

# Coordinating Federalism

## *Intergovernmental Agenda-Setting in Canada and the United States*

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### Summary

- National agenda-setting is a primary objective of Canada's Council of the Federation and the National Governors Association in the United States.
- American Governors have proven more effective at influencing the national agenda than Canadian premiers.
- Hiring full-time staff specifically to engage the media and the federal government would help the Council of the Federation raise its national profile.

### Sommaire

- Un objectif prioritaire du Conseil de la fédération du Canada et de la National Governors Association des États-Unis est de mettre à l'ordre du jour des questions d'importance nationale.
- Par rapport aux premiers ministres des provinces canadiennes, les gouverneurs des États américains exercent une plus grande influence sur l'ordre du jour national.
- En se dotant d'effectifs à temps plein pour promouvoir son action auprès des médias et du gouvernement fédéral, le Conseil de la fédération pourrait renforcer son rôle à l'échelle du pays.

DO JOURNALISTS AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS pay attention when Canadian premiers assemble at their annual Council of the Federation (CoF) summer meetings, and their American counterparts at winter meetings of the National Governors Association (NGA)? Does the rest of the political community take heed?

For both organizations, national agenda-setting is a primary objective. They want to be an integral part of national political conversations and drive outcomes to achieve shared provincial, territorial and state priorities. Given this emphasis, one might expect national media outlets to devote space to covering such high-profile summits, and for federal government leaders to comb through news releases and prepare responses to various calls to action.

Those expectations are only partially met in reality, as this study shows. Media coverage of their meetings remains muted and seldom reflects the messages found in their postmeeting news releases. Moreover, premiers' and governors' federal counterparts tend, more often than not, to disregard their calls to action. This perceived weakness is attributable to a combination of factors. Put simply, each organization needs to establish a common front before positioning itself as a leader on the national stage, and neither has proven particularly adept at developing a focused, strategic internal agenda. These challenges are particularly evident in the Canadian case, revealing potential lessons that may be drawn from the US example (but not without potential costs to solidarity among premiers).

Following a brief background on the evolution of intergovernmental councils (IGCs) in the United States and Canada, this paper proceeds with a novel theoretical framework for understanding how organizations like CoF and the NGA must first form their internal agendas before pursuing national agenda-setting. A brief methodological discussion outlines the mixed-method approach used to test these assumptions, followed by findings related to each IGC's degree of success in influencing the media and its federal counterparts. The study concludes that a lack of impact on the national stage is not entirely negative. Conflict and tension tend to drive national media coverage, for instance, meaning that staying out of the limelight may be as much about the councils' success in generating interjurisdictional solidarity as it is a failure in communications strategy.

## Background

Both intergovernmental councils began as informal get-togethers for heads of government and their spouses, and have gradually become more institutionalized over time.

THE PRESENT STUDY IS THE FIRST to compare IGCs across the 49th parallel, although research has compared CoF to similar organizations in Australia<sup>1</sup> and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

Both IGCs began as informal get-togethers for heads of government and their spouses, and have gradually become more institutionalized over time. The first Conference of Governors was held at the behest of President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907; a year later, governors formed the NGA and began meeting on an annual basis without the president in attendance. However, it became customary for presidents to invite governors to a ball and informal meeting at the White House in advance of NGA meetings in Washington.<sup>3</sup> In 1977, the NGA formalized the practice of alternating chairs between Republican and Democratic governors, cementing the body's *raison d'être* as the country's largest bipartisan executive body, representing all 55 states and territories.

In Canada, the first Annual Premiers' Conference (APC) was held in Quebec City in 1960, although less regular interprovincial gatherings dated back to the late nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Over time, premiers' meetings transitioned from informal meetings, which often included a golf match, to more formalized agendas, and the APC started issuing public news releases to report points of consensus.

Founded in 2003, CoF has emerged as a more institutionalized intergovernmental council than the APC in a number of ways. Unlike its predecessor, CoF has a founding agreement, which serves as its terms of reference. As detailed therein, premiers were to meet more frequently (at least twice a year, instead of once),<sup>5</sup> abide by a rotating chair schedule, respect the rules of consensus decision-making and share the costs of CoF operations on a per capita basis; they are supported by a Steering Committee of Deputy Ministers involved in intergovernmental relations (IGR) and a permanent secretariat (formerly those functions rotated among the host jurisdictions). The CoF chair is responsible for formulating the agenda for the meeting; in practice, the topics to be covered tend to be identified by consensus of all 13 provincial and territorial premiers, with each jurisdiction given the opportunity to table issues it wishes to see discussed.

## Theoretical Framework

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT IGCs such as CoF and the NGA have four main objectives: to influence the national agenda; to protect subnational autonomy or jurisdiction; to coordinate policy-making; and to exchange information, including best practices.<sup>6</sup> These goals are by no means mutually exclusive. Initiatives and activities often serve various purposes, and there are notable trade-offs among them.<sup>7</sup>

Of all of these IGC objectives, however, “[p]erhaps the most important function...is to develop express community norms and aspirations.”<sup>8</sup> These expressions are often, but not always, extended to shape a broader dialogue at the national or even international level. The dual agenda-forming and agenda-setting functions are among the most important reasons jurisdictions band together; by combining forces on joint priorities, they may assert their collective interests more forcefully on a larger stage.

