

A hand holding a magnifying glass over wooden figures. The background is a blurred image of a person's face. The title 'BUILDING CONSENSUS: WHAT WORKS?' is written in large, bold, white capital letters. Below the title is a dotted line. Below the dotted line is the subtitle 'CASE STUDY: CANADA'S ECOFISCAL COMMISSION' in bold, white capital letters. Below the subtitle is another dotted line. Below the dotted line is the authors' names 'MARISA BECK AND MONICA GATTINGER WITH AIMEE RICHARD AND JULIEN TOHME' in bold, white capital letters. Below the authors' names is the date 'MARCH 2022' in bold, white capital letters. The image shows a hand holding a magnifying glass over a group of wooden figures. The figures are in the foreground, and the background is a blurred image of a person's face. The title is in large, bold, white capital letters. Below the title is a dotted line. Below the dotted line is the subtitle 'CASE STUDY: CANADA'S ECOFISCAL COMMISSION' in bold, white capital letters. Below the subtitle is another dotted line. Below the dotted line is the authors' names 'MARISA BECK AND MONICA GATTINGER WITH AIMEE RICHARD AND JULIEN TOHME' in bold, white capital letters. Below the authors' names is the date 'MARCH 2022' in bold, white capital letters.

# BUILDING CONSENSUS: WHAT WORKS?

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**CASE STUDY: CANADA'S  
ECOFISCAL COMMISSION**

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**MARISA BECK AND MONICA GATTINGER  
WITH AIMEE RICHARD AND JULIEN TOHME**

**MARCH 2022**

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As is customary, any errors of fact or interpretation are the responsibility of the authors.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### POSITIVE ENERGY'S "WHAT WORKS?" CASE STUDIES

Positive Energy's research and engagement program for 2018-2021 aims to identify how to strengthen public confidence in public authorities (policymakers, regulators, the courts, Indigenous and municipal governments) making decisions about Canada's energy future in an age of climate change. Three research streams, each with a variety of projects, events and reports, ground the effort: Polarization, Roles and Responsibilities, and Models of and Limits to Consensus-Building. The research effort began with the work on polarization and concludes with investigating pathways to consensus. The polarization research sought to understand polarization as a general phenomenon, its extent, nature, and consequences when it comes to energy and environment, and how decision-makers could go about addressing it. The consensus-building research includes a focus on how polarization and division can be an obstacle and limitation to achieving broad consensus about Canada's energy and climate future (see Box 1).

This case study is one of four that aim to identify 'What Works?' when it comes to building consensus amid polarization over energy and climate change. Each case examines an organization, program, or initiative established to either address polarization – the Alberta Climate Leadership Plan (Bratt, 2021) and the Just Transition Task Force (Frank & Girard Lindsay, 2020) – or foster consensus-building – Canada's Ecofiscal Commission (this study) and the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy (Bird, forthcoming). The four cases represent a mix of national and provincial level efforts, initiatives driven by governments versus those initiated by non-government actors, and those that targeted the general public versus decision-maker audiences.



## THE CASE: CANADA'S ECOFISCAL COMMISSION

Established in 2014 under the leadership of economics professor Chris Ragan, Canada's Ecofiscal Commission set out to promote pollution pricing policies across all levels of government in Canada through focused research and effective communication of research findings. Carbon pricing, the most prominent and politically controversial pollution pricing policy, soon emerged as Ecofiscal's flagship issue. Ecofiscal's goal was to depolarize the debate around carbon pricing by creating a cross-partisan space for evidence-based discussions of the issue. The Commission's five-year mandate ended in late 2019.

The Ecofiscal Commission's main tool to promote cross-partisan consensus was well-researched and well-communicated evidence on the economic benefits of carbon pricing and revenue recycling. The focus on economic analysis was intentionally chosen to debunk the often perceived environment versus economy dichotomy. The Commission convened many of Canada's leading economists to produce research studies, a highly visible and diverse Advisory Board to provide strategic guidance, and an effective Secretariat to manage operations and communication of research outputs. Ecofiscal's activities and organizational structure were driven by the belief that building credibility across party lines is the key ingredient to consensus-building. To that end, Ecofiscal never affiliated itself with governments or political parties, intentionally assembled an Advisory Board that included members of various political stripes and received its funding from non-partisan foundations.

Evidence suggests that Ecofiscal was successful in influencing and shaping carbon pricing policies in Canada. In particular, the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change, the Alberta Climate Leadership Plan, and the Ontario emissions trading scheme were identified by interviewees as directly informed by Ecofiscal research.

However, there is little evidence that Ecofiscal had immediate, significant impact on the level of polarization around carbon pricing in Canada. In fact, both Alberta's and Ontario's carbon pricing policies were immediately removed (at least in part) by incoming governments following provincial elections, and federal carbon pricing was challenged (unsuccessfully) all the way to the Supreme Court. Both a survey and interviews conducted for this study confirmed that Ecofiscal's success in creating a cross-partisan consensus among Canada's political elite was limited. Only once governments were open to the idea of carbon pricing, did Ecofiscal's research inform policymaking and lend credibility to governments' initiatives.

How can we mitigate the harmful effects of partisan polarization on decision-making processes and outcomes? Canada's Ecofiscal Commission is a case study of an organization that aimed to depoliticize one particular policy, carbon pricing, by using one specific tool: infusing the debate with non-partisan, academically rigorous research and evidence.





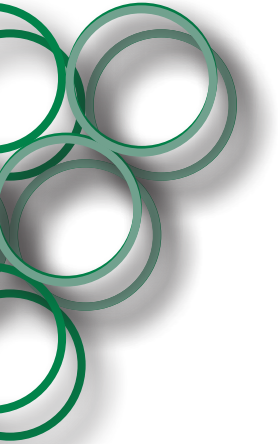
Owing to Ecofiscal's research approach, its organizational structure, and its funding model, the Commission generally enjoyed high visibility and credibility. Interviews and survey results indicate that high quality research was the organization's key strength, together with effective communication activities and strong leadership.

Nevertheless, partisanship and politics restricted Ecofiscal's impact. In particular, the organization was dependent on governments' willingness to listen, and political events such as elections and party leadership changes shaped its success. Importantly, the organization itself was perceived by some as too political and partisan. Multiple factors seem to have driven this perception:

- Ecofiscal's de facto focus on carbon pricing (although its mission targeted pollution pricing more broadly) – an inescapably controversial issue that political parties had adopted as a key wedge issue prior to the organization's establishment;
- Ecofiscal's consistently supportive message on carbon pricing, which raised concerns for some about lack of nuance and ideologically-driven analyses;
- Ecofiscal's success in influencing policy, which created a perceived association with the governments (and parties) introducing carbon pricing policies.

Interestingly, this analysis of what didn't work does not easily translate into a diagnosis of what Ecofiscal could have done better. Rather, our findings illustrate the dilemmas that polarization may create for organizations like Ecofiscal that focus on information and evidence to create lasting policy change. Should Ecofiscal, a small organization with limited resources, not have put most of its weight behind its most controversial issue? Would a less consistently positive message about carbon pricing have compromised policy impact? How could Ecofiscal have informed governments' policies while avoiding becoming associated with them?

In fact, scholarly literature on polarization and political psychology highlights the difficulty of the task that Ecofiscal set for itself. Specifically, research suggests that politicians forming opinions about policy issues tend to be influenced by their prior beliefs or identities, rather than available scientific evidence. Similarly, studies show that people's judgments about the credibility of information sources are ultimately subjective. For example, in an environment of polarization – more precisely, affective polarization, where people have negative feelings about members of opposing political parties or groups – any information provided by political opponents is at high risk of being dismissed.



On a final note, it might be too early to identify and evaluate the full impact of Ecofiscal on policymaking and the political debate over carbon pricing. While the organization ceased operations at the end of 2019, Ecofiscal research is still accessible, and the policy changes that it helped set in motion may have long-lasting effects. In fact, in December 2020, the federal government's climate plan included a new carbon price trajectory which sees the price rising to \$170 per tonne by 2030. This trajectory is in line with recommendations that Ecofiscal made in its final report (Canada's Ecofiscal Commission, 2019). Further, in March 2021, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the federally coordinated carbon price is constitutional. This ruling holds the promise of making carbon pricing a long-term fixture in Canadian policy and lowering the heat of political debate on the issue. Indeed, in the Fall 2021 federal election, the Conservative Party platform committed to establishing a carbon pricing mechanism. It remains to be seen if and how these plans will persevere under a new party leader.

## 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  
What is consensus? A study examining how partisan polarization over energy and climate has limited consensus-building and [how to overcome these limits](#)  
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?





## INTRODUCTION

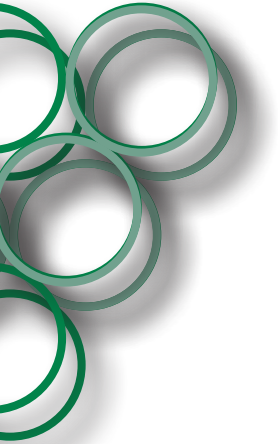
Launched in November 2014 under the leadership of McGill economics professor Chris Ragan, Canada's Ecofiscal's Commission set itself an ambitious goal: to promote the development and implementation of pollution pricing policies in Canada at all levels of government. Ecofiscal's strategy for achieving this goal was to foster a cross-partisan, evidence-informed discussion about the mechanics and benefits of pollution pricing policies by producing rigorous research and disseminating it to policymakers and thought leaders. Right from the outset, the term of Ecofiscal's mandate was set to five years (it ceased operations at the end of 2019).

While Ecofiscal's mission focused on pollution pricing more broadly, over its five-year existence, the organization's work became increasingly identified with one specific policy – carbon pricing – the most salient and politically controversial pollution pricing policy in Canada then and now. Given this study's interest in exploring consensus-building in polarized contexts, the research focuses exclusively on Ecofiscal's work on carbon pricing.

Ecofiscal came into being at a politically pivotal time for carbon pricing in Canada. While the Canadian government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper opposed a federal carbon tax, multiple provinces signalled more openness to carbon pricing. British Columbia had already introduced a carbon tax in 2008, and Alberta had in place a carbon levy for large industrial emitters since 2007. Québec's cap-and-trade system began operation on January 1, 2013.

Ecofiscal's organizational design was intentionally simple:

- At the organization's core was '**the Commission**', a dozen of Canada's most accomplished and respected economists (see Appendix 1 for a list of Commissioners). The Commission was chaired by Chris Ragan, and its task was to produce policy-relevant research on pollution pricing.
- Ecofiscal's **Advisory Board** was a diverse group of Canadian thought leaders, representing a range of sectors, regions, and political perspectives (see Appendix 2 for a list of members). The Advisory Board provided strategic guidance to the organization, and its members also acted as ambassadors for Ecofiscal's pollution pricing message in their communities and constituencies.
- Finally, a **secretariat**, along with a relatively small number of staff, was responsible for operations and communications.
- Ecofiscal received **funding** from several non-partisan foundations, family and corporate.



On the topic of carbon pricing, Ecofiscal produced 10 research studies over five years (see Table 1). The general messages of these studies included: (1) carbon pricing is the most cost-effective policy tool to curb greenhouse gas emissions, and (2) intentional recycling of carbon tax revenues into the economy will lower costs further and offset unwanted distributional impacts. This policy message remained consistent over the organization's lifetime.

Ecofiscal communicated this message through multiple channels. In addition to publicly available research reports, it also engaged with policymakers and thought leaders through briefings to governments, testimony to federal and provincial legislative committees, traditional and social media, training, and courses.

**TABLE 1: STUDIES ON CARBON PRICING PUBLISHED BY THE ECOFISCAL COMMISSION**

Report title	Publication Date
The Way Forward: A Practical Approach to Reducing Canada's Greenhouse Gas Emissions	April 2015
The Way Forward for Ontario: Design Principles For Ontario's New Cap-And-Trade System	June 2015
Provincial Carbon Pricing and Competitiveness Pressures	November 2015
Provincial Carbon Pricing and Household Fairness	April 2016
Choose Wisely: Options and Trade-offs in Recycling Carbon Pricing Revenues	April 2016
Comparing Stringency of Carbon Pricing Policies	July 2016
Supporting Carbon Pricing: How to Identify Policies that Genuinely Complement an Economy-wide Carbon Price	June 2017
Clearing the Air: How Carbon Pricing Helps Canada Fight Climate Change	April 2018
10 Myths About Carbon Pricing in Canada	March 2019
Bridging the Gap: Real Options for Meeting Canada's 2030 GHG Target	November 2019





## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

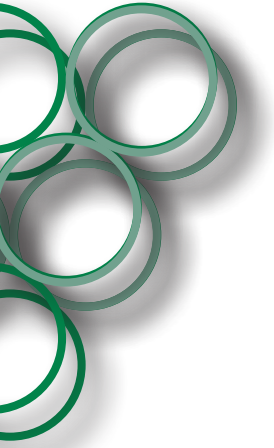
This study is one of four that aim to identify “What Works?” when it comes to building consensus in polarized contexts. Each case examines an organization, program, or initiative established to address polarization: the Alberta Climate Leadership Plan (Bratt, 2021), the Just Transition Task Force (Frank & Girard Lindsay, 2020), Canada’s Ecofiscal Commission (this study), and the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy (Bird, forthcoming). The cases represent a mix of national and provincial level efforts, initiatives driven by governments versus those initiated by non-government actors, and those that target the general public versus decision-maker audiences.

