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Regulatory Governance Initiative

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

a Critical Conversation for Regulatory Professionals

A Critical Conversation™ from the Regulatory Governance Initiative — in collaboration with Carleton University's Graduate School of Public Administration, and with financial support provided by the Ivey Foundation

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A Critical Conversation™ from the Regulatory Governance Initiative — Hosted by Carleton University's School of Public Policy and Administration

The Regulatory Governance Initiative is hosting an event to discuss the risks and challenges associated with polarization in Canada. It will engage a broad spectrum of policymakers, public opinion experts, civil society organizations, academics, and media representatives, in a balanced, structured dialogue on these dynamics and risks. The Critical Conversation is designed 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.

Background

In this Critical Conversation, we will discuss if today's environment of polarization in public opinion is making it harder for policymakers to maintain public confidence and trust and find common ground among Canadians with opposing viewpoints. The ability of government decision-makers to pursue public policy goals on behalf of Canadians depends on their ability to have constructive, evidence-based policy discussions. But if Canadians become more polarized and less able to agree on basic facts, policymakers will face serious and growing challenges to delivering collaborative solutions based on respect, fairness and inclusion.

Our focus on polarization and disengagement does not discount the need to recognize that common ground is often not easily found or even desirable to pursue when important policy decisions are not popular or when "one size fits all policy" makes no sense for the diverse reality Canadians face. Canada's system of government is predicated on recognizing different regional realities. Our concerns relate primarily to the manipulation and exaggeration of the different realities Canadians face and how this makes the search for compromise and trust-based decision-making more difficult than it should otherwise be.

Today's climate of polarization has given rise to the idea that people are further apart than ever on key issues. This paper will begin by looking at today's polarization dynamics and placing them in a historical context. It then presents a snapshot of some of the drivers and forces that are commonly identified as enabling polarization and tries to briefly illustrate this phenomenon through the examples of climate policy, Brexit and public health vaccinations. Finally, the paper concludes with a look at polarization's implications for public policy development and governance, and poses some key questions to help guide discussion during the Critical Conversation

Introduction

Is it a mistake to assume that polarization is a new phenomenon or that current levels of polarization are without precedent? Are we seeing a dramatic shift in public opinion that leaves fewer people in the middle and more people at the ends of a particular spectrum?

Canadian history is littered with examples of intense political and social conflict. Sir John A. Macdonald and George Brown feuded constantly. Macdonald smeared Brown with false bribery allegations. Brown described Macdonald and his other political foes as "A body of men whose policy is despotism, whose faith is darkness, whom all freemen dread and all tyrants caress." But despite their deep-seated animosity both men were able to work together as Fathers of Confederation.

Fast forward to July 1, 1962 when medicare born in Saskatchewan. More than 90 percent of the province's doctors went on strike for 23 days. Many left the province to practise elsewhere. The Canadian Medical Association railed against medicare issuing a pamphlet titled "Political Medicine Is Bad Medicine." Yet by the early 1970s all of Canada was covered by medicare plans based on the Saskatchewan model and today the Canadian Medical Association is a staunch supporter of medicare.

In the late 1980s, the battle over the Canada-U.S. free-trade agreement dominated Canadian media and politics for nearly two years, right up to the 1988 election. During the campaign the Liberal leader John Turner accused Brian Mulroney of "selling out Canada." The Tories responded with direct attacks on Turner's credibility. Anti-free-trade protesters heckled politicians at public events. The Tories hung on to their majority and free trade with the United States was implemented on January 1, 1989. Since then, Canadians have broadly supported expanding trade agreements.

What Has Changed?

How are today's debates different from past ones and is polarization manifesting itself in new ways? While many dynamics are similar in nature, there is no doubt that some of today's challenges linked to polarization are new. Technology, for example, has changed how we communicate with each other in profound ways. In post-revolutionary America, leading figures like Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, and the factions they led, attacked each other so viciously that in his retirement address George Washington warned that a "spirit of revenge" would lead to "formal and permanent despotism."

But these political attacks were limited in scale. Attacking an opponent involved face-to-face encounters, letters and newspapers that most Americans were not directly exposed to. Since then the pace of technological change and its effects on how we communicate means that today's political actors can fire up their base and enrage opponents with the click of a mouse. The ease with which it is possible to fuel such emotional polarization and partisanship, leaving little or no room for compromise, is inarguably a bigger factor today than in the past.