CoF and the NGA share this agenda-setting goal. CoF's founding agreement<sup>9</sup> asserts premiers' common desire to “play a leadership role in revitalizing the Canadian federation and building a more constructive and co-operative federal

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Typical audiences include their respective federal governments, particular domestic political actors (e.g., federal legislators or interest groups), international actors, the media and the general public.

system.” This includes “*exercising leadership on national issues of importance to provinces and territories* and in improving federal-provincial-territorial relations,” which is listed second among CoF’s four principal objectives.<sup>10</sup> Accomplishing this requires “an integrated and co-ordinated approach to federal-provincial-territorial relations *through the development of shared common analysis and positions, where appropriate.*”<sup>11</sup> The final two words in that commitment are crucial to understanding how CoF operates. Deciding if, when, where and how it is “appropriate” to collaborate is a critical first step toward influencing the national agenda.

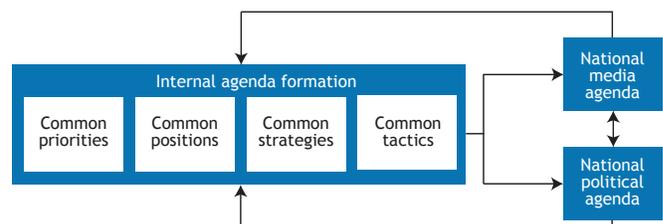
The NGA’s mission statement sounds a similar tone: “The National Governors Association (NGA) is the bipartisan organization of the nation’s governors. Through NGA, governors share best practices, speak with a collective voice on national policy and develop innovative solutions that improve state government and support the principles of federalism...Through NGA, governors *identify priority issues and deal collectively* with matters of public policy and governance at the state and *national* levels.”<sup>12</sup>

Through these statements, both premiers and governors recognize that there is a two-stage process at play when it comes to asserting subnational influence on the national stage (see figure 1). First, these organizations must collaborate to form an internal agenda. This process involves identifying common priorities, then developing joint positions on those issues. If any joint positions are identified, the organization must then choose whether and how to communicate those positions outwardly, developing strategies and tactics for engaging actors including the media and the federal government. If the internal agenda-forming process progresses to this point, it enters the second stage of external agenda-setting. Typical audiences include their respective federal governments, particular domestic political actors (e.g., federal legislators or interest groups), international actors, the media and (often only indirectly) the general public.

This study borrows from Princen’s<sup>13</sup> research on political agenda-setting in the European Union. He defines an agenda as “the set of issues that are seriously

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Agenda formation and agenda-setting by the Council of the Federation and the National Governors Association**

Source: Author.



considered in a polity,” noting that “much of the political struggle around agenda-setting is concerned with moving issues higher up the agenda or pushing them down.”<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the work of Soroka,<sup>15</sup> Princen distinguishes among different types of agenda that may or may not overlap: the media agenda, as defined by major news organizations; the public agenda, which concerns those top-of-mind issues among citizens; and the political agenda, containing the slate of issues before elected decision-makers. Due to a lack of data, the present analysis is confined to the media and political agendas, leaving the examination of the public agenda to future study.<sup>16</sup>

According to this model, successful external agenda-setting depends upon strong internal agenda formation, including the identification of a relatively small number of focused priorities, clear and cohesive positions, well-planned strategies and specific tactics.

