

POLARIZATION OVER ENERGY AND CLIMATE: UNDERSTANDING CANADIAN PUBLIC OPINION, ISSUE 2 - OIL AND GAS*

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Study in Brief

This survey research explores public opinion on the present and future of oil and gas in Canada, the role of federal and provincial governments in energy and climate, and how party affiliation, ideology, region, gender, and age may influence opinions on these topics. As with previous survey analyses, we distinguish between fragmented opinion, where public opinion is split but views are not strongly held, and polarized opinion, where public opinion is both split and concentrated at the extremes. This distinction matters for policymakers: fragmented opinions may be more open to change and compromise, whereas polarized views tend to be hardened.

Overall, we find many areas of agreement, but fragmented opinion on the role that oil and gas should play in Canada's energy future. Polarized opinion emerges along party and ideological lines for some issues. The survey was conducted amidst growing concerns over polarization leading up to Canada's 2019 federal election. This narrative endured in the ensuing months. The existence of a common set of values amongst the populace is a major concern for well-functioning democracies. While democratic systems depend upon some level of disagreement, a highly polarized public reduces stability and creates potentially dysfunctional governance.

As with previous analyses, views on energy issues are most strongly polarized along partisan lines. We have added ideology to this round of analysis, ranking Canadians by quartile (our ideological ranking is based on a series of questions on economic and social issues). Canadians overwhelmingly self-identify as moderate. While several of the topics surveyed are polarized along ideological lines, they are even more polarized along partisan lines. The survey was conducted online between September 9-29, 2019 using Qualtrics Services. We surveyed 2,679 Canadians with five regional subsamples of over 500 (BC, Prairies, Ontario, Québec, Atlantic Canada). Findings for individual survey questions (a companion slide deck of over 90 slides) are available on [Positive Energy's website](#).

Key Findings

This set of findings focuses primarily on Canadian attitudes towards the role of oil and gas in Canada's energy present and future, and opinions about the role of federal and provincial governments in energy and climate. Views are measured using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Analyzing the data across a number of demographic categories (partisan affiliation, ideology, region of residence, age, gender), we identify areas of agreement (green), fragmented opinion (yellow), and polarized opinion (red).

* This work was developed using survey design and implementation executed by professors Stephen Bird (Clarkson University) and Erick Lachapelle (Université de Montréal), and supported by Positive Energy in Fall 2019.

IN BRIEF

There is overwhelming agreement that oil and gas is important to Canada’s current economy. Agreement holds regardless of party affiliation, ideology, region, gender or age. Canadians also agree that oil and gas is important to the country’s future economy, but do so less strongly the younger they are. Importantly, opinions on the future of oil and gas are polarized along partisan lines and tend towards polarized by ideology. Political parties appear to be picking up on ideological differences, and these cues may be generating polarization.

Issue Area	Overall Opinion	By Party	By Ideology	By Region	By Age	By Gender
Importance of oil and gas						
The importance of oil and gas to Canada’s current economy	Strong agreement					Stronger agreement among women
The importance of oil and gas to Canada’s future economy	Agreement, but slightly less		Tending towards polarized	Agreement, but slightly less	Gen Z fragmented	
The future of oil and gas						
Exporting natural gas to countries that use more polluting forms of energy is one of the most important things Canada can do to address climate change	Agreement					
Canada should expand oil and gas production if it can produce it with lower emissions than other countries	Moderate Agreement		Furthest left/right somewhat polarized	Tending towards fragmented		Slightly stronger agreement among men
Since global demand for oil and gas is rising, Canada should expand production for export	Slight Agreement		Furthest left/right somewhat polarized	Fragmented, Prairies in stronger agreement	Gen Z fragmented	Men agree more strongly
Phasing out oil and gas is unnecessary because new technologies will dramatically reduce emissions	Slight Agreement			Slight fragmentation in all regions; Prairies in stronger agreement		
Phasing out oil and gas production is unfair to people in provinces that produce it	Slight Agreement		Furthest left/right polarized	Polarized in Prairies		
Canada needs to invest tax dollars into retraining workers as the country addresses climate change	Strong Agreement		Higher Agreement furthest left			

IN BRIEF

When asked more specific questions about the future of oil and gas, Canadians’ opinions are either in agreement or fragmented, and most issues are polarized along partisan and to some extent ideological lines. The two strongest areas of agreement relate to natural gas exports and retraining workers. There is agreement across all demographics for the proposition that exporting natural gas to displace emissions abroad is one of the most important things Canada can do to address climate change. There is also very strong agreement that Canada should use public resources to retrain workers as the country addresses climate change. Interestingly, support for both topics does not differ by party affiliation, ideology, region, age or gender.

Canadians agree that Canada should expand oil and gas production if it can be produced with lower emissions than other countries. Opinion is fragmented when it comes to expanding oil and gas production for export in a context of growing global demand. In both cases, opinions are polarized along partisan lines, and tend towards polarization along ideological lines. Differences by region and age are not as large as one might expect. As above, this suggests that parties are tapping into ideological differences in ways that may generate polarization.

When asked if phasing out oil and gas is necessary and whether a phase-out is unfair to people in producing provinces, opinion is fragmented overall and polarized along partisan and ideological lines. Interestingly, opinions are not polarized along regional, age or gender lines.

Role of Federal and Provincial Governments

We find agreement or fragmentation overall and between groups on survey questions about the role of federal and provincial governments. There is very strong agreement for the federal government developing a long-term energy vision, moderate agreement that the federal government has a role in how energy resources are developed in provinces, and fragmented opinion that provinces should be able to address climate change as they see fit.

Issue Area	Overall Opinion	By Party	By Ideology	By Region	By Age	By Gender
Role of federal and provincial governments						
The federal government needs to develop a long-term energy vision for Canada – even if some provinces don’t agree with it	Very strong agreement					
The federal government has no role in how energy resources are developed in provinces	Moderate disagreement	Tending towards polarized	Tending towards polarized			
Provinces should be able to address climate change whatever way they see fit	Slight Agreement	Some-what polarized				

Relevance for Decision-Makers

This survey was conducted prior to the onset of SARS-CoV-2. Whether the pandemic will have an enduring influence on Canadian attitudes and values remains to be seen. However, these survey results offer a useful baseline as decision-makers make choices about Canada's energy future in a highly volatile and dynamic environment.

In general, the results suggest that Canadians are optimistic that Canada can align climate action with oil and gas development through strong climate policies, a growing and environmentally-responsible oil and gas sector, and a strong export market that can reduce emissions abroad. Canadians are also clear that they want a long-term vision for Canada's energy and climate future, with expectations that the federal government should develop such a vision and that provinces should have capacity for choice in addressing climate change.

The results also reveal that Canadians' attitudes on energy and climate issues are not as polarized as many believe. There are far more areas of agreement than disagreement over the future of oil and gas and the roles of the federal and provincial governments. We do not find polarized opinions by age or gender, and opinions are rarely polarized along regional lines. This suggests there may be more room to find common ground than commonly believed. Polarized opinions emerge along partisan lines and in some cases along ideological lines, which suggests political parties may be mobilizing ideological differences in ways that drive polarized opinion.

Next Steps for Positive Energy

We will add to this analysis in coming months, undertaking more detailed statistical analyses of survey results. Positive Energy also plans to replicate this survey in the future to track the process of polarization (and depolarization). This work contributes to Positive Energy's ongoing research to understand polarization over energy and climate issues, and to identify ways to address and navigate polarized contexts.

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