This study investigates the degree to which and why the Ecofiscal Commission was effective in strategically using research and facts as tools to (1) influence policy outcomes, and (2) promote cross-partisan support for carbon pricing. The objective is to identify the features of Ecofiscal’s activities and organizational design that shaped its success. In so doing, we aim to draw conclusions about the impact of research and evidence on decision-making in a polarized political environment. What is the potential for scientific information to influence the content and character of debates? What are the limits of its influence?

Two major caveats need to be stated when speaking about the methodology for this study. First, policymaking processes and political polarization are social phenomena that are notoriously difficult to study empirically – in particular, if the goal is to identify causal relationships. It is well understood that a wide variety of factors influence policy outcomes – research and evidence (as produced by Ecofiscal) may not necessarily be among them. Additionally, Ecofiscal was not the only source of scientific evidence on carbon pricing available to policymakers but was part of an ecosystem of knowledge producers and influencers. Thus, it is not possible to isolate the specific impact of Ecofiscal’s policy inputs *ex post*. Similarly, it is not possible to determine what levels of polarization around carbon pricing would have been had Ecofiscal not come into existence.

To address this methodological challenge, we rely heavily on the assessments and perceptions of interviewees and survey participants, as well as conclusions that can be drawn from analysis of public records of when, how, and by whom Ecofiscal was mentioned in legislative debates across the country. With regards to polarization over carbon pricing in particular, we analyze coverage of carbon pricing in Canada’s major newspapers to better understand the most important issues in political debates of the time. We did not analyze how politicians, journalists, researchers, and others referenced and debated Ecofiscal’s work on social media (e.g., Twitter). While such an analysis was beyond the scope of this study, we suspect it would further illustrate some of our findings.





Second, this study is one in a series of Positive Energy publications exploring polarization over Canada's energy future in an age of climate change. In-depth discussion of certain concepts or phenomena are not included in this study but can be found in other Positive Energy publications, including an in-depth literature review of (political) polarization (Aguirre, 2020), a historical review of why and how energy and climate policy has become polarized along partisan lines in Canada (Frank, 2022), and an overview of means of addressing political polarization (Roy, forthcoming).

The data sources for this study are described below.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

We conducted 14 confidential, semi-structured interviews with experts involved in Ecofiscal's work as well as knowledgeable external observers. Interviewees included Ecofiscal Commissioners, Advisory Board members, staff, and representatives from foundations that provided funding. The interviews were conducted over the phone and were roughly 30 minutes in duration. During interviews, participants were asked to evaluate Ecofiscal's impact on policy outcomes and to identify factors underpinning the Commission's successes and shortcomings. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data to identify recurring ideas and patterns.

The interview guide and a list of interview participants are included in Appendix 1.

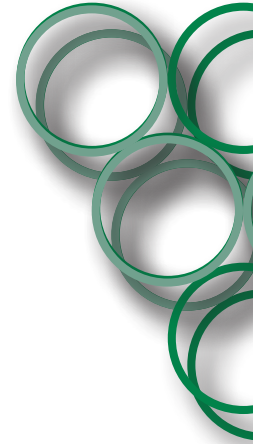
### **Online survey**

We also conducted an online survey that included 13 closed and open-ended questions with internal and external stakeholders of Ecofiscal. Positive Energy researchers designed the survey and analysed the data, and Ecofiscal's staff sent the invitation to participate to its email distribution list of 3,318 recipients (2,964 English; 354 French). The survey was conducted between February 11, 2020 and March 1, 2020. In total, 374 people participated in the survey (response rate = 11%), but response rates varied across questions. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques.

The survey questions and results are included in Appendix 2.

### **Hansard index search**

We searched federal and provincial legislative transcripts in key jurisdictions (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Québec) to identify mentions of Ecofiscal and its research. We selected these provinces because they either had a carbon pricing system in place at the time, or their governments were actively considering this policy option.



For the search of legislative records, the search terms used were 'Ecofiscal' and 'Écofiscalité' in Hansard indexes. Federally, we searched for mentions in the House of Commons and Senate floors, as well as committees on energy, environment, finance and natural resources. At the provincial level, we identified mentions on the floor of the legislature and in key committees. For each mention, data was collected on the year of mention, the context of the mention (on the legislative floor or in committee), the speaker (name; legislative member or committee witness; political party), and the content of the mention (including citations where relevant). When a single speaker raised Ecofiscal on multiple occasions in the same meeting/intervention, this was only counted as one mention.

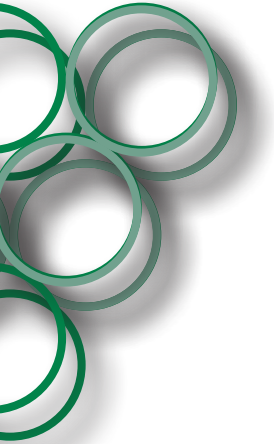
### **Content analysis of carbon pricing coverage in Canadian newspapers**

To capture a 'snapshot' of the public discourse around carbon pricing leading up to establishment of the Ecofiscal Commission, we analysed how carbon pricing was covered in Canadian daily newspapers between April 2011 and August 2015. This content analysis helps put the rationale for Ecofiscal and its mission into context.

The selection of newspapers was made based on circulation so as to include the most widely consumed sources. Circulation data was extracted from News Media Canada<sup>1</sup>, the Canadian newspapers' trade association. A minimum of 100,000 readers was chosen as the threshold for inclusion (although all newspapers selected far exceeded this number). In addition to national papers, we included regional papers in provinces that had already implemented carbon pricing prior to the establishment of the Ecofiscal Commission (Alberta, British Columbia, and Québec), or that represented a key 'battleground' province for carbon pricing (Ontario). We considered publications in both English and French.

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1. <https://nmc-mic.ca/about-newspapers/circulation/daily-newspapers/>



**TABLE 2: COVERAGE OF CARBON PRICING IN CANADIAN NEWSPAPERS,  
APRIL 2011 - AUGUST 2015**

Geographic scope	Publication title	Articles analyzed (#)
National	The Globe and Mail	8
	The National Post	8
Alberta	Calgary Herald	2
	Edmonton Journal	2
	Edmonton Sun	2
Ontario	Toronto Sun	2
	Toronto Star	2
B.C.	Vancouver Sun	1
	The Province	2
	Times Colonist	2
Québec	Journal de Québec	2
	Journal de Montréal	2
	Metro	2
	Montreal Gazette	2

For each newspaper, we searched their archives for articles tagged with the key words ‘carbon tax’ (‘taxe sur le carbone’) or ‘carbon pricing’ (‘prix du carbone’). Table 2 lists the daily newspapers that included relevant articles and the numbers of articles analyzed.

The content of articles was coded thematically focusing on whether they expressed support or opposition to carbon pricing, as well as benefits and costs identified. The results of this research are discussed in the analysis below.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT: WHY THE ECOFISCAL COMMISSION? WHY IN 2014?

### A PATH FORWARD IN A DIVERSE POLICY LANDSCAPE

Several interviewees observed that the 2008 federal election was an important turning point in the political debate around carbon pricing in Canada. Liberal leader Stéphane Dion fought and lost the 2008 federal election over his proposal for a Green Shift that centred on carbon pricing. His Conservative opponents aggressively attacked the proposal, and the opposing campaigns turned the issue into a deeply partisan one. Absent any federal coordination it was up to the provinces to determine their own approaches. Alberta introduced an intensity-based carbon levy for large industrial emitters in 2007, and a broad-based carbon pricing and revenue recycling scheme was established in British Columbia in 2008. Interviewees indicated that the deep partisan divide continued throughout the Harper Conservative government years and became one of the key rationales for establishing Ecofiscal.

Though the federal government under Prime Minister Harper (2006-2015) was opposed to a carbon tax<sup>2</sup>, some interviewees described the policy situation in 2013 on carbon pricing as a ‘window of opportunity’ for Ecofiscal to make an impact at the provincial level and drive progress from the bottom up.<sup>3</sup> Interviewees mentioned that there was appetite in multiple provinces, including Ontario and Québec, to consider provincial carbon pricing policies.

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2. The Conservative Party platform in the 2008 federal election included the commitment to establish a cap-and-trade system in North America, but once they formed government, the Conservatives did not follow through on the commitment in the wake of the global financial crisis and recession, which knocked cap-and-trade off both Canadian and American policy agendas (see Gattinger 2016).

3. Against this backdrop, the first Ecofiscal report on carbon pricing in 2014 examined a ‘bottom up’ approach whereby provinces set up independent policies.



## OPPOSITION TO CARBON PRICING CITING ECONOMIC FEARS

Analysis of how carbon pricing was covered in major Canadian newspapers between 2011 and 2015 sheds further light on the political debate around carbon pricing leading up to and around the time of Ecofiscal's creation. A number of commonly used arguments for and against carbon pricing can be identified.

Of the articles reviewed, 12 were expressly supportive of carbon pricing, 13 were outwardly opposed it, and 14 were either ambivalent or expressed arguments from both sides of the debate. While the sample is too small to reliably identify regional differences in coverage, it appears that the articles reviewed in Alberta and British Columbia tended to be more critical than in Québec, Ontario, and nationally.<sup>4</sup>

Economic arguments concerning competitiveness and potential wealth (re)distribution lay at the heart of discussions opposing carbon pricing policies. A key argument was that such a scheme constituted a 'tax on everything' – a phrase first used by then Prime Minister Stephen Harper in the 2008 federal election campaign. The point was repeatedly made that any attempt to put a price on carbon would inevitably lead to an increase in the prices of all goods and services downstream of energy providers – in essence, the entire economy – as energy providers and other companies would pass on costs to consumers. Indeed, one editorial stated that falling fuel prices at the time constituted a tax break for the average citizen and appealed to leaders: "Can you not leave Lincoln's 'common man' alone? Just once? Please? Can you not, just one time, allow a little of the benefit to flow down and let those who most need and appreciate some small break have that break?" (Murphy, 2015).

In addition, many commentators feared the development of a large bureaucratic machinery to oversee and govern any pricing scheme (in particular, cap-and-trade), further weighing down the economy and ultimately becoming a potential avenue for corruption. Finally, there was a common perception throughout articles opposing carbon pricing that, even if properly administered, it would always represent an undue burden on the Canadian economy, which relies greatly on the export of fossil fuels, and would slow economic growth to a dangerous level. These fears manifested mostly in terms of a massive loss of jobs in Canada as well as concerns about Canada's international competitiveness. In some cases, critiques went so far as to say that carbon pricing was a means of socialist wealth redistribution. In a similar vein, one article described carbon pricing as "a policy that will cut emissions here while needlessly transferring billions of dollars from Alberta to Ottawa" (Staples, 2011).

It is important to note that not all articles critical of carbon pricing were hostile to the need to address climate change. Such commentaries critiqued carbon pricing for being too costly, ineffective, or too politically contentious to be successful. This last point in particular was made in the context of the Harper administration's stance on carbon pricing. Indeed, one author stated that "the Conservatives have turned any mention of the proposal into the policy equivalent of a toxic waste dump" (McParland, 2013). Garon (2014) identified Québec's carbon price not as a sign of the province's leadership on climate change but rather a burden on businesses that remains ineffective if other jurisdictions fail to join and cooperate.

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4. Notably, the analysis revealed a difference of support or opposition based on ownership of the news outlets, with negative coverage of carbon pricing overwhelmingly published in newspapers owned by Postmedia. This observation may warrant further research.