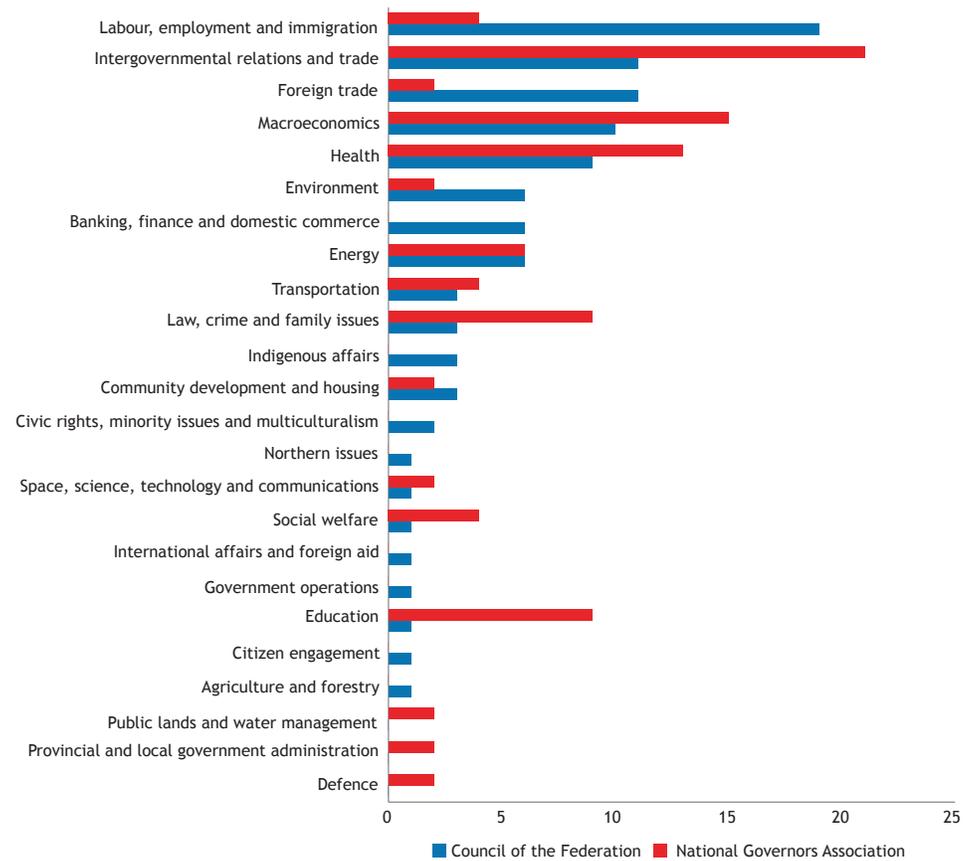
## Methodology

THE FOLLOWING ANALYSIS IS THREE-PRONGED. First, all official CoF and NGA news releases from their respective major annual meetings between 2007 and 2017 were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques to discern the priorities and calls to action that each subnational council directed at its federal counterparts. Second, these results were assessed in terms of their alignment with the national media and political agendas. News release language was compared with the volume and content of national newspaper coverage of each meeting to assess alignment with the media agenda. Next, each subnational council’s calls to action were evaluated in terms of whether their targets — federal legislative or executive branches — responded to their requests. In other words, how successful were CoF and the NGA at helping to set the political agenda in Ottawa and Washington, respectively?

It is important to note: these analyses assess the level of correlation between the IGCs’ internal agendas and their national media and political agendas; they do not establish one-way causality. It stands to reason that communications by CoF and the NGA would at least influence, if not drive, media and political discourses. Yet, the obverse is also possible: rather than shaping those discourses, premiers and governors may simply reflect or transmit them in their news releases.

Third, interviews were conducted with officials from the jurisdictions that hosted CoF or assisted with its administration over the period under study; an intergovernmental official from the Canadian federal government; and a group

**FIGURE 2.**  
News release headings, by topic, 2007-17



Source: Council of the Federation and National Governors Association news releases.

of NGA officials. These interviews focused on the objectives sought and strategies employed to influence the national agenda. Journalists and federal officials were also interviewed for their perspectives on CoF’s influence over the national agenda. All interviewees were provided with an earlier draft of this paper for their feedback. A full list of interviews is included in appendix A.<sup>17</sup>

## Findings

### Internal agenda formation

THE FIRST SET OF FINDINGS CONCERNS THE MAIN ISSUES detailed in CoF and NGA news releases over the decade 2007-17.<sup>18</sup> Using bolded headings as the unit of observation, each summer CoF news release and winter NGA news release<sup>19</sup> was coded using the Canadian Policy Agendas codebook developed by

According to this media analysis, neither intergovernmental council has proven especially effective at shaping the national media agenda.

Soroka.<sup>20</sup> Headings provide an accurate reflection of the content discussed at each meeting; interviewees confirm that they routinely use the titles of meeting agenda items as headings to structure their public communications, whether through formal news releases or common key messages for premiers and governors as they engage with the media.

As illustrated in figure 2, each body covered a wide range of policy issues over the course of the decade, and the focus shifted considerably from meeting to meeting. The economy has figured in a news release following every CoF summer meeting since 2007, and health since 2008. Other issues have fallen off the CoF agenda from time to time, however — such as internal trade (off in 2011) and international trade (off from 2012 to 2014); while still others have spiked in importance from meeting to meeting (for example, jobs in 2008, 2010, 2013 and 2017).

Unlike CoF news releases, which cover a plethora of policy areas, NGA meetings tend to coalesce around one or two main issues that vary from year to year. Crime and the economy dominated the governors' winter meeting in 2010, for instance, while health and IGR figured prominently in 2014. This difference in structure is largely due to the fact that CoF agendas are set collaboratively by bureaucrats from all jurisdictions, resulting in a proliferation of topics, while the chair and co-chair have greater control over which issues get the most attention at NGA meetings and thus generate greater focus.<sup>21</sup>

### Influence on the media agenda

The next set of findings concerns the extent to which CoF and the NGA have been successful in shaping the media agenda in their respective countries. The analysis focuses on national media stories that had these major IGC meetings as their primary focus. National newspaper coverage of each association's summits was compiled using structured keyword searches of the Factiva database, limiting outlets to leading English-language national newspapers (*Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Toronto Star* for Canada; *Washington Post* and *New York Times* for the United States) and to dates within one week prior to and after each major meeting (summer for CoF, winter for the NGA).<sup>22</sup>

According to this analysis, neither IGC has proven especially effective at shaping the national media agenda in terms of volume or substance. On the first count, very few stories have been devoted primarily to covering the outcomes of the CoF and NGA meetings. From 2007 to 2017, the selected national newspaper outlets devoted a total of 31 stories exclusively to CoF summer meetings, and 37 to NGA winter meetings. This amounts to less than 1 story per outlet per meeting in Canada, and 1.7 per outlet per meeting in the United States.

Journalists rarely refer directly to Council of the Federation or National Governors Association news releases and reports, viewing them as too vague and process-oriented for engaging journalism.

This relatively low number is attributable, at least in part, to reduced national media budgets;<sup>23</sup> as one respondent noted of television coverage (not covered here), “There was a time when the premiers met [and] the CBC sent a truck and they set up a set, and Don Newman did a show live from the premiers’ meeting every day at five o’clock...I just [don’t] necessarily think there’s that investment anymore...I think it’s just more treated as a regional event than on the national political calendar now.”<sup>24</sup>

When they did devote ink to these meetings, most national journalists based their stories on one-on-one interviews, press conferences and scrums. Journalists rarely refer directly to CoF or NGA news releases and reports, viewing them as too vague and process-oriented for engaging journalism.<sup>25</sup>

At first blush, a low level of national media coverage may be viewed as a failure on the part of CoF and the NGA to generate interest among journalists. However, given that media coverage in both countries tends to focus on conflict and that a major function of IGCs is to reduce interjurisdictional tensions (an objective not always achieved), a relatively low volume of coverage may be more a reflection of the fact that “kumbaya moments” receive less attention.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, “no news” could be considered “good news.”

