

DIGGING DEEPER

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# Parliamentary Dynamics

Navigating Partisanship & Party  
Discipline

**EVERY DAY**  
**ADVOCATES**



Environmental  
Leadership  
Canada

# Contents

- 1 Inter-Party Dynamics: Partisanship**
- 2 Intra-Party Dynamics: Party Discipline**
- 3 Navigating Parliamentary Dynamics as Environmental Advocates**



## Objective

From the outside, the decisions made by politicians are often baffling or appear short-sighted. Understanding the dynamics *between* and *within* parties behind the scenes can help make sense of why elected officials vote in the House of Commons the way they do and why parties so rarely seem to work together to get things done.

This resource will introduce advocates to two important relationship dynamics in Canadian politics with a history of obstructing environmental leadership: partisanship and party discipline. In doing so, it will touch on such questions as:

- *Why do MPs almost always vote along party lines?*
- *What stops decision-makers from "putting politics aside" to take action for the environment?*
- *How can advocates within and outside of the political sphere support MPs in navigating these pressures?*

# 1 Inter-Party Dynamics: Toxic Partisanship

Scoring political points shouldn't be more important than solving society's greatest problems. Unfortunately, extreme, polarizing partisanship leads to exactly this.

## *Understanding Partisanship in Canada*

**Partisanship** is loosely defined as an affiliation with, preference for and/or adherence to a certain political party (e.g. the Liberals, Conservatives, NDP, Greens or Bloc Quebecois). As political parties are held together by common values, ideas about governance, and policy priorities, it is unsurprising that many individuals form strong attachments to a particular party (become "partisans"). However, while this shared identity holds parties together, it is also what sets them apart from others, creating the potential for fraught relationships.

Partisanship is not an inherent barrier to environmental leadership - after all, many countries with multiple political parties have been able to build consensus and prioritize action for the environment. However, **partisanship becomes problematic when it reaches the toxic, extreme levels currently on display throughout North America**, including in Canadian politics.

A few factors lend themselves to high levels of partisanship in Canada. These include:

- The first-past-the-post "winner takes all" system of electing MPs, as majority governments do not need to collaborate with other parties
- Oversimplification in political coverage by the media and low levels of political literacy among the public
- Regional divides and disenfranchisement (real or perceived) from centers of decision-making
- An established culture of partisanship and sectarianism in political institutions
- Spillover and influence from highly charged and polarizing political discourse in U.S.
- Strict party discipline (see Section 2 for more)

## *How Extreme Partisanship Impedes Action for the Environment*

Extreme partisanship affects environmental progress in a number of ways - even when minority governments are forced to collaborate and despite individual MPs who may seek to build cross-partisan relationships (e.g. the All-Party Caucus on Climate Change).

# 1 Inter-Party Dynamics: Toxic Partisanship

## **Limited collaboration to full-blown obstructionism**

Extreme partisanship disincentivizes and impedes working relationships between MPs across party lines. Among other things, this plays out through: heckling in the House of Commons; voting down proposed legislation before it has the opportunity to be studied at committee; rejecting proposed amendments to bills without consideration; and MPs using procedural tactics to delay and obstruct one another. Because extreme partisanship drives a perceived need to "score political points" with the public and/or party base, **this discord can persist even when both parties want the same or a similar outcome on a particular issue.** For example, parties have voted down bills or motions from another party, only to introduce similar measures themselves soon after.

## **Policy lurch & reversals**

While proponents of partisanship may argue that consensus-building takes too long in the face of urgent environmental crises, **the flipside is that decisions pushed through by a single party face considerable risk of being reversed or ignored when the balance of power shifts.** For example, in the early 2000s, the Canadian Parliament ratified the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty, to set emissions reductions targets. However, when the government changed after an election, Canada withdrew from the treaty and abandoned the targets. At best, this creates disjointed policy ("policy lurch"); at worst, and more often, it creates significant setbacks for the environment.

## **The environment as a "political football"**

Extreme partisanship can polarize public debate on issues that should reasonably be expected to transcend politics, like the environment. For example, some parties have occasionally claimed exclusivity to environmental leadership, even though environmental advocates exist across the political spectrum and many environmental initiatives are the result of bipartisan cooperation. In other instances, parties have deployed labels such as "elitist," "radical," and so forth when criticizing environmental legislation (or even when framing calls for ambitious climate action). This contributes to public mistrust of climate solutions and to the denial of human-made climate change altogether, impeding environmental action inside *and outside* of Parliament.

