

# Linking Political Orientation and Environmentalism



Aly Muhammad Sayani

University Of Toronto

September 2021

Advisor: Professor Lisa Kramer, PhD

An analysis of changing environmental attitudes and subsequent party support in Canada



## 1 Introduction

Canada is one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gas emissions by volume (11th), is three times above the global average for per capita emissions (3rd), and is significantly far behind where it needs to be both in setting climate policy goals and achieving those it has already set (Ritchie, 2019). It is a country with a stained recent past in global climate leadership, becoming the first to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol in 2011 and receiving a "Lifetime Unachievement" award from the Climate Action Network in 2013, after numerous fossil of the year awards during 9 years of environmental negligence under Conservative former prime minister Stephen Harper from 2006 to 2015 (Climate Action Network 2013; Hayden 2014) (Stoddart et al., 2016). Furthermore, Canada is a federal state, meaning the majority of power in enforcing environmental legislation lies with provincial as opposed to federal government. As a result, the climate agenda will not progress without a 'delicate intergovernmental balance, and a weakening of the Conservative reaction' (Macneil and Paterson, 2018). This study aims to improve understanding of the link between party and ideological alignment and environmental attitudes.

## 2 Aims

This study aims to improve understanding of the link between party and ideological alignment and environmental attitudes. It will discuss how this may impact how Canadians vote both in federal and provincial elections, and what this means for environmental policy, through a review of existing literature and analysis of federal election data from 2015 and 2019. It aims to provide an updated understanding on the link between environmental attitudes and political orientation on a federal level, whilst also taking interprovincial circumstances into account, an aspect often overlooked in previous studies on the topic.

## 3 Literature Findings

- Canada has a terrible record on environmental policy, largely due to anti-environment sentiment from 2006-2015 under Conservative Prime Minister Harper, which was passed on to many Canadians and is still visible today
- Rising RWP both inside Canada and globally has created a wave of "Anti-tax politics" that poses risk to environmental policy
- Canada is a federal state, meaning most power lies with provinces rather than Ottawa. As a result, there is a deadlock between provinces that have conflicting economic interests over shared emissions policies
- Emissions production is heavily intertwined with the political economy of Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada's largest emitters, led by tar sands expansion
- BC, QB and NS only provinces to successfully implement good environmental policy due to partisan consensus i.e. Carbon tax or renewable energy use
- Majority of Canadians see the environment as a pressing issue, but majority also do not understand carbon pricing or its benefits. This leaves them open to manipulation by Conservative media who frame environmental policy in terms of rising energy costs, which are easier to understand
- The environment is a positional issue in Canada, meaning those on the left and centre tend to support environmental policy, with those on the right more opposed

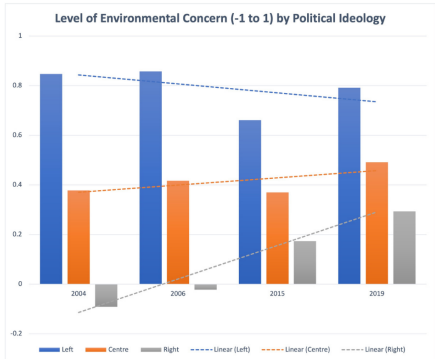
## 4 Methodology

The purpose of my data analysis is to provide an updated understanding of the changing link between environmentalism and political orientation. I analyze four different measures of political orientation against a single measure of environmental concern, in an aim to produce results comparable with Anderson and Stephenson's 2011 study of the 2000, 2004 and 2006 federal election surveys. Using STATA 17.0 and Excel, I generated several graphs to represent 4 different measures of environmental concern against ideology, party feeling, party identification and vote choice. I then did a provincial breakdown of each of these measures.

