisanship— i.e., toxic partisanship—is a genuine limit to consensus-building. The gradual decline of civility, loss of trust, and increasing difficulty of leading or brokering bipartisan cooperation all have broader policy implications, but the risk to Canada's net zero ambitions should not be understated.

Rather than renounce or play down their partisan stripes, political actors can set an important example and diffuse in-group, us versus them mentalities by debating, collaborating, and co-developing initiatives—civilly and publicly—with partisan opponents. Non-political actors can also aid in these efforts by working as honest brokers, mediators and facilitators of cross-partisanship.

2. Negative polarization (dislike or hatred for out-groups, including but not limited to partisan out-groups; often associated with "us versus them" thinking)

Diffusing us versus them requires an understanding of what activates this mentality to begin with. This paper samples a few findings from the social psychology literature—a field which has exploded in recent decades and offers a roadmap for anyone looking to polarize and activate us versus them mindsets. However, it is also increasingly offering antidotes for polarization. Actors who understand how these tactics are used to factionalize are better equipped to defend against them.

3. False polarization (incorrect perceptions of the true extent of polarization)

False polarization can generate feedback loops, leading individuals to believe they have far less in common with their political opposition than they do in reality. This is a key challenge in the energy and climate debate, and emerging literature offers a number of tactics to expose false polarization and foster more productive conversations.

The axiom that facts are not enough to change minds is only part of the story. Providing more information about the beliefs of political opponents, focusing on the consequences of policies rather than the values that underpin them, and inducing sadness rather than anger on emotionally fraught policy topics, can all help in different contexts.

This third and final research stream of Positive Energy's second phase focuses on identifying models of and limits to consensus-building. Core to this is the challenge of identifying what decision-makers and leaders understand "consensus" to be.

Analysis of the interview data revealed several important divergences on the language of consensus. Participants disagreed whether climate change and energy policies have been drivers of partisan polarization in Canada or merely proxies for longstanding conflicts and many of the broader societal and political drivers listed above. There was also a deeper, more fundamental divergence on the desirability of consensus, and the extent to which consensus on these issues has ever existed in Canada.

TABLE 1: IS CONSENSUS DESIRABLE? RESPONSES OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

	Consensus is not necessarily desirable	Consensus is desirable	Polarization is inevitable
We have lost consensus	10%	38%	10%
We never had consensus	16%	22%	4%
n=50			

A minority of participants who believed Canada has never had consensus on energy or climate also said that consensus is not necessarily desirable (8 of 50). This perspective reflects the challenge of polarized contexts: a minority who either believe that certain ideological or political positions are unworthy of negotiation or compromise.

Despite the partisan tensions of the last several years, there was some agreement on the solution space for these issues. The post-COVID paradigm on federal energy and climate policy is in its early stages, but this analysis suggests that it possesses several important features that have support across partisan lines:

1. Cross-party consensus on net zero emissions by 2050 (or sooner)

2. Consensus on market-based policies like industrial carbon pricing, with some disagreement on the price path and use of revenues; the consensus on retail carbon pricing remains vulnerable

3. Consensus on clean tech broadly, with reasonable consensus among Liberals and Conservatives on energy sources like next-generation nuclear, blue hydrogen and natural gas

These concepts are a potential basis for cross-partisan collaboration on Canada's energy and climate future. Engaged actors have the beginnings of an important political consensus to work with, but time is short to build policy around that consensus. By offering a mix of policies that appear less vulnerable to partisan polarization and tactics that can be used to overcome polarized contexts, this study aims to help equip decision-makers for the challenges ahead.

INTRODUCTION

"Net zero emissions by 2050" has quickly gained broad acceptance across partisan lines. Taking Canada's political parties at their word, this is a hugely promising development. Yet since 2015, no policy issue has enflamed partisan tensions quite like energy and climate change. Politicians have built entire electoral campaigns around promises to undo or fight energy infrastructure decisions and policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Incoming governments have largely delivered on those promises. The federal carbon price and the Trans Mountain Expansion Project, the basis for an implicit "grand bargain" between the federal government and the provinces, are two high-profile examples.

The federation's longstanding regional and cultural conflicts will endure, and they will find new proxies in the years to come. Eliminating or offsetting greenhouse gas emissions across the Canadian economy—and the equally vital, interconnected challenges of energy security, reconciliation, and regulatory reform—will involve a far more consequential set of policy choices with sharper trade-offs and tighter timelines. How to start proactively building consensus around the organizing principle of net zero and the difficult infrastructure and policy decisions that await? Can partisan politics play a more constructive role in this mission?

This study headlines Positive Energy's research on the models of and limits to consensus-building (see Box 1), and follows our research on the causes and severity of polarization around energy decision-making.

Through examination of the broad collection of psychological and societal behaviours that "polarization" describes, this study identifies important limits to consensus-building processes in an environment where several high-profile energy and climate issues have polarized along partisan lines. Data sources include publicly available documents, scholarly and grey literature and in-depth interviews with 50 Canadian environmental and energy leaders (see Appendix 1). We asked two research questions:

1. How did Canadian climate and energy issues come to be polarized along partisan lines?

2. What can be done to reduce, mitigate or navigate partisan polarization and enable/facilitate/build consensus?

We identify **11** influential drivers of polarization. These drivers emerged from qualitative analysis of the history of Canadian energy and climate politics as told by participants. After laying out a multi-decade timeline of events, we analyze the interview data to evaluate how participants view this history, how they think about the language of "polarization" and "consensus", and the extent to which they actually want to work with their ideological and partisan counterparts. From these analyses, we identify three limits to consensus-building processes that flow from partisan politics and that are potentially tractable in the Canadian context (**toxic partisanship, negative polarization,** and **false polarization**). We conclude by positioning our findings within Positive Energy's broader body of work to offer novel insights for decision-makers keen to seize upon the current cross-partisan consensus on net zero by 2050.

BOX 1: POSITIVE ENERGY'S RESEARCH ON CONSENSUS-BUILDING

The second three-year phase of Positive Energy (2019-2021) aims to address the following question: How can Canada, an energy-intensive federal democracy with a large resource base, build and maintain public confidence in public authorities (federal, provincial, and territorial policymakers and regulators, Indigenous governments, municipal governments and the courts) making decisions about the country's energy future in an age of climate change?

Three fundamental questions form the research and engagement agenda. How can Canada navigate, address and overcome polarization over its energy future? What are the respective roles and responsibilities among policymakers, regulators, the courts, municipalities and Indigenous governments, when it comes to decision-making? What are the models of and limits to consensus-building on energy decisions?

Consensus-based, inclusive, and transparent decision-making is a pillar of democratic society and key to building public confidence. But amid partisan polarization, regional differences and a continued lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, it is not always clear how to build consensus. What does consensus mean in the Canadian energy and climate context? What tools and approaches to consensus-building should public authorities use to build public confidence, and what are their limits?

Informed by our work on polarization and roles and responsibilities, projects in the consensus-building research stream address the crucial question: *How to decide?* We explore this question through the lens of Positive Energy's bedrock principles of *Informed Reform* and *Durable Balance.*

The consensus-building research programme includes projects in the following areas:

- Understanding consensus-building
    A literature review on models of and limits to consensus-building

- Consensus-building at the national level
    Overcoming Limits to Consensus-Building on Energy and Climate: Toxic Partisanship, Us versus Them, False Polarization (this report)
    Research and evidence as a tool for consensus-building: a case study of Canada's Ecofiscal Commission to identify 'What Works?'
    Independent government advisory bodies as a tool for consensus-building: a case study of the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy to identify 'What Works?'
    An exploratory study of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles in energy and climate decision-making

- Consensus-building at the local level
    Support for a First Nations Major Projects Coalition study examining environmental, social, and governance (ESG) investment standards from an Indigenous perspective
    Provincial government efforts to build consensus around wind power development: How effective are different tools?

BACKGROUND: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Much like "energy"[1] and "transition"[2] , "partisanship", "polarization" and "consensus" operate as umbrella terms in the literature and the public discourse. Answering research questions involving these words requires a critical examination of the assumptions underlying their use.

PARTISANSHIP

Partisanship describes affinity or support for a specific political party. It can offer an important sense of identity and belonging (Caruana et al. 2015; West and Iyengar 2020). At its most generic, identity is a conception of "in-group" status based on shared features or traits that differentiate someone from an "out-group" (Tajfel 1981; Dovidio et al. 2008).

Like other sources of identity, partisan identity varies in strength. Officials who collect a salary from, regularly donate to, volunteer with or vote for a political party typically have stronger partisan (i.e., Big-L Liberal or Big-C Conservative) or ideological (i.e., small-l liberal or small-c conservative) identities than individuals who interact less regularly with partisan politics. Several scholars have noted the rise of toxic partisanship in Canadian politics over the past 15 years (Dornan 2011; Johnston 2019; Boxell et al. 2020), defined by Moore-Berg et al. as a state of "unforgiving partisan rancor, diminished bipartisan collaboration, and intractable partisan conflict" (2020, p.199). This decline of respect and trust among political opponents is not unique to Canada (Shanto and Westwood 2015).

Stronger identification with a political in-group makes it likelier that individuals will dehumanize members of partisan out-groups (Cassese 2021). Partisan spaces also generally have fewer social guardrails. Whereas discrimination based on gender, race or other identities generates social pushback, open contempt or mockery of partisan opposition has become a norm in partisan spaces and can even be beneficial for in-group social status (Iyengar et al. 2019; Moore-Berg et al. 2020; Sheffer 2020). As Mason notes: "The strength of a person's identification with his or her party affects how biased, active, and angry that person is, even if that person's issue positions are moderate" (2015, p.132).

Individuals who hold different identities often respond to new information differently, using mental shortcuts to arrive at distinct conclusions (Kahan 2012; Cleland and Gattinger 2019). New conceptual models argue that the mind is more like an immune system than a computer processor, defending its owner from information that may conflict with deeply held beliefs or that risk social ostracism (Mandelbaum 2019). This "motivated reasoning", including partisan bias, occurs not with the primary goal of truth-seeking but the highly rational goal of self-preservation and maintenance of in-group status.

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1. Other Positive Energy studies use an all-encompassing definition of the term "energy" that applies to all sources and aspects of Canada's energy systems (see: Cleland and Gattinger 2021). This study uses a narrower definition. Unless otherwise noted, references to "energy issues" only include issues where there is evidence of polarization along partisan lines (e.g., oil and gas production and specific megaprojects).
2. See: Beck with Richard 2020

POLARIZATION

Polarization is distinct from being "polarized". While it is relatively easy to assess whether two populations are polariz*ing*, there is no agreed upon threshold or standard to determine whether two populations are polariz*ed* (Bird et al. 2019a). One potential definition of "polarized" has emerged from Positive Energy's work: two subgroups that have reached a sufficiently hardened or extreme state, to the point where consensus-building becomes difficult or impossible (Bird et al. 2019b; Bratt 2020).

The core focus of this study is partisan polarization, which describes divergences between members and supporters of different political parties. However, there are a number of distinct ways in which partisan groups can diverge. This study will discuss five different "manifestations" of polarization that are relevant for understanding trends in public opinion on climate and energy issues, and considers their influence both inside and outside of partisan contexts. It builds upon vocabulary developed and refined by Mason (2015), Lelkes (2016), Bird et al. (2019a), and Beck with Richard (2020).

1. Negative polarization

2. False polarization

3. Issue polarization

4. Ideological polarization

5. Sorting

Negative polarization describes growing dislike for members of an out-group, and is also known as negative affect, affective polarization, or in the context of partisan politics, negative partisanship (Caruana et al. 2015; Johnston 2019). Toxic partisanship is one potential symptom of negatively polarized political parties. At the individual or societal levels, sufficiently extreme negative affect is often reality-altering, manifesting as fear, hatred, violence or loss of commitment to democratic principles (Sniderman et al. 1993; Isbell et al. 2006; Van Bavel and Periera 2018; Kalmoe and Mason 2019; Ridge 2020).

