FINAL REPORT OF EVENT PROCEEDINGS

Challenges to Evidence-Based Policy Development in an Age of Public Polarization and Disengagement

a Critical Conversation for Regulatory Professionals

February 20, 2020

Contents

About RGI

Headquartered at Carleton University's School of Public Policy and Administration, the Regulatory Governance Initiative (RGI) is an education and cross-sectoral research hub whose aim is to help develop and promote a better understanding and application of regulatory excellence. Its approach is holistic, drawing on expertise from the public, private and non-profit sectors and academia in collaboration with scholars from the RGI network to deliver a program involving a combination of education (professional development), research and dialogue.

In its mission to push the boundaries of regulatory policy thinking, the RGI uses its university-based, impartial convening capacity to host Critical Conversation® events. These events aim to push the boundaries of thinking on important policy and regulatory issues, bringing together senior government policy makers, academics and key non-government opinion leaders to take part in a facilitated discussion that explores the insights of presenters and participants and raises awareness and collective understanding of the issue under discussion.

Agenda

8:00 a.m. **Registration and breakfast**

8:30 a.m. **Opening remarks**
Dr. Graeme Auld, Director, School of Public Policy and Administration, Carleton University

8:40 a.m. **Review of agenda, introduction of the background paper**
Rick Stewart, Executive Director, Regulatory Governance Initiative

8:50 a.m. **Introduction of speakers**
Yaprak Baltacioğlu, Chancellor, Carleton University

9:00 a.m. **Lessons in Resilience: Canada's digital media ecosystem and the 2019 election**
Dr. Taylor Owen, Associate Professor, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University

9:30 a.m. **Unpacking Populism and Polarization**
Nik Nanos, Chief Data Scientist and Founder, Nanos Research

10:00 a.m. **Polarization and Myths: The role of the petroleum sector in a climate change era**
Louise Métivier, Strategic Advisor to the Deputy Minister, Natural Resources Canada

10:30 a.m. **Networking break and refreshments**

11:00 a.m. **Roundtable discussion and priority ranking**
Identify the top three priorities to the questions provided.

11:45 a.m. **Plenary discussion**

12:15 p.m. **Rapporteur**
Susan Harada, Director (Int), School of Journalism and Communication Carleton University

12:30 p.m. **Closing remarks**
Rick Stewart, Executive Director, Regulatory Governance Initiative

Introduction

This Critical Conversation on the implications for policy development in an age of polarization and disengagement was designed to discuss the risks and challenges associated with public polarization and disengagement in Canada. The Critical Conversation was intended to raise awareness and collective understanding of the issues and explore ideas on how to help shift the Canadian policy conversation towards a more reasoned debate and good-faith pursuit of evidence-based policy outcomes.

It provided an opportunity for a broad spectrum of policymakers, public opinion experts, civil society organizations, academics, and media representatives, to have a balanced, structured dialogue on these risks and challenges.

The program consisted of a series of presentations followed by an engaging round table discussion anchored by some key questions posed in a background paper: Challenges to Evidence-Based Policy Development in an Age of Public Polarization and Disengagement — A Critical Conversation for Regulatory Professionals. The paper helped participants come prepared to engage with each other and to think about the sort of information that policymakers need to collect on a systematic basis over the long term.

To frame the Critical Conversation, participants focused on answering these three questions from the background paper:

1. Do you think there is a public polarization and disengagement problem in Canada that risks undermining evidence-based policy development?
   - Do you agree that every age has experienced polarization and gotten through it, albeit often at high cost?
   - Are Canadians more polarized in their views and less willing to appreciate alternative viewpoints than ever before?
   - Are today's polarizing debates creating divisions that cannot be bridged and leave a lasting disconnect?
   - To what extent to you see evidence-based policy development and administration being undermined?

2. To the extent there is an emerging problem, what do you see as being the most important drivers of this phenomenon?
   - To what extent is there diminishing trust in professional expertise and public institutions, and diminishing acceptance of evidence and scientific facts?
   - To what extent are social media echo chambers and "shock" reporting reinforcing people's natural tendency to self-select information consistent with their a priori views and dismiss competing/conflicting "evidence"/points of view?

3. To the extent that there is a problem, what do you think can be done to address this development?

Presentations

The Critical Conversation began with presentations from three speakers:

- Dr. Taylor Owen, Associate Professor, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University
- Nik Nanos, Chief Data Scientist and Founder, Nanos Research
- Louise Métivier, Strategic Advisor to the Deputy Minister, Natural Resources Canada

The presenters shared their particular perspectives and experience on polarization and disengagement in Canada. There was an opportunity to engage with and ask questions of these presenters, participate in small group roundtable discussions and draw conclusions about portable learnings this file has to offer.

