

Justin Trudeau didn't start the fire. But the Prime Minister helped stoke Canada's political polarization

PAUL WELLS

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED MAY 4, 2024UPDATED MAY 5, 2024

Paul Wells is a journalist and author based in Ottawa who writes on [Substack](#). This essay is adapted from his coming book Justin Trudeau on the Ropes: Governing in Troubled Times.

Justin Trudeau led the federal Liberals into the 2015 election on a promise to give the middle ground back to Canadians.

Before long, there was less middle ground.

It had already been shrinking for years when [Mr. Trudeau](#) became the Liberal Leader in 2013. He didn't cause the polarization of Canadian politics, but he noticed it, acted on it, nudged it along. By 2021, that polarization came not only to save his career, but to define it.

Since 1965, teams of political scientists have surveyed thousands of Canadians after every federal election. Most of the questions don't change from one survey to the next, so the Canadian Election Study has become a basic tool for measuring Canadians' attitudes toward politics, the economy and one another over time. It's now older than the latest generation of academics who run it.

One of the Canadian Election Study's standard sets of questions is the "feeling thermometer." Respondents are given the name of a political party and asked how they feel about it, on a scale from zero to 100. A score of zero represents "a very negative feeling" and 100 represents a "very positive feeling."

Respondents usually give a higher score to the party that receives their vote than to the parties competing against it, which only makes sense. From 1988 to 2004, the average gap between the two scores, for supporters of all parties, was about 20 points. It would bump up or down a bit from election to election, but it stayed close to 20 points from the 1988 rematch of Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives and John Turner's Liberals, to 2004, which was the first election for Paul Martin, Stephen Harper and Jack Layton as leaders of their parties.

Then the gap started to widen, fairly consistently through five consecutive elections, until in 2019 it had more than doubled to 44 points.

In 1988, most respondents gave marks between 30 and 60 out of 100 to the opposing party, which we can take to mean Liberals or New Democrats for Conservative voters, and Conservatives (or the old Progressive Conservative, Reform and Canadian Alliance parties) for Liberal or NDP supporters. This indicates they rated the other side near the middle of the scale. By 2019, scores between zero and 10 were almost seven times more common than in 1988, making that bottom-of-the-barrel grade the most common response.

Canadians used to think the parties they voted against were all right, just not their cup of tea. Lately they more often believe the opposing party is beyond redemption.

There is a term for this: “affective polarization,” or partisan disdain for the other side. This gap is actually bigger than partisans’ real disagreement on the issues facing government, such as taxation, immigration, or crime and punishment. It hasn’t only been happening in Canada. Affective polarization was first identified in the United States where, like most things, it’s bigger than here. But investigators have also found affective polarization increasing over the past few decades in Switzerland, France, Denmark and New Zealand.

One of the academics studying polarization in Canada is Eric Merkley at the University of Toronto. He’s measured “considerable hostility” in Canadians’ views of opposing parties – the Conservatives for Liberal and NDP supporters, and the Liberals (more than the NDP) for Conservatives. In one of Dr. Merkley’s surveys, 65 per cent of respondents believed the word “selfish” applied to supporters of the opposing party, and 70 per cent said “hypocritical” applies. What about when you feed them kinder words? How about “open-minded”? Well, no: Sixty-eight per cent reject that as a word to describe the opposing party.

Some of the perceived gap is attributable to self-perception and to genuine disagreement on issues. Dr. Merkley found that NDP and Liberal supporters are likelier to self-identify as being on the left than they used to, with Conservatives placing themselves more emphatically on the right. He also found the two camps’ answers on policy questions have been diverging over time. In the 1990s, Liberals were close to Conservatives on support for [immigration](#), same-sex marriage, or how they would rank jobs and environmental protection if forced to choose. Now Liberals’ opinions on all those issues are closer to New Democrats than to Conservatives.

But partisans’ ideas about their opponents actually exceed real differences. “Canadians think they are more polarized than they actually are,” Dr. Merkley [writes](#). How many Liberals or New Democrats are [LGBTQ](#)? Respondents overestimate by 15 points more than when they’re asked the same question about Conservatives. How many Conservatives are fully vaccinated for COVID-19? Here respondents guess low, missing by 15 points more than when they guess for other national parties.

Affective polarization erodes communities because people who support opposing parties increasingly don't even want to know one another. In the United States, about 40 per cent of respondents say they'd be upset if their son or daughter married someone from another party, or if such a person became their neighbour. In Canada the number is lower – Dr. Merkley found it at 29 per cent – but that's higher than if the new in-law was from another race, a francophone, an atheist, or queer. It's about the same as the level of unease with a Muslim neighbour or in-law.

What causes increases in affective polarization? Partly it's that political parties have become more homogeneous, a phenomenon political scientists call "sorting." Political parties used to be broad coalitions. Now each is more monolithic in its members' perceptions.

Political scientists say polarization is partly elite-driven. That matches what I've seen. The old notion that "at the end of the day, we're all working for Canadians" is not the sort of thing you hear in Ottawa these days. Soon after he became prime minister, Mr. Harper put the word out among Conservative staffers to stop drinking in bars frequented by Liberals. In 2017, a senior Trudeau adviser came to speak at a Maclean's event where Garnett Genuis, a pro-life Conservative from an Edmonton riding, won the magazine's "Parliamentarian of the Year" award. The award-winner was selected by other parliamentarians and the winner's name was always a surprise. "I had to stay because I was part of the program," the Trudeau adviser told me, "but I saw a lot of our people leave when Garnett got the prize and I'm proud of them."