The rise of negative polarization in Canada and abroad is well documented (Cochrane 2015; Owen et al. 2019; Aguirre 2020; Boxell et al. 2020). In Canada, rising negative partisanship dates back to at least 1988 (Johnston 2019). Most surveys measure negative affect by quantifying how respondents feel about specific in-groups or out-groups (warmth, affinity, dislike, etc.) using numerical scales (see: Lauka et al. 2018; Owen et al. 2019; Knudsen 2021)

False polarization describes perceptions of increasing polarization among two or more groups, whether those groups are polarizing or not (Lelkes 2016; Moore-Berg et al. 2020). In other words, it is a bias that leads groups to think that they are more polarized (negatively or otherwise) than they actually are (see: Levendusky and Maholtra 2013; 2016; Owen et al. 2019).

False polarization leads to positive feedback loops that can make other forms of polarization worse. As Fernbach and Van Boven (2022, p.1) note: "'false polarization' is insidious because it reinforces actual polarization and inhibits compromise." There is a fast-growing body of research showing that individuals tend to pessimistically exaggerate their political opponents' ideologies and motives, based on heuristics like oversimplification and categorical thinking (Ward and Tavits 2019; Moore-Berg et al. 2020; Lees and Cikara 2021). More recent literature explores tactics for overcoming these psychological tendencies, including providing more information about the beliefs of political opponents, focusing on the consequences of policy rather than values, and inducing sadness rather than anger on emotionally fraught policy topics (Fernbach and Van Boven 2022).

Issue polarization is a divergence from moderate or non-existent positions on a particular issue to more extreme positions (Mason 2013). The more easily an issue collapses into a yes-no binary (e.g., megaprojects, carbon pricing), the more vulnerable it is to issue polarization.

In environments with high negative affect, issue polarization is often instantaneous. Individuals who dislike a particular messenger are far likelier to reject that messenger's ideas out of hand, even if the ideas are otherwise consistent with that individual's ideology (Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Kahan et al. 2012; Toff and Suhay 2019; Barthold 2020).

Ideological polarization is a deeper form of polarization characterized by a divergence in collective ideology or worldview across two or more groups. There is little evidence to suggest that ideological polarization is occurring within the general public; Canadians overwhelmingly identify as ideologically moderate (Merkley 2020; Nanos for Positive Energy 2021). However, "elite" ideological polarization, including among political leaders, has been occurring over several decades in both the US and Canada and is well documented in the literature (Druckman et al. 2013; McCright et al. 2014). Positive Energy's research on the language of "transition" illustrates how certain ideological divergences among decision-makers in Canada have led to vastly different interpretation of widely-used terms (Beck with Richard 2020).

Sorting refers to processes within specific groups that lead to greater uniformity and alignment across beliefs, identities, or values when compared to other groups. Partisan sorting manifests as a stronger correlation between partisan identity, ideology and vote and has been underway in Canada since at least 1992 (Kevins and Soroka 2018; Aguirre 2020). At the political level, one indicator of this partisan sorting is the decline of "Blue Grits" and "Red Tories". Put another way, parties and their bases have become more homogenous.

The findings from this study indicate that participants believe partisan politics are contributing to *negative polarization* and *false polarization* both within partisan settings and within the public discourse.

CONSENSUS-BUILDING

Scholars and practitioners have grappled with the vagueness of the term "consensus" for decades, and various disciplines define it differently (see: DeGroot 1974; Fink et al. 1984; Oreskes 2004; Oppenheimer et al. 2007). On questions of public policy or governance, consensus sometimes entails little more than pluralities or bare majorities. Scientific consensus, on the other hand, often requires something closer to unanimity. However, much like the distinction between "polarization" and "polarized", this study conceives of consensus-building as the process of moving toward greater levels of agreement. Subsequent sections will explore the challenges of defining when a group has reached "consensus", including competing perceptions of when a decision is final.

Canadian literature has identified good practices for building consensus on environmental and energy policies in polarized contexts, including collaborative, inclusive and participant-designed processes, with trusted arbiters and mechanisms to correct past injustices (Cormick et al. 1996; Sidaway 2013; Cleland et al. 2016; Frank and Girard Lindsay 2020). More recent literature suggests that the pipeline-for-climate-policy trade did not adhere to the spirit of these principles and struggled with durability because it linked two distinct policies that engaged two highly polarized segments of the electorate (Nisbet 2020).

Recent work on depolarizing controversial policies proposes similar strategies, starting with deliberative consultation processes based on preapproved rules of engagement that explore all issue perspectives, with an emphasis on logic and reason. The shared narratives that emerge can help inform policymaking by identifying new frames, inputs, and points of commonality (Lenihan et al. 2020). Consensus-building exercises that start by "priming" participants around shared identities have also proven effective in overcoming negative polarization by actively diffusing "us versus them" biases (Levendusky 2018). Other scholars have argued for particular models of civic discourse as a way to build trust and reorient perspectives, not necessarily with the goal of building consensus but rather promoting understanding (Barthold 2020). Canadian initiatives have sought to apply similar principles to polarized conversations about energy and climate change. Most notably, the Alberta Narratives Project has found that language that speaks to values and identity, never deals in absolutes, establishes common values upfront, and relies on trusted messengers is far more likely to build consensus effectively (Marshall et al. 2018).

It is a common misconception that better and more accurate information about an issue can help to build consensus among polarized groups. The opposite is often true. In the case of climate change, exposure to stories about the impacts of climate change can actually increase partisan polarization on government action (Hart and Nisbet 2012; Druckman and McGrath 2019). In the presence of increasingly bubbled-off information ecosystems (Kaakinen et al. 2020), this remains a serious challenge for decision-makers.

As this study will discuss, addressing polarization over energy and climate issues cannot occur in a silo. Reform to Canada's energy systems is unlikely to be truly informed if it fails to address broader underlying sources of discontent. As McCoy and Somer (2021, p.8) note regarding the overall state of polarization in democratic nations:

> *"Shifting the logic of polarization from a vicious cycle to a virtuous one will require responding to the underlying grievances and deficiencies in representation, welfare, governance, and inclusion that made societies receptive to polarizing strategies in the first place."*

ENERGY AND CLIMATE POLITICS

Public opinion on climate change—its existence and the desirable scope and pace of action—sits neatly on the traditional left-right spectrum (Dalton 2009). Positive Energy's ongoing survey work has corroborated this finding (Bird et al. 2019a; Nanos for Positive Energy 2020). Scholarly literature has identified partisan affiliation as a uniquely strong predictor of public opinion on a number of climate and energy-related questions (Smith and Mayer 2019). Other studies have found links between populist leanings (Huber 2020), free-market preferences (Cook and Lewandowsky 2016) and climate skepticism, and concern over climate change is likewise correlated to support for renewable energy and opposition to hydrocarbons (Olson-Hazboun et al 2018). In addition, "primes" or "cues" from leaders and decision-makers (who have grown more ideologically polarized in recent decades) appear to have a strong influence on public opinion on climate change (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Van Boven and Sherman 2021).

Most energy issues do not seem to occupy the left-right spectrum the way climate change does. Exceptions include some aspects of oil and gas (Nanos for Positive Energy 2020; Nanos for Positive Energy 2021) and cases where there is an emphasis on the environmental dimensions of an energy-related issue—e.g., discussing the climate implications of an energy policy instead of the economic implications (Gromet et al. 2013; Hoffarth and Hodson 2016). A complex set of factors influence opinion on energy issues, including the specific energy source, geographic proximity (Sherren et al. 2019), language, framing and risk perception (Clarke et al. 2015; Clarke et al. 2016).

In the broadest possible terms, ideological liberalism and conservatism can be understood as psychological preferences for change or stability, respectively (Carney et al. 2008; Jost 2017). When conservative preferences for order and stability are violated, it can result in a heightened threat bias (Cararro et al. 2011; Lilienfeld and Laltzman 2014). Ideological liberals also behave more conservatively in the presence of elevated threats, particularly when there is risk of disproportionate harm to marginalized or vulnerable groups (Nail et al. 2009; Sterling et al. 2019). Ideological conservatives are simply likelier to greet a destabilizing, highly complex, long-term environmental challenge with skepticism. If the problem is not actually a problem, then no solutions are necessary—particularly solutions that are incompatible with ideological priors on the desirable role of government, taxation, and market intervention.

METHODS

The findings in this report are based on research conducted in two main phases. Phase I consisted of documentary analysis, reviews of scholarly and grey literature, and background discussions with several long-time observers of energy and climate politics. Document analysis included election platforms of major federal parties dating back to 1984, archival media coverage of elections and major political events, electoral results and voting patterns dating back to 1921, and Hansard analysis of specific terms related to energy and climate policy starting in 2006. Scholarly literature reviews covered Canadian elections dating back to 1984, Canadian federalism, political polarization and social psychology. Phase I of the project informed Phase II, including the choice of participants (see Appendix 1) and the final interview guide (see Appendix 2).

Phase II of the project consisted of 50 qualitative, semi-structured interviews, which occurred between February and September 2021. Participants were senior and emerging leaders with experience spanning partisan politics, civil society, the private sector, public service, academia, and journalism. We selected participants capable of providing a wide range of perspectives, with emphasis on regional and sectoral diversity. Interviews explored three key areas: the origins and nature of partisan polarization over energy and climate change, polarization as an obstacle to consensus-building, and building consensus in polarized contexts. Interviews occurred on a "confidential but not anonymous" basis, with participants agreeing to publicly disclose their names provided that the contents of their interviews not be associated with their name in reporting. We used a combination of inductive and deductive analysis to code interview transcripts and develop key themes.[3]

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3. Our approach to the research evolved as the project progressed. The review of election platforms proved helpful in constructing the timeline in the Findings and Analysis section. However, there were very few mentions of the role of election platforms in polarizing energy and climate issues during Phase II. As such, we have largely excluded discussion of election platforms from this analysis. Keyword scans in Hansard were also abandoned early on as they were offering limited insights into the how or the what of the research questions. In addition, while partisan politics still forms the basis for the analysis, the initial frame of "partisan polarization" also broadened over the course of the study. A sizeable portion of the analysis now considers partisan polarization in the context of its relationship to other manifestations of polarization (described above).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Two major findings emerge from this study.

First, several compounding drivers have contributed to the polarization of various climate and energy issues along partisan lines. This study identifies 11 drivers, clustered around two broad themes. The most thematically prominent drivers in the interview data were political leaders, misinformation, the gap between public opinion and decision-maker opinion, and correlations between partisanship, ideology and geography. All drivers have varied in intensity over time.

Second, this study identifies three common drivers of polarization that function as limits to consensus-building. All three are tractable to a certain extent: toxic partisanship (dislike for partisan opponents to the point where civility and bipartisanship become difficult or impossible), negative affect (dislike or hatred for out-groups, including but not limited to partisan out-groups; often associated with "us versus them" thinking), and false polarization (incorrect perceptions of polarization).

These limits affect far more policy areas than just climate change and energy policy. There were fundamental divergences among interviewees on the subject of consensus-building, including whether consensus is a desirable outcome for climate and energy policy, and the extent to which consensus has ever existed.

The following subsections unpack these answers to the research questions in turn:

1. How did Canadian climate and energy issues come to be polarized along partisan lines?

2. What can be done to reduce, mitigate or navigate partisan polarization and enable/facilitate/build consensus?

HOW DID ENERGY AND CLIMATE POLITICS BECOME POLARIZED IN CANADA?

Among participants, 46 of 50 agreed that climate and energy issues were polarized along partisan lines. Asked when the polarization began and what events made it worse, participants mentioned 42 discrete events (see Figure 1). Inductive analysis of the interview data identified 11 important drivers behind these events, clustered around two broad themes.

