

Mass Polarization in Canada: What’s Causing It? Why Should We Care?

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There is growing concern among governments, civil society groups, journalists and academics that democratic societies, including Canada’s, are under stress through twin pressures of polarization and institutional dissatisfaction. At some level, this concern reflects our close cultural and geographic proximity to the United States, whose democratic institutions and social fabric have been under considerable strain. But, it also reflects recent trends in Canada – debate over COVID-19 policy, the Ottawa blockade, the apparent rise of populist conservatism under Pierre Poilievre’s leadership of the Conservative Party, and the staying power of the People’s Party of Canada. The scale, scope, and nature of polarization in Canada, however, demands closer scrutiny. There is not a clear cut story as to whether Canada is truly polarizing like the United States. The answer depends on how you conceptualize polarization and the survey measures being used to evaluate these concepts. This report has three objectives. First, it will provide an overview of the state of polarization in Canada using data I collected and the Canadian Election Study (CES). In doing so, it will answer questions related to whether Canada is polarizing, on what dimensions, and by how much. Second, it will evaluate possible consequences of polarization with a particular focus on affective polarization – the increasing hostility of political partisans towards their least preferred political party and its supporters. Third, it will evaluate possible causes of Canadian polarization. It will also provide some concluding thoughts related to lessons learned and paths forward for future research on Canadian polarization.

The State of Polarization in Canada

At a very general level, polarization is about the division of society into two contrasting groups, but there are different ways we can think about how exactly the public is divided. It can be principally emotional – reflecting differences in feelings towards political parties and leaders.¹ It could be cognitive – based on differences in values or ideological orientations.² It could be identity-driven, anchored in social differences between groups like race or religion.³ We might also speak about polarization as a phenomenon between supporters of political parties, or as a society-wide phenomenon. And finally, we might distinguish our own perceptions or beliefs about polarization from reality.⁴ The degree to which Canadian society is polarized is heavily dependent on how one defines the concept. Affective Polarization

We have the strongest evidence of polarization in Canada in the emotional evaluations of supporters of our major political parties. Scholars refer to this phenomenon as affective polarization. Supporters of the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party (NDP) increasingly dislike the Conservative Party, and supporters of the latter party increasingly dislike the Liberal Party, in particular.⁵ This resembles the growing mutual hostility Democrats and Republicans hold towards one another in the United States. Scholars have measured this dimension of polarization over time using the Canadian Election Study (CES) with 0-100 “feeling thermometers.” These questions ask survey respondents to report their feelings towards each party on 0-100 scales (see the left panel of Figure 1).

The average feeling towards their principal opponent has declined from 40 degrees to 27 degrees since 1988. At the same time, feelings towards one’s own party have increased from a low of 52 degrees in 1997 to 71 degrees in 2019. The result has been an approximate doubling of the polarization of feelings between one’s own party and its principal opponent from a 20 degree

difference to a 44 degree gap. The right panel of Figure 1 shows the distribution of people's feelings towards the opposing party. We see a large jump in individuals placing this party at the extreme low end of the scale (i.e., zero degrees).

There are a couple of important limitations of these survey measures: they only ask respondents how they feel about political parties – not their supporters. And, respondents may not understand what numeric values along that 0-100 scale substantively mean. Another approach is to ask people how well certain positive or negative words, like honest, open-minded, selfish, and hypocritical, apply to elected officials and supporters of each of the parties. Unfortunately, these questions have not been asked overtime in the CES. I asked these questions in a survey of 2,068 adult Canadians in 2019.

We see evidence of considerable hostility towards opposing parties and their supporters. 65% of supporters of the Liberals, NDP, and Conservatives believe the word selfish applies somewhat or extremely well (28% for the latter category) to their principal political opponent (Liberals for Conservative supporters, Conservatives for Liberal and NDP supporters). There is no significant difference between respondents asked to evaluate elected officials compared to voters of those parties. 70% feel the same about the word hypocritical, with only a small difference between those asked to evaluate elected officials (72%) and voters of that party (68%).