Hidden tribes

The phenomenon of increased political polarization in western democracies has been well-documented in several recent studies including the *Hidden Tribes* report by the UK-based NGO More in Common. This landmark study was based on a representative survey of 8,000 Americans in 2018. It found that rather than being divided roughly 50-50 between two opposing political groups, American society today

consists of seven distinctive groups, most of whom are deeply concerned by the country's growing polarization.

> Our research concludes that we have become a set of tribes, with different codes, values, and even facts. In our public debates, it seems that we no longer just disagree. We reject each other's premises and doubt each other's motives. We question each other's character. We block our ears to diverse perspectives. At home, polarization is souring personal relationships, ruining Thanksgiving dinners, and driving families apart.
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> We are experiencing these divisions in our workplaces, neighborhood groups, even our places of worship. In the media, pundits score points, mock opponents, and talk over each other. On the Internet, social media has become a hotbed of outrage, takedowns, and cruelty—often targeting total strangers.
>
> — *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America`s Polarized Landscape*, More in Common, October 2018

The largest tribe is the "politically disengaged," who hold moderate centrist beliefs, but who have become exhausted by the partisanship on both ends of the political spectrum. Because they are increasingly tuning out of policy debates, this segment is ceding the floor to louder more zealous voices, which is in turn increasing the partisan divide and making collaborative policy even more challenging.

As prevalent as this phenomenon appears to be in the U.S., the evidence suggests that the U.S. is more polarized than other democracies.

> In the study, the researchers present evidence showing long-term trends in "affective polarization" — a phenomenon in which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than toward their own. They found that in the US, affective polarization has increased more dramatically since the late 1970s than in the eight other countries they examined–the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden.
>
> — *Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization*, Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2020

How polarized are Canadians?

As the history of confederation, medicare and free trade shows, Canadians have historically been able to come together after divisive and passionate disagreements over important policy questions. While there may be a general sense today that things are getting worse when it comes to the civility of public discourse and trust in our fellow citizens and our institutions, it is unclear if Canadians are in fact becoming more polarized.

> Researchers, pundits and armchair analysts have argued for some time now 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 our data, the story is a bit more complicated than is often assumed.
>
> — *Research Memo #3 Polarization and Its Discontents*, Digital Democracy Project, Public Policy Forum and McGill University's Max Bell School of Public Policy, September 2019

While the jury may be out on the extent to which polarization in Canada is a disruptive force, there are enough signs to warrant heightened vigilance among policymakers when it comes to monitoring its effects. For example, the Digital Democracy Project describes a Canadian media environment where political partisans are biased toward sharing information that reinforces their beliefs. The research also indicates a preference for sharing negative content, and that even when people are exposed to news coverage with different points of view, they tend to only choose and share information that supports their own political views.

At the same time, less-partisan Canadians appear to be less motivated to share their views and take part in politics. This suggests that motivated partisans could wield outsized influence on public policy debates in ways that eschew compromise in favour of advancing political and social agendas.

Emotions over facts

As the general public increasingly tunes out of important policy debates, they cede the floor to louder and more zealous voices with a zero-sum view of issues that makes them unwilling to see or accept the benefit of compromise. When this is accompanied by a growing distrust of experts and the evidence they bring to the table, the result is that effective information dissemination is being undermined by more emotion-based, "evidence-light" argumentation. The result is an increasing partisan divide leading to a polarization of vocal viewpoints around narrow extremes and making collaborative, evidence-based policy development and implementation even less likely.

> Yet inevitably, no matter how much research is done, there remain unknowns. Thus, some aspects of the body of science may be contested on scientific grounds, whereas others become contested and can become part of proxy debates because the systems of interest inevitably intertwine with public values and these values, at least in democracies, are inevitably the subjects of dispute and ideology. In many ways this is the real challenge of science – the more useful it is for society, the more likely it is to be entangled with politics.
>
> — *Science in a global perspective—challenges ahead*, Sir Peter Gluckman, Acceptance speech for being awarded an honorary doctorate, October 14, 2019

While it would seem that this phenomenon of relying on emotions over facts is less pronounced in Canada at this point, a scenario of distrust and polarization leading to disengagement from broad-based, measured policy discourse may not the most conducive social context for public policy development and implementation. Interestingly, it also presents significant challenges to the mainstream media who are struggling with how to re-engage the growing ranks of the disengaged public.