Indeed, considering the substance of the coverage, premiers might well appreciate the lower level of coverage devoted to their meetings (given its negativity), while most governors may question the NGA’s ability to set the national policy agenda (given journalists’ focus).

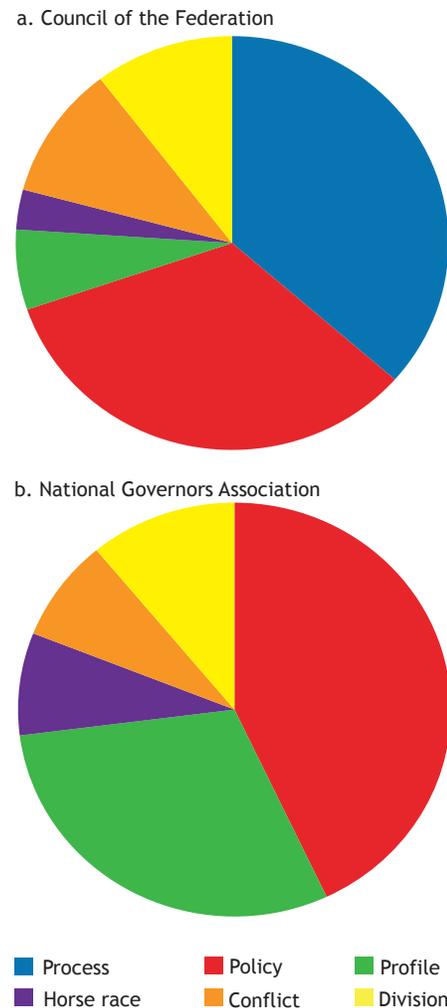
To measure this sort of framing, each story was coded in one of six exclusive categories, depending on its primary focus:

- process, concerning the functioning of the IGC itself;
- policy, centring on the substantive position(s) taken by the IGC or other political actors;
- profile, featuring in-depth coverage of particular premiers or governors;
- horse race, assessing winners or losers in terms of upcoming or previous elections;
- external conflict, revealing tension between orders of government; or
- internal division, exposing cleavages among premiers or governors.

The findings reveal a distinct set of prominent frames in each country (see figure 3). Process stories are unique to Canada. Columnists, in particular, have described the overall function — and, largely, the perceived failings — of CoF as

**FIGURE 3.**  
**Media coverage of**  
**the Council of the**  
**Federation and the**  
**National Governors**  
**Association, by primary**  
**focus, 2007-17**

Source: Council of the Federation:  
*Globe and Mail, National Post, Toronto*  
*Star*; National Governors Association:  
*Washington Post, New York Times*.



an institution. Indeed, of the nine process stories devoted to covering the CoF, seven were opinion (versus hard news) pieces that cast it in a negative light. Another portrayed CoF positively following an anti-US-protectionism meeting in 2009; the remaining story was neutral in its coverage of premiers' luggage being lost en route to Regina for the same meeting.

The negative tone of those process stories was far from ambiguous. Consider the following excerpts, drawn from the opening paragraphs of feature stories on CoF summer meetings:

*Each summer reminds Canadians why they have a federal government and why this country, thank goodness, is more than the sum of its parts. The parts came together in the form of the premiers at their annual confab, which, in its lavishness, pretense and uselessness, resembles meetings of the Arab League — predictably, they agreed on nothing of importance.<sup>27</sup>*

*There's a perverse rhythm to the annual summer gatherings of provincial premiers. Usually, they end with much ado about very little after starting with virtually no notice of the screamingly urgent. This year was no different.*<sup>28</sup>

*People expect a formal council to do more than merely talk or squawk. A council must act coherently. That's not something rival premiers do well.*<sup>29</sup>

Put simply, with over one-third of all stories that are printed placing CoF in a negative light, the media has portrayed the council as an ineffectual player on the national stage.

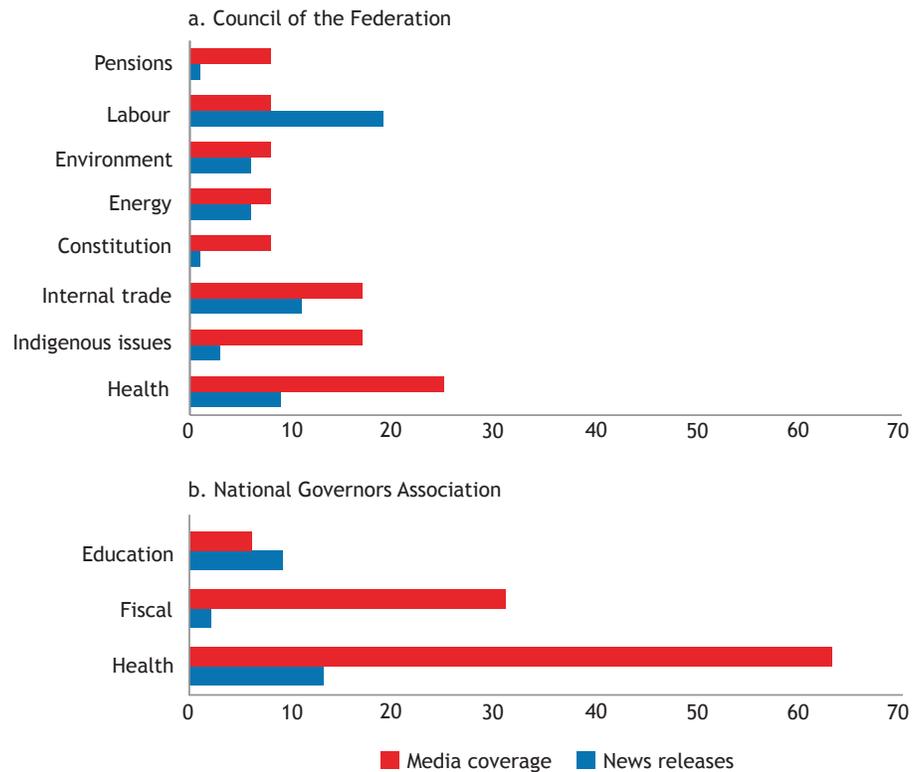
South of the border, coverage has tended to treat NGA meetings less as collaborative summits and more as showcases for the competing presidential ambitions of their members. To this end, American journalists used profile (30 percent) and horse race (8 percent) frames to a far greater extent than their Canadian counterparts. Of the 24 profile stories, all but 5 focused exclusively on Republican governors, highlighting their prospects for winning the presidential primaries in 2007-08 and 2011-12. As one journalist framed the 2008 winter NGA meeting, “Energy policy, health care and highways were the top issues on the agenda of the National Governors Association here Sunday, but many governors were consumed with presidential politics, buzzing about the possibility that the next vice president would come from their ranks.”<sup>30</sup>