Partisan/Political

Less Tractable

- Canadian political leaders who wedged the environment against the economy, most notably during election campaigns

- The political influence of the United States, particularly altered policy priorities as a result of the 2000 and 2016 American elections

- The gap between public and decision-maker or "elite" opinion, which reduces representativeness and continues to add to the challenge of public confidence in decision-making of all kinds, including energy

- The hardening and fusing of political and social identities since the 1990s, resulting in better sorted, less ideologically diverse party bases and the clustering of party support by province, education, population, density, etc.
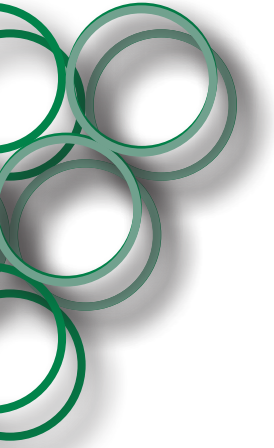
More Tractable

- The rise of toxic partisanship in Canada and abroad

- Negative polarization among the broader public, characterized by growing dislike for out-groups and "us versus them" thinking (including partisan opponents)

- False polarization, perpetuated by many of the above drivers

Socioeconomic, Cultural, and Technological

- A growing misinformation ecosystem facilitated by digital technologies and Web 2.0[4]

- The emergence of the oil sands as a symbol of the environmental costs of oil and gas production domestically and abroad

- Economic volatility in Alberta, particularly slowdowns that some Albertans view as attributable to federal policy

- The influence of global finance, academia and civil society, including growing calls for more aggressive climate action

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4. Web 2.0 was a paradigm shift from the static, "read-only" world wide web of the 1990s. Web 2.0's emphasis on ease of use and participation facilitated an explosion of user-generated content, allowing early social media platforms such as MySpace and Youtube to flourish and paving the way for Facebook, Twitter, etc. (Murugesan 2007). Web 3.0, still in its infancy, emphasizes decentralization and democratization through innovations like blockchain, crypto-currencies, and widespread use of machine learning (Rudman and Rikus 2016). The challenges and opportunities that Web 3.0 pose to public confidence in energy decision-making merit further study.

Drivers or proxies?

There is substantial interaction across these drivers. Importantly, several are self-reinforcing. The qualitative data reflects these tensions: participants disagreed whether climate change and energy policies have been drivers of partisan polarization in Canada or merely proxies for longstanding conflicts and many of the broader societal and political trends described above:

About half of participants (26 of 50) **stated or implied** these policies are **a driver** of polarization in Canada.

> *"[Conservative parties] are doing what democratic political parties are supposed to do. They're giving voice to the interests of the people they represent, which is very much not to have a carbon tax."*

> *"It just speaks to just how divisive it is because you say 'carbon tax' or 'Trudeau' here in Alberta, some people just spit on the ground... If you're attacking the oil industry, you're attacking the province."*

More than one quarter of participants (14 of 50) **stated or implied** these policies are **a proxy** for polarization in Canada.

> *"I think that with energy and climate, there are legitimate differences, but it's just the branch on which the polarization bird has happened to land."*

> *"The way that politicians talk about politics is never actually about policy details. It's about the emotion, it's about beating the other side. I can imagine partisan operatives would be mad at this statement, but I genuinely think it's devoid of substance. The substance is 'how do we win, how do we beat the other team?' Not any of the climate stuff."*

One fifth of participants (10 of 50) **stated or implied** that these policies are **both** a proxy for and driver of polarization in Canada.

> *"You could say the desire for wedge issues, which is part of polarization, took advantage of the carbon tax and pipelines. But it's been a bit of a vicious circle."*

The view that energy and climate policies are a driver of polarization was somewhat more common among participants based in oil-producing provinces (particularly Alberta) and among participants with experience in politics or non-government organizations who focus on climate change in their work.

A timeline of events

As Figure 1 shows, participants provided 16 unique answers to the question of when energy and climate change policy started to polarize. Three answers stood out:

- The 2008 federal election, specifically Liberal leader Stéphane Dion's decision to run on climate action and place a revenue-neutral carbon price at the centre of his party's platform

- The National Energy Program in the early 1980s
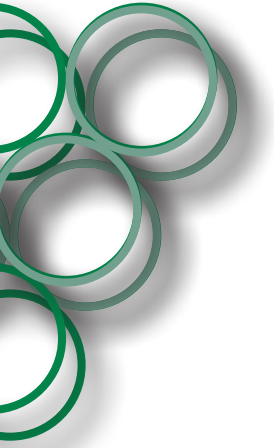
- The Kyoto Protocol in the late 1990s

Four additional answers received more than one response:

- Industry disinformation campaigns designed to confuse the public about climate change from the late 1970s onwards

- The merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party in 2003

- The placement of the oil sands mining truck at the National Mall in Washington, DC in 2006, which attracted unprecedented international attention and scrutiny to the oil sands

- Doug Ford's successful campaign for the leadership of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives in 2018, which he built around dismantling the province's cap-and-trade system
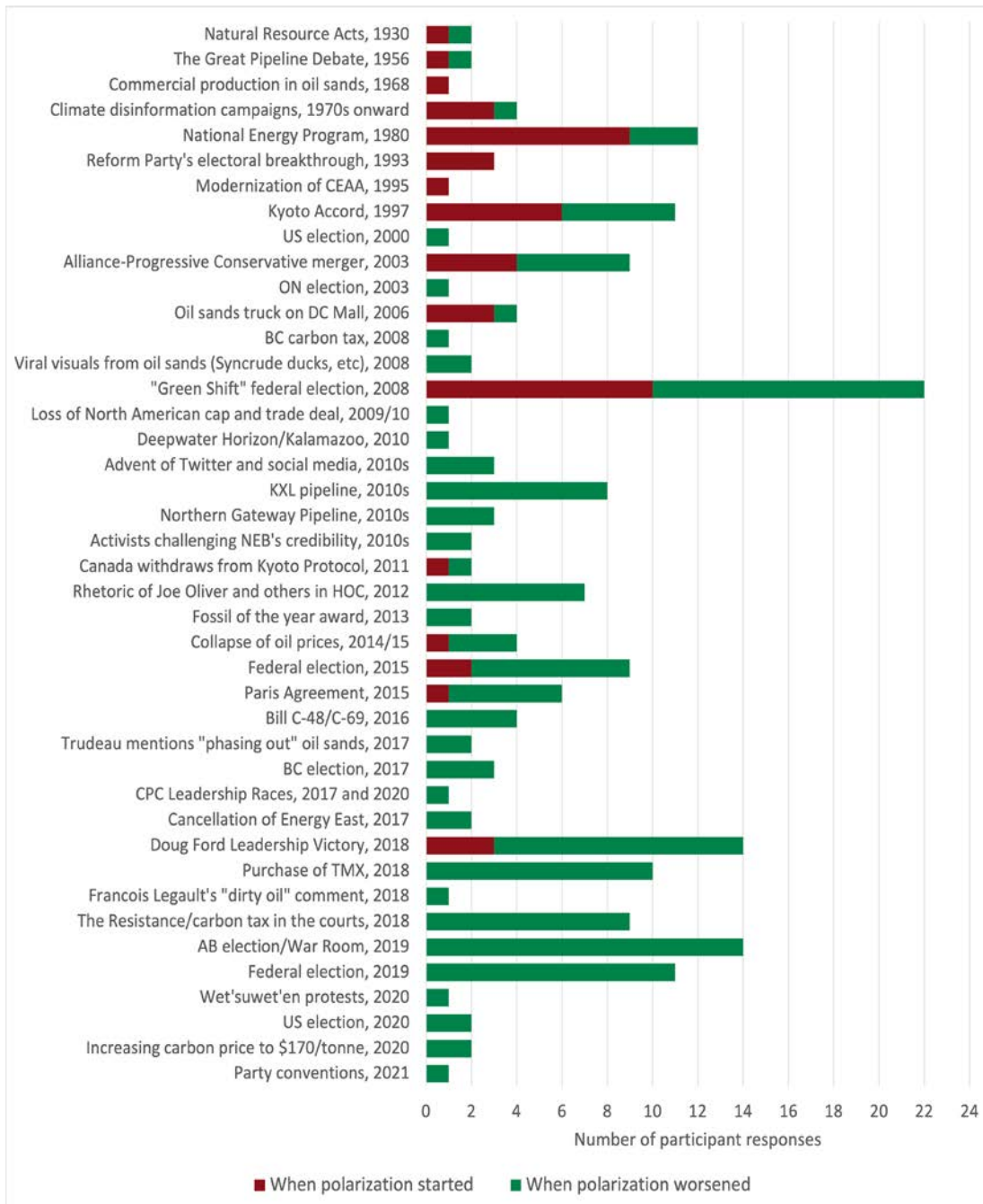
Some participants declined to offer a specific event for the origins and instead referred to eras or windows of time.

Asked when polarization over energy and climate policy started to worsen, participants provided 39 unique answers. Five answers received more than ten responses; four explicitly relate to partisan politics:

- The 2019 Alberta election and the policy positions and rhetoric of United Conservative candidates, and subsequent establishment of the "Energy War Room" (aka the Canadian Energy Centre)

- The 2008 federal election

- The 2019 federal election, viewed by many from across the political spectrum as a referendum on the federal carbon price

- Doug Ford's successful leadership campaign to replace Patrick Brown as leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives, which featured a pledge to repeal Ontario's "cap-and-trade carbon tax" at its centre

- The federal government's purchase of the Trans Mountain Pipeline and the rights to the Expansion Project (TMX) in 2018

FIGURE 1: A TIMELINE OF POLARIZING EVENTS ON ENERGY AND CLIMATE ISSUES IN CANADA

Natural Resource Acts, 1930
The Great Pipeline Debate, 1956
Commercial production in oil sands, 1968
Climate disinformation campaigns, 1970s onward
National Energy Program, 1980
Reform Party's electoral breakthrough, 1993
Modernization of CEAA, 1995
Kyoto Accord, 1997
US election, 2000
Alliance-Progressive Conservative merger, 2003
ON election, 2003
Oil sands truck on DC Mall, 2006
BC carbon tax, 2008
Viral visuals from oil sands (Syncrude ducks, etc), 2008
"Green Shift" federal election, 2008
Loss of North American cap and trade deal, 2009/10
Deepwater Horizon/Kalamazoo, 2010
Advent of Twitter and social media, 2010s
KXL pipeline, 2010s
Northern Gateway Pipeline, 2010s
Activists challenging NEB's credibility, 2010s
Canada withdraws from Kyoto Protocol, 2011
Rhetoric of Joe Oliver and others in HOC, 2012
Fossil of the year award, 2013
Collapse of oil prices, 2014/15
Federal election, 2015
Paris Agreement, 2015
Bill C-48/C-69, 2016
Trudeau mentions "phasing out" oil sands, 2017
BC election, 2017
CPC Leadership Races, 2017 and 2020
Cancellation of Energy East, 2017
Doug Ford Leadership Victory, 2018
Purchase of TMX, 2018
Francois Legault's "dirty oil" comment, 2018
The Resistance/carbon tax in the courts, 2018
AB election/War Room, 2019
Federal election, 2019
Wet'suwet'en protests, 2020
US election, 2020
Increasing carbon price to $170/tonne, 2020
Party conventions, 2021

Number of participant responses

■ When polarization started   ■ When polarization worsened

The analysis below is informed by the interviews and supplemented by scholarly literature and supporting documentation where noted. It is structured chronologically based on the timeline of events in Figure 1. Periods are roughly demarcated based on federal election outcomes, which have brought about substantial shifts in energy and climate policy.
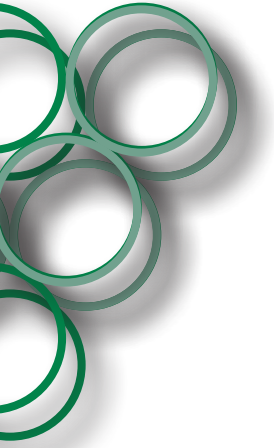
Energy origin story (1905-1967)

The Natural Resources Acts of 1930 granted the four western provinces control over forests, minerals and fossil fuels on Crown land. The boundaries of this arrangement have been a source of conflict ever since, particularly on environment issues where jurisdiction is often ambiguous or overlapping. Oil and gas have been proxies for these federal-provincial conflicts on numerous occasions, though other natural resources occasionally serve this role as well.