Declining trust

The “echo chambers” that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have created that repeat and reinforce partisan positions are only exacerbating the problem. Some right-wing pundits have gone so far as to argue that there is no future for centrist politics—at least in the U.S.

Closer to home, Edelman’s 2018 Trust Barometer report revealed that only 46% of the general public here in Canada say they trust their government and 54% are disengaged with news from traditional media, consuming broadcast and print stories on a less-than-weekly basis.

> The more dramatic story this year is that the world is now divided by trust. There is a 16-point gap between the more trusting informed public and the far more skeptical mass population, marking a return to record highs of trust inequality, and the reemergence of a true “mass-class” divide.
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> The phenomenon fueling this divide was a global rise in trust among the informed public. Markets such as the US, UK, Canada, South Korea and Hong Kong saw trust gains of 12 points or more among the informed public. In 18 markets, there is now a double-digit trust gap between the informed public and the mass population.
>
> — *2019 Edelman Trust Barometer*, Edelman Intelligence, January 2019

Drivers and Trends Snapshot

There are multiple factors driving polarization and disengagement today that did not exist a generation ago. In fact, some of these drivers and forces are even newer. For example, in 2007, the first iPhone appeared and today we think nothing of having unfettered access to the internet in our pockets. While some factors have made it easier and faster to widely disseminate and aggressively advance competing views, others may be creating divides that make it difficult to properly appreciate outside perspectives, diminishing the basis for common understanding. This section of the paper briefly looks at some of these dynamics.

Social media and Echo chambers

Social media is often cited as playing a central role in fostering polarization, but its role is not as straightforward as it first appears. In the U.S., a National Bureau of Economic Research study provided a simple test of the role of the internet: Is more social media use associated with more polarization? The study assessed polarization in the US for different age ranges. Surprisingly, it found that polarization was highest for the age groups that use the internet and social media the least, such as adults aged 75 and older.

However, the climate of debate on social media influences the tone of debate on other media platforms and in personal interactions. Journalists and politicians are intensely focused on social media. These thought leaders engage in fiercely contested discussions that leak into the mainstream. This allows social media to influence polarization even in people who are less engaged in social media.

For example, tweets with more emotive and moral words are more likely to be retweeted. These tweets then get picked up and repeated in mainstream media outlets. This also might help explain why encouraging people to follow politicians from the opposing side appears to worsen polarization.

Politicians tweet the policy positions that their political base wants to hear in moral and emotive language that may create negative reactions from the opposing side.

Moreover, confirming our opinions and biases has never been easier. Relying on social media for information tends to narrow the range of information people access. Facebook, for example, doesn't focus on optimizing information delivery to deepen understanding. Instead, Facebook relies on algorithms to provide what people like and want to read reinforcing that what they believe must be factually true. The result is akin to people wearing digital blinders.

Identity-group politics

Steven Pinker, a Harvard psychology professor, defined identity-group politics as "…the syndrome in which people's beliefs and interests are assumed to be determined by their membership in groups, particularly their sex, race, sexual orientation, and disability status.," in a January 2020 Washington Examiner article.

In left-wing and right-wing circles, the focus has shifted from unifying values to group identities. The left believes that right-wing tribalism—bigotry, racism—is tearing the country apart. The right believes that left-wing tribalism—identity politics, political correctness—is tearing the country apart.

> Identity politics tends to be applied to scholarship that foregrounds analyses of ethnicity, race and gender, but with a lack of analytical rigour, indicating a degree of conceptual looseness. Moreover, the designation identity politics is not neutral; it is often mobilized as a rhetorical device to distance authors from scholarship that foregrounds analyses of ethnicity, race and gender, and to inscribe a materialist/culturalist divide in claims-making. We argue that the effect of this demarcation of identity from politics is to control the boundaries of political discourse, limiting who and what gains entry into the political. This serves to reassert an exclusionary conception of Canadian identity.
>
> — *Engaging with Identity Politics in Canadian Political Science*, Nicole Bernhardt and Laura Pin, Canadian Journal of Political Science, June 2018

Such stark partisanship – so-called emotional polarization when people with opposing viewpoints dislike each other regardless of how close they may be on certain issues – is clearly posing significant challenges to reasoned policy debate in the U.S., it also seems that Canada is not immune. The Digital Democracy Project from the Public Policy Forum and McGill University's Max Bell School of Public Policy argues polarization in Canada arises partly from intense party loyalty and how far apart Canada's political parties are. While not new, this suggests party positions could be an important factor driving polarization—a phenomenon political scientists call partisan sorting.