While economic arguments were at the heart of opposition to carbon pricing, they were not used as frequently in articles supporting the policy. A notable exception here is Munger (2013), who argued that Alberta's carbon levy benefits the province's economy as it creates revenues that are invested in easing a transition toward renewable energy sources. Rather, supportive articles focused on the need to meet emissions targets. More specifically, they argued that without any serious carbon pricing measures, including a significant price per tonne, Canada would not be able to meet its emissions targets. For example, one author stated that "Canada's goal is to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 17 per cent from 2005 levels, but Environment Canada projects the country will only get halfway to that goal under current practices" (Hume, 2014). In relation to this, several articles focused on the need for federal leadership, attempting to communicate ideas and persuade critics of the value of these policy tools. Indeed, a central theme emerging from this analysis was the need for federal action to supplement provincial initiatives or to take the lead on carbon pricing if necessary. This argument articulated the view that the federal government has the responsibility to harmonize policy initiatives across the country and provide a coherent structure to enable Canada to meet its emissions reduction targets. This can be seen in a quote from a representative of the David Suzuki Foundation: "I would say the main obstacle to Canada in meeting its target is a lack of leadership at the national level by the federal government" (Hume, 2014). When economic arguments did make their way into this side of the debate, they were usually framed in ways that sought to diminish or contextualize the potential adverse impacts of carbon pricing on the economy.

Finally, several articles highlighted the politically contentious nature of the debate and highlighted the need to develop more clear and coherent ways of communicating the value of carbon pricing to the public. Indeed, Preston Manning, Ecofiscal Advisory Board member (2014-2019) said in a Globe and Mail editorial that carbon pricing is "an idea that has been very poorly communicated to the public, especially by climate-change worriers and carbon-tax advocates" (Manning, 2014). Thompson (2015) argued that the idea of carbon pricing is actually well-aligned with a free-market ideology and 'small' governments, indicating that Conservatives' reluctance to champion the policy may be predominantly based on short-sighted political calculations.

Ecofiscal's message on carbon pricing directly responded to this debate and aimed to reconcile the key arguments by demonstrating through rigorous research that emissions reductions and economic growth can go hand in hand.





## HOW SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE INFORMS POLITICIANS' OPINIONS AND POLICY DECISIONS (–OR NOT)

One interviewee identified weak policy choices as a source of frustration and an important motivation for bringing Ecofiscal to life: “I would say that one of the reasons why Ecofiscal was created was the recognition that it was difficult to get what we viewed as good and sensible policy in a polarized world. And we built Ecofiscal in a way that we felt would deal with that or at least address in some way that polarization.”

The scholarly research reviewed below helps put the task that Ecofiscal defined for itself – to promote “good and sensible” carbon pricing policies and to influence the way in which politicians and other thought leaders think about carbon pricing by providing scientific evidence – into context. Specifically, this section reviews current scholarly understandings of (1) how scientific evidence influences policymaking, and (2) how scientific evidence influences people’s beliefs and attitudes. We also define partisan polarization, and how partisan polarization may affect policymaking and opinion formation.

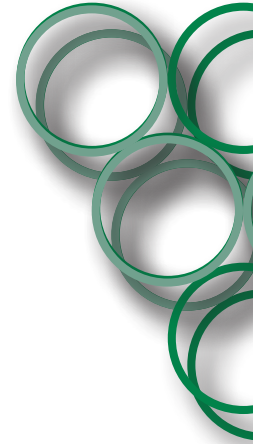
### Scientific evidence and opinion formation

What do we know about how scientific evidence influences politicians’ beliefs and opinions about policy issues? One approach would suggest that politicians’ policy opinions will converge when they are all exposed to the same evidence. Convergence of opinions would make it much easier to find consensus in policymaking and implementation. However, Montpetit and Lachapelle (2017) find that policymakers do not necessarily engage in a ‘rational’ learning process when confronted with new information about a policy issue. Their previously held positions – even if contrary to new evidence – may harden and move further apart from those with opposing views. Their research finds that such hardening of positions occurs when individuals are not open to softening or shifting their stance, but rather, reject new information

that challenges their views.

Where would such resistance come from? Research in political psychology and political science offers potential explanations. Studies demonstrate that humans are *motivated reasoners*; they collect, process, and interpret information in pursuit of various objectives. When pursuing ‘accuracy goals’, people are driven by the objective of arriving at *true* conclusions. In contrast, ‘directional’ motivated reasoning means people collect, process, and interpret information with the objective of arriving at conclusions that are *useful* to them in some other way. A large body of empirical work reveals that people tend to reason in ways that align with prior political positions (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006; Druckman, 2012). Another finds that reasoning is driven by the goal of maintaining identity and belonging in a particular group, whether political, social, or familial (Kahan, 2016a; 2016b; Mason, 2015). Importantly, policy experts are not exempt from motivated reasoning. On the contrary, some studies find that the more sophisticated and knowledgeable someone is about an issue, the more effectively they can discount arguments that challenge their identity commitments (Kahan, 2013; Lodge & Taber, 2013).

Alternatively, Druckman and McGrath (2019) suggest that people’s perceptions of the credibility of information sources better explains why certain scientific evidence moves – or does not move – their opinions. They note that credibility is typically judged along two deeply subjective dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise. Studies find that people consider sources credible when they perceive them to be politically neutral and objective (Gauchat, 2012) and when they believe the information to have no other purpose than advancing the truth (Rabinovich, Morton, & Birney, 2012).



### Scientific evidence in policymaking

A ‘rational’ technocratic model of the science-policy relationship would see policymakers exclusively (or at least extensively) drawing on research and expert evidence to set the policy agenda, design policies, and implement them<sup>5</sup>. But as the previous section reveals, it is far less straightforward than that.

Empirical studies demonstrate that the link between science and policy is non-linear and complex (Cairney, 2015). In practice, the timing and nature of policy decisions may more likely be determined by spontaneous, brief openings of ‘policy windows’ where policy problems, solutions, and political imperatives align (Kingdon, 1984) or ‘punctuated equilibria’ where major change occurs rarely and is difficult to predict (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) – rather than the availability of new evidence. Science holds no monopoly on decision-makers’ attention. Numerous actors are involved in the production, interpretation, and application of policy-relevant information, including politicians, public servants, researchers, advocates, and lobbyists. As described above, all of these actors do not form opinions exclusively based on scientific evidence; they respond to institutional, economic, and political incentives; and their opinions are influenced by their pre-existing beliefs and a broad range of objectives.

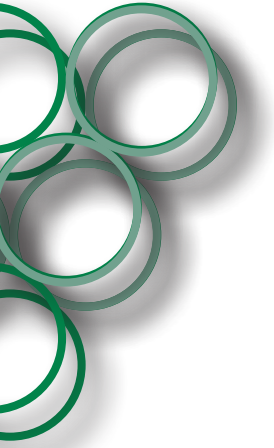
What is more, research challenges the assumption that providing more scientific evidence will sway politicians’ views. For instance, Baekgaard et al. (2017) found that motivated reasoning among politicians on an issue cannot easily be mitigated by providing them with more factual evidence – in fact, it can have the opposite effect. Survey experiments with close to one thousand Danish politicians found that providing politicians with a large volume of factual information about a policy issue that contradicted their previous position had no corrective impact. The authors concluded that “evidence does not tend to build bridges across political parties and politicians of various ideological orientations. Rather, evidence reinforces the importance of various political beliefs and may even increase political conflict” (Baekgaard et al., 2017, p. 1135).

### Opinion formation and policymaking amid polarization

How does political polarization shape the potential influence of scientific evidence in opinion formation and policymaking? Polarization describes “an increasingly stark and antagonistic division between political parties, groups, or viewpoints, and the accompanying decline of moderate or centrist positions that normally mediate those differences” (Calhoun, 2002). Polarization can occur at the ‘elite’ level (political parties, lawmakers, experts, opinion leaders) and/or among citizens. Since the Ecofiscal Commission focused its activities primarily on the ‘elite’ (including governments at all levels), polarization is discussed here through that lens. Given the partisan divide over carbon pricing in Canada, we are particularly interested in partisan polarization, which refers to polarization among elites associated with political parties (elected officials, their staff, donors, members, and supporters).

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5. Scholars argue that the technocratic model falls short even as an aspirational goal: drawing exclusively on science to inform policy implies that other types of relevant knowledge, such as community knowledge and Indigenous knowledge, are excluded from decision-making (Bäckstrand, 2003; Owens et al., 2004; Blowers et al., 2004).



Political science literature reveals that partisan polarization can manifest in various ways. For the purpose of this case study, two specific manifestations are relevant:

- **Partisan sorting:** This refers to individual parties growing more homogenous over time with regards to ideology, beliefs, and positions on specific policies compared to their counterparts. Kevins and Soroka (2017) establish that partisan sorting in Canada increased between 1992 and 2015. When it comes to climate and energy policy in Canada, Positive Energy's public survey work indicates a strong tendency towards partisan sorting on these issues (Bird et al. 2019). For the last four federal election cycles, carbon pricing has been a 'wedge issue', i.e., an issue that political actors or parties use to differentiate themselves from their opponents.
- **Affective polarization:** This refers to how people feel about different political parties and their perceived political opponents. In an environment of affective polarization, people hold high levels of contempt (even hate), anger, and mistrust against individuals from 'the other' political communities or parties, and their reasoning is strongly driven by resentment of political opponents. In extreme cases, issues become controversial and polarizing simply due to one party expressing a position about them (Gilens & Murakawa, 2002). Johnston (2019) finds that affective polarization has been on the rise in Canada since 1988.

Partisan polarization may heighten the effects of motivated reasoning and mistrust in the sorts of information sources discussed above, and further mute the potential impact of scientific evidence on politicians' policy positions and policy decisions. When party positions on a policy issue are well-defined (partisan sorting) and distrust of political opponents well-established (affective polarization), politicians are more likely to engage in politically motivated reasoning than in policy learning in the face of new evidence. The reward for signalling loyalty to their party is high. Further, strong affective polarization likely lowers the perceived credibility of sources of policy-relevant evidence provided – or endorsed – by political opponents.

This brief literature review highlights the enormous challenge of the task that Ecofiscal took on, and underscores why the organization and its activities were designed with one key objective in mind: credibility to politicians and their staff.









# THE ECOFISCAL COMMISSION: DRIVING POLICY PROGRESS WITH FACTS

## OBJECTIVE: BUILD CREDIBILITY IN A POLARIZED ENVIRONMENT

Given the partisan environment in which Ecofiscal was established, it is not surprising that many interviewees emphasized the importance for Ecofiscal of building credibility to achieve its mission. Interviews highlighted five major planks of Ecofiscal's approach to establishing credibility; all of them address in various ways the dimensions of source credibility identified in the literature: trustworthiness and expertise. Four of these elements relate to features of Ecofiscal's organizational structure (the Commission, the Advisory Board, the Chair and Secretariat, and funding) and the other two to its activities (research, communications).

### **Mobilization of leading Canadian economists to establish expertise**

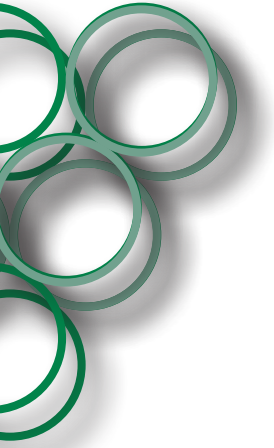
The Commission was composed of 12 reputable Canadian economists from universities and/or research organizations across the country (Appendix 3). Why was the Ecofiscal Commission exclusively composed of economists? Interviews revealed that the discipline was specifically chosen to address matters of credibility and legitimacy on pollution pricing. The choice was a direct response to the persistent and common perception among both decision-makers and the general public that an inherent trade-off exists between environmental protection and economic prosperity (see the results of the media analysis above). The composition of the Ecofiscal Commission was intended to send a clear message: instead of convening environmentalists, a multistakeholder group or a multidisciplinary group of scholars, the Commission appointed a group of the country's most reputable economists to underscore that economic theory demonstrates carbon pricing is a tool that can deliver on both economic growth and pollution reductions. As one interviewee explained: "People are more likely to believe economists on that statement than philosophers."

### **A diverse, unexpected Advisory Board to signal trustworthiness**

Ecofiscal's Advisory Board was composed of well-known thought leaders from politics, industry, and civil society (Appendix 4). Advisory Board members represented views from across the political spectrum, different regions, and a variety of sectors. For example, the Advisory Board brought together both Steve Williams, then Suncor President and CEO, and Peter Robinson, former CEO of the David Suzuki Foundation. Similarly, former Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin sat on the board along with Preston Manning, founder of the Reform Party. Despite their diverse interests and political/ideological orientations, Advisory Board members were united in their support for pollution pricing. As with the Commission itself, Advisory Board composition was intended to convey the message that pollution pricing enjoys support from a broad coalition of Canadian leaders and is not inevitably a source of division among political groups, Canada's regions, or different sectors of society.