On the flip side, 68% of partisans reject the word “open-minded” to describe their principal political opponent and once again there is no meaningful difference in how people evaluate elected officials and voters of that party. This level of hostility does not exist between supporters of the Liberal Party and NDP. In short, we see a polarization of feelings between Conservatives, on the one hand, and Liberal and NDP supporters, on the other. This has almost certainly increased over time. If you perceive Canadian politics to have gotten increasingly negative and hostile, this is why. Partisan Polarization

Another dimension of polarization is likely playing a starring role in the growing emotional divide between our political parties. Supporters of these parties increasingly disagree with one another over public policy, once again distinguishing the Liberals and NDP on one side, and Conservatives on the other.⁷ The support base of these parties have grown apart in their values and beliefs. This is often referred to as partisan polarization or partisan sorting, which has been observed in the U.S. as well.⁸

We can see evidence of this in the CES. Figure 2 presents the results of a series of policy and values-based questions that have been asked between 1993 and 2015, broken down by partisanship. On all six issues, we see growing differences between the Conservatives, on the one hand, and Liberals and NDP on the other. Across the board, we see movement to the left by the NDP and (especially) the Liberals. The Conservatives have moved to the left on two issues (immigration and same-sex marriage, though more slowly than the Liberals and NDP) and to the right on one other issue (environment), but have otherwise remained stable. The end result is a growing gap between these parties in their policy beliefs.

Partisan polarization is also reflected in broader motivating ideology of party supporters. In the top panels of Figure 3, I show the spread of ideological identification among CES respondents for Liberal and NDP supporters (i.e., Left) and Conservative supporters (i.e., Right) as measured on a 0-10 scale where 10 mean right-wing and 0 means left-wing. We see growing divergence between partisans over time. The bottom panels show the same, but with a composite ideological

index composed of a number of questions related to people’s attitudes towards public policy (many of which appear in Figure 2). Again, we see divergence, but mostly due to movement of Liberal and NDP supporters to the left. There is more ideological disagreement between parties than ever before – a potential source of affective polarization. False Polarization

There are a number of important caveats to the polarization narrative I have outlined above. First, it is clear that Canadians think they are more polarized than they actually are. This is known as perceptual or false polarization. Scholars in the United States have shown that, for all the evidence of polarization, Americans think the parties are more divided than they really are. They believe Republicans are more right-wing, religious, more southern, and wealthier than is actually the case, and see Democrats as more left-wing, diverse, and secular than the facts warrant.¹¹ False polarization is potentially problematic in its own right – our perceptions of polarization may play a role in generating more hostility towards our political opponents.¹²

We see evidence of false polarization in Canada as well – though perhaps not at the same level as we see in the United States. Since the 1997 CES, survey respondents have been asked to place each of the parties on a 0-10 left-right ideological scale. The average response for each party over time is shown in the left panel of Figure 4. Respondents have perceived the Conservatives – and their legacy parties – to have shifted a full scale point to the right, and the Liberal Party a full scale point to the left. This has resulted in almost tripling the degree of polarization people perceived between the left (i.e., a weighted average of the Liberals and NDP) and the right (i.e., the Conservatives).

How much of this perceived polarization is accurate? How much of it is false polarization? This is trickier to evaluate, but we can use the self-reported ideological placement of Conservative, Liberal, and NDP supporters as the “true placement” for a given party and calculate the difference between the party placements shown in the left panel of Figure 4 and the “true” value. The right panel of Figure 4 plots the percent of perceived polarization that can be attributed to such error. It has increased over time. In 1997, we actually perceived ourselves to be almost half as polarized as we actually were. By 2015 we saw ourselves as 25% more polarized than reality. In 2004 and 2008, false polarization was driven principally by distorted evaluations of the NDP. Since then, it has been driven mostly by misperceptions about the Conservative Party.

We can also see false polarization in people’s evaluations of the socio-demographic makeup of each party’s supporters. In a recently conducted 2023 survey of 1,004 adult Canadian partisans, I asked respondents to give their best estimate for the share of Liberal/NDP or Conservative supporters from a given group in society. People have a tendency to overestimate (underestimate) all small (large) groups. So, I take the difference between respondent’s error for a stereotypical group and a related counter-stereotypical group (e.g., error for Conservative Evangelicals vs. Liberal/NDP Evangelicals). This gives us a measure of net bias in our respondents’ perceptions. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Respondents overestimated the prevalence of LGBTQ representatives in the Liberal Party and the NDP by 15 percentage points more than for the Conservatives. They also underestimated the share of the COVID-19 fully-vaccinated among Conservatives by 15 percentage points more than for the Liberal Party and NDP. On average across these items, respondents perceived a 12.1 percentage point difference in the composition of the Conservative Party, on the one hand, and Liberal Party and NDP, on the other. 6.6 percentage points of this difference is error, or roughly 55%.

Canadians believe we are more polarized than we really are. Why might this be? Part of the explanation is psychological. People may exaggerate differences with opposing political parties in order to strengthen their own identities and political orientations.¹³ But, the media may also play an important role in this process. U.S. research has shown that media coverage of politics and polarization can heighten misperceptions by giving news consumers a distorted sense of how politically divided the public is.¹⁴ We have to discuss polarization with care, otherwise we might make the problem worse.

