

Public Opinion and Managing Subnational Fiscal Risks

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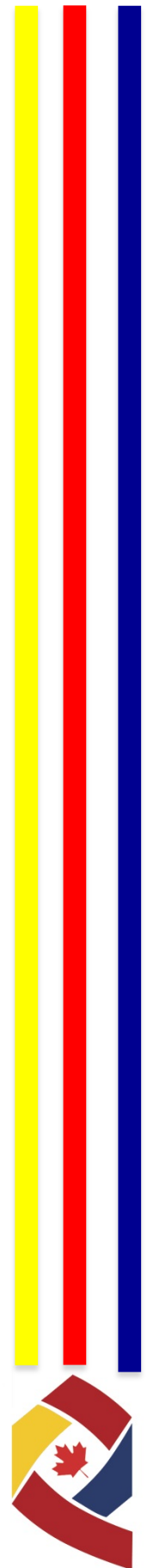
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Introduction

What does research on public opinion and policy attitudes have to say about the design of national policy responses to the problem of provincial fiscal shocks? One standard answer would be: *not very much*. A persistent conclusion among public opinion scholars is that the average citizen is basically indifferent to the substance of policy, and instead responds to policies on the basis of their symbolic content, particularly associations with salient social and political groups (Achen and Bartels 2016). At the same time, a sizable minority of scholars have long advanced a more optimistic view. While not assuming a citizenry comprised of political junkies, in this view citizens can, and sometimes do, take account of policy substance in forming policy judgments.

In this short note, I discuss recent literature that captures how group identity and policy information interact to shape policy attitudes, with a view to informing discussion of policy responses to provincial fiscal shocks. I also briefly discuss some of my past research concerning one policy-design feature that seems to matter to citizens (under the right conditions): the institutional allocations of authority policies create. Given the obvious regional dimensions of the problem of responding to provincial fiscal shocks, I conclude by reflecting on the conditions under which regional identities are likely to drive citizen attitudes in this policy area.

Partisanship, Information, and Policy Attitudes

When it comes to the influence of social identity on policy attitudes, the impact of partisanship, or “party identification”, is without peer. Party identification (party ID) refers to one’s sense of membership in and affective attachment to the social group constituted by the party (Campbell et al. 1960). Party ID means more than an intention to vote for a party – in fact, partisans sometimes defect from their party in elections. Nonetheless, the link to the vote decision is strong, and party ID also has powerful effects on political participation and a range of political attitudes.

When it comes to policy attitudes (i.e., whether one favours or opposes a particular policy or set of policies), one influential perspective holds that partisan influence largely reflects “cue taking” (Popkin 1991). Rather than investing energy and thought in divining a position of her own, the cue-taking partisan relies on the party elite to identify the “correct” policy judgment. The political science research literature contains ample evidence, both observational and experimental, consistent with such effects on citizens’ policy attitudes (Zaller 1992; Lenz 2012). Often, it seems, partisan considerations crowd out almost everything else.

There are conditions, however, under which information about the substance of public policy – about the characteristics of policy problems, policies’ concrete features and anticipated effects, and connections to valued principles – makes a difference to policy attitudes. There is good evidence, in particular, that policy substance matters when *policy information is plentiful and prominent* (Bullock 2011; Boudreau and Mackenzie 2014; Peterson 2017), when *partisans*

disagree with their party on a personally important issue (Mullinix 2016), and when *parties' policy positions are not highly polarized* (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013).

One highly influential study (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013), for instance, examines experimentally the effect of substantive policy arguments on policy attitudes in the presence of different information about parties' policy commitments. Perhaps the most striking comparison to be made in this rich investigation is between the influence of strong policy arguments a.) when individuals have no information about parties' positions and b.) when they are told the "partisan divide is not stark" and that "members of each party... [can be found] on both sides" (63). While there are, in the latter circumstances, some differences in the degree to which adherents of different parties respond to the various arguments, to a fair approximation, policy arguments are almost as influential when parties' indicated positions are not polarized (i.e., when the divide is "not stark") as when their positions are *absent entirely*.

Institutions and Policy Attitudes

Given the right conditions, what sort of policy features might be important to citizens? Some of my own research, in collaboration with Alan Jacobs, highlights one obvious possibility: policies' institutional features (Jacobs and Matthews 2017). In our theoretical framework, a key consideration for citizens is the degree to which the intended benefits of a policy are uncertain. If I support this policy, the citizen may ask, how likely am I to realize the benefits? To the extent citizens understand that different institutional arrangements elevate or diminish uncertainty about policy benefits, it follows that institutional features may affect their policy attitudes.

Our research suggests that the way in which political authority is allocated in the task of policy implementation, broadly construed, can have a critical influence on policy attitudes, particularly in relation to broadly popular social investments that entail a specific, short-run cost for citizens. In one experiment with an American sample, for instance, we show that a policy managed by an arm's-length government agency (the Army Corps of Engineers) attracts significantly more support than when the same policy is managed by an entity deeply enmeshed in day-to-day politics (the U.S. Congress). In another experiment, we show that institutional rules that limit political discretion in the allocation of government monies enhance support for costly public investments. In both settings, the key variable is the degree to which the institutional framework is exposed to political pressures that may interfere with a policy's smooth implementation.

Importantly, in our studies, information on parties' or other salient groups' positions on the policies in question is purposely absent. As suggested by Druckman and colleagues' (2013) findings, therefore, our results are best understood as applying to circumstances and policies when parties and other salient political actors are not deeply divided.

Regional Identities and National Responses to Provincial Fiscal Shocks

For understanding public opinion toward a national response to the management of provincial fiscal shocks, the key political identities may well be regional rather than partisan. Canadians certainly possess regional – that is, provincial – social identities, although their significance to policy attitudes is generally overstated (Matthews, Mendelsohn, and Besco 2013). Regional identities do matter, however, when a particular policy question has an obvious regional dimension (such as Québec’s place in the federation) or can be framed in regional terms. And Canadians seem to be primed to accept policy frames that emphasize regional grievance: with the exception of Ontario, in every province a majority or very sizable minority believes their province is not “treated with the respect it deserves” (Montpetit, Lachapelle, and Kiss, 2017).

Whether the design of policies to manage subnational fiscal risks matters to citizens, then, boils down to one’s expectations about the larger politics of that issue. As regards the role of regional identities, research on how partisan identities and policy substance affect policy attitudes suggests that a key variable will be the extent to which the provinces prominently disagree among themselves, and with the federal government, on the proper approach in this area. On the one hand, Canadian public opinion can probably tolerate some intergovernmental bickering without entirely losing sight of the substantive dimensions of the problem. In this circumstance, policymakers would be wise to consider how particular policy arrangements do, or do not, resonate with widely shared political values, address problems that citizens regard as important, and – consistent with my research – respect citizens’ sensitivity to institutional sources of uncertainty about policy benefits.

On the other hand, if the politics develop into an Ottawa-vs.-the-Rest, East-vs.-West, or other dichotomy, it is likely that the design of the policy solution will matter less to public opinion than to the region in which that “public” is located. Furthermore, if the politics of subnational fiscal risks divide the federal parties, then there is little chance policy substance will make a difference to voters. Rather, the standard, and largely pessimistic, conclusions about public opinion will apply.

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