Advisory Board members provided strategic advice to the organization but also acted as ambassadors for pollution pricing in their various communities and in the media. Members' outspoken support for Ecofiscal's work aimed to boost credibility among the communities that members represented and to foster the perception of Ecofiscal as cross-partisan and ideologically diverse. Notably, only retired politicians were included in the Board so as to avoid political conflicts of the moment.





### **Strong chair and secretariat**

Chris Ragan acted as the Commission's chair and central spokesperson. Some interviewees called him a 'charismatic' chair with exceptional strength in both academic research and communication. Ecofiscal's secretariat included Executive Director Dale Beugin and a small team of research and communications experts. The tasks of the secretariat included research support, communications, and outreach.

### **Financial independence to signal trustworthiness**

To further emphasize the organization's independence from political parties and governments, Ecofiscal's funding was sourced exclusively from non-partisan, corporate and family foundations. Further, Commissioners and Advisory Board members were not compensated for their time.

### **Rigorous research process**

Ecofiscal's research process was designed to foster academic rigour. Major reports required consensus among all Commissioners, which entailed long and detailed discussions of assumptions and findings. Interviewees indicated that this consensus-building process usually meant that the production of a report was long and intense, but reports were more rigorous and credible as a result since Commissioners were speaking with one voice. Shorter reports and blog posts did not require consensus.

### **Targeted communications activities**

Ecofiscal chose as its primary target audience policymakers at all levels of government, as well as those influencing policymakers' views, including journalists. In one interviewee's words, Ecofiscal aimed to communicate with the small fraction of "Canadians who think about policy, argue about policy, write about policy, make policy, implement policy." While all of Ecofiscal's research and work was accessible to the general public, interviewees indicated that Ecofiscal recognized that its limited communication resources were most effectively used to target decision-makers.

Ecofiscal communicated with decision-makers through several channels:

- Research publications (including reports, blogs, video clips) accessible through Ecofiscal's website;
- Media appearances of the Commission's Chair, Ecofiscal staff, Commissioners, and Advisory Board members (including newspapers, radio, TV);
- Face-to-face engagement with policymakers by way of bilateral meetings, training sessions, events, and testimony to federal and provincial legislatures, and
- Social media (including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn).

Interviews indicate that Ecofiscal aimed for its messaging to be clear, rooted in research, and consistent over the organization's lifetime.



## ASSESSING THE ECOFISCAL COMMISSION'S SUCCESS IN MAKING FACTS MATTER

The previous section discussed the strategies that Ecofiscal employed to garner credibility on carbon pricing in a polarized and highly partisan political environment. Members of Ecofiscal's Commission and Advisory Board considered credibility a necessary ingredient for the organization to fulfill its mission: promoting carbon pricing policies in Canada and 'mainstreaming' the policy tool across political parties. Did it work?

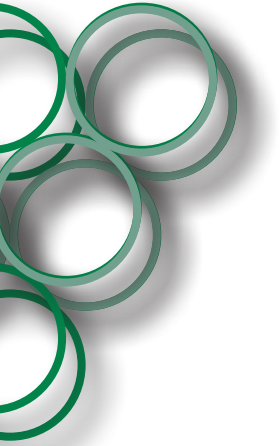
### DID ECOFISCAL SHAPE THE LANDSCAPE OF CARBON PRICING POLICIES IN CANADA? YES.

The evidence considered in this study strongly indicates that Ecofiscal succeeded in influencing policy outcomes, both at the federal and provincial levels. Survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Ecofiscal was 'extremely,' 'very' or 'somewhat' effective in influencing policy decisions (84%) and policy discussions (92%) in Canada (see Appendix 2 for the survey instrument and results). The high level of agreement among survey respondents was generally consistent across geographic regions and professional roles of respondents.

The interviews affirmed Ecofiscal's tangible influence on Canadian carbon pricing policy. One interviewee stated that Ecofiscal research was on the table in every behind-closed-door policy discussion on carbon pricing between 2014 and 2019. Multiple interviewees mentioned specific policies that were visibly shaped by Ecofiscal's research, including the Liberal Party's platform on carbon pricing for the 2015 federal election and subsequently the federal Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change (2016). In particular, the design of the Framework's 'backstop policy' was identified by a number of interviewees as close to a direct import from Ecofiscal's first report on carbon pricing. In fact, the Framework document quotes Ecofiscal on the practicality and cost-effectiveness of carbon pricing. Further, interviewees stated that Ecofiscal was advising the Ontario and Alberta governments on their respective pricing policies (Ontario's Climate Change Mitigation and

Low-Carbon Economy Act of 2016 and Alberta's Climate Leadership Plan of 2015). Interestingly, one interviewee remarked that Ecofiscal was influential once carbon pricing was on a government's agenda but was less effective at putting carbon pricing on the agenda in the first place. This suggests that Ecofiscal's influence may have been more about policy design than about 'mainstreaming' carbon pricing per se.

The analysis of mentions in federal and provincial legislatures (Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Québec) further documents Ecofiscal's influence on policy discussions and outcomes. Over the Commission's lifetime (2014 to 2019), it was mentioned on 79 different occasions, of which the vast majority focused on carbon pricing (see Table 3). The majority of mentions were at the federal level, followed by Alberta and Ontario, and one mention in BC. There were no mentions in the Québec legislature.



**TABLE 3: MENTIONS OF THE ECOFISCAL COMMISSION IN FEDERAL AND SELECT PROVINCIAL LEGISLATURES, 2014 TO 2019**

	House of Commons	Senate	Ontario	Alberta	British Columbia	Québec
House	18	2	6	14	0	0
Committee	22	9	5	2	1	0
Total	40	11	11	16	1	0

Of note, 15 of these mentions were made by people with direct connection to Ecofiscal, appearing as witnesses before legislative committees. Executive Director Dale Beugin spoke eight times as a witness and Chris Ragan three times. Two representatives of Ecofiscal’s funding organizations (The Suncor Foundation, The Ivey Foundation) mentioned the Commission in their remarks to House of Commons Committees, as did Ecofiscal Commissioner Stewart Elgie (twice).

It is a sign of policy influence that both Ecofiscal staff and members of the Ecofiscal network were invited to testify (repeatedly) to legislators. It signals that these individuals were perceived as credible experts.



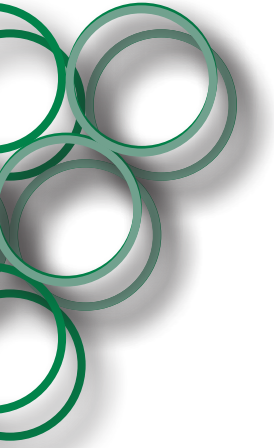
## DID ECOFISCAL MAINSTREAM SUPPORT FOR CARBON PRICING ACROSS PARTISAN DIVIDES? NO.

This study finds little evidence that Ecofiscal's research and communications helped build immediate cross-partisan consensus around carbon pricing. Ecofiscal had aimed to introduce evidence into the political debate over carbon pricing to create a common understanding among those from different parties. However, survey respondents and multiple interviewees were doubtful of Ecofiscal's success in this regard. When survey respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of the Ecofiscal Commission in depolarizing and depoliticizing debates over carbon pricing on a scale of 0 to 10, the average response was 6/10. When asked about areas where Ecofiscal was not successful, 21 survey respondents out of 202 noted Ecofiscal's failure to depoliticize the public discourse around carbon pricing. One interviewee said of Ecofiscal's performance on this front: "So one of the things that we haven't yet been successful – and this is maybe the biggest failure – is that we haven't been able to make carbon pricing mainstream."<sup>6</sup> Another interviewee said that Ecofiscal was not able to "convince the unconvincible."

A closer analysis of the legislative mentions of Ecofiscal's research further highlights the contrast between Ecofiscal's success in influencing policy, on the one hand, and its unmet ambitions to foster cross-partisan consensus, on the other. The analysis reveals that (a) Ecofiscal's research was mentioned by speakers from various parties, including those supporting and opposing carbon pricing; (b) speakers selectively chose and interpreted various elements of Ecofiscal research and evidence to support their positions. For example, speakers from the federal Conservative Party drew on Ecofiscal research in their remarks several times to put dollar figures on the economic cost of carbon pricing, but they were silent on Ecofiscal's discussion of revenue recycling options. In contrast, speakers from the federal Liberal and New Democratic parties frequently emphasized the economic benefits of linking carbon taxation to revenue recycling. In sum, it seems that politicians from various parties used elements of Ecofiscal research that legitimized their pre-existing position on carbon pricing. One interviewee confirmed this impression, saying that Ecofiscal work was instrumentalized by both supporters and opponents of pollution pricing.

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6. Since the interviews for this study were conducted, the political debate around carbon pricing in Canada has evolved. The March 2021 Supreme Court ruling and the adoption of carbon pricing in the Conservative Party's policy platform in 2021 federal election certainly indicate progress toward the mainstreaming of carbon pricing in Canadian politics. See the concluding section of this report for a discussion of Ecofiscal's continuing legacy beyond 2019.



On the topic of polarization more generally, several interviewees indicated that polarization around carbon pricing had actually increased since Ecofiscal began its work in 2014; others said the nature of polarization over the topic had changed – but not diminished – since then. Only one interviewee felt that polarization had not changed over Ecofiscal’s lifetime. When asked why and how polarization had changed, multiple interviewees mentioned the uptake of carbon pricing in various provinces (Ontario, Alberta) and by the federal government over Ecofiscal’s lifetime. Interviewees indicated that the conflict over carbon pricing became more concrete, targeted, and partisan as there were actual policies to fight against. The new pricing schemes became inextricably associated with the governments in power at the time. It is perhaps not surprising then, that a change in government in Ontario (2018) led immediately to the abolishment of the carbon price, and that Alberta’s Climate Leadership Plan triggered a large backlash in the province, which ultimately led to higher levels of polarization around carbon pricing, a change of government in Alberta and the repeal of the consumer carbon tax once the new government was in power (Bratt 2021).

Importantly, some survey respondents and several interviewees indicated that Ecofiscal’s work may have contributed to polarization because of its focus on carbon pricing – an increasingly polarized and partisan issue. One interviewee wondered whether Ecofiscal inadvertently contributed to greater polarization by delivering more material to ‘polarizers on both sides.’ Ecofiscal’s targeted focus and consistent message was perceived by some interviewees as ‘taking sides’ and lacking nuance: “... you could argue that the Ecofiscal Commission ended up adding to the polarization by creating a highly effective voice for one narrow policy instrument, which ended up being a lightning rod used by those who were opposed to climate policy.” Another interviewee noted that, ideally, Ecofiscal should have pushed back against politicians misconstruing its research, but the individual recognized that this is a very difficult thing to do while being and being seen to be non-partisan.



## THE DRIVERS OF ECOFISCAL'S POLICY IMPACT AND THE OBSTACLES TO CONSENSUS-BUILDING

Having assessed the evidence on Ecofiscal's performance, this section examines the factors that helped it succeed in influencing policy, but that also contributed to its failure to foster cross-partisan consensus on carbon pricing.

### **Excellence in research and communications activities**

Both interview and survey data indicate that Ecofiscal performed very well overall in its core activities – research and communication. Interviewees and survey respondents considered Ecofiscal's research to be sound and rigorous – even by those who opposed pollution pricing. Survey participants rated research quality at an average of 8/10, and all interviewees were of the view that Ecofiscal's academic rigour was the key driver of its credibility and policy influence.

Nevertheless, some survey participants and interviewees pointed out that Ecofiscal's credibility was compromised by the fact that research results *always* supported the introduction of carbon pricing as the most efficient measure to curb emissions – as if the findings were predetermined. Indeed, Ecofiscal included support for pollution pricing in its mission from the outset. Its work started from the basic premise that pollution pricing policies are economically effective and worth pursuing. The research never questioned the superiority of carbon pricing given its alignment with economic theory and the Commission's composition. In contrast, researchers from the natural sciences or the other disciplines in social sciences might have developed different policy recommendations, because their perspective on 'effective policy' would likely be different, considering, for example, the social or political acceptability of policy. In sum, Ecofiscal's efforts to base its recommendations exclusively on economic expertise may have come at a cost. On a similar note, one interviewee suggested that the organization's research might have

enjoyed more credibility if the research process had been more open and inclusive of voices beyond those on the Commission.

A similarly positive assessment emerged for Ecofiscal's communications efforts. Only about one in ten respondents (22 out of 202) indicated that Ecofiscal could have improved its communication activities and media presence (including social media). In response to an open-ended question, one survey respondent stated that Ecofiscal should have done more to reach out to young people in particular. Interviewees also assessed Ecofiscal's communications efforts positively, although two interviewees stated that Ecofiscal should have communicated more directly with the general public rather than focusing on policymakers and opinion makers alone.