## **Amplified attacks on environmental leaders (especially women and BIPOC individuals)**

The "us vs. them" narrative of extreme partisanship fuels personal attacks on those on different sides of the political spectrum. When coupled with the polarization of the environment in public discourse, this has led to relentless - sometimes even violent or harassing attacks - on environmental leaders in politics. Too frequently, these attacks employ racist and/or sexist rhetoric, creating not only an extra burden on those individuals driving change, but reinforcing broader social inequities that have impeded environmental progress in the first place.



Want to dive deeper into the effects of Parliamentary dynamics on the environment? Read our full report *Environmental Leadership in Canada's Parliament: Realities, Opportunities and Constraints*, based on GreenPAC's interviews with current and former MPs across the political spectrum.

## 2 Intra-Party Dynamics: Party Discipline

**It's a familiar scene in Canada: votes in Parliament along party lines. It is not just the hyper-partisan political culture that contributes to this: MPs face substantial pressure from within to "walk the party line."**

**Party discipline** refers to the control exerted by political parties and their leaders over individual MPs and candidates. Party discipline not only compels MPs to vote along party lines but also "toe the party line" in public. This reduces how much an individual MP can apply their own judgement, build bipartisan solutions, or in some cases, accurately reflect the will or needs of their own constituents in decision-making.



*Party discipline has been reported in all parties in Canada*

Among other Westminster systems of government (e.g., the UK and New Zealand), **Canada is known for having some of the strictest party discipline in the world.** In fact, MPs in Canada vote with their party more than 98% of the time.

Some of the main factors that keep MPs in check include:

- The **party whip**: a party official whose designated task is to ensure party members vote according to party preference ("whipped votes")
- **Repercussions to dissent**: the party leader controls Parliamentary appointments (e.g. Cabinet positions or Committee seats, all of which come with perks/influence for individual MPs (and can be taken away). Senior party officials can also exert enormous sway over who receives the party nomination at election time. Informally, MPs who publicly oppose their party's standpoint may face ostracization and criticism from colleagues
- **Media coverage**: the media's too-frequent (over)simplification of policy issues creates competing "us vs. them" narratives for public consumption. This can increase pressure on MPs from constituents to vote in line with the party's position

On the flipside, some MPs find value in public dissent, even at the risk of party repercussions. For example, savvy MPs can use public dissent strategically to:

- Advance Parliamentary debate on and increase public awareness of an important issue
- Validate backlash from constituents or key stakeholders
- Help the party evolve its platform and policy stances
- Build their political brand as an individual

# 3 Navigating Parliamentary Dynamics as an Advocate

By recognizing and remaining sensitive to the various pressure points on MPs, environmental advocates are more likely to build constructive - and impactful - relationships with those in office. Here are some tactics to keep in mind:

- **Don't be discouraged** from engaging with your MP because of the challenges posed by partisanship and party discipline! MPs still can and do collaborate successfully across party lines, even though it can be an uphill process. Behind the scenes (and away from public scrutiny), MPs have many opportunities to push the needle on issues through caucus meetings (incl. all-party caucuses), Private Members' work, and more. **See our "Tools of MPs" Primer for more about how MPs can drive change.**
- Look for **policy windows**, specific moments (such as during periods of crisis) where there is greater impetus and public attention to galvanize action
- **Avoid focusing on a single issue.** Your MP will need to build partnerships in Parliament to affect change, which is easier when they can draw clear connections between different public priorities
- **Be credible.** Know the arguments and counter-arguments for what you are trying to achieve. Comparing Canada's performance on environmental issues to other countries, international targets, its own promises, and the party's own stated goals can make you more persuasive.
- **Make their job easier** by preparing research and next steps in advance. The average MP's office has limited staff/research capacity and low environmental literacy

## *Getting partisan: Making change from the inside*

During GreenPAC's FLIP 2.0 Summit, speaker and former CPC deputy leader Lisa Raitt was asked about the party's controversial 2021 decision not to acknowledge the reality of climate change in party policy. Raitt pointed out that this decision was made by party delegates who represent a relatively small number of the party's most ardent grassroots supporters and called on others to engage for change:

*"...My message to young people out there who want to know that they'll be able to afford to buy a house eventually and who care about the economy and the environment is to get involved. There are 338 ridings in this country... [If] you want to change the channel on the message, there is a really open road here for people to get involved and take over boards and change the policy and have it evolve instead of everyone fighting from the top down." - Lisa Raitt, Deputy Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, 2017-2019*