Alberta, and Saskatchewan to a lesser extent, have driven a disproportionate share of Canada's populist political movements over the past 100 years. The West first channeled this energy via the agrarian Progressive Party, which broke the partisan duopoly in federal politics and became official opposition to William Lyon McKenzie King's Liberals in 1921 (Leithner 1993). This is the first example of a third party emerging as a result of issue polarization—in this case, free trade with the United States. The Progressives were followed by the United Farmers of Alberta in 1925/26, and Social Credit and the Co-operative Commonwealth in 1935.

Third parties have functioned as a safety valve against serious political polarization at the federal level, an oft-used remedy for anti-party sentiment, and a driver of issue polarization and prioritization as a result (Leithner 1993). The trade-off is that issues prioritized by third parties tend to polarize faster, particularly along regional lines (Bélanger 2004; Johnston 2019).

The most infamous energy dispute prior to the commercialization of the oil sands was the Great Pipeline Debate of 1956. To complete the TransCanada pipeline, which moves natural gas from Alberta deep into Québec, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent took several actions that ended up sparking a constitutional crisis, closing off debate on a bill to accelerate the pipeline's construction by suspending Parliament. As one academic participant noted:

> *"We don't shut down Parliament for six months over energy infrastructure anymore, so we're considerably less polarized now than we were then. We've improved since largely because Diefenbaker turned it from a partisan issue to a regulatory issue. The creation of the NEB was one of the wisest decisions in Canadian political history."*

The public backlash played a major role in ending 21 years of consecutive Liberal governments. John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives lost the popular vote but edged out St. Laurent's Liberals by seven seats in the 1957 federal election. Diefenbaker established the National Energy Board in 1959 to insulate energy infrastructure decisions from political interference (for more detail on the Great Pipeline Debate, the formation of the NEB, and the evolution of its mandate, see Thomson 2020).

The oil sands and the NEP (1967-84)

After decades of effort to unlock the resource, the oil sands' first commercial operations began in 1967. From the start of the 1973 OPEC crisis to the Iranian revolution in 1979, a barrel of West Texas Intermediate crude oil surged from $22 to $130.
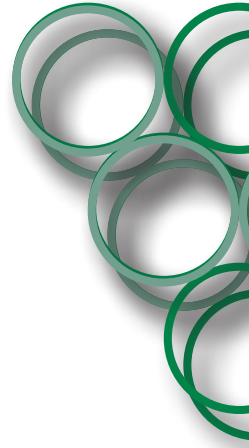
With a fresh majority government and all-time high oil prices, Pierre Trudeau's Liberals tabled key features of the National Energy Program (NEP) in their 1980 budget. This quasi-nationalization of oil production included a "made-in-Canada" oil price set below world prices, taxes on natural gas exports and petroleum and gas revenues, various incentives for oil and alternative energy development, and the creation of the Crown corporation Petro-Canada to which all new and existing projects on Crown lands were required to surrender a 25 percent ownership stake (Bratt 2021).

The National Energy Program fuelled negative polarization in Alberta and oil-producing provinces, where it was widely perceived as an attack on the province and a wealth transfer to Ottawa. The resentment of the NEP and the name Trudeau endures. One participant who lived in Alberta in the 1980s recalled the economic and psychological impacts of these policies:

> *"Any of us who lived through [the NEP] saw massive numbers of homes for sale, repossessed by banks, people unable to pay their mortgage, losing their jobs, migrating to the US. That's something that is ingrained. The 2019 election demonstrated that very clearly."*

The NEP may have also catalyzed some ideological polarization within Alberta, specifically on what role, if any, the federal government should have in the future of the oil and gas sector and by extension the province's economy. As one interviewee with experience as a political staffer observed:

> *"It was framed as confiscatory. . . It was never an issue of energy versus environment. It was a jurisdictional challenge, federal versus provincial. Who owns the resource? Who gets to set the framework for its development?"*

Progressive Conservative leadership (1984-93)

Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives quickly unwound the NEP following their landslide win in the 1984 election. The Progressive Conservatives won 50 percent of the popular vote, including an unprecedented 58 of 75 seats in Québec. This swing came almost entirely at the Liberals' expense under leader John Turner. The Progressive Conservatives would secure another majority mandate in 1988 in what became known as the "free trade" election.

Multiple participants discussed Brian Mulroney as the first Prime Minister to prioritize the environment and pointed to three key achievements: the 1987 Montreal Protocol, a unanimous, universally-ratified treaty to phase out substances depleting the ozone layer; the 1991 Canada-US Air Quality Agreement to phase out sulfur dioxide to address acid rain; and Canadian leadership at the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.
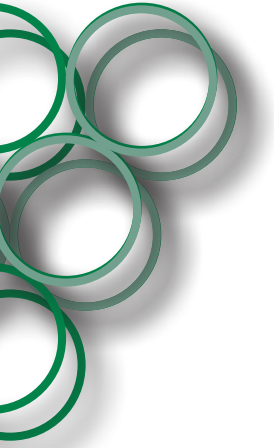
Mulroney's time as Prime Minister coincided with several sociopolitical forces that would shape the energy-climate debates to come. The first was the beginnings of ideological polarization among America's strongest partisans, notably within think tanks and the political class (McCarty et al. 2006; McCright and Dunlap 2010; Kahan et al. 2012; Druckman et al. 2013; McCright et al. 2014). The literature has identified similar patterns in Canada. Successive federal conservative parties have shifted rightward while the NDP and Liberals have converged left of centre since the 1980s (Cochrane 2015; Johnston 2019).

The net outcome is a wider ideological gap between Canada's two governing federal parties. The scholarship also traces rising negative polarization among Canadian partisans, which dates back to 1988 and has worsened since (Cochrane 2015; Owen et al. 2019; Johnston 2019; Boxell et al. 2020).

The era of "green" initiatives from some conservative politicians activated other conservative elites long before climate change was on the public radar. Of particular note was an escalating disinformation campaign from American conservative political leaders, strategists, think tanks, foundations, media, and energy majors to polarize environmental issues and preemptively confuse the public about climate science (Jacques et al. 2008; Dunlap and McCright 2011; McCright and Dunlap 2011; Farrell 2016).

This early polarization had a significant influence over the initial media coverage of climate change. For instance, between 1988 to 2002, 52 percent of climate-themed articles in American prestige press (New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal and Los Angeles Times) gave "roughly equal attention" to arguments that climate change is driven by natural processes rather than human activity (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004). Subsequent research has found that mobilization and "cues" from the political class and advocacy groups have been highly influential on public opinion on climate change, more so than new science, media coverage or extreme weather (Carmichael and Brulle 2017).

Regional fragmentation and the Kyoto Accord (1993-2005)

The 1992 Rio Declaration was one of Mulroney's final multilateral efforts as Prime Minister and provided Canada with its first emissions target—six percent below 1992 levels by 2000. But other issues, including deficits, taxation, accountability in government, and western alienation held the public's attention and dominated the 1993 election campaign.

The emergence of the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party in the 1993 election balkanized Canada's electoral map and reduced the Progressive Conservatives to just 2 seats. The Bloc and Reform ran on issues of culture and identity, resulting in regionally concentrated coalitions (Cairns 1994). Under leader Jean Chrétien, the Liberals became the beneficiaries of this vote splitting and won a strong majority, dominating in Ontario (98 of 99 seats) and Atlantic Canada (31 of 32). The Liberals would secure three consecutive majority mandates with three very similar looking electoral maps.

Chrétien signed the Kyoto Protocol in December 1997—months after securing a second mandate with another regionally fragmented electoral map. Kyoto was the most substantial international climate agreement to date, but there is dispute in the literature and in our data as to how effective it was at mobilizing opposition across regional and partisan lines. Smith (2009, p.52) notes: "A common set of anti-Kyoto claims emerged from the province of Alberta, the oil and gas-led coalition, and the Alliance Party."

A participant with research expertise described events at that time:

> *"Kyoto was a legally binding instrument. That was when things really polarized at the political elite level. The think tanks were organized. There was more opposition money brought into it. So, yes, absolutely without any doubt in my mind, it was 1997 [when energy-climate polarization began]."*

A participant with experience in the Conservative Party of Canada framed things quite differently:

> *"The industry was doing well. They didn't sense the growing importance of climate policy or reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The fact that the Liberals in the 90s and early 2000s signed Kyoto but didn't move on it, it did cause climate activists to double down but my sense is that it left the energy sector mostly fat and wealthy and a bit complacent."*

The Liberals' handling of the ratification process damaged provincial and interparty relations. Chrétien committed the country and—by extension—provinces to enhanced targets with almost no consultation with the premiers. Across party lines, but particularly among the Progressive Conservatives and the Reform Party, the move was largely seen as an insincere, unilateral decision with no genuine political capital behind the commitments. Chrétien sensed the political importance of ratification. But multiple factors, including resistance from opposition parties and Al Gore's narrow loss to George W. Bush in the 2000 US election was enough to scuttle any serious discussion of policy action to meet targets.

Participants noted the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives as an inflection point. After Mulroney's aberrant success in Québec as a Conservative leader, the merger shifted the nerve centre of Canadian conservatism back to Alberta. Stephen Harper's message discipline and skilled brokering within his caucus resulted in a much more unified message on Western interests and the oil and gas sector than his predecessors. Several participants noted the growing uniformity of perspectives and ideology within the Conservative Party at this time, particularly with members from Alberta.

In his waning days as Prime Minister, Chrétien introduced legislation to overhaul campaign finance rules. Most notably, corporate and union contributions to federal political parties dropped from a maximum of $50,000 to $0. This new dependence on small-money donors instead of large donors fundamentally and permanently changed the parties' operations and rhetoric. According to one participant with extensive political experience:

> *"Most people don't even think about how big a change it brought, just in terms of the things we care about in policy, the way we talk about our politics, the way political parties function, the way third parties function… Has it made our politics more polarized? I'm not sure I would say yes to that, but it certainly made our politics more populist in the sense that most political leaders are less invested in what corporate Canada thinks of its [sic] policies."*
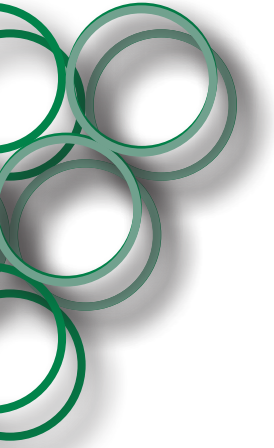
One perverse outcome of this change to federal politics is the language that parties use in their messaging and campaigning. Language that conveys urgency or invokes emotions like fear or rage improve the probability of a donation. These tactics are not unique to politics, but Canada's federal politics were now forced to compete for donors' attention like everyone else.

These changes came into effect for the 2004 election, when Stephen Harper's newly-unified Conservative Party won 30 percent of the popular vote (Reform never broke 20 percent; the Alliance hit 25 percent in 2000), reducing Paul Martin's Liberals to a weak minority government that lasted just 18 months. In the 2006 federal election, the Conservatives took another step forward, winning 36 percent of the popular vote and 124 seats in parliament—enough to form a minority government of their own.

An energy superpower (2006-2008)

Prime Minister Harper used his first speech abroad to declare Canada an "emerging energy superpower", but he envisioned the oil and gas sector reaching that destination largely on its own. Two participants, one a journalist and one with experience as a Conservative staffer, described this "hands-off" style, but in different terms:

> *"The people around [Harper] had a very clear plan or vision of what they thought the federal government should be, which was largely less of it, and that it should do less, spend less money, be involved in less stuff."*

"Harper's predisposition was that government should not be in the business of business, the old Ralph Klein line… The government's role is not to pick winners and losers and tip the scales. These companies know what they're doing and they'll do what they need to do."

During the Conservatives' first minority government, the oil sands started drawing international attention from activists and politicians. Participants cited the placement of an oil sands mining truck on the National Mall for the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival, growing opposition to pipelines among environmentalists and Indigenous Peoples, the international coverage of the raft of ducks that drowned in a Syncrude tailings pond, and the simultaneous advent of social media, as a "perfect storm" of negative attention for oil and gas in general, and the oil sands in particular.