32 percent of stories in Canada and 43 percent of stories in the United States featured primarily substantive coverage of intergovernmental councils' issue positions.

Policy did figure somewhat prominently in reporting: 32 percent of stories in Canada and 43 percent of stories in the United States featured primarily substantive coverage of IGCs' issue positions. However, as illustrated in figure 4, the media was very selective in terms of which policy areas it highlighted following CoF and NGA meetings, and those choices seldom aligned with the priorities emphasized in the IGC news releases. Premiers have often devoted considerable news release space to labour and employment issues, for example, yet the national media focused primarily on health care. Journalists' choice of policy frame is largely attributable to the conflictual nature of the issue, pitting premiers against the federal government over funding. In the United States, the media also overwhelmingly covered health care among all policy areas, and fiscal matters and education to a lesser extent. Although media coverage of CoF was wider in terms of issue areas (eight were addressed), NGA coverage was limited to only those three issues.

Further research is needed to examine the portrayal of CoF and the NGA by television and online media; local media; between meetings (to understand the long-term impact on agendas); through indirect coverage (i.e., not focusing

**FIGURE 4.**  
**Policy areas addressed by the two intergovernmental councils’  
 news releases and the national media, 2007-17**



Source: Council of the Federation news releases, *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Star*; National Governors Association news releases, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*.

specifically on the meeting itself, but incorporating broader references to the IGCs); and prior to 2007.<sup>31</sup> One particularly interesting line of inquiry consists of exploring IGC meetings as rare opportunities for national journalists to meet on a one-on-one, often social, basis with leaders from across the country. According to Benzie and Coyle (interviews), informal conversations with premiers and their staff have helped to inform their coverage of national politics outside the specific confines of CoF.

### Influence on the political agenda

If these IGCs have failed to capture the attention of the national media, how have the federal governments in Canada and the United States reacted to the calls to action directed at them by CoF and the NGA, respectively?

To measure Ottawa’s responsiveness to premiers’ joint calls to action, all CoF summer meeting news releases from 2010 to 2017 were dissected into quasi-sentences, using the method prescribed by the Comparative Manifesto Project.<sup>32</sup>

Each quasisentence represents a unique statement, expression, idea or argument, and may extend from a few words to a long paragraph of text. Over the coding period, CoF made a total of 135 calls on the federal government to perform some sort of action, ranging from reforms to specific programs to abstract notions of improved collaboration with provinces and territories. For perspective, these calls amounted to roughly one-tenth of the 1,325 quasisentences found in the news releases.

Confined to news releases only, these findings do not include calls to action embedded in various CoF working group reports, including those related to cannabis legalization, health care innovation, energy, trade and Indigenous children in care. While many of the more important demands of the federal government were highlighted in news releases, dozens of others can be found in these public reports.

As shown in figure 5, the number of calls made on the federal government increased steadily from a low of 7 in 2014 to a high-water mark of 33 in 2017. This rise is largely attributable to the election of a new, more intergovernmentally engaged federal government, with Justin Trudeau as prime minister, in 2015. The new Liberal government entered office on a platform chock full of election promises like action on climate change and cannabis legalization that required collaboration with (if not, acquiescence from) its provincial and territorial counterparts. In addition to responding to the federal government's priorities, the premiers had their own list of requests for federal action after a long decade of disengagement by the previous Harper government, including disaster management and labour market development.<sup>33</sup>

Figure 5 illustrates how the federal government has responded to these 135 calls to action. Twenty-seven of them were deemed too vague to code, including requests that the federal government “engage meaningfully with provinces and territories on new free trade agreements” and “set overall immigration levels that will sustain economic growth.”

While many of the more important demands of the Canadian federal government were highlighted in news releases, dozens of others can be found in the public reports.

Of the 108 codable calls to action, nearly two-thirds (66) were at least partially addressed by the federal government, indicating that CoF has a fairly solid track record of helping to define the federal government's political agenda. The 37 calls marked “partially addressed” included those that were publicly acknowledged by the federal government or were met by initial steps or a commitment to take action later. In summer 2013, for instance, premiers called for a meeting of federal, provincial and territorial labour market ministers to discuss the renewal of federal-provincial funding arrangements to support job

training. It took almost a year for this meeting to be convened, in July 2014, meaning that the premiers' rather urgent call for the meeting was only partially met. Likewise, the premiers' 2016 call for the federal government to increase overall immigration levels — including raising the caps on the number of provincially nominated immigrants — was only partially addressed, in that while overall levels increased, the caps were not removed.