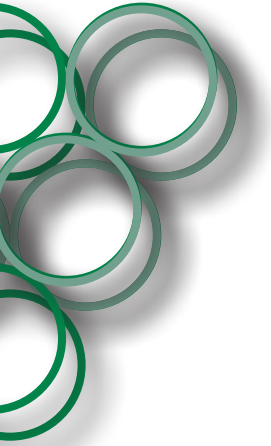
All of this said, the fact that policymakers from various parties drew on Ecofiscal research to justify their positions suggests that its research was viewed as relevant and credible across the political spectrum.

### **A functional organizational structure**

**The Commission.** Former Commissioners interviewed for this study indicated that the Commission and the consensus-based approach to research production worked well. Many described the research process as intellectually stimulating and rich.

**The Advisory Board.** As noted previously, one of the Advisory Board's explicit functions was to foster credibility among the constituencies of its members. In particular, Preston Manning's participation on the Board and his outspoken support for carbon pricing attracted much attention in political debate and the media. A National Post article read, "Preston Manning leading the carbon tax





brigades? It makes more sense than you might think” (Kay, 2015). Multiple interviewees mentioned his support as key, with one individual attributing a depolarizing effect to his participation. This study’s analysis of legislative mentions of Ecofiscal reveals that multiple speakers explicitly mentioned Preston Manning in their remarks:

*“When Preston Manning and the cross-partisan Ecofiscal Commission are calling for carbon pricing, it is quite clearly not the job-killing tax on everything that Canadians have been repeatedly told.” (Member of Parliament Nathaniel Erskine-Smith, Liberal Party, House of Commons, December 8th, 2015).*

*“In the words of Canada’s Ecofiscal Commission, a nonpartisan commission of economists whose advisory board includes such radical socialists as Preston Manning, former Alberta Finance minister Jim Dinning, economist Jack Mintz, who members opposite have called on for his nonpartisan expertise – they’re all part of this group, and they state: Carbon pricing makes economic sense for Canadian provinces.” (MLA David Shepherd, NDP, Legislative Assembly of Alberta, May 31st, 2016).*

It is important to note that these speakers were both from political parties that already supported carbon pricing – no speaker from a party opposing the policy responded or expressed similar sentiments.

In sum, the message that Ecofiscal intended to send through the composition of its Advisory Board did not go unnoticed. That said, while there is evidence that it provided justification and fostered legitimacy for those in support of carbon pricing, there is no evidence that it changed the minds of those opposing it. One interviewee mentioned

that the Advisory Board was homogenous in the sense that all members were supportive of carbon pricing. As a consequence, Ecofiscal did not institutionalize an internal dialogue with carbon pricing opponents or critics.

**Leadership and organizational capacity.** Multiple interviewees explicitly mentioned Chris Ragan’s exceptional performance as Commission chair. The competency of the Ecofiscal secretariat and its Executive Director, Dale Beugin, was also mentioned positively by multiple interviewees.

**Funding model.** Over 80 percent of survey respondents indicated that independent long-term funding was ‘important’ or ‘very important’ to the organization’s effectiveness. One interviewee mentioned that the absence of government funding was key to the organization’s credibility.

The above analysis suggests that Ecofiscal’s organizational structure was effective and supported its mission. In fact, nearly 70 percent of survey respondents and about half of the interviewees believed that the ‘Ecofiscal model’ – an independent provider of research and policy advice – would be replicable to other controversial policy areas. However, these are necessary but insufficient conditions: multiple interviewees emphasized that timing and political circumstances needed to be right in order for the model to succeed. We turn to this below.

### **But: (Partisan) politics are inescapable**

While Ecofiscal’s activities were effective and its organizational structure functional in the context of its mission, political dynamics were a major obstacle to its success. Three political dynamics emerged from the survey and interview findings.

**Appetite from policymakers.** Over 80 percent of survey respondents indicated that appetite from policymakers for Ecofiscal research was a key factor in its success. Similarly, a number of interviewees mentioned that an organization like Ecofiscal needs a willing audience for its products to be successful.

Given that carbon pricing had been a deeply divisive issue between political parties long before Ecofiscal was established, it is not surprising that some governments were more open than others to learning about carbon pricing and shifting their position on the issues. The brief review of academic literature above highlighted how hard it can be to change policymakers' positions through new evidence once partisan sorting has occurred.

**Political events outside of Ecofiscal's control.**

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of party/candidate election campaigns in setting the tone of carbon pricing debates and crystallizing positions. Specifically, four interviewees pointed to the departure of Patrick Brown from the leadership race in Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party in early 2018 as a pivotal moment in Canadian carbon pricing politics – and Ecofiscal's story. Brown, a PC leadership candidate who supported carbon pricing, left the race suddenly over a political scandal, which created space for Doug Ford, a vigorous opponent of carbon pricing, to become leader – and ultimately premier. This setback was completely unrelated to carbon pricing or Ecofiscal's performance; it was simply 'bad luck' as multiple interviewees put it.

**Perceived politicization of Ecofiscal itself.** Analysis of both interview and survey data indicates that the two elements of Ecofiscal's mission – promoting carbon pricing policies and building cross-partisan consensus – may inherently stand in tension with each other. Ultimately, Ecofiscal's success in influencing policy decisions was perceived by some as having compromised its ability to serve as a non-partisan consensus-building force. The objective of influencing policy decisions required Ecofiscal to work with governments willing to listen, but the objective of fostering cross-partisan consensus arguably required the opposite – staying out of politics altogether. Once Ecofiscal succeeded in influencing policy decisions, it became associated with the party in power, which arguably weakened its perceived cross-partisan character, and by extension, its credibility. Asked about areas where Ecofiscal was not successful and lessons that could be learned, 16 survey respondents (out of 202) said that Ecofiscal became too involved in partisan politics (or was perceived as being too involved). Specifically, some noted that Ecofiscal became too associated with the federal Liberal Party, which adopted a number of its ideas. Multiple interviewees also expressed this view. In contrast, one interviewee was of the view that Ecofiscal should have done more to pro-actively engage with politics rather than just trying to stay out of it.









## CONCLUSION: WHAT WORKED? WHAT DIDN'T?

The Ecofiscal Commission endeavored to use research and evidence to shape stable policies and create consensus in a polarized context. What can we learn from its successes and failures?

Overall, the analysis found that the factors over which Ecofiscal had control – its organizational structure and its activities – were generally conducive to the accomplishment of its mission. But factors mostly outside of its control – including existing partisan polarization over carbon pricing, election cycles and campaigns, and political instrumentalization of its research – created challenges that prevented it from fully achieving its objectives. As our review of the scholarly literature reveals, these obstacles to

achieving consensus are to be expected: people's tendency to engage in motivated reasoning, heightened by partisan sorting and affective polarization, limits the potential of scientific evidence to change their minds and foster consensus across party lines.

### WHAT WORKED?

Ecofiscal's research was generally deemed credible and of high academic quality. The main criticism concerned the narrow research focus on carbon pricing, the perceived lack of nuance in findings (i.e., always supportive of carbon pricing) and the absence of non-economist voices on the Commission.

Through an effective communications strategy, Ecofiscal was able to direct its research findings into federal and provincial governments' hands to foster influence on policy design. Some suggested that Ecofiscal should have targeted the general public more directly rather than speaking primarily to the 'elite', which risks information being used selectively and opportunistically.

This analysis finds that Ecofiscal research influenced the design of multiple carbon pricing policies in Canada, including the federal-provincial-territorial Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change, Alberta's Climate Leadership Plan, and Ontario's (short-lived) trading scheme. Of course, Ecofiscal's research was one of many factors shaping these initiatives, but it provided legitimacy to governments introducing these policies. One interviewee indicated that Ecofiscal did help elevate the profile of carbon pricing in the political discourse. As discussed below, Ecofiscal may have contributed to paving the way to recent cross-partisan support for carbon pricing.



## WHAT DIDN'T WORK?

Even in the best of cases, the path from academic research to long-term policy change is complex: it is rarely if ever possible to draw a straight line between research findings and policy choices. As research on motivated reasoning suggests, evidence and information may not be the key driver when policymakers form beliefs and attitudes about a policy issue. This is especially the case on issues like carbon pricing, which had become divided along partisan lines prior to Ecofiscal's launch. All told, partisan sorting, affective polarization and people's partisan identity tend to shape decision-makers' collection, processing, and interpretation of information, including robust research like that undertaken by Ecofiscal. As such, those aiming to feed evidence into political debates always run the risk that their research becomes instrumentalized and politicized in ways that put their perceived credibility and non-partisanship at risk. Further, for issues polarized along partisan lines, any policy decision is at constant risk of reversal with the next election. In short, policy reforms may neither be well-informed nor stable results that strike a 'durable balance' between competing imperatives (Cleland & Gattinger, 2017; 2019).

Indeed, this study reveals that the evidence produced by Ecofiscal was used differently by politicians from different parties. Neither survey results, nor interview findings, nor the analysis of legislative mentions of Ecofiscal research, provide any indication that Ecofiscal's work helped build cross-partisan consensus around carbon pricing. Rather, survey respondents and interviewees indicated that the opposite may be true. Notably, some interviewees were of the view that Ecofiscal's policy success led to the organization being associated with the parties in power at the time, which reduced its credibility with their political opponents.

Nevertheless, overall, interviewees agreed that Ecofiscal can serve as a useful model for other organizations aiming to support evidence-informed decision-making in controversial policy fields. The organization did as well as could be expected given the political context in which it worked.

One may wonder then whether this research falls short of posing the most interesting question emerging from the case study: What could have worked better? In an environment characterized by partisan polarization, did Ecofiscal set for itself an impossible task – to promote a particular policy approach and political consensus over the approach simultaneously? Would success with the former necessarily compromise progress with the latter? Quite possibly. And this is something that future such initiatives should consider seriously in designing their mandate and approach.

On a final, more hopeful note, it might be too early to identify and evaluate the full impact – and indeed the success – of the Ecofiscal Commission on Canada's policies and the degree of political consensus surrounding carbon pricing. While the organization ceased operations in 2019, its research remains in the public domain and the policy changes that Ecofiscal helped set in motion may have long-lasting effects. By way of a possible example, in December 2020, the federal government released a new climate plan that will see the carbon tax rise to \$170 per tonne by 2030. This trajectory is in line with recommendations that Ecofiscal made in its final report, which recommended the price rise to \$210 per tonne (Canada's Ecofiscal Commission, 2019). Further, in March 2021, Canada's Supreme Court ruled that the federally coordinated carbon price included in the Pan-Canadian Framework is constitutional.

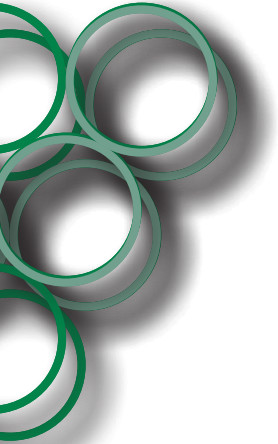
Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ecofiscal intervened as a friend of the court in the case. The ruling holds the promise of making carbon pricing a long-term fixture in Canadian politics, which may ultimately lower the heat of political debate and partisan campaigning on the issue as well. Indeed, in the fall 2021 federal election, the Conservative Party platform committed to establishing a carbon pricing mechanism. While it remains to be seen whether these plans will persevere under a new party leader and while the policy progress on carbon pricing in Canada cannot be directly imputed to the Ecofiscal Commission, there is no question that the organization has left a lasting mark on the Canadian policy landscape.