Data mining and manipulation

Most Canadians leave a trail of data across the internet every day. This data is harvested or "mined" in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate. Misuse of this data has the potential to stoke polarization by using the data to target specific groups and then influence their behaviour with misinformation.

In 2015, Cambridge Analytica, a U.K.-based political consulting firm working on behalf of Ted Cruz's campaign to win the 2016 Republican nomination, used Facebook as a means for "political-voter

surveillance" through the collection of user data points. After Cruz dropped out of the race, Cambridge Analytica used the same strategies to aid Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential bid.

Independent investigations into data mining, along with whistle-blower accounts of the firm's impact on Brexit, led to a scandal over the influence of social media in political elections. In addition, Cambridge Analytica's inappropriate use of Facebook data while working on the Trump campaign became a source of controversy when it was revealed the company harvested the personal data of millions of Facebook users without their consent and used it for targeted political advertising. In early 2020, the company's operations in 68 countries were revealed with the release of more than 100,000 documents, which prompted the UK's Guardian newspaper to declare that "global manipulation is out of control," on January 4, 2020.

Bots, trolls and fake news

Bots (automated social media accounts run by algorithms) and trolls (people focused on advancing an agenda) can have an outsized influence on public debate by manipulating and distorting facts in ways that leak into mainstream media and public discourse. Russia's use of bots and trolls to influence the 2016 US election is a prime example.

> According to a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 62% of adults get their news from social media (a sharp increase from the 49% observed in 2012). Among these, two-thirds of Facebook users (66%) get news on the site, nearly six-in-ten Twitter users (59%) get news on Twitter, and seven-in-ten Reddit users get news on that platform.
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> This is relevant when coupled with another phenomenon that became prevalent particularly around 2016 presidential election: the massive spread of fake news… fake news is extremely difficult to detect posing a challenge for social media users, moderators, and governmental agencies trying control their dissemination. A December 2016 Pew Research Center study found that 'about two-in-three U.S. adults (64%) say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events. Moreover, 23% admit to having shared a made-up news story (knowingly or not) on social media.
>
> — *Social Media Networks, Fake News, and Polarization*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Marina Azzimonti and Marcos Fernandes, March 2018

The 24-hour cable news cycle

A generation ago, when Canadians tuned into the nightly news, they could choose from only a narrow range of options that presented the news at the same time. There was only a marginal, if any, difference in how the news was covered and presented. This meant that for the most part people relied on the same set of facts to frame their understanding of issues.

Today, the proliferation of cable news options means people can seek out partisan opinions much more easily. And at the same time, the demands of the 24-hour news cycle mean that media outlets have less time and fewer resources to cover news in depth. As the pressure to constantly cover what is presented as breaking news, time for analysis and understanding context is limited. Ultimately, more time-intensive investigative journalism focused on a deeper understanding of the issues has suffered.

The 24-hour news cycle has also enabled political partisans to flood airwaves with distracting messages when faced with challenges to their agenda. The well-documented fatigue that many Canadians express when it comes to remaining well informed encourages disengagement. This in turn can foster polarization as people filter out messages they don't agree with or understand in order to stop feeling overwhelmed by the volume and pace of the 24-hour news cycle.

Economic dislocation

Technology-based developments are not the only factors that risk creating polarization and disengagement today. Canada's strong job market performance in recent years hides significant differentiation among regions, genders, and working-age Canadians with different levels of education. Access to gainful and rewarding employment is one of the most important ways people remain engaged in their communities. Unemployment and lack of meaningful work can often be sources of disengagement and the challenges this breeds.

> The challenges are most acute for working-age men without post-secondary qualifications, whose labour market outcomes outside of the oil-producing provinces have for some time resembled some of the poor outcomes observed in parts of the United States. This cohort seems to be facing a series of secular headwinds that threaten their inclusion in broader labour market gains.
>
> — *Forgotten People and Forgotten Places: Canada's Economic Performance in the Age of Populism*, Sean Speer, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, August 2019

The rural–urban divide

Similarly, the growing urban-rural divide in Canada may also be a factor that risks creating a greater disconnect in the policy debate process, as people have less and less common experience to draw upon.