"[The oil sands truck and the ducks] showed you how the industry and its provincial boosters were not ready. They wanted to talk about Canada as an energy superpower without realizing that the profile and responsibility level increases significantly when global media and global environmentalists are paying attention."

"I don't know if there's a single non-political event that was more divisive than the truck. It just spawned all of the derision towards the oilsands for the next 14, 15 years."

"Mid-2000s, the oil sands are booming, but there wasn't much awareness among the general public. Then with the truck, they wanted to drum up support for the oil sands and showcase Albertan technology. And then a year later, you have this duck incident… The images were ugly."

Some scholars note that this era featured intensifying levels of negative polarization in political and partisan settings—most notably the House of Commons (Dornan 2011). Several participants remarked on this declining trust and escalating partisan animosity.

The green shift and a majority 20 years in the making (2008-2015)

The 2008 federal election was the first significant instance of public issue polarization on climate during a federal election, and the first campaign to explicitly pit the environment against the economy. This was both by accident and design. The Financial Crisis and Great Recession changed the tenor of the election and vaulted economic recovery to the top of voters' priority lists. New Liberal leader Stéphane Dion was the first major party leader to build a platform around climate change—with a $40-per-tonne, revenue-neutral carbon tax at its centre. The Conservatives took the opportunity to adopt populist campaign messaging and successfully framed Dion and his climate plan as untenable and risky given new economic realities.

The success of the Conservatives' electoral strategy was an affirmation: in a first contest between environment and economy, the economy won decisively. It was the Liberals' poorest election performance since 1984. Participants had different interpretations of the outcome:

> *"Dion's Green Shift was an excellent piece of policy work, ahead of its time and not marketed in the right way. It created an opening for opponents to ratchet up the hyperbole, which they did."*

> *"Dion himself was easily attackable. And the carbon tax, applied at the consumer retail level, became a tax on everything."*

> *"Dion broke the cardinal rule of politics, which is don't provide a solution until people know what the problem is. And that's what happened. He may have had good intentions, but he didn't define it well enough as a wedge. And as a result, the Conservatives ended up reacting to it. And here we are today with a really clear, bright line. If you're a Conservative, you're anti-climate."*
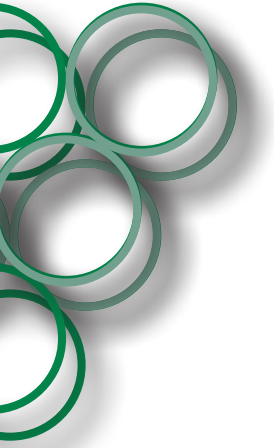
The temptation to embrace populism around policies related to taxation is not unique to a single political party. British Columbia's election the following year, in which the centre-right BC Liberals implemented a carbon tax opposed by the centre-left NDP, was a mirror image of the 2008 federal election.

One former political staffer described the parallels between the two elections:

> *"The federal Conservative Party decided to give in to the populist temptation and [framed] the tax proposals for carbon pricing as 'a tax on everything' and basically went full bore on a populist backlash campaign, not dissimilar to the BC NDP campaign. It shattered the slowly emerging consensus on this issue for short-term political gain."*

President Barack Obama also reshuffled his policy agenda in response to the Financial Crisis. With congressional supermajorities, the Obama Administration prioritized health policy over climate policy while facilitating the expansion of hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus, Haynesville and Fayette shale formations. A bill establishing a foundation for cross-border emissions trading, akin to the Canada-US Air Quality Agreement, passed in the House but died in the Senate in 2009. A former Member of Parliament described that missed opportunity for the Conservative Party and for Canada:

> *"We'd be in a much better place had President Obama been able to put together a coherent carbon agenda. Canada was ready to go on cap and trade and we ended up getting a watered-down approach on research, biofuels and carbon capture instead of an integrated North American strategy. He was faced with the possibility of becoming energy independent through fracking, and as a result the economics were there and the concept of carbon trading between the two countries was gone."*

In parallel, several oil majors were proposing new pipelines in Canada to diversify market access for Alberta oil. This included Keystone XL and Northern Gateway in the mid-2000s, and the Trans Mountain expansion (TMX) and Energy East, first proposed in 2013. Several participants noted that Northern Gateway became an outlet for liberals and progressives who opposed Harper and the Conservatives on ideological grounds but lacked a concrete issue to express that opposition.

In the 2011 election, the modern Conservative Party's long-sought breakthrough in Ontario materialized. As in 2008, negative partisanship was a driver of voter preferences (Caruana et al. 2015). The anti-Conservative vote coalesced around Jack Layton's NDP, pushing the Party into Official Opposition status for the first time (Dornan 2011 p.9). It was the most dramatic reshaping of the electoral map since 1993.

Energy and climate change played diminished roles in the 2011 election due to the ongoing recovery from the Great Recession, the relative health of the oil and gas sector and the failure of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) in Copenhagen (Harada 2011). None of the major parties shied away from climate change—the Conservative platform asserted that the environment and the economy go "hand in hand"—but none prioritized it either.

With a majority, the Conservative caucus continued to wedge on energy issues. Seven interviewees noted that Minister Joe Oliver's characterization of pipeline opponents as "national security threats" and Harper's "list of enemies" signaled to opposition parties that climate change and pipelines would be effective wedge issues in future elections. Participants noted that the rhetorical escalation was a deliberate strategic choice within the Prime Minister's Office. Other policies made clear that getting Alberta oil to market was a policy priority for the Harper Conservatives. For instance, the National Energy Board Act handed final say, including on rejected projects, back to cabinet. The return of major pipeline decisions to the political arena signaled that the Conservatives would actively intervene to ensure their completion. Climate issues were neither a significant part of the discourse nor a legislative priority from 2011 to 2015.

A new policy window (2015-2020)

A new energy and climate policy window opened in 2015 following the surprise victories of the Alberta NDP and the federal Liberals, the Paris Climate Conference, and a late diplomatic push by the Obama Administration for emissions targets from large developing nations like China (Bratt 2020).

In the 2015 federal election, a sitting government was defending a majority for the first time since 2004. Prime Minister Stephen Harper faced challenges from two new party leaders, Tom Mulcair and Justin Trudeau, both of whom were polling as viable alternatives capable of forming government. Energy and environment received renewed attention but were bundled together with other policies into the defining feature of the campaign: a desire for change in the country's direction (Coletto 2016, p.322). One political scientist described the election as a turning point for negative partisanship at the public level:

> *"I think 2015 is the moment where we clearly see the effects of polarization in place. We saw the anybody-but-Harper campaign, 'Harper's proposing new policy X and it's another example of him being a horrible human being, and he just needs to get out of office, etc.' People saying really vicious things. Trudeau comes in, sunny ways, does the same thing in a lot of policy areas and many of those people now say, 'OK, I guess it's not so bad, what he's doing.'"*

The 2015 campaign had some significant firsts. In addition to the looming Paris Conference and growing public awareness of climate change, Green Party leader Elizabeth May joined the leaders' debate for the first time, and the debate featured a dedicated segment on energy-environment. The Conservatives reused several of their successful strategies from 2008 and 2011, casting Harper as a steady economic hand and wedging on a range of cultural issues that had gradually subsumed environment and climate change over the previous decade.
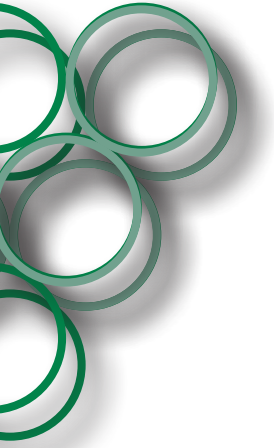
The Conservative platform pioneered the phrase "job-killing carbon tax", but as two participants with experience in the Conservative Party noted, this framing was ineffective:

> *"If you read the Liberal 2015 platform, it is not clear that their intention is to default to a federal carbon tax if the provinces don't conform to a pretty narrow set of parameters. The Conservative Party didn't say very much about the Liberals' plan because the truth is there wasn't a lot to self-evidently criticize."*

> *"Stephen Harper always said people vote for political parties for two reasons: pocketbook and identity. And if you can't figure out how to put an issue into one of those two buckets, you're going to lose. And Dion's failure to cast [carbon pricing and climate action] in terms of either a pocketbook or an identity issue is what cost him the election."*

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's first major international trip was the 21st COP in Paris—widely regarded as the most important since Kyoto. The Liberals took the occasion to send an unusually large delegation along with the slogan "Canada is back". It was a clear signal that climate would be a rhetorical and policy focus. In the words of one participant:

> *"Under Chrétien and Harper there were no trade-offs. To the extent we had a consensus it was to not care about the climate. I think the Trudeau government is the first time in modern history where we're saying we may not be prepared to make those trade-offs."*

Less than a year into their first mandate the Liberals released the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change. Developed over several months with the premiers, the Framework was built around a simple principle: provincially-designed policies that would meet a minimum standard set by the federal government. The framework was an attempt to sidestep the issues that had proven fatal for the NEP and Kyoto by ensuring buy-in from the premiers, provincially-led policy design, and an implicit "grand bargain" to keep Alberta onside. While the Framework featured a panoply of policies, carbon pricing received the majority of political and media attention. Every province except Saskatchewan eventually signed on to the Framework.

This agreement was short-lived.

The 2016 US federal election blunted the international momentum from the Paris Conference. After approving the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion in November 2016, the Liberals began encountering resistance to both aspects of the grand bargain. British Columbia Liberal Premier Christy Clark had conditionally approved TMX but narrowly lost re-election to NDP Leader John Horgan in May 2017. Horgan vowed to use "every tool" at his disposal to stop TMX. In Ontario, Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown endorsed the federal carbon pricing backstop but was ousted as leader in January 2018. Doug Ford narrowly won the leadership race to replace him and made fighting the federal carbon price a centrepiece of his campaign. Ford won a strong majority in June 2018 and made good on his promise, leaving approximately $3 billion of worthless emissions permits from Ontario's cap-and-trade regime in the hands of Ontario businesses. Legal challenges and uncertainty mounted and the Liberals purchased the pipeline in 2018 as Kinder Morgan backed out of the project.

After spearheading the merger of the Wildrose Party and Progressive Conservatives in Alberta, Jason Kenney campaigned on a platform organized around a "fair deal" that would diminish Ottawa's influence in Alberta's affairs, pointing to Trudeau and Rachel Notley's policies as the cause of the recession that began in 2014. Kenney's tactics included legal challenges to the federal carbon tax, a public inquiry, a referendum, and the creation of a "war room" (aka the Canadian Energy Centre) to counter narratives about the oil sands' environmental and economic performance. Federally, new Conservative leader Andrew Scheer campaigned on a national energy corridor and repeal of the carbon tax, but struggled to convince voters that he or his party were serious about climate change.

The 2019 election reduced the Liberals to a minority government. There was a general view among participants with political experience that the the federal government's purchase of the TransMountain Pipeline cost them seats in Québec while the carbon tax cost them seats in Western Canada. However, there was mixed opinion among participants as to how strong an endorsement or rejection of the Liberals' approach to energy and climate the election actually was:

> *"Two thirds of Canadians voted for parties that support the notion of a carbon tax. Now, in my book, two thirds amounts to a consensus. A rather strong consensus. There is still polarization for reasons that have to do with political branding, which I suspect at this point is more of a problem for the Conservatives than for anyone else."*

Another participant suggested the Conservative position was misunderstood:

> *"One of my frustrations sometimes is that issues can become more about narrative than about the actual policy. . . the [2019] campaign, the narrative was set quite early about what the Conservatives' environment plan was and wasn't. It became very difficult for them get away from playing defense."*

A post-COVID paradigm (2020-)

Canadians altered their policy priorities in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the mainstreaming of "net zero by 2050" continues:

> *"I'm getting asked quite often whether we've reached a tipping point. Two years ago, pre-COVID, I'd say maybe not. But in the last year we've seen big money move—the institutional investors, TCFD [Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures] investor guidance, industry association engagement, activist boards. Now I do actually strongly believe that we've reached a tipping point in many ways. it's become increasingly depolarized."*

Notable federal climate policy and other developments since the 2019 federal election include:

- The Canadian Net Zero Emissions Accountability Act (Bill C-12)

- Targeted industrial strategies for hydrogen and small modular reactors (SMRs)

- A defined path for the federal carbon price through 2030

- The Supreme Court ruling that the Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act is constitutional

- Enhanced 2030 emissions targets and a cap on oil and gas emissions

- Consultations on Just Transition legislation

- Net zero commitments from several sectors including multiple oil sands majors (The Pathways Alliance)

- Internationally, COP26 in Glasgow, the passage of a climate-focused infrastructure bill by the Biden Administration, and dozens of countries, including India, bringing their net zero commitments forward in time.