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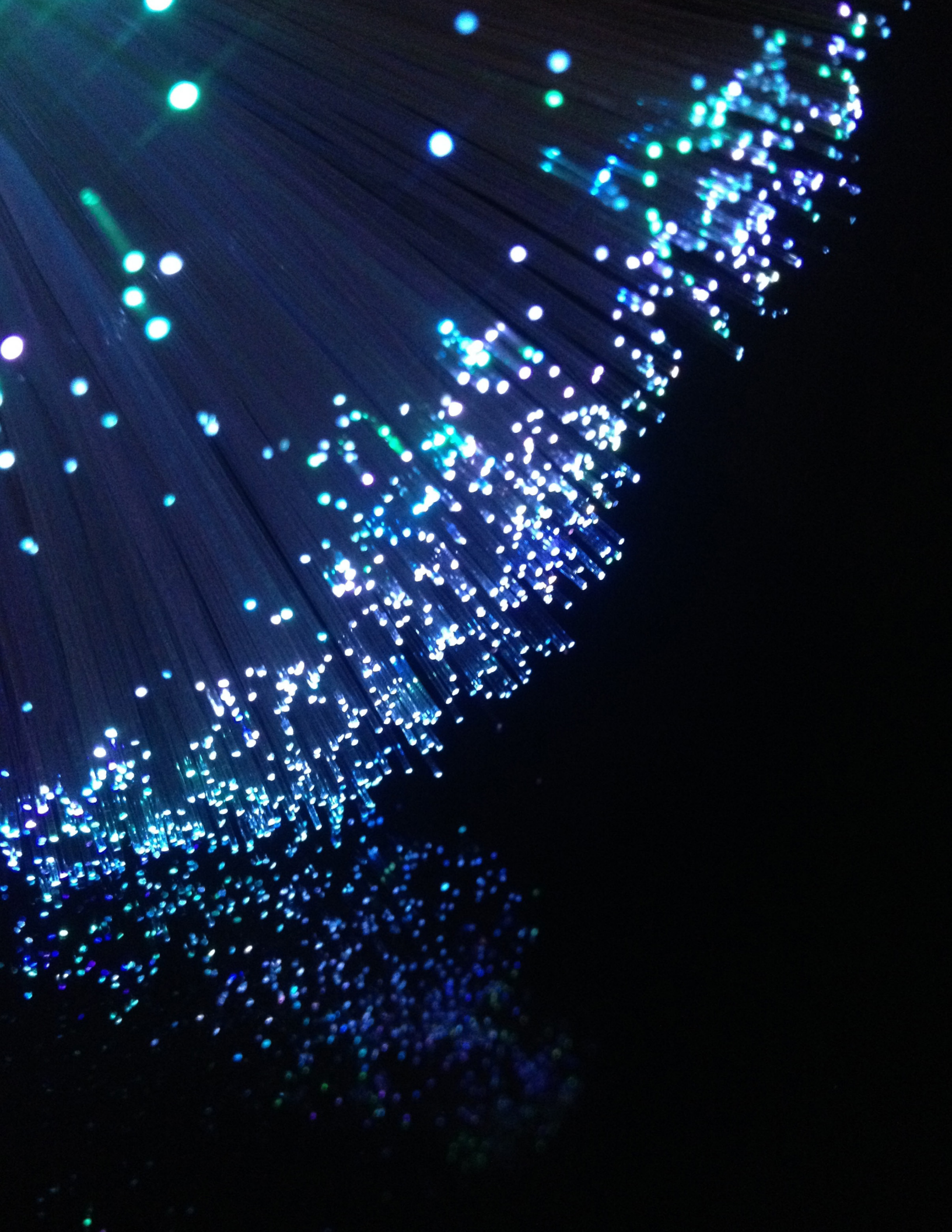
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## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE AND LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

The interviews conducted for this study were semi-structured. The interview guide provided a general structure for each conversation, but there was opportunity to expand beyond the guide in light of interviewee responses. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

### Interview Guide:

1. The Ecofiscal Commission was founded in 2014. In your view, back then, was the political discourse around carbon pricing less, more, differently polarized?

### The Commission:

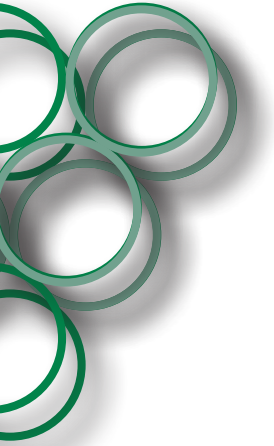
2. Can you describe the origin story of the Ecofiscal Commission? When was it established, by whom and why?
3. What have been the key objectives of the Ecofiscal Commission? Have they changed over time? Why or why not?
4. Has the Commission's messaging changed over time? If yes, how and why?
5. What are the key measures or approaches or strategies that the Ecofiscal Commission applied to depolarizing the debate, i.e., to take politics and partisanship out of the discussion?

### Effectiveness:

6. What measures or strategies have been effective in the work of the Ecofiscal Commission with regards to reducing polarization, and what measures/strategies have proven to be less effective?
7. How would you evaluate the influence that Ecofiscal has had on policy outcomes? Can you give some concrete examples?
8. From your experience as a Commissioner/Advisory Board member/Funder, representing Ecofiscal in public venues, what has been the general perception of the Commission or its reputation among decision-makers?

### Personal reflection:

9. Why did you agree to become a Commissioner/Advisory Board member/Funder?
10. Have your expectations been met?
11. Through your work with the Ecofiscal Commission, what have you learned about opposition to carbon pricing? Have you become more understanding of opponents' concerns or less?
12. What lessons are you taking with you into your future work on these issues?



Fourteen individuals were interviewed for this study, representing four key groups: Commissioners, Advisory Board members, staff, funders, and observers. Two participants requested anonymity.

Name	Role	Affiliation	Interviewed on
Dale Beugin	Staff (Executive Director)	Ecofiscal Commission	August 20, 2019
Jean Charest	Advisory Board Member	Former politician (Québec, federal)	October 16, 2019
David Collyer	Observer	Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (former)	November 01, 2019
Stewart Elgie	Commissioner	Smart Prosperity Institute; University of Ottawa	September 26, 2019
Bruce Lourie	Funder	Ivey Foundation	October 3, 2019
Shawn McCarthy	Observer	The Globe and Mail	October 21, 2019
Jane McDonald	Observer	International Institute for Sustainable Development	November 05, 2019
Chris Ragan	Chair of the Commission	McGill University	August 22, 2019
France St-Hilaire	Commissioner	Institute for Research on Public Policy	October 1, 2019
Arlene Strom	Funder	Suncor Foundation	October 10, 2019
William Watson	Observer	McGill University (retired)	October 28, 2019
Anonymous 1			October 24, 2019
Anonymous 2			September 30, 2019

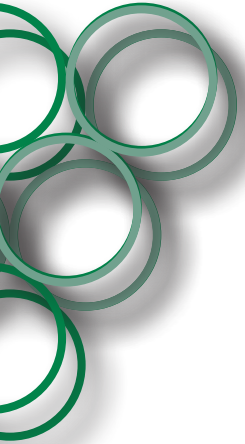
## APPENDIX 2: SURVEY INSTRUMENT AND FINDINGS

The bilingual survey (French and English) consisted of 13 questions (see below). The invitation to participate in the survey was sent to the Ecofiscal Commission's mailing list, comprised of 3,318 email addresses (354 French, 2,964 English).

Responses were collected from February 11, 2020 to March 1, 2020. In total, 374 people participated, but response rates varied across questions.

1. Consent to participate (n=374)
2. Which of the following best describes your professional role? (n=348)
  - a. Government
  - b. Academic
  - c. NGO
  - d. Media
  - e. Business
  - f. other (please specify)

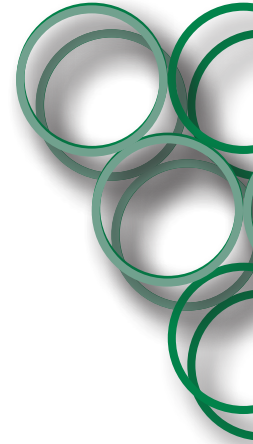
Answer Choices	Responses	
Government	20,7%	72
Academic	10,1%	35
NGO	18,4%	64
Media	4,3%	15
Business	23,3%	81
Other (please specify)	23,3%	81
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>348</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>26</b>



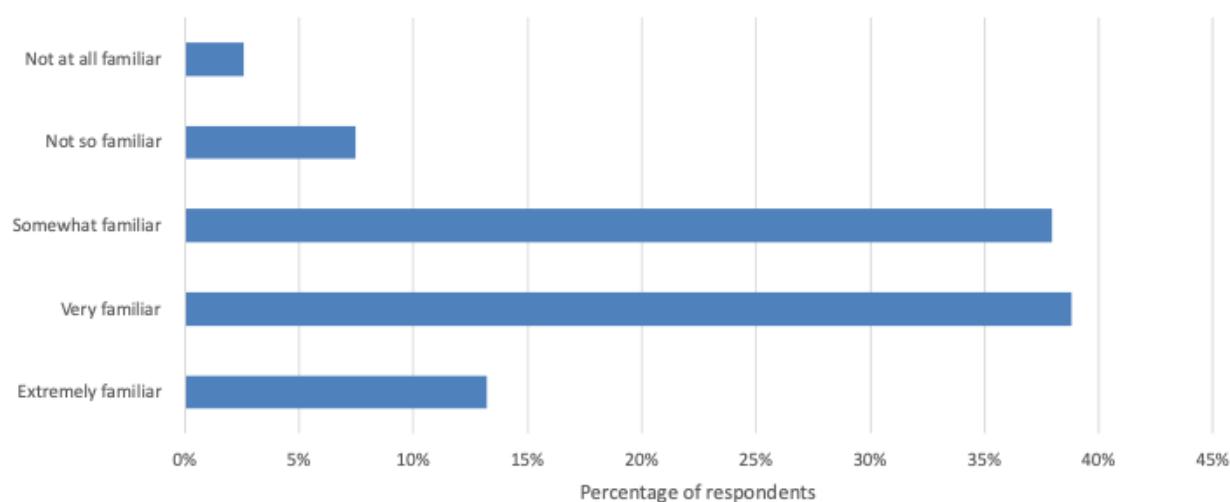
3. Where is most of your work focused? (n=346)

- |    |                     |    |                        |
|----|---------------------|----|------------------------|
| a. | Nationally (Canada) | g. | Québec                 |
| b. | British Columbia    | h. | New Brunswick          |
| c. | Alberta             | i. | Nova Scotia            |
| d. | Saskatchewan        | j. | Prince Edward Island   |
| e. | Manitoba            | k. | Newfoundland           |
| f. | Ontario             | l. | Other (please specify) |

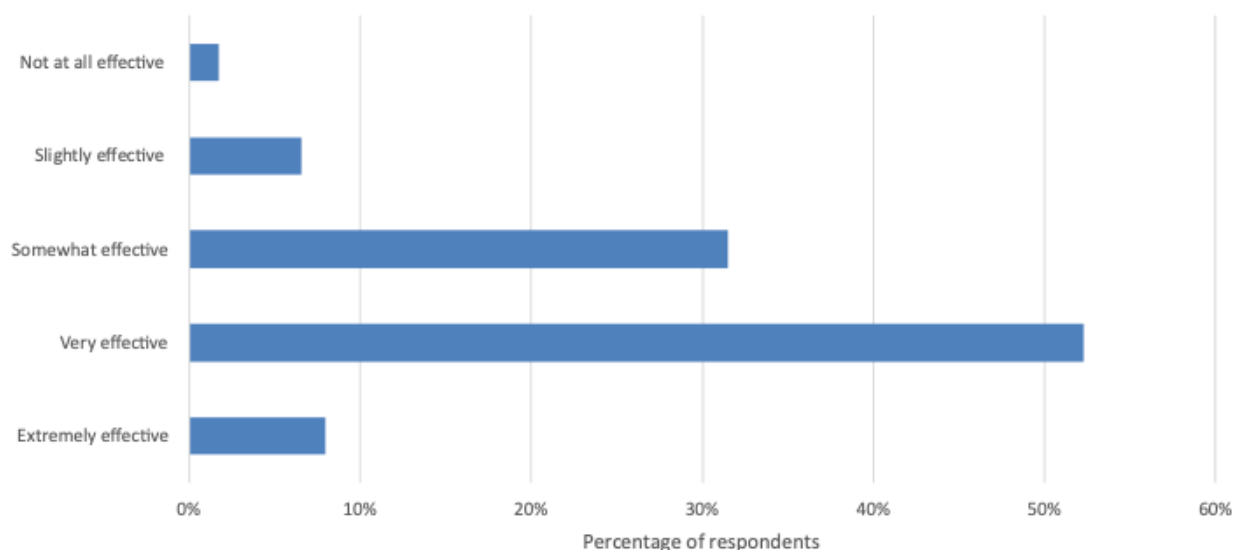
Answer Choices	Responses	
Nationally (Canada)	21,7%	75
British Columbia	9,3%	32
Alberta	12,7%	44
Saskatchewan	1,5%	5
Manitoba	1,2%	4
Ontario	30,6%	106
Québec	<b>7,8%</b>	<b>27</b>
New Brunswick	<b>1,5%</b>	<b>5</b>
Nova Scotia	4,4%	15
Prince Edward Island	1,2%	4
Newfoundland and Labrador	0,3%	1
Other (please specify)	8,1%	28
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>346</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>28</b>