> A combination of aging demographics, outmigration, and concentrated immigration to cities is contributing to marked demographic and economic differences between urban and rural places. Rural areas now represent just 18.7 percent of the national population and are home to lower levels of employment, labour force participation, income, and educational attainment.
>
> — *Forgotten People and Forgotten Places: Canada's Economic Performance in the Age of Populism*, Sean Speer, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, August 2019

A few years ago, Toban Dyck, formerly a Toronto-based journalist, moved back to Manitoba to work on his family's farm. Following last year's federal election, he offered the following observations:

> During and following the recent federal election, many outspoken champions of the agricultural sector spewed bile at the Liberals for the party's carbon tax, its handling of the trade dispute with China, and for failing to properly address the concerns farmers are currently facing and alienating the Western provinces. …

> How we as rural/farm people choose to engage with our leaders and the public is important. Right now is a prime opportunity for the agricultural sector to live up to its potential and model good political discourse while leading the charge on effective agricultural policies that take seriously the cultural and environmental shifts no single government—minority or majority—will be able to reverse.
>
> — *Falling into the trap of partisanship will only deepen the divide between farmers and city dwellers*, Toban Dyck, National Post, November 4, 2019

The federal election laid bare the political difference between rural and urban Canadians. The Conservatives won 121 ridings with an average density of 423 people per square kilometre. That compares with an average density of more than 2,000 people per square kilometre in the 157 Liberal-held seats and almost 1,900 in the 24 NDP seats. The national average density per riding is 1,418. However, it does not automatically follow that this urban-rural gap is fostering polarization and disengagement.

> If Canadian voters in cities and small towns vote differently, does this suggest they're driven by sharply different values? Our social-values research suggests not. Indeed, data on the values of Canadians in urban, suburban, and rural settings show a considerable amount of common ground.
>
> Likely because of our broad base of shared values, Canadians have a limited appetite for really vilifying each other. Our political culture has tended to revolve around the efficacy of specific policies for building a fair, healthy, prosperous society — not on finding groups to target as insufficiently Canadian, be they newcomers or "urban elites."
>
> — *Urban and rural Canada may be closer than we think*, iPolitics, Michael Adams and David Jamieson, January 10, 2019

Racial and ethnic diversity

Finally, Canada's increased racial and ethnic diversity is widely considered a source of prosperity. But it can equally contribute to a decline in social trust as people lose faith that we can understand each another. This can stoke social and political conflict. Immigration policy is a flashpoint for these feelings.

> What is extremely important is to note that opposition to immigration in general – and visible minority immigration in particular – is not up dramatically. What is dramatic is the level of ideological and partisan polarization on this issue. This also connects to similar irreconcilable differences on a range of other key policy issues that will be at the core of the coming election. Immigration attitude have become much more polarized and our research suggests that they are sorting voter choices in ways that we have never seen before in Canada.
>
> — *Increased Polarization on Attitudes to Immigration Reshaping the Political Landscape in Canada*, Ekos Politics, April 15, 2019

Case Studies Snapshot

The phenomenon of polarizing debate is evident across a range of policy issues—some are obvious, like climate change and Brexit, while others are less high profile, like the anti-vaccination movement. We briefly examine these case studies to help illustrate the tensions and opportunities around polarization and disengagement.

Climate policies

Climate policies are a source of contention and conflict within and between many countries around the world. The December 2019 UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid failed to produce any consensus or meaningful results as the United States, Brazil, Australia and Saudi Arabia, along with a handful of other countries, blocked reforms.

Although denying or downplaying climate change is a feature of politics in many Western democracies, the U.S. stands out. American Republicans are the least likely to see it as a major threat, according to the Pew Research Center.

> …why are American Republicans more skeptical about climate change than right-wing voters in other countries? The first reason has to do with polarization in politics and identity. …
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> As global warming emerged on the US national agenda, it became one of those divisive hot-button issues in the culture war, along with abortion, gun control, health care, race, women and LGBTQ's rights. …
>
> Undeniably, the measures needed to curb greenhouse-gas emissions imply government intervention and internationally binding treaties that go against the conservatives' ideals of individual freedom, limited government and free markets.
>
> — *Why is climate scepticism so successful in the United States?*, The Conversation, January 20, 2020

Canada is also mired in a divisive debate on climate change. A convey of 150 trucks left Red Deer, Alberta on February 13, 2018, under the banner "United We Roll." This was just one high visibility manifestation of the frustration many Canadians, especially in the West, feel about climate change related issues like the federal carbon tax and delays in pipeline projects. With demonstrations and counter demonstrations roiling the country, it's easy to conclude that Canadians are polarized more than ever over climate policies.