In the 2021 election campaign, every party ran on the continuation of a federal carbon price and a pledge of net zero emissions by 2050. The Conservatives, who campaigned on the repeal of the federal carbon price under Andrew Scheer, included a carbon price in their platform with a less aggressive price path and a different approach to recycling revenues.

The post-COVID paradigm on federal energy and climate policy is in its early stages, but this analysis suggests that it possesses several important features that have support across partisan lines:

1. Cross-party consensus on net zero emissions by 2050 (or sooner)

2. Consensus on industrial carbon pricing, with some remaining disagreement on the price path and use of revenues, but a consensus on retail carbon pricing that is more vulnerable than it was six months ago[5]

3. Consensus on clean tech broadly, with reasonable consensus among Liberals and Conservatives on energy sources like next-generation nuclear, blue hydrogen and natural gas

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5. Under the Liberals' current plan, the federal carbon price will rise to $170 per tonne by 2030, with the vast majority of revenues directed to household rebates that will rise alongside the price of carbon. In the 2021 federal election, the Conservatives proposed freezing the carbon price at $50 per tonne, with revenues directed to low-carbon savings accounts. The new leader of the Conservative Party will ultimately decide whether to preserve the political consensus on retail carbon pricing.
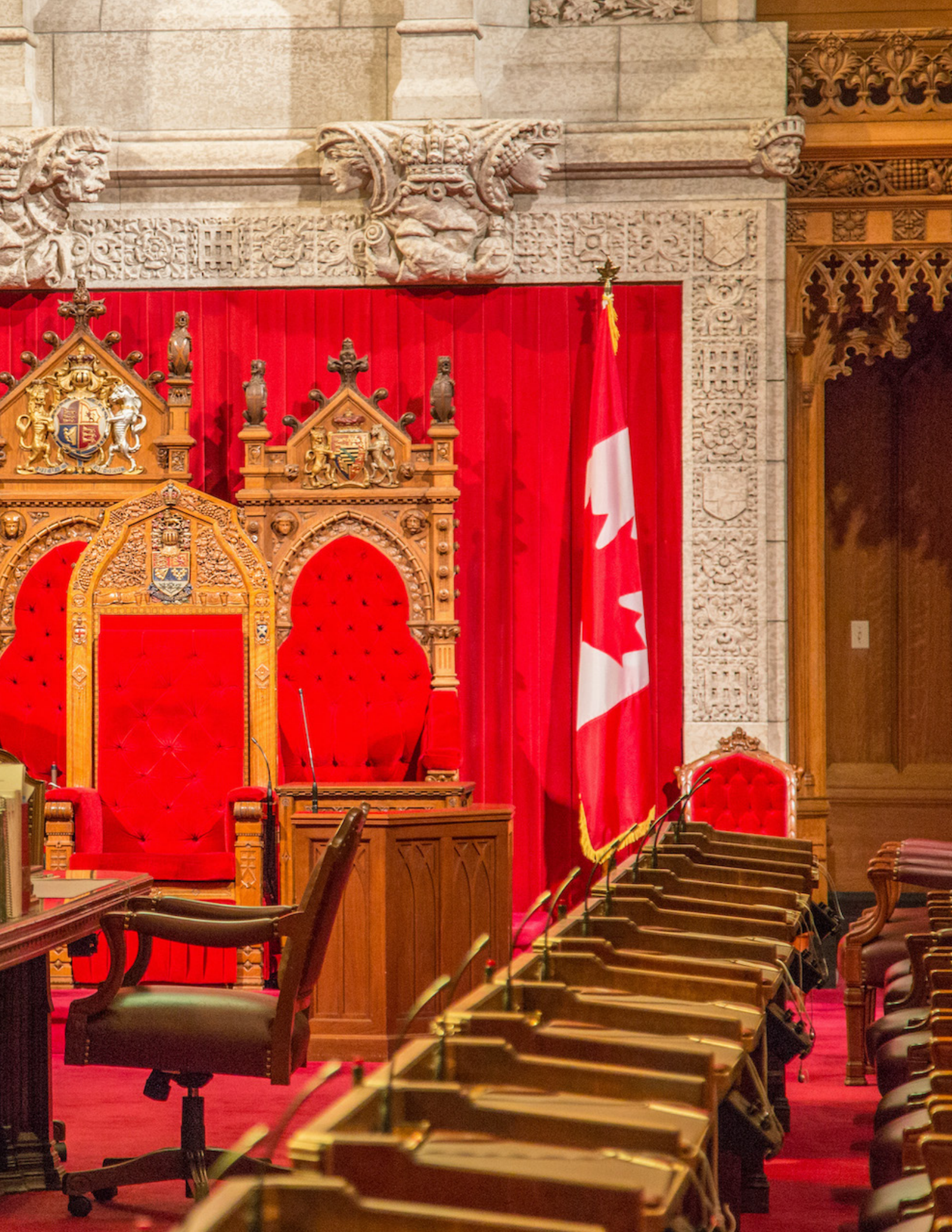
WHAT IS "CONSENSUS"?

We asked participants a range of questions regarding consensus-building and performed inductive analysis on the nature, strength, and desirability of consensus on climate and energy issues. There were meaningful splits in perceptions and attitudes.

Previous Positive Energy research has uncovered how energy and environmental leaders occupy two distinct "realities" when it comes to the language of energy transition (Beck with Richard 2020). This study finds similarly non-overlapping perspectives on the language of "consensus". This invites broader questions about how certain political and non-political actors perceive their opposition and the extent to which leaders with opposing views actually want to agree or work together.

What is "consensus"? Among participants, there was no consensus on the answer to this question. Asked whether Canada has ever had consensus on climate or energy policies, two distinct views emerged.

A majority of participants (29 of 50) agreed that Canada has lost consensus on climate and energy issues, with partisan polarization operating as a key driver—particularly in Alberta and Saskatchewan. These participants often pointed to discrete events where consensus was lost, including provincial backlash to the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change.

> *"Carbon pricing and Alberta is the perfect example. [The oil majors] couldn't have been more supportive. They stood on the stage, gave speeches in support of the [Alberta] Climate Leadership Plan and carbon pricing and the emissions cap. In the run up to the next election, it all just crumbled apart."*

A healthy minority of participants (21 of 50) asserted that Canada has never had consensus on climate and energy issues, or to the extent that consensus did exist, it was very shallow. Participants who believed Canada has never had consensus generally discussed the arc of the debate over 20 or even 40-year timeframes. Three of these 21 participants added the caveat that change is now so rapid it is hard to say whether Canada has ever had a consensus.

> *"There's certainly never been a political consensus on [climate action or Canada's desirable energy mix]. [The Pan-Canadian Framework] was just a historical moment of alignment, not dissimilar to Meech Lake and Charlottetown. But then it fractures because political actors who are not in power try to use it to seize power."*

The desire to return to balance was a common theme among participants, specifically the idea that the conversation has become overly skewed in favour of either oil and gas development or climate action. This view was common amongst participants from Alberta or with experience in NGOs and politics. A subset noted the extreme positions and excesses of their perceived opponents as sufficient grounds to adopt more extreme positions of their own as a necessary counterweight. A smaller subgroup still presented themselves as underdogs compared to their opposition (financial resources, influence and reach, etc.).
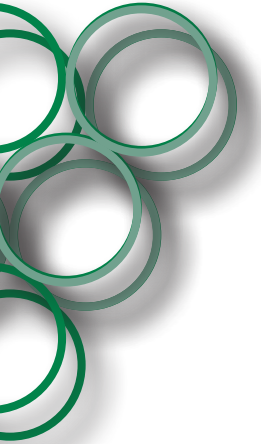
Is consensus desirable?

There was also a deeper, more fundamental divergence on the desirability of consensus. We observed a spectrum of realities, but interview analysis revealed three broad categories/narratives.

30 participants stated or implied that consensus is desirable on these issues.

> *"I think [depolarization] is absolutely an objective that we should care about. I care about that very much. It's probably the only reason I still do this work."*

13 participants stated or implied that consensus is not necessarily desirable on these issues (i.e., appeared to favour moving reality closer to their own perspective or theory of change rather than prioritizing consensus or compromise). This view was more concentrated among actors with experience in partisan politics and non-government organizations (10 of 13).

> *"It's too easy for those of us who want climate action to get sucked into this idea that actually all we have to do is compromise and strike some grand bargain. I'd love to see us less sorted, I'd love to see this issue depolarize, but that's far less important to me than fighting climate change. That's where I'm going to put my energy. My priority is not to build bridges to folks in the conservative movement, it's to beat them in elections."*

7 participants stated or implied that polarization over these issues is inevitable and consensus is either incredibly difficult or impossible to achieve, desirable or not.

> *"All of these things are going to be heavily contested because there's billions of dollars at stake and because they touch consumers where they live."*

A minority of participants (8) believed we have never had consensus and that consensus is not necessarily desirable. This perspective reflects the challenge of polarized states: a minority who either believe that certain ideological or political positions are unworthy of negotiation or compromise.

TABLE 1: IS CONSENSUS DESIRABLE? RESPONSES OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

	Consensus is not necessarily desirable	Consensus is desirable	Polarization is inevitable
We have lost consensus	10%	38%	10%
We never had consensus	16%	22%	4%
n=50			

OVERCOMING LIMITS TO CONSENSUS-BUILDING

This section combines the above analysis with participant insights and findings from Positive Energy's broader body of research to provide recommendations for decision-makers. Of the 11 drivers identified as contributors to the polarization of energy and climate issues along partisan lines, seven relate to or flow from partisan politics. Rather than focus on drivers of polarization that are "brute facts" (political incentive structures, American influence on Canada's policy agenda, sorting, etc.), this section will focus on three more tractable drivers. All impose limits to consensus-building and pose real risks to an orderly transition to net zero:

1. Toxic partisanship: Dislike for partisan opponents to the point where civility and bipartisanship become difficult or impossible

2. Negative polarization: Dislike or hatred for out-groups, including but not limited to partisan out-groups; often associated with "us versus them" thinking

3. False polarization: Incorrect perceptions of polarization

Toxic Partisanship

34 participants characterized excessive partisanship as a significant limit to consensus-building on climate and energy policy.

This view was less common among participants with direct experience in politics, and a few of these participants challenged the use of partisanship as a unit of analysis:

> *"Partisan means that you support one party or candidate rather than another. In a democracy, that's how we decide what to do. This emotional connotation that being partisan is in some way dirty or lacking in dignity or decorum, not the sort of thing that a nice person does, is really unjustified and harmful to good people's willingness to get involved in politics."*

> *"I generally am skeptical of the idea that partisan debate is a barrier to consensus. I think in the long run, it creates consensus. We may not see it for a while, but if voters are not presented with choices, real choices, then they will not feel like they're represented by the political system. And I think that, if anything, breeds situations where consensus is that much more difficult to achieve."*

Partisanship is an inevitable part of politics. Choices at the ballot box matter, teams and coalitions are necessary to scale action, and everyone participating in decision-making around net zero cannot avoid partisan politics entirely. Our analysis indicates that the true limit to consensus-building is not partisanship, but rather excessive or toxic partisanship—a problem that Canada, the US, and many other advanced economies are grappling with. Ongoing partisan sorting, negative partisanship and Canada's unique geography have arguably supercharged this trend, making our politics more combative and less collegial.