An additional 29 calls for federal action were fully fulfilled by the federal government. These included calls to engage in free trade negotiations with Asian partners, streamline federal-provincial environmental assessments, establish a national housing strategy, invest in infrastructure, improve marine safety, enhance air access with key trading partners, improve the efficiency of disaster relief funding, increase health funding and collaborate with the United States to address the opioid crisis. Some of these calls we heeded in short order, while others took years (and even a change in federal government).

The Council of the Federation appears moderately successful at gaining the attention of the federal government when it comes to acknowledging or taking action on provincial/territorial priorities.

It could be argued that the federal government would have taken such measures in the absence of provincial and territorial pressure. In this regard, further research into how federal officials treat CoF calls to action is required. In the meantime, this fulfillment rate remains significant and suggests premiers' national priorities are at least somewhat correlated with those of the federal government.

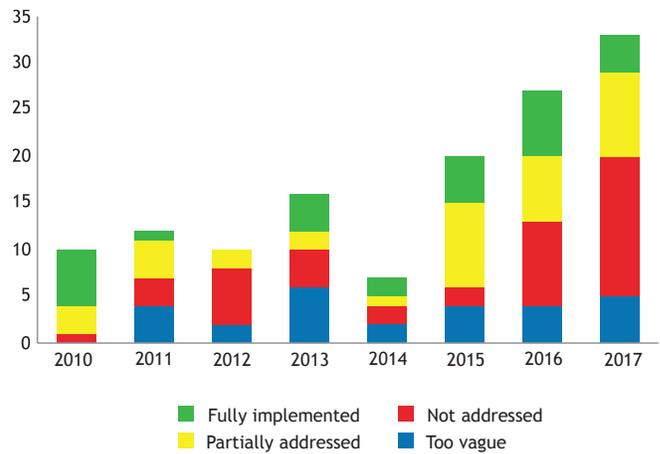
The remaining 42 calls for federal action have gone unaddressed, including re-starting free trade negotiations with Singapore, the devolution of labour market development authority to provinces, commitments to limit federal spending power and compensation for harm to certain provinces' industries as a result of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with the European Union. CoF calls for the meaningful inclusion of provinces and territories in employment insurance reforms, ongoing management of free trade agreements, immigration decisions and fiscal transfers have also fallen on deaf ears. Granted, over half (24) of these unheeded calls were made in the two years prior to writing (2016 and 2017), meaning that the federal government may yet act on at least some of them.

Overall, CoF appears at least moderately successful at gaining the attention of the federal government when it comes to acknowledging or taking action on provincial/territorial priorities.

The NGA is far less ardent when it comes to making public calls for federal government action. Over the entire 2010-17 period, the organization made only seven direct demands on the federal government. Three were made dur-

**FIGURE 5.**  
**Council of the Federation calls for action by the federal government, 2010-17**

Source: Council of the Federation news releases, Canadian federal government news releases.



ing summer meetings in 2014 and 2015 and were directed at Congress, not the President. Two saw governors “urging Congress to take swift action to pass the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*...and urging Congress to complete the long-overdue reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*” (2014). Both of these requests were heeded by Congress, with both pieces of legislation adopted within the year. The third call stated, “Before any tax legislation that affects states is passed, governors maintain that Congress must first address the sales tax collection issue,” namely, to establish “parity between in-state and out-of-state retailers regarding the collection of state and local sales taxes.” At the time of writing, Congress had not passed legislation to that effect.

The NGA tends to focus on horizontal matters in its summer meetings, making the infrequency of calls on the federal government understandable. Yet, even at their winter meetings, which focus more on vertical relations and issues, governors made only four additional sets of demands of their federal counterparts in over a decade. Half (2) of these were too vague to assess in terms of a federal response, namely, a pair of requests embedded in a 2010 joint letter from the NGA and CoF to the President of the United States and Prime Minister of Canada to assist their governments with “promoting policy innovation” related to competitiveness, and to “collaborate with them when developing national strategies that directly affect commerce, security and energy and environmental issues critical to states, provinces and territories.” While the letter may have contained specific requests, it is not publicly available.

The National Governors Association is far less ardent when it comes to making public calls for federal government action.

The remaining two sets of NGA calls on the federal government were contained in a pair of committee reports that governors endorsed and released publicly. The first, in 2014, urged the administration to support states’ efforts to enhance health care quality and control system costs. This 14-page *NGA Health Care*

*Sustainability Task Force Report* contained 38 separate recommendations related to supporting state health care innovations, Medicare-Medicaid enrolment, long-term services and supports, and payment and delivery reform. Released two years later, a second report outlined *Governors' Priorities for Addressing the Nation's Opioid Crisis* (2016). At four pages, the document contained 18 recommendations related to funding, addiction support (prevention, identification, treatment, recovery) and law enforcement. Very few of these recommendations have been taken up by the federal government, although the precise extent of the federal response awaits further study.

## Discussion

In general the Canadian federal government leads in shaping the agenda of intergovernmental relations.