Ideological Polarization?

A second caveat to the polarization narrative is that there is little evidence that Canadians are becoming more extreme in their ideological beliefs. That is, the moderate middle still holds in Canada. We can see this in Figure 6, again using CES data. In both ideological self-placement and the policy-based ideological index used above, we see little clustering at the both extremes. Most Canadians hold the centre. If there is any change, it's that Canadians are systematically moving to the left in their policy beliefs (see comparison of bottom left and right panels), but this is not evidence of ideological polarization. Social Polarization?

Finally, a key component of American polarization is its social component. Republicans and Democrats are increasingly dissimilar from one another in their racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds. This has been linked to affective polarization – perhaps even trumping the role of ideology and values.¹⁶ There is much less evidence that this is occurring in Canada. In a survey of 2,068 adult Canadians I collected in 2019, respondents were asked to evaluate their feelings of belonging and attachment to 25 different societal groups. Only eight of these groups were significantly correlated with their strength of partisan attachments. These groups are displayed in Table 1. The correlations themselves range from weak (0.12 for lower class) to modest (0.39 for Westerner) and in no case did more than 10% of the sample hold the specified identity intensely. Some of these identities clearly do connect to partisanship in a meaningful way – particularly Western, LGBTQ, and Evangelical identities – but it is clear that our partisan politics are not nearly as socially stratified as the American political climate.

Why Should We Care?

The story of polarization in Canada is nuanced, but there is no dispute that the Canadian public is affectively polarizing, likely reflecting growing ideological differences between our parties. There may be important cognitive, social, and political consequences for the Canadian public and society writ large.

There is a real risk that affective polarization may push Canadians into partisan and ideological silos that prevent their ability to engage with and learn from perspectives that are different than their own. This can exacerbate polarization and erode the foundations of social trust in society. There are two principal mechanisms that create this dynamic. As polarization accelerates, Canadians might be motivated to seek out and engage with political information that reinforces their partisan and ideological beliefs and avoid perspectives that challenge their own. This is known as selective exposure.¹⁷ In a 2021 study in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* I show that Canadians do tend to gravitate to news stories featuring headlines that are compatible with their ideological and partisan beliefs.¹⁸ The jury is still out as to whether this is because we are attracted to information that reinforces what we believe or are repelled by information that challenges us.

There is some good news, though. We still appear to prefer mainstream news over partisan media outlets, like Rebel News, when given a choice of what news to consume.¹⁹ This is true for Conservative supporters as well, despite increasing concerns about their declining trust in the mainstream press. We might gravitate towards information that supports our political views, but this hasn't yet translated into a preference for partisan news.

The second mechanism that might encourage the creation of partisan and ideological silos is motivated reasoning. As we encounter information when paying attention to the news or over the course of our day-to-day lives, we might be motivated to reflexively accept, and be persuaded by, information that supports our political views (known as confirmation bias) or to counter-argue and reject information that is inconvenient for us (disconfirmation bias).²⁰ We may even interpret the exact same information in diametrically opposing ways to make it compatible with our pre-existing political beliefs.²¹ In that same 2021 study, I find that right-wing and left-wing Canadians interpreted data from a hypothetical gun control study in ways that reinforced their prior beliefs.²² As polarization accelerates, biased reasoning and information seeking is also likely to increase. Liberal, Conservative, and NDP supporters may increasingly live in different information realities.

The growth of information silos separating the political left and the right are likely to be reinforced by social dynamics. Increasing hostility towards political opponents will reduce people's willingness to interact and form connections with these people in their day-to-day lives. Scholars have referred to this as social distance (not to be confused with the COVID-19-related term).²³ In the 2023 survey I noted above, I asked respondents how comfortable they would be with members of various groups in society as neighbours, friends, or in-laws (including co-partisans and opposing partisans). Between 22% and 27% of Canadians reported some discomfort with opposing partisans in their social circle depending on the item.

These results are weaker than what we see in the United States, where over 40% of Americans would be upset with a son or daughter marrying someone from the other party,²⁴ but they are still notable when compared to other social groups. I created a composite index of social distance with these items, ranging from 0-1, where 1 represents the maximum level of social distance. This will allow us to compare these results to other social groups. These results are shown in Figure 7. Social distance is unsurprisingly highest for convicted felons (0.66), followed by those who are unvaccinated against COVID-19 (0.42) and those on welfare (0.38). Social distance from opposing partisans (0.29) is comparable towards people's feelings about having Muslims in their social circle (0.28).