While toxic environments are generally less productive, Canada's political structures and institutions nudge political actors to behave toxically. As one participant put it:

> *"Politicians would not polarize their base, their electorate, if it didn't work. At the end of the day, they're rational actors and they're going to do what is in their best interest. As long as we have a system that rewards this amplification of cleavages, we're going to get politicians who do that."*

Eliminating partisanship is not a reasonable goal, but partisan and non-partisan actors can take steps to mitigate its influence on negative polarization and false polarization. Cross-partisanship is an important ingredient in this mix. Rather than renounce or play down their partisan stripes, political actors can both set an important example and diffuse in-group versus out-group, us versus them mentalities by debating, collaborating, and co-developing initiatives—civilly and publicly—with partisan opponents. Toxicity and incivility trickle down; so do collegiality and respectful disagreement. One participant stressed the need for more of these processes in Parliament:

> *"I think the first step would be a public process with clear mandates to achieve consensus on critical issues. And I think like any good mediated process, you start with the areas where you have common ground. I think it would be helpful for Canadians to actually see that happening, and I can think of people from all major parties who would do it."*

Efforts to promote cross-partisanship need not be limited to partisans. Non-political actors can aid in these efforts by playing the role of honest brokers and mediators, and creating forums that operate as neutral territory. Positive Energy's survey work has identified universities and researchers as widely trusted information sources on climate and energy issues, while politicians and the private sector are the least trusted (Nanos for Positive Energy 2021). Democratized, cross-sectoral collaborations that diffuse toxic partisanship can help build public confidence on the way to net zero. Canada's new and seemingly stable configuration of federal minority governments will continue to offer additional opportunities for cross-partisanship.

Another option is non-partisan approaches that transfer some decision-making authority from partisan actors (i.e., politicians and their staff) to expert panels, citizen assemblies, and other collaborative, less explicitly political forums (granted, this requires political actors to relinquish some power, which can be a tough sell). One participant with experience in partisan politics suggested diffusing the partisan debate and tough policy choices via independent commissions:

> *"I think it's time for another Royal Commission on the future of the Canadian economy. In 1984, the Macdonald Commission. It wasn't partisan, it wasn't the Trudeau Commission, right? And so because it was a Royal Commission with an independent mandate, Brian Mulroney was able to take on a lot of the recommendations."*
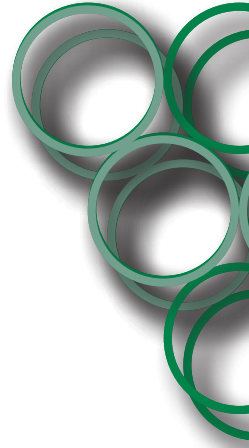
Negative Polarization

Participants viewed negative polarization as a substantial limit to consensus-building; it was thematically present in 48 of the interviews. The broader rise of negative affect (not exclusively among individuals with strong partisan identities), remains an enormous challenge for decision-makers moving forward. Participants from all sectors, including some from partisan politics, lamented the rise of "us versus them" mentalities in the worlds of energy and climate policy:

> *"I'm concerned that the approach that has been taken simply treats anybody who questions anything on the current orthodoxy as being evil as opposed to mistaken."*

> *"When you look at how conflict works, these narratives really serve to kind of 'other' and dehumanize people."*

The implications of negative polarization reach far beyond public confidence in energy decision-making or climate politics and unearth much deeper issues like social cohesion and trust in institutions more broadly. Negative polarization/partisanship did not start with climate or energy politics, but they certainly appear to have made these trends worse among some segments of the Canadian population—particularly in Alberta.

The rise of negative polarization has created a number of cascading issues in our politics. Arguably the most significant is its influence on issue polarization, which is quite important in moderation to help clarify policy positions, facilitate issue prioritization, and present genuine options in democratic political systems. One participant with experience in partisan politics articulated the value of polarization as a mobilizer and a tool for clarifying policy positions:

> *"I don't know if polarization is always necessarily a bad thing either. It's strategically relevant and necessary in some contexts. If you want to get people to care about what you're doing, you have to create a case for urgency..."*

When paired with high levels of negative partisanship, however, issue polarization becomes less about staking out thoughtful policy positions or a coherent ideology and more about opposing out-groups for its own sake. When the social stakes are "us versus them", other policy choices and broader discourse will inevitably succumb to that mindset. As the US experience demonstrates, this can be deeply corrosive in the long run; the consequences of crossing these social tipping points are incredibly difficult to forecast.
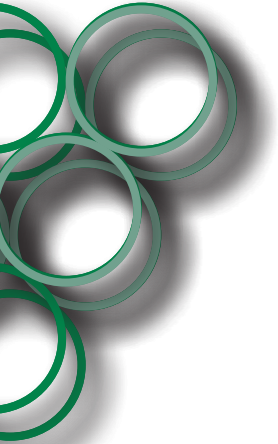
Diffusing us versus them requires an understanding of what activates those mentalities in the first place. The exponential growth in social psychology literature—of which this paper samples but a few offerings—has provided a roadmap for anyone looking to activate us versus them, transform complexity into binary, and generally confuse or overwhelm. Mainstreaming and normalizing the scientific understanding of how in-group/out-group behaviours manifest in partisan and ideologically diverse spaces is an important step towards diminishing their influence. Negative partisanship will likely remain a weapon of choice in Canada without changes to incentive structures in our politics. In the absence of such reforms, mainstreaming the understanding of negative affect, false polarization, misinformation, and how they are used to factionalize is an urgent task. Actors and populations that understand these tactics are better equipped to defend against them.

Unchecked, negative partisanship, especially among political leaders, has ramifications for net zero. TMX and Site C will not be the last megaprojects; the carbon price will not be the last controversial climate policy vulnerable to disinformation and populist messaging. The risk of continued policy reversals or "whipsaws" poses a unique threat to Positive Energy's concepts of *informed reform* and *durable balance* in energy decision-making systems.

As outlined by Cleland and Gattinger (2021) in a study of energy project decision-making systems:

> *"If regulatory decisions can be overturned by policymakers with little attention to due process, or if decisions, once final, can be subsequently overturned due to a change in government, then participants will forever be in doubt as to whether decision outcomes can be relied upon."*

False Polarization

Just as actors should not downplay the risks of polarization, they should not overstate how severe the problem is. On climate and energy policy, there is often more consensus behind the scenes than many realize (see: Bratt 2020). False polarization—specifically the notion that the debate is artificially framed and unnecessarily heated—was thematically present in 25 of the interviews. While our data suggest that there are some who will never agree and do not want to (i.e., they are sufficiently negatively, ideologically or falsely polarized), decision-makers should remain alert to false polarization and not assume polarized states as representative or the default. A former executive described their experiences with false polarization:

> *"No matter what table you sit at, the conversation is exactly the same. 'They don't understand this. They don't appreciate us. They're idealistic. They're unreasonable.' And it's just one group having, in my view, a completely erroneous interpretation of the other's objectives. They sit in their two silos and throw rocks at each other. Neither thinks the other understands them and they're on the side of virtue and the other side just doesn't get it and is completely wrong."*

The feedback loop between negative polarization and false polarization is another important limit to consensus-building. The psychological effects of negative polarization can lead individuals to believe they have far less in common with their political opposition than they do in reality. This can lead to dehumanization, rejection of democratic legitimacy of decisions, and can further fuel false polarization. As noted in the literature review, more information about the consequences of policies and the beliefs of political opposition, rather than the values that inform those policies, has proven effective in diffusing false polarization (Fernbach and Van Boven 2022).
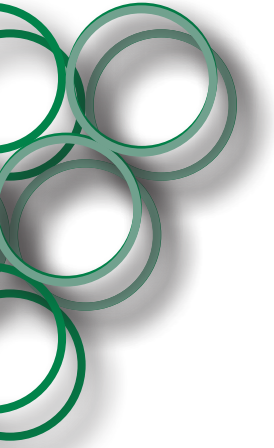
Specific tactics can help break down the vicious negative-false polarization feedback loop, but the hydra has many heads. Several participants noted the effect of the media and social media in perpetuating false polarization. New financial pressures, a business model dependent upon eyeballs and clicks, and tight timelines for journalists make binary conflict narratives a safe and reliable fallback. While there are efforts within the journalism community to add greater complexity and nuance to reporting on polarizing subjects (see: Ripley 2019), one participant (a journalist) believed that Canadian energy and climate reporting as a whole is doing the public a disservice:

> *"There is a lot of really awful climate and energy coverage in this country that deepens divisions and we need to keep calling attention to that."*

Other participants took the media landscape as a given, and suggested that effectively overcoming false polarization requires altering the composition of voices in the debate:

> *"More moderate people need to speak out and speak out loudly and speak out passionately. We need more of the pragmatic, evidence-based, data-driven people to be speaking out, saying, 'OK, enough lobbing grenades back and forth and what do we do, and how do we do it together?'"*

Another tactic for overcoming false polarization lies in the data. Interviewees' responses suggest that the ideological gap on most energy and climate issues is often exaggerated and the potential solution space is actually quite broad (see Figure 2). Participants found clean technology, broadly defined, to be a promising area for collaboration. Other non-controversial policies like energy efficiency and retrofits have broad appeal because they are perceived as money-savers for citizens and businesses. Other policies that have diffuse costs and benefits—such as research and development and nature-based solutions—also received mentions across the partisan and ideological spectrum.

FIGURE 2: POLICY AREAS LESS VULNERABLE TO PARTISAN POLARIZATION (UNPROMPTED)
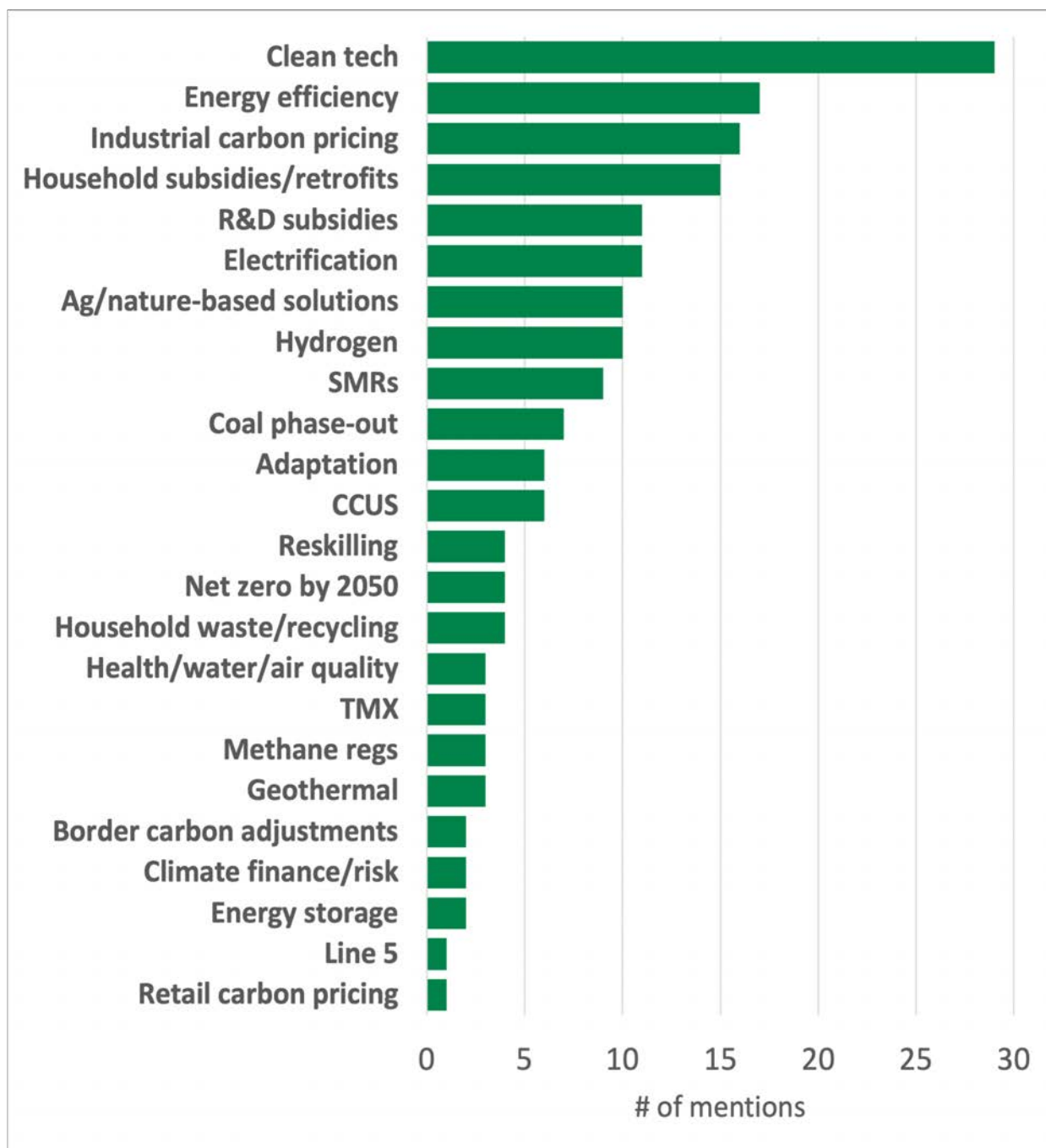
These results and the emerging literature on false polarization suggest it is perhaps less important to agree on the why of emissions reductions than the how. There is tremendous opportunity for collaboration on solutions across partisan and ideological lines. As one interviewee with experience in both partisan politics and non-government organizations noted:

> *"We need to talk about material impacts. We need to talk about economic security. We need to meet people where they are and stop trying to lecture them about the values they ought to hold because we're getting distracted by these value discussions. In reality, most people agree on enough of the fundamentals that we can actually act on these issues."*

Other limits to consensus-building

Although outside the scope of this analysis, Positive Energy's work to date has identified several other important limits to consensus-building unrelated to partisan politics:

- Regulatory systems contending with a growing set of decision-making criteria and strong public demand for greater participation (Cleland and Gattinger 2021; Larkin 2021)

- Insufficient engagement with or opportunities for leadership from Indigenous peoples in both energy projects and standards development (von der Porten and Podlasly 2021)

- Federalism and Canada's uneven distribution of natural resources (Bratt 2021)

- Insufficient clarity over who decides what, when and how on energy and climate policy (Cleland and Gattinger 2021; Harrison 2021; Larkin 2021; Pickford 2021)

- Divergent and regionally concentrated opinions over the future role of oil and gas production and consumption in the Canadian economy (Nanos for Positive Energy 2020; 2021)

CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of partisan polarization, this study explored several important limits to consensus-building processes on energy and climate policies in Canada. Using documentary analysis, literature reviews, and interviews with 50 Canadian environmental and energy leaders, we identified 11 influential drivers of polarization based on a multi-decade timeline of events, examined divergences in participants' understanding of this history, and analyzed differences in perceptions around the language of polarization and consensus. We integrated this analysis with scholarly literature and findings from other Positive Energy research studies to provide guidance on overcoming three important but potentially tractable limits to consensus-building: toxic partisanship, negative polarization, and false polarization.

Overcoming polarization, including partisan polarization, is not a simple task. A long sequence of political and social events has brought us to this point, but decision-makers looking to seize the emerging political consensus on net zero by 2050 have options. Non-partisan, and more importantly, cross-partisan approaches to decision-making and dialogue are two promising approaches.

While it is easier to polarize than it is to build consensus, emerging social psychology literature offers a number of promising tactics to combat this asymmetry and instill public confidence on the way to net zero.
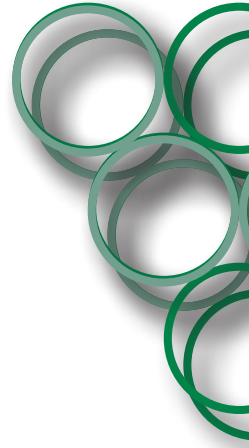
This study is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the limits to consensus-building. Potential future research directions include deeper analysis of other drivers identified in this study; what future disruptive technologies (e.g., Web 3.0) mean for consensus-building; and analysis of limits to consensus-building for specific projects or policy types.

Canada faces a complex and unique set of challenges in charting its energy future. Actors engaged in the project of net zero by 2050 have the beginnings of an important political consensus to work with. But time is short. Without a deeper understanding of how to work within that consensus, progress is unlikely.
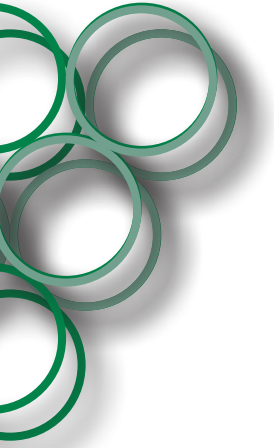
APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

- Catherine Abreu, Executive Director, Climate Action Network Canada (2016-2021)

- Perrin Beatty, President and CEO, Canadian Chamber of Commerce; Member of Parliament (1972-1993); Cabinet Minister (1979-1980, 1984-1993)

- Julia-Maria Becker, Former Project Lead, Alberta Narratives Project

- Tzeporah Berman, International Program Director, Stand.earth; Chair, Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty

- Michael Bernstein, Executive Director, Canadians for Clean Prosperity

- Ken Boessenkool, J.W. McConnell Professor of Practice, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University; Chief of Staff to the Premier of British Columbia (2011-2012)

- Duane Bratt, Professor, Department of Economics, Justice, and Policy Studies, Mount Royal University

- Ian Brodie, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary; Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister (2006-2008)

- Eric Campbell, Creator and Host, Smart Prosperity: The Podcast; Associate, Smart Prosperity Institute

- Mel Cappe, Professor, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy; Clerk of the Privy Council (1999-2002); Deputy Minister of the Environment (1994-1996)

- Jean Charest, Premier of Québec (2003-2012); Member of Parliament (1984-1998); Minister of the Environment (1991-1993)

- Dave Collyer, Corporate Director; President and CEO, Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (2008-2014)

- Louise Comeau, Director, Environment and Sustainable Development Research Centre, University of New Brunswick

- Margareta Dovgal, Director of Research, Resource Works

- Robin Edger, Former ENGO executive

- Max Fawcett, Columnist, National Observer; Senior Manager, Alberta Climate Change Office (2017-2019)

- Emma Gilchrist, Editor-in-Chief, The Narwhal

- Emma Graney, Energy Reporter, The Globe and Mail

- Don Guy, Owner and Chief Strategist, Pollara Insights

- Martha Hall Findlay, Chief Sustainability Officer, Suncor Energy; Member of Parliament (2008-2011)

- Chantal Hébert, Columnist, Toronto Star

- Robert Hornung, President and CEO, Canadian Renewable Energy Association

- Shannon Joseph, Vice President, Government Relations, Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers

- Joanna Kyriazis, Senior Policy Advisor, Clean Energy Canada

- Sarah Lawrynuik, Climate Change Journalist, formerly with CBC and Winnipeg Free Press

- André Lecours, Full Professor, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa

- Megan Leslie, Member of Parliament (2008-2015); Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Environment Critic (2012-2015)

- Preston Manning, Member of Parliament (1993-2002); Leader of the Official Opposition (1997-2000)

- Dale Marshall, National Program Manager, Environmental Defence

- David McGown, Executive Director, Canadian Business Coalition for Climate Policy

- Bob Mills, Member of Parliament (1993-2008); Environment Critic (2001-2006)

- Ted Morton, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, University of Calgary; Member of the Alberta Legislative Assembly (2004-2012); Minister of Sustainable Resource Development (2006-2010)

- Nik Nanos, Chair and CEO, Nanos Research Group; Senior Fellow, Positive Energy

- Renze Nauta, Director of Policy and Stakeholder Relations, Office of the Leader of the Opposition (2020-2022)

- Marla Orenstein, Director, Natural Resources Centre, Canada West Foundation

- Evan Pivnick, Principal, Cascade Strategies; Chief of Staff, BC Greens Caucus (2018-2021)

- Chris Ragan, Professor and Director, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University

- Lisa Raitt, Member of Parliament (2008-2019); Deputy Leader of the Opposition (2017-2019); Minister of Natural Resources (2008-2010)

- Shakti Ramkumar, Director of Communications and Policy, Student Energy

- Jean-Sébastien Rioux, Associate Professor, The School of Public Policy, University of Calgary (2012-2021); Chief of Staff to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (2006-2007); Chief of Staff to the Minister of Industry (2007-2008)

- Kim Rudd, Member of Parliament (2015-2019); Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources (2015-2019)

- Dianne Saxe, Deputy Leader, Green Party of Ontario; Senior Fellow, Massey College; Adjunct Professor, University of Toronto; Environmental Commissioner of Ontario (2015-2019)

- Sean Speer, Assistant Professor, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto; Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister (2014-2015)

- Katie Sullivan, Managing Director, International Emissions Trading Association

- Brian Topp, Partner, GT and Company; Fellow, Public Policy Forum; Chief of Staff to the Premier of Alberta (2015-2016); Deputy Chief of Staff to the Premier of Saskatchewan (1995-1999)

- Melanee Thomas, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Calgary

- Isabelle Turcotte, Director, Federal Policy, Pembina Institute

- Chris Turner, Journalist and author

- Kathleen Wynne, Premier of Ontario (2013-2018); Member of Provincial Parliament (2003-Present)

APPENDIX 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Origins and nature of partisan polarization over energy and environmental issues

1. Do you think energy and climate issues are polarized along partisan lines?

2. If so, when do you believe it started, and why? Please specify if nationally or within/between provinces.

3. Is polarization being driven by political parties, elites, grassroots, stakeholders, media, decision-makers, all of the above, none of the above, or someone else? Is one feeding the other, or have they alternated over time?

4. Why do you think the federal parties came down on issues like carbon taxes and pipelines in the way that they did?

5. Are there any events or elections that you believe were particularly polarizing on energy or climate?

Partisan polarization as an obstacle to consensus-building

6. In your view, has partisan polarization been an obstacle to consensus-building on energy and environment issues?

7. In your view, has partisan polarization contributed to the loss of previously established consensus on energy and environment issues?

8. Are there specific areas of energy or climate policy where partisan polarization is less of a problem? More of a problem?

Building consensus, overcoming polarization

9. Can you think of any examples of energy/climate policymaking where partisan polarization was an obstacle but was overcome? If so, what contributed to this success?

10. Can you think of any examples of energy/climate policymaking where partisan polarization actively made the problem of policy implementation worse?

11. How do you think we can overcome polarization on these issues? Are there things that have not been tried that we should try?

12. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

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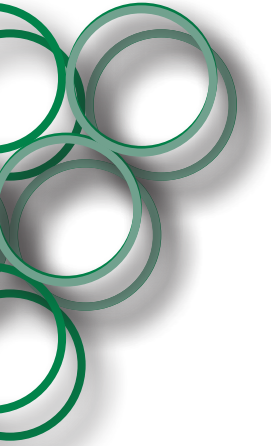
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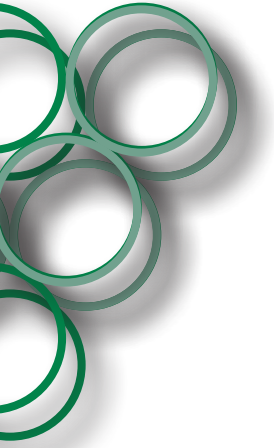
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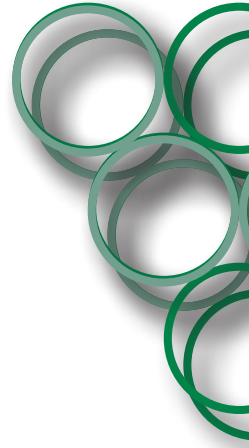
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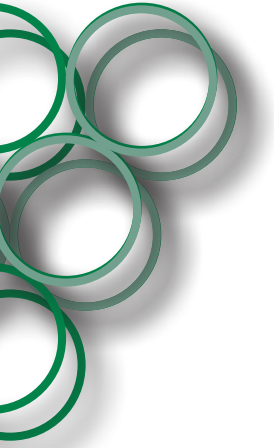
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