Lessons in Resilience: Canada's Digital Media Ecosystem and the 2019 Election
Dr. Taylor Owen, Associate Professor, Max Bell School of Public Policy, McGill University

Dr. Taylor began by outlining how researchers, pundits and armchair analysts have argued for some time that Canada is becoming more like the United States when it comes to polarization — typically understood as the segmenting of society into increasingly isolated and mutually incomprehensible political tribes. It is also common to see at least some of the blame for polarization placed on the media, where increasingly partisan social media echo chambers amplify disagreement and distort the public conversation.

Yet while there is some evidence that Canadians are polarized, according to the data, the story is a bit more complicated than is often assumed. In particular, the usual narrative of social media-based echo chambers driving real-world polarization is not supported by Dr. Taylor's survey and online data. Yes, some small subset of Twitter users tends to create online echo chambers, but survey findings suggest that the offline impact is very limited.

Ultimately, the biggest driver of polarization seems to be ideology and partisanship themselves. As our political parties have become more ideologically distinct, their strongest partisans have tended to feel more distant from each other. This echoes one of Dr. Taylor's findings: it is the media consumers with strong partisan tendencies who are more likely to become misinformed with news exposure, especially via social media.

Four key findings

1. We find evidence of affective polarization—dislike of parties or their supporters on the other end of the political spectrum simply because they belong to an opposing group—among the Canadian public.

2. Twitter users of all partisan stripes tend to create their own polarized spaces online. They are more likely to follow only candidates from their own party than others.

3. Media sources that draw a highly partisan audience are only viewed by a small percentage of Canadians who share those partisan leanings. What makes someone more likely to consume these news sources is not how partisan they are, but how much time they spend on social media.

4. However, polarization does not appear to be linked to media consumption—either for traditional media, social media, or media sources that are preferred by mostly left-leaning or right-leaning supporters.

(Learn more about Dr. Taylor's work with the Digital Democracy Project — a joint initiative led by the Ottawa-based Public Policy Forum and the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University.)

Unpacking Populism and Polarization

Nik Nanos, Chief Data Scientist and Founder, Nanos Research

Mr. Nanos began his presentation by asking the audience to consider how susceptible Canadians are to polarization and disengagement. He described social media as a "game" and traditional media as a "show." But then argued that the reality Canadians experience can be altogether different.

To make his point, Mr. Nanos cited polling after Prime Minister Stephen Harper prorogued Parliament. Many pundits and media outlets decried the decision and, in some cases, presented it as an almost existential threat to democracy. But Nanos Research polling that asked Canadians "what was the most important issue to them personally" showed that only 4% of Canadians were concerned with prorogation.

This led Mr. Nanos to examine the importance of discerning between literal and symbolic messaging as it relates to polarization and disengagement. Policymakers may make powerful cases based on a detailed set of facts, but in the age of polarization symbolic measures may resonate more strongly.

He cited the debate around immigration as an example. Statistics and data can be used to marshal support for immigration. But they are unlikely to generate as much support as an image of Prime Minister Trudeau helping a young Syrian refugee into a snowsuit.

Mr. Nanos explored Canadian attitudes to energy policy as a proxy for rates of polarization. He cited a case study that examines rates of polarization. Nanos and Positive Energy have tested polarization on a number of issues related to both Canada's performance on energy and environmental issues, as well as agreement with energy and environmental policy positions. The trends show a potential emerging consensus on most issues, with polarization being greater around issues that involve economic and energy price trade-offs.

Key case study findings

- Canadians still more likely to say Canada is doing a poor rather than good job on energy issues

- Consensus opinions are emerging on national interest being more important than local, provincial or Indigenous interests

- Consensus opinions are emerging on oil and gas being on the decline

- Consensus opinions are emerging on the need for more partnerships with local communities and Indigenous communities

- Polarization is greatest when the trade-off for more partnerships or environmental actions is less economic development in Canada

Polarization and Myths: The Role of the Petroleum Sector in a Climate Change Era

Louise Métivier, Strategic Advisor to the Deputy Minister, Natural Resources Canada

Ms. Métivier's [presentation](#) began by asserting that in today's environment, briefing and engaging government ministers on energy policy can be challenging. The visceral and emotional nature of the debate on energy policy and climate change can lead to defensiveness among policymakers and politicians.

She then shifted to a discussion of the complexities of implementing a national energy framework and strategy. She cited polarization as one of the key roadblocks to delivering an energy framework and strategy.

This lack of a framework has led to a one-off approach to project approval, which then typically gets challenged in court, potentially encouraging polarized opinions. Once a project is approved it may appear to represent an overall policy but without a framework and strategy, policymakers remain mired in a one-off approach to projects.

Ms. Métivier noted that policymakers have lost some of their capacity to do robust analysis because they are now sometimes overly focused on project- or issue-specific communications and engagement to counter polarization instead of building frameworks and broader narratives. This approach may encourage polarization because Canadians lack the context of an overall policy framework.