I'd add party funding as a driver of polarization. Jean Chrétien and Mr. Harper ended the old system where businesses and labour unions could give very large donations to their preferred party. In 2011, Mr. Harper also ended the per-vote subsidy that gave every established party a periodic windfall from the government. Now every party's main source of donations is individual Canadians, whose total annual donation is capped at \$1,700. To succeed, parties need to separate their supporters from their money, a few dollars at a time, by constantly telling scary stories about what will happen if the other side gets in.

A final, powerful driver of polarization, once it begins to dominate the political culture, is events themselves. In the years before and since Mr. Trudeau came to power, the news headlines from home and abroad provided no shortage of horrors for partisans to interpret by their increasingly disparate lights.

In 2008, the U.S. banking system started to collapse. Two successive presidential administrations, George W. Bush's and Barack Obama's, bailed out the banks to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. Individual homeowners were not so fortunate. A Great Recession produced untold pain and hardship in America's old industrial heartland. Chronic unemployment and unsafe work conditions produced a continent-wide market for an ever-deadlier opioid spiral – OxyContin, then heroin, increasingly adulterated with fentanyl. Firearms, alcohol

and suicide completed the mounting slaughter. In 2014, the U.S. reached an astonishing milestone: Life expectancy peaked at 78.9 years, and then [started to decline](#) for the first time since the First World War.

The sense of unprecedented alienation from the old elites that were supposed to take care of people – government, finance, industry – drove two virulent new protest movements in America: the Tea Party on the right and Occupy Wall Street on the left. Flip sides of the same devalued coin, both movements were convinced the leadership class was ransacking the country and that ordinary people had to take direct action to stop it.

In Kentucky, Ben McGrath covered a Tea Party rally in 2010 [for The New Yorker](#). He found the protesters “suspicious of decadent élites and concerned about a central government whose ambitions had grown unmanageably large. ... Large assemblies of like-minded people, even profoundly anxious people anticipating the imminent death of empire, have an unmistakable allure: festive despair.”

Kurt Andersen wrote the cover ode to Time’s 2011 Person of the Year, [“The Protester.”](#) It was the moment of the Arab Spring revolutions in the Arab world and North Africa. “All over the world,” Mr. Andersen wrote, “the protesters of 2011 share a belief that their countries’ political systems and economies have grown dysfunctional and corrupt – sham democracies rigged to favor the rich and powerful and prevent significant change.”

A Canadian echo of Occupy was the Idle No More protests for Indigenous rights, which closed roads, railways and bridges across the country in 2012. The terrorist attacks on Parliament Hill and at St-Jean-sur-Richelieu in 2014, the global surge of migrants from Syria and elsewhere into Europe in 2015, the Yellow Vest populist protests in France in 2018, the copycat United We Roll convoy into Ottawa in 2019 – all of them contributed to a feeling that ordinary people and their supposed leaders had lost control of events.

Polarized politics don’t make it impossible for votes to swing, but they do make it harder. Voter allegiances become stickier. Partisans become likelier to put up with excesses or outrages on their side because they imagine the other side would be far worse.

Having won his re-election in 2019 as both a witness to Canada’s increasing polarization and an actor encouraging it, Mr. Trudeau kept sorting the electorate. Since the thing that had saved him – far more than his patchy record or his inconstant character – was the feeling that a change in vote from Liberal to Conservative must not be contemplated, he set out to make the distinction even clearer.

The biggest event between the 2019 election and the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns in early 2020 was the nationwide cascade of road and rail blockades

by Wet'suwet'en, Mohawk and other activists against TC Energy's Coastal GasLink pipeline in British Columbia. Mr. Trudeau took a hard line – not against the protesters, but against the Conservatives' then-leader Andrew Scheer, for adopting a law-and-order stance against the protests. The Prime Minister met with every opposition leader except Mr. Scheer, whose position on the protests [“disqualified him.”](#) The clear message: that there was acceptable and unacceptable debate in Canada; that Mr. Trudeau would decide which was which; and that the Conservatives, who had won 220,000 more votes than the Liberals in the previous election, could be disqualified from public discourse as he pleased.

Having dismissed the biggest opposition party, Mr. Trudeau then effectively dismissed his own finance minister in the early months of the COVID-19 lockdown. Bill Morneau was a relative moderate in the Liberal cabinet, which meant that there was less and less room for him in Mr. Trudeau's calculations. When Mr. Morneau worried about the cost of wage and business subsidies, Mr. Trudeau's office leaked disparaging stories about their own minister, and the Prime Minister eventually accepted Mr. Morneau's resignation, which pushed the Conservatives, and then his own government, away from the political centre.

Mr. Trudeau didn't start the gradual estrangement in our national politics, and neither is he the only leader contributing to it. Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre is all about affective polarization, too, which helps explain how we got the politics we have today. The centre, however, is crumbling, and the Prime Minister certainly didn't help. The supporters of one big party are now strangers to the supporters of the other big party – and they don't even particularly want to know one another better. And the interests of both big parties lie in benefiting from that drift, not reversing it.