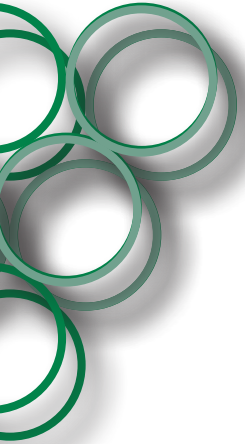
4. How familiar are you with the work of the Ecofiscal Commission? (n=348) [extremely familiar; very familiar; somewhat familiar; not so familiar; not at all familiar]



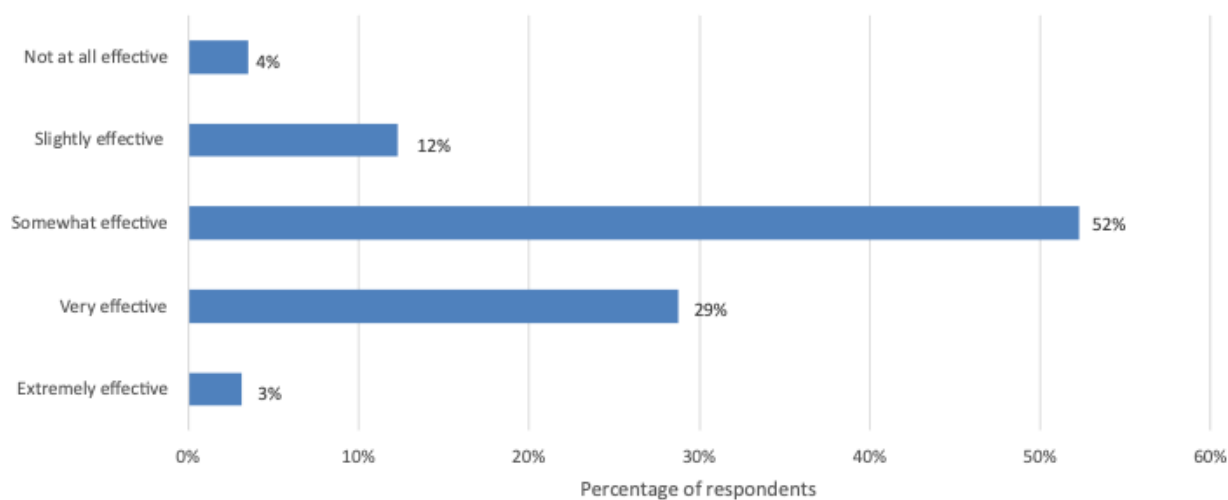
5. Please rate the effectiveness of the Ecofiscal Commission in influencing policy discussions in Canada. (n=289) [extremely effective; very effective; somewhat effective; slightly effective; not at all effective]



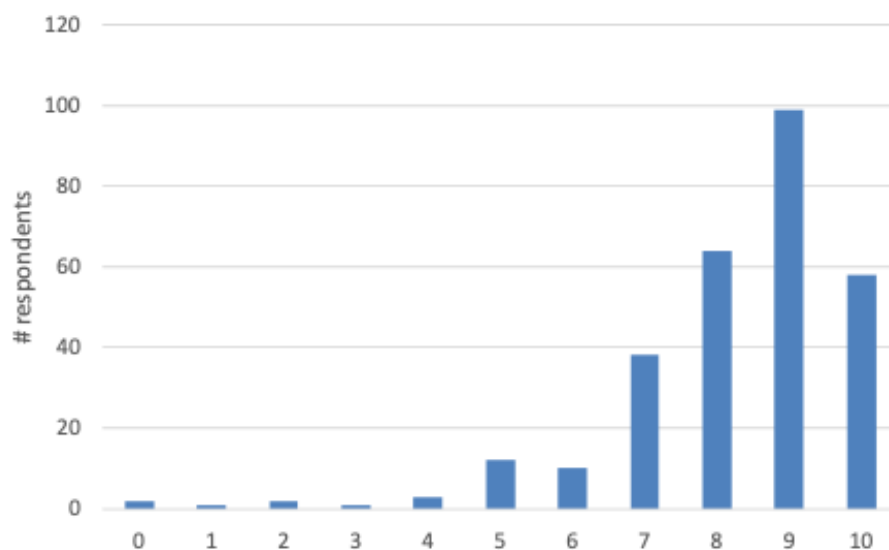


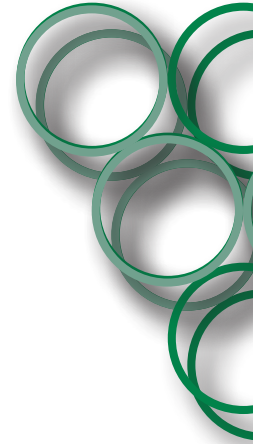


6. Please rate the effectiveness of the Ecofiscal Commission in influencing policy decisions in Canada. (n=285) [extremely effective; very effective; somewhat effective; slightly effective; not at all effective]

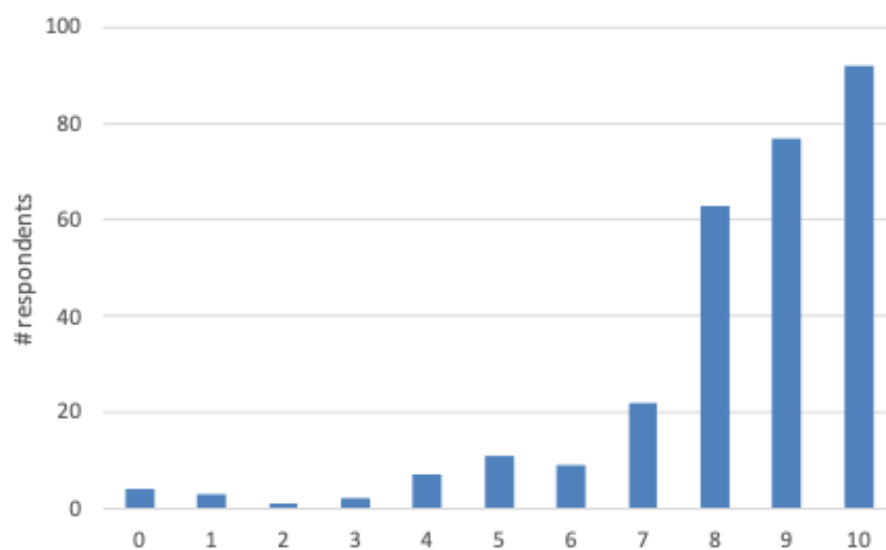


7. On a scale from 0 to 10, how would you rate the quality of the research done by the Ecofiscal Commission? [fill in, values 0 to 10] (n=290)

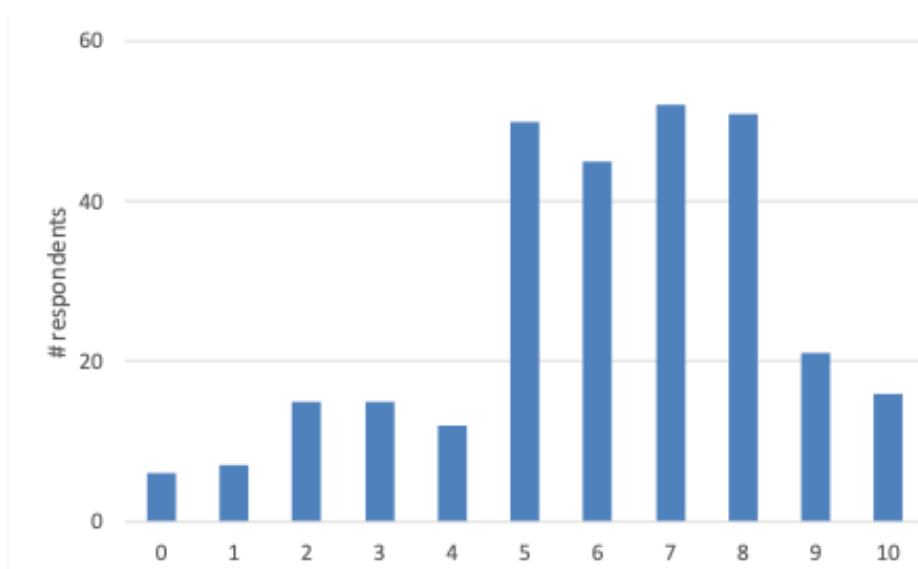


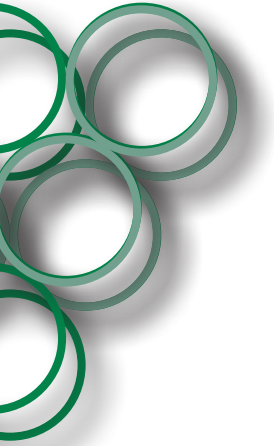


8. On a scale from 0 to 10, how would you rate the credibility of the Ecofiscal Commission as an independent source of policy advice? [fill in, values 0 to 10] (n=291)



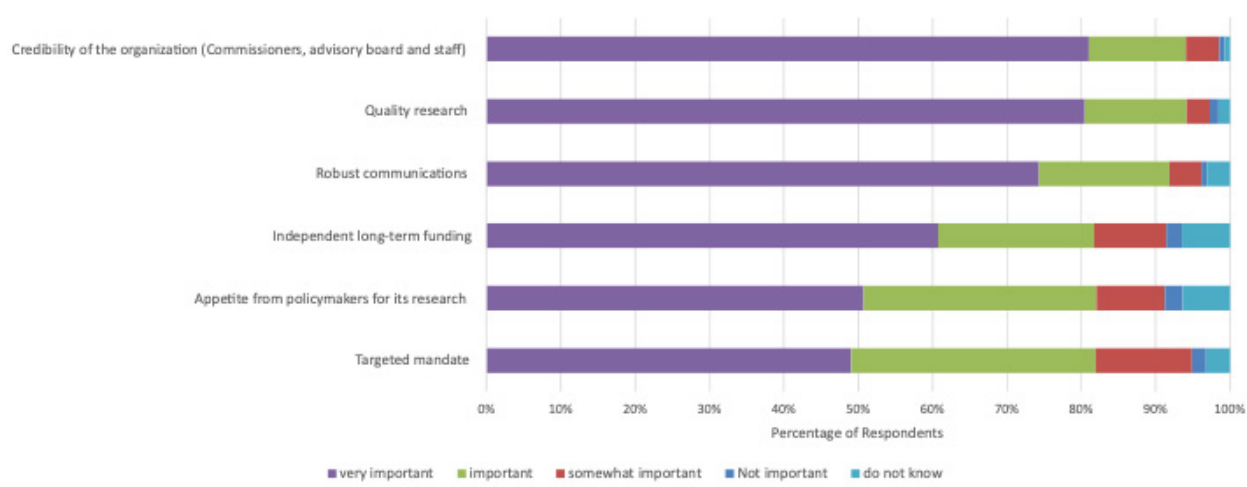
9. On a scale from 0 to 10, how would you rate the Ecofiscal Commission's effectiveness in depolarizing and depoliticising the debate around carbon pricing in Canada? [fill in, values 0 to 10] (n=290)





10. Please rate the importance of the following attributes of the Commission to its effectiveness in influencing policy in Canada. [very important; important; somewhat important; not important; do not know] (n=290)

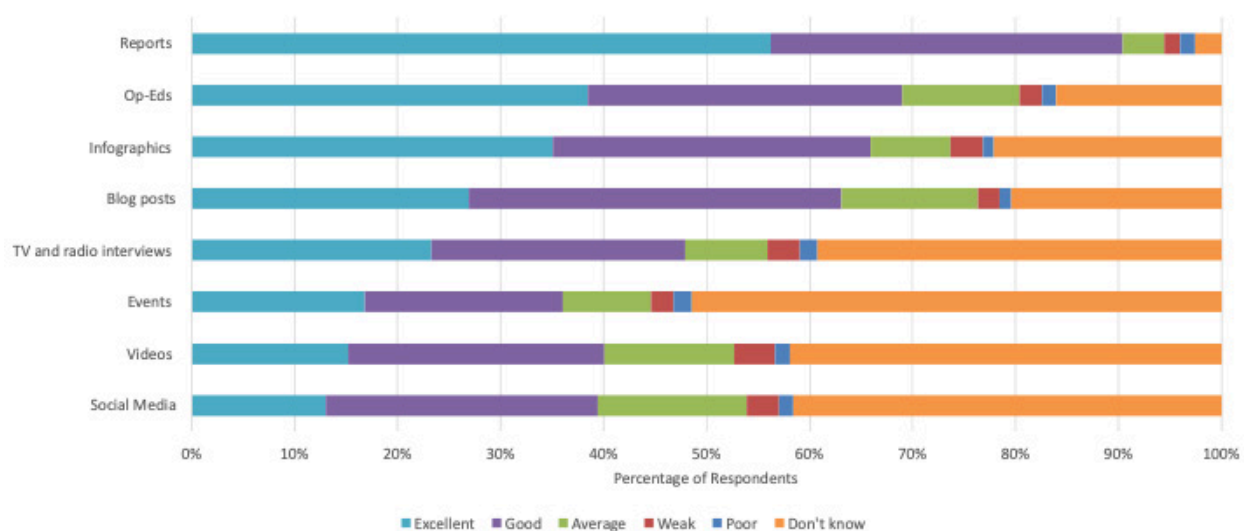
- a. Quality research
- b. Credibility of the organization (Commissioners, advisory board, and staff)
- c. Targeted mandate
- d. Independent long-term funding
- e. Robust communication
- f. Appetite from policymakers for its research