THE FOREGOING ANALYSIS LARGELY CONFIRMS WHAT Anderson and Gallagher<sup>34</sup> observed for Canada: “While one or more provinces can sometimes push the national agenda...in general the federal government leads in shaping the agenda of IGR. Its fiscal role, strong convoking power and centrality as a national newsmaker give it advantages no province, or even the provinces collectively, can have.” Studies reveal that states have a higher level of individual and joint influence on the US political agenda,<sup>35</sup> but CoF’s impact remains more limited. The question remains: Why have premiers seemed to struggle more than governors when it comes to meeting their objective to set the national agenda, particularly the media agenda, in their respective countries? There appear to be three overarching reasons.

### Lack of urgency

First, despite what is written in their founding documents, the officials interviewed disagreed as to whether national agenda-setting was, indeed, an objective of CoF. While one CoF official agreed that “We want to set the agenda and respond to it,”<sup>36</sup> another saw value in “influencing it, certainly, but not *setting* it.”<sup>37</sup> Others saw CoF’s role as being “more reactive to problems that premiers have been facing, and how to solve some of those problems. And that’s probably led more to our trying to influence things at the national level than sitting back and saying, ‘Okay, driverless cars are going to be a big thing, let’s get in there early and talk about how we want to do driverless cars.’ I haven’t seen that kind of really longer-term strategic ‘Let’s do this because it’s the right thing to do or what we all want to do.’”<sup>38</sup> Some interviewees even doubted that a national policy conversation is possible, let alone desirable.<sup>39</sup>

Premiers have faced media criticism on this count. Consider the following observation from one of Canada’s leading columnists:

*Every summer the country's premiers converge on some picturesque spot in Canada for their annual gathering...The backdrop changes as do some of the characters but the script, for the most part, remains the same. Year in and year out the premiers usually find one or more apples of discord with the federal government of the day to chew on. Some years they are unanimously aggrieved over some action of their federal partner...On other occasions it is perceived federal inaction...This is not to say that some of the concerns raised by the premiers are not real...But it also seems that when the premiers spend time in the same room they conveniently forget that they are not, as a group, devoid of the power to do more than tear up their shirts in front of the cameras. When repeatedly faced with what they collectively see as a federal leadership vacuum it apparently does not cross their minds to fill it with more than empty words. By all indications, thinking outside the federal-provincial box does not come easily to this generation of premiers. It is not that they are not equal partners with the federal government in the federation but that they don't often act like they are.<sup>40</sup>*

This lack of agreement on the importance of national agenda-setting is an obvious hindrance to CoF becoming a national agenda-setter.

Yet it would be unfair to conclude that CoF's failings as a national agenda-setter outweigh its successes in other areas. As Collins<sup>41</sup> found, CoF has emerged as a more effective policy coordination and collaborative body than its predecessor, the APC. During Prime Minister Harper's term in office, premiers helped fill the national policy leadership vacuum by establishing pan-Canadian agreements in areas as divergent as health care (notably on the pricing of pharmaceutical drugs),<sup>42</sup> Indigenous affairs and energy (with notable ongoing tensions over climate change). That their efforts did not necessarily prompt federal action or draw media attention should not detract from the major gains achieved through those collaborations.

#### Lack of focus

Second, both CoF and the NGA have failed to establish a consistent, well-defined set of common priorities, which in turn has prevented them from developing pointed positions, clear messaging and issue ownership vis-à-vis their federal counterparts. As discussed, premiers' meetings have tended to feature a longer list of issues than NGA gatherings; conversely, compared to CoF's, NGA agendas have tended to vary considerably from year to year. This lack of internal focus frustrates officials bent on streamlined, consistent external communications.

As one CoF official suggested, "The biggest challenge is we're 13 separate governments with separate interests. By definition, a common set of messages out of these

Both the Council of the Federation and the National Governors Association have failed to establish a consistent, well-defined set of common priorities

Even when premiers have agreed on a particular priority, arriving at a common position or set of key messages has proven challenging.

meetings is an act of accommodation. Rarely do we all have the same interests.”<sup>43</sup> By virtue of this diversity of interests, according to another, “[E]very COF meeting, it’s kind of a mishmash. It’s a bit of a dog’s breakfast. Because...everybody is representing their own jurisdictions...everybody comes to the table with a different perspective and or different goals and aims. They all kind of agree on something that they put to paper. That is generally very vague. Doesn’t have teeth to it, or very much behind it. And then they come out of it and then you don’t hear about it again.”<sup>44</sup> This is because consensus rules tend to drive premiers to the “moderate middle,”<sup>45</sup> resulting in “freaking bland” news releases and key messages.<sup>46</sup>

While a cacophony of regional requests clouds the organization’s agenda and narrative, several officials saw this parochialism as a necessary evil. “I think they fragment the message, but I think to the individual premier it helps them see some value in CoF. So it’s a bit of a trade-off,” in that many premiers would see no value in attending or participating if their pet policies were not on the agenda or in the news release.<sup>47</sup> This is particularly true of smaller provinces and territories, which, without the rule of consensus and the occasional opportunity to chair CoF, would lack a voice in national affairs.<sup>48</sup>

Even when premiers have agreed on a particular priority, arriving at a common position or set of key messages has proven challenging. Consider the premiers’ drive for a pan-Canadian approach to energy, which was on and off the CoF agenda between 2006 and 2015. What began as a broad “Shared Energy Vision for Canada” in 2007 soon fell by the wayside amid divisions over the balance between nonrenewable resource development and climate change priorities. These tensions increased when Alberta Premier Alison Redford pushed for a “Canadian Energy Strategy” in 2012, prompting her BC (2012) and Quebec (2013) counterparts to withhold their support until environmental concerns could be incorporated, which was not accomplished until 2015.

CoF insiders offer several leading explanations for the apparent lack of consensus among premiers when it comes to forming a coherent internal agenda.

