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Does Canadian federalism amplify policy disagreements? Values, regions and policy preferences [1]

Author: Montpetit, Éric, Lachapelle, Erick and Kiss, Simon
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SUMMARY

Federations have to strike a delicate balance between unity and regional diversity. In the Canadian case, the highly decentralized nature of the federal system enables the provinces and regions to exercise considerable autonomy. In this context, policy disagreements have often been interpreted through the prism of regionalism. Some observers of Canadian politics have expressed concerns that this amplifies disagreement and could undermine the legitimacy of national policies and institutions.

The significance of regionalism in Canada has long been debated and studied. In this paper, the authors' approach is different from that of much literature in this field: they explore whether disagreements stemming from value cleavages are made worse by Canada's regional nature. Their analysis is based on an original survey that measures the degree to which Canadians are divided along three value inclinations: egalitarianism, traditionalism and legal rigorism (a belief that laws should apply strictly and uniformly to everyone). The survey was conducted in early 2015, in five regions: British Columbia, the three Prairie provinces, Ontario, Quebec, and the four Atlantic provinces. The samples comprised around 1,000 respondents.

The authors carried out detailed empirical analyses of 7 public spending domains, as well as 12 policy issues ranging from restrictions on religious symbols to support for oil pipelines. Their principal finding is that Canadians are first and foremost divided over values, not regions. Disagreements on policy issues exist because of Canadians' differing values, not because of territorial fracture lines. In other words, the three value inclinations and the conflicts they generate are present in every region.

Moreover, individuals who share the same values, regardless of where they live, have similar policy preferences. For example, whether they live in Quebec or the Prairie provinces, proponents of social justice show similar levels of support for environmental spending.

Based on their findings, the authors present three implications for policy. First, to be successful, policy should be designed, framed and promoted to appeal primarily to values, not regions. Although the composition of values varies among regions, this does not prevent the formation of cross-regional alliances that could foster some level of national acceptance. Second, those who seek countrywide support for national policies will nevertheless sometimes need to adopt regionally sensitive communications strategies, notably to appeal to values that have been overlooked in the past in given regions by policy-makers. Third, provincial policy-makers may find it beneficial to exchange with their counterparts in other provinces when developing policies and strategies.

More broadly, the authors conclude that there may have been a tendency to exaggerate fears that disagreements among Canada's regions will be harmful to policy acceptance and institutional legitimacy. Regional differences should not be ignored, but more systematic attention to value disagreements within regions seems warranted.

Region: Canada [3]
Tags: federalism [4]
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　　　　diversity [6]