U.S. scholarship has also shown that affective polarization can generate political homophily in romantic relationships and marital households.²⁵ Preferences for shared politics in relationships rivals the value people place on having a shared level of education or religious affiliation, according to both experiments and real-world data from dating websites.²⁶ I have found the same patterns in Canada in a 2021 study, though researchers don't yet have access to behavioural data here.²⁷ In short, affective polarization is likely to drive higher levels of social segregation between partisans with possible consequences like reduced trust and discrimination.

Even more troubling, scholars have argued that affective polarization, when taken to an extreme, can undermine democracy. This can happen through two mechanisms. One, partisans may be more willing to forgive democratic transgressions by party leaders to bolster their party's electoral prospects and prevent their opponents from achieving victory.²⁸ Two, partisans may be

more willing to condone violence in service of political aims.²⁹ There is still an active debate in the United States on the scope of this problem and whether it is truly related to affective polarization.³⁰ We don't have much research in Canada at this point on these questions – something to keep an eye on in the future.

What is Causing Affective Polarization?

Understanding the root causes of affective polarization is vitally important given its potential consequences. A consensus has not yet developed on this question – either in specific countries like the United States or cross-nationally. There are, however, a few likely suspects.

First, it is likely that the hostility that people feel towards political opponents is rooted in growing ideological differences between party supporters.³¹ We dislike the other side because we more strongly disagree with them about politics and policy than ever before. In the United States, it is also possible that this hostility is rooted in social difference – Democrats and Republicans increasingly don't resemble one another in their social and demographic backgrounds.³² How well this latter explanation extends beyond the U.S., however, is very much an open question. My own analysis using data in Canada suggests there are principally ideological, rather than social, foundations to hostility towards political opponents.³³

Second, both affective polarization and its ideological foundations are likely products of the polarization of our political parties, known as elite polarization. We have evidence from the Comparative Manifestos Project that this has occurred in Canada.³⁴ The old Progressive Conservatives moved to the political right starting with PM Brian Mulroney, which continued with the Reform, Alliance, and new Conservative Party. The Liberal Party has also moved to the political left over time, likely accelerating during the Justin Trudeau years, though the data has not yet been updated to reflect the 2019 or 2021 elections.

This means that our major parties are increasingly sending ideological messages to Canadians. We adapt accordingly, by changing our partisan allegiances to reflect the new ideological pull of Canadian politics or by changing our opinions to follow our preferred party. Either way, this pushes the supporters of our parties farther and farther apart, increasing affective polarization as a consequence. There is cross-national evidence showing a correlation between elite polarization and affective polarization.³⁵ Our political parties are likely playing a central role in polarizing our politics.

Another possible culprit for affective polarization in Canada is social media. Social media gives people tremendous choice in the information they consume, which, alongside recommendation algorithms, can create echo chambers that reinforce people's beliefs and shield them from challenging information.³⁶ Social media can also expose people to inflammatory political content – the type that is more likely to go viral.³⁷ Relatedly, social media is a key conduit for the spread of misinformation and fake news, the latter of which is typically characterized by hyper-partisan content that is derogatory towards targeted political actors.³⁸

There are a number of reasons why we should be skeptical that social media has had a predominant role in Canadian polarization. First, the polarizing trends I outlined above have been gradually unfolding since at least the early 1990s – long before the advent of social media. We tend to have recency bias when evaluating the causes of polarization. Second, researchers are increasingly finding that the echo chamber narrative is overstated. Most people don't use social media for

political reasons³⁹ and there is some evidence social media may actually expose people to more information from one's less preferred political side than they would otherwise receive.⁴⁰ Why? Because people tend to construct in-person social networks with high levels of political homophily, especially as polarization accelerates. Social media connections tend to be comprised of much looser social ties.

Third, reverse causation and selection bias are persistent problems in evaluating the causal link between social media and polarization – affectively polarized people may be more likely to intensely use social media to express themselves and to opt-into online echo chambers.⁴¹ People also tend to gravitate towards misinformation that taps into their already existing hostility towards political opponents.⁴² We observe misinformation-saturated, polarized discourse on social media and assume the latter causes the former. That might not be the case.

Finally, there is the inconvenient fact that social media use is not positively associated with greater hostility towards political opponents.⁴³ Older individuals, who use social media the least, are more polarized than younger Canadians, who use it the most. Social media could well have a number of negative consequences, like the erosion of institutional trust and democratic satisfaction, but it is not likely a major player in Canadian polarization as I have described here.