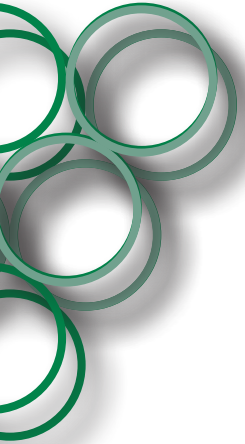




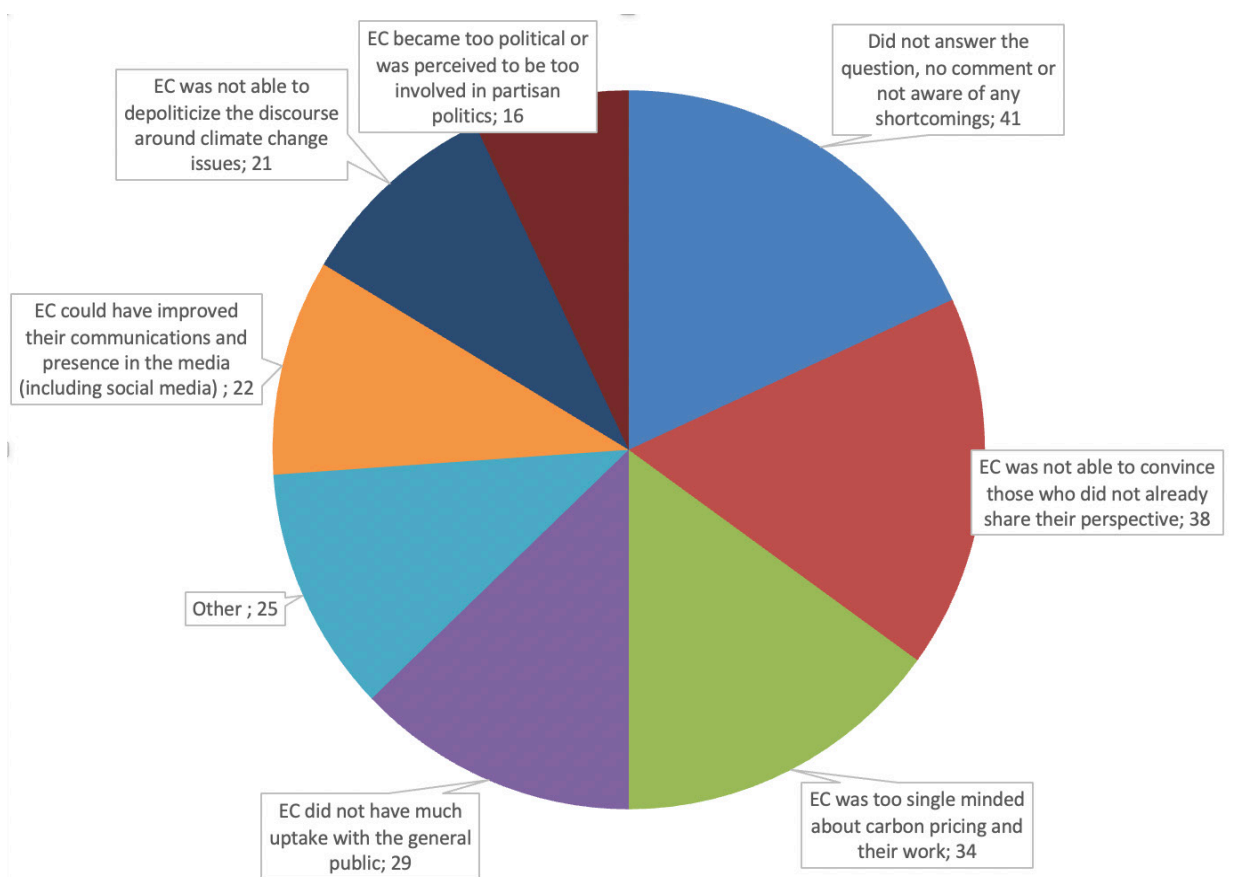
11. Please rate the value of the following communications resources presented by the Ecofiscal Commission. [poor, weak, average, good, excellent, don't know] (n=289)

- a. Reports
- b. Blog posts
- c. Op-Eds
- d. TV and radio interviews
- e. Social media
- f. Infographics
- g. videos
- h. Events



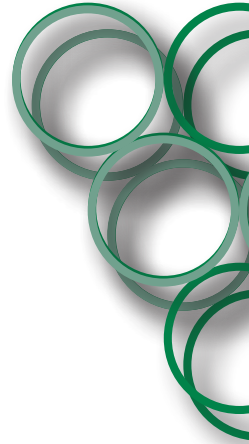


12. Please comment on any areas where the Ecofiscal Commission has not been successful, and what lessons could be learnt.  
[open] (n=202)

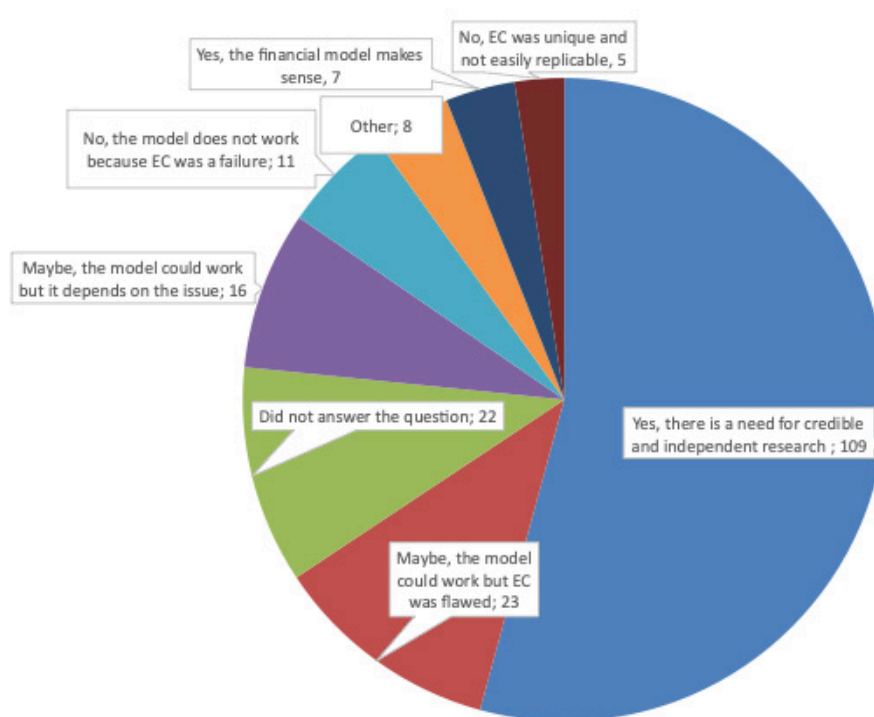


*Note: Total number of responses may exceed number of respondents because multiple responses allowed. The answers were grouped thematically.*





13. Do you think that the model of Ecofiscal Commission as an independent provider of research and policy advice is replicable in other controversial policy areas? [yes; no; not sure; it depends] (n=291)
- a. Why do you say so? [open]



*Note: Total number of responses may exceed number of respondents because multiple responses allowed. The answers were grouped thematically.*



## APPENDIX 3: THE COMMISSION

### Chris Ragan, Chair

- Director, Max Bell School of Public Policy, Department of Economics, McGill University

### Elizabeth Beale, Commissioner

- Former President and CEO, Atlantic Provinces Economic Council

### Paul Boothe, Commissioner

- Professor and Director of the Lawrence National Centre for Policy and Management, Ivey Business School, Western University
- Former Deputy Minister, Environment Canada
- Former Deputy Minister, Finance, Saskatchewan

### Mel Cappe, Commissioner

- Distinguished Fellow, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto
- Former President, Institute for Research on Public Policy
- Former Clerk of the Privy Council

### Bev Dahlby, Commissioner

- Research Fellow, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary
- Former Member of the Technical Committee on Business Taxation

### Don Drummond, Commissioner

- Adjunct Professor and Stauffer-Dunning Fellow, School of Policy Studies, Queen's University
- Former Chief Economist, TD Bank
- Former ADM, Department of Finance

### Stewart Elgie, Commissioner

- Professor of law and economics; Director, Institute of the Environment, University of Ottawa
- Executive Chair, Smart Prosperity Institute

### Glen Hodgson, Commissioner

- Senior Fellow, C.D. Howe Institute, and Chief Economist for International Financial Consulting Ltd.
- Former Senior Vice President & Chief Economist, Conference Board of Canada

### Paul Lanoie, Commissioner (2014-2016)

- Sustainable Development Commissioner (appointed 2016)
- Former Professor at HEC Montréal

### Justin Leroux, Commissioner (2018-2019)

- Associate Professor, Department of Applied Economics, HEC Montréal

### Richard Lipsey, Commissioner

- Professor Emeritus, Department of Economics, Simon Fraser University

### Nancy Olewiler, Commissioner

- Director of and Professor in the School of Public Policy, Simon Fraser University

### France St-Hilaire, Commissioner

- Vice President of Research, Institute for Research on Public Policy

### Lindsay Tedds, Commissioner (2018-2019)

- Associate Professor & Scientific Director, Fiscal and Economic Policy, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary

## APPENDIX 4: THE ADVISORY BOARD

### Elyse Allan

- President and CEO, GE Canada

### Dominic Barton (2014-2019)

- Then: Managing Director of McKinsey and Company

### Gordon Campbell

- Former Mayor of Vancouver
- Former Premier of British Columbia
- Formerly Canada's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland

### Jean Charest

- Partner, McCarthy Tétrault
- Former Premier of Québec

### Karen Clarke-Whistler

- Chief Environment Officer, TD Bank Group

### Jim Dinning

- Corporate Director; Fellow of the Institute of Corporate Directors
- Former Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta
- Former Alberta Treasurer
- Former Chancellor of the University of Calgary

### Peter Gilgan

- Founder and CEO, Mattamy Homes

### Michael Harcourt

- Former Premier of British Columbia
- Former Mayor of Vancouver

### Bruce Lourie

- President, Ivey Foundation

### Janice MacKinnon (2014-2018)

- Professor of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan
- Former cabinet minister in Saskatchewan

### Preston Manning (2014-2019)

- Senior Fellow, Fraser Institute
- President and CEO of the Manning Centre for Building Democracy
- Founder and former leader of the Reform Party of Canada

### Paul Martin

- Former Prime Minister of Canada

### Jack Mintz (2014-2017)

- President's Fellow, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary

### Bob Rae (2014-2016)

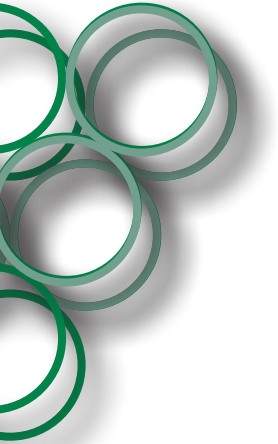
- Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations
- Former Premier of Ontario
- Former leader of the Ontario New Democratic Party
- Former interim leader of the Liberal Party of Canada

### Peter Robinson

- Former CEO, David Suzuki Foundation

### Lorne Trottier

- Co-founder, Matrox Electronic Systems Ltd.



Annette Verschuren

- Chair and CEO, NRStor Inc.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2014-2017)

- Former Canadian President of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC)
- Former International Chair of the ICC

Steve Williams

- President & CEO, Suncor Energy





**POSITIVE ENERGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA** USES THE CONVENING POWER OF THE UNIVERSITY TO BRING TOGETHER ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS WITH EMERGING AND SENIOR DECISION-MAKERS FROM INDUSTRY, GOVERNMENT, INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS TO DETERMINE HOW TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN ENERGY DECISION-MAKING.

POSITIVE **ENERGY**