Individual projects are then used as proxies for a policy that opposing sides want to debate. An additional challenge revolves around the fact that formulating an energy policy framework means debating assumptions about the future. Without a clear view of the future, debates can become overly sensitive to perceptions of public opinion in the short term.

Despite these challenges, Ms. Métivier argued that Canadians are perhaps less polarized over energy issues than social and traditional media suggest. She cited a December 2019 Ipsos poll for Global News that showed 65% of Canadians support construction of new pipelines and 64% agree that Canada should be doing what it can to capitalize on the world's need for fossil fuels.

Ms. Métivier also cited research conducted by her fellow presenter Nik Nanos in October 2019 that 60% of Canadians say they would support fossil fuel energy if Canada had a more environmentally proactive climate change policy.

Ms. Métivier concluded with a series of provocative statements that many in the audience assumed were facts. She ran through the list and made the case that these statements were in fact myths. This exercise was a useful reminder that when we discuss polarization, even informed, engaged individuals, may be drawing incorrect conclusions without realizing it.

Myth or reality?

- The world is not on track to meet its Paris Commitments.
- Other developed countries are doing much more to address climate change.
- There is still time to meet or exceed our 2030 targets without drastic economic impacts.
- Committing to combatting climate change and continuing to produce more petroleum products is not compatible.
- Achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 means no more fossil fuels in our economy.
- Industry should be responsible for downstream emissions.

- Resource development, including oil and gas, are a barrier/solution to achieving our environmental goals.
- The oil and gas sector is an industry of the past and cannot fit into the new modern economy – people will find jobs in other fields.
- The oil and gas is an issue for Alberta and the West, the rest of Canada does not need it.
- Oilsands are the most polluting form of oil production in the world.
- Indigenous Peoples do not want pipelines and resource projects on their lands

Roundtable discussion and priority ranking

Following the presentations, participants broke into small groups to reflect and discuss the issues presented more in depth. They were guided by these three questions:

1. Do you think there is a public polarization and disengagement problem in Canada that risks undermining evidence-based policy development?

2. To the extent there is an emerging problem, what do you see as being the most important drivers of this phenomenon?

3. To the extent that there is a problem, what do you think can be done to address this development?

Each table subsequently reported back on the specifics of their discussions to the broader group. They presented their answers to the framework questions and identified the top-three priorities to enable answering the questions provided. Participants were then asked to "vote" on the answers from all groups using green stickers to signal agreement and red stickers to signal disagreement. This involved discussion of key points raised.

The following text is a summary of the top-rated answers that were presented. The ideas generated from the discussions were wide-ranging, and the overall tone of the discussion was collegial and constructive. Suggestions that received fewer than three votes are not included here. (See the Annex: Roundtable discussion and priority ranking for a more detailed summary)

Question 1: Do you think there is a public polarization and disengagement problem in Canada that risks undermining evidence-based policy development?

For this question, there were a number of ideas that centered around the challenges of reaching general consensus on issues of debate, and some of the factors that seem to be facilitating a greater sense of public polarization today compared with the past.

- Despite the very real tensions around polarization in Canada, the data suggest that we are not as polarized as we think we are [**3 votes for**]
- Technology, particularly social media, was cited as an aggravating factor in polarization because of its ability to flood the public discourse with misinformation [**7 votes for**]
- Need more research on why some issues get settled [**10 votes for**]

Question 2: To the extent there is an emerging problem, what do you see as being the most important drivers of this phenomenon?

For this question, roundtable discussion generated a wide range of ideas and suggestions covering many of the possible factors outlined in the related background paper. Interestingly, no real common thread emerged from the discussion or plenary voting, with one exception:

- Delays in hearing from authoritative voices create a vacuum allowing polarizing counter-voices to dominate [**7 votes for**]

Question 3: To the extent that there is a problem, what do you think can be done to address this development?

Similar to question #2, there was a variety of ideas generated around possible "solutions" to the challenge of public polarization and disengagement. In this case, there were some very clear dominating themes, and one idea – regulation – where there was clearly divided opinion.

- Continuing education in schools focused on social literacy and information literacy [**6 votes for**]
- Regulating the delivery of social media [**6 votes against** / **4 votes for**]
- Need more purposeful public engagement [**6 votes for**]
- Invest in emotional intelligence quotient training for children and youth to promote collaboration, resilience and empathy [**11 votes for**]
- Be aware of personal biases, seek out alternative experiences and realities to learn other perspectives and mitigate biases [**5 votes for**]

Rapporteur's feedback and conclusions

Susan Harada, Director (Int), School of Journalism and Communication Carleton University
at Carleton University

"Policymaking certainly feels like it's an important factor when It comes to how we approach polarization," said Ms. Harada as she opened her summary. She highlighted five key conclusions from the conversation.