The rise of Wexit Canada, a political party campaigning under the slogan "The West Wants Out," suggests there are some deep divisions in Canadian society along geographical lines. Much of the rise of this movement has been attributed to tensions over climate policies. On January 10, Elections Canada granted Wexit Canada eligibility for the next federal election. The party vows to contest every byelection between now and then and also to run a full slate of candidates in the Canada's four western provinces. These and other tensions support the view that climate policy is a flashpoint for polarization.

But research from Positive Energy, an energy research program at the University of Ottawa, paints a more nuanced picture. Researchers designed a September 2019 survey to measure polarization on climate and energy issues. Nanos Research polled Canadians with the survey for the first time in September 2019 and will continue to do so annually to track whether polarization is increasing or decreasing over time.

> Nanos and Positive Energy has 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.
>
> — *Divided? Polarization and Canada's Energy Future in an Age of Climate Change*, survey conducted by Nanos Research for Positive Energy, September 2019

Writing in *Policy Options*, three of the contributors to the University of Ottawa's Positive Energy research program described the survey results as revealing a distinction between fragmentation and polarization.

> What's the difference? When the public is polarized on an issue, it means that opinions are concentrated at extreme ends of the spectrum. People don't just agree or disagree, they do so strongly. When opinion is fragmented on an issue, it means that views differ, but they are not necessarily hardened at either end of the spectrum.
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> Why does it matter? Polarized opinions are tough for political systems to deal with. People are hardened in incommensurable views. On the other hand, fragmented opinions are more amenable to political decision-making. People's views aren't crystallized. They may be more malleable and open to compromise.
>
> — *On energy and climate, we're actually not so polarized*, Policy Options, Stephen Bird, Monica Gattinger and Erick Lachapelle, January 2020

Brexit

The Brexit vote to leave the European Union is widely blamed for creating a very negative, polarized dynamic in the United Kingdom. But what does that really mean? At a basic level it could just mean that almost no one in the UK thinks that leaving or remaining in the EU is unimportant. But what if support for leaving varies dramatically based on class, identity or their feelings about the consequences of Brexit? Or has the UK become polarized into strongly committed Remainers and strongly committed Leavers.

> Indeed, many voters themselves appear implicitly to recognise this characterisation by their ready willingness to identify themselves as a 'Remainer' or as a 'Leaver'. As a result, these two perspectives on Britain's future now appear to motivate and engage voters much more than do the country's political parties, albeit that,

> gradually, the division between Remainers and Leavers has come increasingly to be reflected in the pattern of support for the parties. The debate about Brexit has come to represent much more than an argument about the practical consequences of leaving the EU; rather, it has created two camps with quite different perspectives on Britain and its place in the world. It may well prove not the easiest division to heal.
>
> — *British Social Attitudes 36, The EU Debate Has Brexit Polarised Britain?,* The National Centre for Social Research, 2019

The National Centre for Social Research is Britain's largest independent social research agency. *In British Social Attitudes 36*, researchers point to "considerable evidence" that Brexit has polarized attitudes towards the EU: "The link between social background and attitudes towards membership of the EU is stronger than it was before the referendum."

A Pew Research survey of 1,031 UK adults from June 4 to July 20, 2019, before Boris Johnson became prime minister on July 24, showed that support for and against Brexit "…aligns with attitudes toward the EU, immigration and the country's culture, but traditional cleavages along party lines and the left-right ideological spectrum still exist on other topics…"

The survey had five key findings: the 2016 EU referendum vote cut across party and ideological lines; Remainers and Leavers are starkly divided in their views of the EU; concerns about immigration deeply divide Remainers and Leavers; Leavers and Remainers differ over the future of the country's culture; and the public was roughly divided on their views of the economy.

The antivax movement in Canada

With measles outbreaks grabbing headlines in Canada, calls for mandatory vaccinations have grown. Nine out of 10 Canadians say they support legislation that would make it mandatory for all school-aged children to be up to date on their vaccinations, according to a 2019 Ipsos poll conducted for Global News. At the same time, only about 2 percent of the population hold anti-vaccine views, according to a 2017 report from the C.D. Howe Institute: *In Need of a Booster: How to Improve Childhood Vaccination Coverage in Canada*.