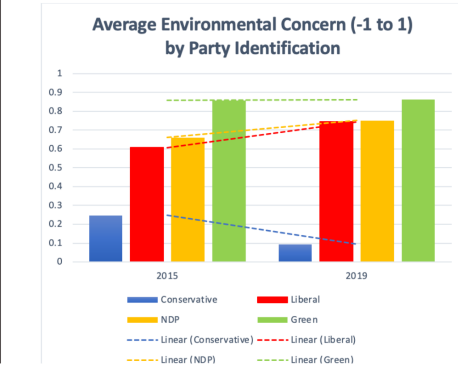
## 5 Results and Analysis \*

\*The Environmental Concern variable was generated by coding decrease spending as -1, no change 0, increase 1, and generating an average

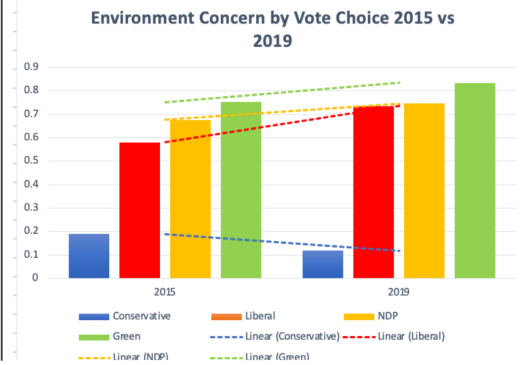
Stage 1: Environmental Concern by Ideology



Stage 3: Environmental Concern by Party Identification



Stage 4: Environmental Concern by Vote Choice



Stage 2: Average Party Feeling at Increasing Levels of Environmental Concern

In Stage 2, I plotted average party feeling at increasing levels of environmental concern. Combining my data with the results from the 2004 and 2006 data from Anderson and Stephenson's study, I found: (Too many graphs to include here)

- As the tendency to spend on the environment increases, the average party feeling for the Liberal, New Democratic and Green Parties increases, and average party feeling falls for the Conservative party. The inverse is also true as the tendency to spend on the environment decreases.
- Over time, the difference in average party feeling between those who want to increase spending and those who want to decrease spending has increased i.e. Opinions on party feeling sorted by environmental spending have become more polarized -> Difference in party feeling for Conservatives who want to decrease spending vs increase spending in 2004 was 11, but by 2019 the difference is 35., with similar differences for the other parties This means the issue is 3 times as polarizing now as it was in 2004

Stage 5: Provincial Breakdown of Stages 1-4

In Stage 5, I carried out the same 4 stages of analysis, but broke each one down by province. My key findings were: (Too many graphs to include here)

- Between 2015 and 2019, every province saw an increase in average environmental concern, except Alberta and Saskatchewan, who saw a decrease.
- Alberta and Saskatchewan, only provinces where right-leaning individuals didn't see an increase in environmental concern between 2015 and 2019
- For those who want to increase spending on the environment, respondents from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario showed the highest average party feeling for Conservatives
- The provinces where there is a partisan consensus on environmental policy (BC, NS, NWT, PEI) tend to post the highest scores on environmental concern across voters from each of the four parties in that province. Provinces that don't have consensus on the environment tend to post lower scores, with Alberta and Saskatchewan posing the lowest scores across voters from each of the four parties

## 6 Conclusion

It appears that Canada is stuck with the problem of federalism and its detrimental impact in inhibiting the progress of environmental policy nationwide. Alberta and Saskatchewan remain consistently opposed to pro-environmental policy largely in the realm of policy elites, but also as found in the data, in the realm of public opinion. Whilst the data shows an improvement in consensus on environmental concern, there is a worrying increase in the polarization of attitudes from party supporters nationwide, especially in the most carbon-intensive provinces. Solutions to this likely lie in the solidification of public opinion in these provinces, matched with an increase in the political mobilization of pro-environmental groups in these areas, a historically successful method in forcing policy change. On a federal level, the government may consider implementing a far harsher carbon price backstop, or reduce subsidies and investment in oil sands to incentivize alternative energy production. Whilst the data suggests opinions on environmental spending based on party preferences are diverging, I hope that this trend is nullified, and Canada's parties may work together to tackle climate change and the risks it poses to the Canadian and global population.