Disinformation can spread quickly and easily

Disinformation and misinformation often have equal weight given to them in relation to the actual facts of a situation. Digital tools are enabling this. Whereas in earlier times, there might have to be a test of legitimacy and credibility before a story or an idea became widespread. Today, there's not that same process and people will tune out.

Information delivery

There is a big concern over the delivery of information and ultimately social media is definitely a contributing factor, but it is not the main driver of polarization.

Catastrophic thinking can lead to disengagement

Describing issues like climate change in a catastrophic way can also promote disengagement because it can be far too overwhelming to try to talk to about ways to solve it. People become selective about what they read and pay attention to.

Inequality and polarization

Income inequality has produced a system where there are those who benefit from the system and those who feel undermined and disenfranchised. These people are susceptible to manipulation because they are frustrated with the status quo. We end up being distracted and not debating the real issues.

Investing in education

Better investment in public education and a focus on social and traditional media literacy holds some promise as a way to mitigate polarization and disengagement. Investing in our children and youth to help them think critically, solve problems and be resilient should be emphasized.

Annex: Roundtable discussion and priority ranking

Q1: Do you think there is a public polarization and disengagement problem in Canada that risks undermining evidence-based policy development?

REACHING CONSENSUS

People will tune out conversations on evidence-based policy development because they are inaccessible

Timeframes matter, sometimes it takes years to set the stage for a change in reception to changed views

People have different views on what is the right evidence we should use to inform decisions; this makes it hard to have a common evidence-based view

Science can be weaponized to undermine responses

It's hard to measure disengagement, voting rates don't tell the whole story because voters can be misinformed and disengaged

Decrease polarization with multi-party caucuses

Gotcha politics is limiting considerations of options and solutions

Need more research on why some issues get settled

NOT A NEW PHENOMENON

Polarization is linked to expectation that there is a solution/ something can be fixed

Every age has experienced polarization, it's not new

Despite the very real tensions around polarization in Canada, the data suggest that we are not as polarized as we think we are

Technology, particularly social media, was cited as an aggravating factor in polarization because of its ability to flood the public discourse with misinformation

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

News media consolidation

Social media accentuates and amplifies

There is an erosion of policy analysis and science

Heightened regional differences on national issues (e.g., pipelines)

DATA MANIPULATION

We're not providing evidence to political decision makers that can be used

Are we causing an erosion of trust with the bad conduct of experts who may be manufactured for a specific issue?

A call-out culture leads to declining transparency

IDENTITY-GROUP POLITICS

Income inequality can exacerbate tensions between haves and have nots

Populism as the reason for undermining evidence-based decisions

Polarization can mobilize government to take action and make decisions (elected officials need to be reelected)

With fewer loyalties to country and religion to provide a unifying direction we have more factions

Ultimately, polarization is more problematic than issue-specific debates because factions within each camp can align on some issues

24-HOUR NEWS

Delays in hearing from authoritative voices create a vacuum allowing polarizing counter-voices to dominate

Timeframes for politicians are too short, leads to "close enough" policy adoption

Q2: To the extent there is an emerging problem, what do you see as being the most important drivers of this phenomenon?

FAKE NEWS

With the erosion of traditional media, do we have a common reality?

The word "facts" can be a loaded word

What is missing is context, risks and benefits

A vocal minority using technology has magnified polarization through echo chambers

SOCIAL MEDIA

Very self-selecting, makes polarization worse because of more options for information

Social media is a contributing factor but not the main factor

There are more critics

Emotional and passionate communication in democracies that have an incentive structure for clicks

Ease of access to social media and constant exposure drives disengagement

Q3: To the extent that there is a problem, what do you think can be done to address this development?

EDUCATION

- Education in schools focused on social literacy and information literacy
- Invest in emotional intelligence quotient training for children and youth to promote collaboration, resilience and empathy
- Strengthen the role of foundations, think tanks and universities
- Need a fake news app to combat misinformation

PERSPECTIVE

- Be aware of personal biases, seek out alternative experiences and realities to learn other perspectives and mitigate biases
- Do we need a foresight mechanism to be less reactive?
- Continue to reinforce and strengthen our media systems
- Don't become a prisoner of social media
- Consider the context of public perception

REGULATION

- Regulating the delivery of social media
- Review incentive structure for journalism and information sharing sites
- Address problems with algorithms that alter perception

ENGAGEMENT

- Need more purposeful public engagement
- Describing issues in catastrophic terms can overwhelm people and promote disengagement
- Electoral change? Address the electoral system
- Strengthen public broadcasters
- Reduce economic anxiety
- Need more like CBC Radio's Ontario Today to have open discussions where we can be willing to be uncomfortable