These numbers suggest that anti-vax views are not contributing to polarization in Canada. But according to Tim Caulfield, the Canada Research Chair in health law and policy at the University of Alberta, anti-vax sentiment is more pervasive than the C.D. Howe's 2 percent number suggests. Caufield divides antivaxxers into two groups: committed disbelievers, between 2 and 5 percent of the population and a second vaccine-hesitant group—somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of Canadians. Reaching this second group appears to be key to limiting the spread of avoidable diseases in Canada.

> The avalanche of online information on immunization is having a major impact on the percentage of the population who choose to get vaccinated. Vaccine misinformation spreads widely with the interactive Web 2.0 and social media; this can bury science-based information. A plethora of immunization misinformation online is affecting trust in health care professionals and in public immunization programs.

— *Promoting immunization resiliency in the digital information age*, 2020 Volume 46 - Canada Communicable Disease Report (CCDR), Public Health Agency of Canada

While Canadians are overwhelmingly in favour of mandatory vaccinations to access public facilities, such as schools, policymakers risk fomenting polarization with these measures. Committed or even casual anti-vaxxers may use heavy handed approaches to justify extreme positions and conspiracy theories, which in turn would likely lead to more polarization.

Instead a better understanding of why the more casual anti-vaxxer behaves the way they do may hold more potential for effective policies.

> The reasons for their poor follow-through are varied: There could be logistical reasons, single parents without the time to get their children vaccinated, or they might harbour fears of specific vaccines. "There's a whole bunch of factors that are relevant to why a child may not get vaccinated, and I think that's really important," Caulfield said. "It's not all about these vaccination myths and the anti-vaxx ideology, there are also practical considerations we need to factor in."
>
> — *Who are the anti-vaxxers? Here's what we know — and how they got there in the first place*, National Post, March 29, 2019

Implications for Policy and Governance

The above overview of emerging dynamics and possible contributory factors clearly illustrates that there are likely a wide variety of important implications for public policy and governance. While not meant to be a definitive list, the following could be some important implications:

- People are clustering themselves into groups that compete against each other in a zero-sum game where negotiation and compromise are perceived as betrayal.
    - Polarization encourages zero-sum thinking, so even when there is broad agreement on important issues, such as the need for background check for gun purchases in the US, politicians are loath to compromise.
    - Polarization can lead citizens to identify their political views as patriotic while viewing opposing views as unpatriotic, making it harder to come together to deal with existential threats like climate change or destabilizing financial crises.
    - Polarization brings pressure to conform within groups. This changes the dynamics within groups, as members feel more pressure to conform in their beliefs and actions, making internal dissent and diversity less likely. Policymakers are then forced to work with people who hold more extreme and hardened views and opinions.
- Deception becomes a more accepted part of the public discourse. Polarization encourages people to see deception as valid when they are in conflict with another group. This can present serious challenges to policymakers if false information is expected to be used as a basis for formulating policies.

- Policy priorities could be skewed as they become disconnected from facts and evidence. Pressure from misinformed opinions based on fake news could cause policymakers to feel constrained in their decision choices and thwart implementation of policies grounded in fact.
- Stalemate, inaction and policy drift are other consequences of a more polarized environment. It is much more difficult for political coalitions to form and to pass new legislation and adapt to changing economic and social circumstances. The main consequences for policy are either that serious problems go unaddressed or the solutions tend to be ideological and one-sided.
    - A polarized environment encourages more intense lobbying, which in turn puts pressure on policymakers to conform to agendas that may be seen as counter to the broader public interest.
- The general public may be losing trust in key institutions that were once trusted by the majority. For instance, on issues like climate change that are beset by emotion and conflicting "facts," some Canadians are reported as being uncertain about whether they should trust scientists and academics.
    - A polarized, partisan environment often means citizens don't see government officials and government policies as impartial and evidence based. The deep state phenomenon in the U.S. is an example of this mistrust.
- Referendums, such as Brexit, are presented as solutions for myriad problems. However, referendums often create situations where policy actions become constrained in ways that are detrimental to the public. For example, policymakers in California, which uses referendums and ballot initiatives, have found their ability to formulate policies severely circumscribed by initiatives like freezes on property taxes.

Actions and Solutions

It is clear that Canadian policymakers will face increasing challenges in their continued ability to develop and implement evidence-based public-policy measures. Arguably, there is a risk that policymakers could be pressured into simply responding to arguments from the most vocal advocates. Policymakers need to cast how problems are defined in ways that are more sensitive to their uneven effects in different communities. There is also a need to get better at advancing approaches that are more agile and flexible and as a result less prescriptive.