There are similar worries that the fragmentation of the media environment may generate polarization. People have more choice about what news they consume, and this may lead them to engage with partisan media sources that reinforce their prior beliefs, causing more polarization downstream.⁴⁴ There is experimental and real-world evidence in the United States that partisan media has contributed to polarization, starting with the rise of Fox News.⁴⁵ But even then, the case might be overstated. The vast majority of Americans consume a moderate media diet, despite increasingly levels of media distrust.⁴⁶ There is, of course, the obvious problem of reverse causality where already polarized individuals gravitate towards partisan media.

And, most importantly for our purposes, the rise of partisan media has been much more limited in Canada. In my 2021 study, I find that people of all partisan stripes prefer credible mainstream sources, like the CBC, over partisan media outlets that cater to their politics (e.g., Rebel News), even if they do modestly prefer news content that aligns with their politics. In part, this is because partisan media outlets are trusted less, but citizens are also less aware of them – they do not have the same brand recognition. It is not surprising, then, that very few Canadians consume domestic partisan media. The 2019 Digital Democracy Project tracked the online behaviour of 750 Canadians for several weeks during the 2019 Canadian federal election. Only 1% visited a Rebel Media webpage at least one time during that time span.⁴⁷ It is possible that partisan media will one day gain a foothold in Canada as traditional outlets struggle. But, to date, the story of Canadian polarization is likely not a story of the changing media landscape.

Moving Forward

Worries about polarization in Canada are not unfounded, but the scale and scope of the problem depend on how one defines polarization and there is much to learn about the causes and consequences of this process. It does not appear to be the case that Canadians are moving to the ideological extremes, nor is our partisan politics becoming increasingly stratified by social identities like race or religion. For these reasons, it is possible that polarization in Canada is less toxic than what we have seen in the United States over the past decade. It is also important not to conflate polarization with other phenomena gripping Canadian society, like rising institutional

distrust and dissatisfaction. These can have very different causes and consequences.

On the other hand, it is clear that supporters of the Conservative Party, on one side, and the Liberal Party and NDP, on the other, increasingly disagree with one another about policy and that this has generated considerable mutual animosity. If our politics appear to be more negative and toxic than in the past, this is probably why. This long-running trend is likely because of the behaviour of our political parties, rather than because of social media or an evolving media landscape (though these changes aren't helping matters).

How concerned should we be about polarization? Affective polarization, in particular, has been associated with a number of challenges – greater political homophily in online and offline relationships, discrimination, political bias, echo chambers, and the spread of misinformation. It is likely not the case that current polarizing trends are providing a genuine threat to democracy in Canada, but we need much more research on these questions in Canada to fully appreciate the gravity of the challenges we face.

At the same time, there is nothing inherently bad about some forms of polarization. Voters should be provided clear, contrasting visions of what governments should and should not do across a range of policy domains. Voters should disagree, even deeply, on these questions without observers pathologizing them. The focus should not be on stamping out polarization in all its forms, but rather to turn down the temperature and learn how to have constructive disagreement.

There is no magic wand that can be waived as a cure all. There is no policy solution. We can't fact-check our way to healthy political discourse and we can't force political parties to tone down their rhetoric. But, two avenues to improve our political climate are worth exploring. First, as I show above, Canadians believe they are more polarized than they really are. These misperceptions can generate inter-party hostility, though there is still more work to be done to understand the nature of the causal relationship. American research has shown that correcting these misperceptions can reduce affective polarization. There are two lessons here: we should strive to reinforce the common ground that exists across the political divide and journalists should refrain from framing news stories in ways that give people a misleading impression of how divided we really are, as much as commercial incentives may drive them to do otherwise.

Second, there is some evidence that talking to people you disagree with can reduce affective polarization.⁴⁹ Inter-partisan dialog likely does this by reducing people's misperceptions about how different and extreme their political opponents are from themselves. But, there is much to learn about the conditions under which inter-party dialog can be productive. Focusing discussion on areas of agreement may reduce polarization,⁵⁰ but emphasizing eras of disagreement may make things worse.⁵¹ Discussion in unmoderated online spaces is probably counterproductive, particularly with anonymity.⁵² Structured discussion in face-to-face settings is likely more effective.⁵³ Teaching people how to have constructive discussions with those they disagree with – starting at a young age – has the potential to reduce affective polarization. The wrong approach might backfire.

The Canadian public is polarizing to a degree, but this is not a cause for panic. There is no evidence that this poses a threat for Canadian democracy so far. There is much more that needs to be learned to properly diagnose the problem and provide constructions solutions.

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