Policymakers must also continue to focus on how to protect and build trust in institutions and the decision makers who work in them. Canadians need to be able to trust that decision makers are acting in the broader public interest. As public servants work to serve the government of the day and support the broader public interest, policy ideas based on misinformation driven by polarization can present serious challenges. Disagreements and contested facts are not new to policy and political debates. But the speed at which misinformation flows and morphs into action is new.

In an increasingly polarized world, rebuilding trust and finding common ground must inform every aspect of policymaking. Getting to a place where Canadians have more trust in each other and their institutions will be difficult but not impossible. What follows are some possible broad actions and solutions that could serve to support this goal; these ideas are intended to help spur the discussion during the Critical Conversation.

- **Encourage intergroup contact.** The "contact hypothesis" suggests that getting to know each other can reduce prejudice between groups. For example, Ireland has run several Citizens Assembles since 2016 that have made policy recommendations credited with advances in Ireland's approach to climate change.
- **Create opportunities for perspective taking**. The promise of encouraging the perception of a situation from an alternative point of view was recently illustrated in a 2016 experiment in Florida that attempted to change support for issues faced by transgender minorities. In this intervention, a brief exchange exploring a range of issues from the perspective of a trans individual was sufficient to shift people's attitudes.
- **Foster citizen engagement.** Its purpose is to replace token participation with more deliberative means of ongoing engagement. Citizen engagement refers to public participation characterized by interactive and iterative deliberation between citizens and government officials to contribute meaningfully to specific public policy decisions in a transparent and accountable manner. Citizen engagement gives greater emphasis to information and power sharing, mutual respect and reciprocity between citizens and their government than do more traditional methods of involving the public in decision-making.

  However, true citizen engagement will require a rethinking of current government approaches to consultation. Governments are often criticized as only paying lip service to the idea of engagement, as they present proposed actions that are seen as pre-formed and inflexible. Indeed, it sometimes seems that a willingness to admit to not having all the answers or accepting the need for a course correction does not come naturally in today's "gotcha" political climate.

  Encouragingly, this has not always been the case. For example, Canadian governments in the past used to put forward white papers that were designed to spark true debate and citizen engagement, the feedback from which then informed policymaking. But to return to this model, governments and politicians must be prepared to admit they don't always have all the answers.
- **Mandatory voting.** Making voting a duty of all citizens could foster a stronger sense of civic responsibility and lead to more engagement and understanding of issues and related policies. Mandatory voting is widely used around the world. Voting is mandatory in several European countries, Australia and most Latin American countries. Definitive research is need on the effects of compulsory voting beyond the obvious impact on rates of voter turnout.

  > Those in favour of compulsory voting often adduce the importance of participation among all segments of society. Citizens of democracies are forced to do many things in the interest of the public good, they maintain, including serving on juries and educating their children, and full participation serves the country as whole. Those opposed to compulsory voting often argue that, from a democratic theory perspective, the right to vote implicitly includes a right not to vote. Such a right of abstention, they argue, is more important than any societal good that might accompany high turnout. In fact, opponents of compulsory voting often contend that the country may be better off if those who are disinclined to vote are not pushed to participate in public affairs.
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  > — *Beyond Turnout: The Consequences of Compulsory Voting*, Political Studies Association, Political Insight, Shane P Singh, August 20, 2014

- **Strengthen public broadcasting and support for private media**. While there has always been a tendency for the media to "chase headlines," efforts to help reduce the financial pressure on traditional media outlets could encourage more in-depth fact-based approaches to news gathering and delivery.

> The fundamental right to seek and disseminate information through an independent press is under attack, and part of the assault has come from an unexpected source. Elected leaders in many democracies, who should be press freedom's staunchest defenders, have made explicit attempts to silence critical media voices and strengthen outlets that serve up favorable coverage. The trend is linked to a global decline in democracy itself: The erosion of press freedom is both a symptom of and a contributor to the breakdown of other democratic institutions and principles, a fact that makes it especially alarming.
>
> — *Freedom and the Media 2019: A Downward Spiral*, Freedom House, Sarah Repucci, June 2019

Conclusion

These questions are intended to guide the roundtable discussions and recommendations:

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 then 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?

Next steps

The rapporteur will summarize and synthesize participants' key findings and views during the plenary session of the Critical Conversation. A full report will be posted on the Regulatory Governance Initiative website following the event.