- While CoF is more institutionalized than its predecessor, the APC, summits remain relatively infrequent. This, coupled with a lack of formal activity between meetings, a high rate of turnover among premiers and political staff, and a very small secretariat, contributes to lower levels of trust and familiarity with IGR practices and issues. This, in turn, has led to stalled momentum on key files.<sup>49</sup> The NGA has not suffered as much from this weakness, because a much larger number of permanent staff contribute institutional memory and continuity.

Both intergovernmental councils (but the Council of the Federation, in particular) have lacked a strong, coherent political communications strategy to promote the consensus they have produced.

- While only rarely acrimonious, a series of cross-cutting regional, ideological and (at times) partisan cleavages tend to dissuade premiers from attempting to build deep consensus on divisive issues. According to bureaucrats and partisan officials, very few of the high-profile spats reported in the media are based in fact, at least in terms of their intensity.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the culture of CoF — not unlike the elite culture of executive federalism throughout history<sup>51</sup> — has contributed to a system of abeyances whereby premiers and IGR officials simply avoid digging into issues where they perceive little hope of agreement. Conversely, this sort of division is precisely what the media chooses to cover.<sup>52</sup> According to one official, “The media has always wanted to focus on the division...[and on] airing some of our differences, even when the differences actually weren’t in the rooms, but the media would pick up on any nuance of controversy.”<sup>53</sup>
- Consensus relies heavily on the chair’s willingness and ability to broker parochial interests into national ones. Chairs who are motivated and comfortable with assuming a position on the national stage can be quite effective in this regard, setting the stage and modelling the way for long-term collaboration.<sup>54</sup>
- There are very narrow, and often unpredictable, windows for agreement in Canadian IGR. In particular, election cycles have to align such that premiers who need to take particular positions that play well back home are in alignment with each other at the right time.<sup>55</sup>

#### Lack of strategy

Third, both IGCs (but CoF, in particular) have lacked a strong, coherent political communications strategy to promote the consensus they have produced.

In general, the NGA has been more successful at earning policy-based coverage from the media, and has employed a multipronged strategy for influencing the federal government, including extensive and effective lobbying efforts.<sup>56</sup> As a primarily political body, consisting almost entirely of governors and their political staff, the NGA is more attuned to issues of political communications and intergovernmental negotiation.

Indeed, as one CoF official familiar with joint CoF/NGA meetings put it, “[W]hen the Americans are included it’s always a lot smaller and it’s pointier. They want to talk about really tactical things. Not so much big strategic plans or really big things,” but rather how to engage with the media and federal governments.<sup>57</sup> The NGA has a permanent Office of Communications to work with the media (assembling press conferences, setting up editorial board

interviews and drafting op-eds, for instance), and an Office of Federal Relations to engage with Congress and the administration. By contrast, CoF has a total of four full-time staff dedicated to supporting the broad operational needs of the organization, none of whom has a mandate to plan communications with the media or the federal government.

Instead, CoF leaves communications up to the host premier's political communications team, whose responsibilities largely entail organizing each meeting's closing press conference, and to IGR bureaucrats across the country, who spend months negotiating the language found in news releases and working group reports. Interviews with CoF officials revealed obvious, but far from heated, divisions between these political and bureaucratic staff.

According to these interviews, IGR officials looked at the news release as an important public record of decision. By contrast, host premiers' communications teams typically viewed the CoF meeting as an opportunity to profile their own premiers, particularly if they were new to the premiership or nearing the end of their provincial election cycle.<sup>58</sup> They saw the news releases as overly focused on policy and bereft of any communication value.

As one political communications staffer put it, "I read all the press releases and had feedback on all the press releases, but I didn't find that they were necessarily as absolutely critical as probably the intergovernmental affairs people did because I was more focused on opportunities to profile our premier."<sup>59</sup>

Another was blunter: "I'll tell you exactly what it was like. We dreaded the IGR staff coming over to spend their two hours explaining to us the minor nuance in a position between us and some other province...on eight different issues that were going to be discussed. Now, I'll tell you that [our premier] was a policy wonk — he loved it. [But] then we went off, the chief of staff and I, and a few other IGR staff and sat in rooms for hours on end. Watched TV, we're on the computers...and thought about ways that we could get the profile for [our premier] back home."<sup>60</sup> In short, IGR bureaucrats were responsible for building consensus over key priorities and positions, while political staff were in charge of strategy and tactics related to external communications. The problem, confided one premier's office official, is that political staff only become involved with the meeting a few days before it happens.<sup>61</sup>

There were two notable exceptions to this pattern. In 2002, on the heels of federal cutbacks and on the eve of CoF's founding, leaders established the Premiers Council on Canadian Health Awareness (PCCHA). The organization was led

Intergovernmental relations bureaucrats are responsible for building consensus over key priorities and positions, while political staff are in charge of strategy and tactics related to external communications.

by provincial and territorial political communications staff and devoted itself to mobilizing public opinion in favour of federal reinvestment in health care funding. Its tactics resembled the NGA's and involved conducting and publishing public opinion polls, releasing op-eds, organizing press conferences and editorial board meetings, and taking out full-page advertisements in national newspapers. By nearly all accounts, the efforts were successful in bringing the federal government to the negotiating table and ultimately securing a 10-year, \$41-billion Health Care Accord in 2004.

A decade later, newly elected Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter became chair of CoF and directed his own staff to take a similar approach to securing the renewal of the health accord. Building explicitly on the PCCHA model and with CoF's blessing, Dexter's staff worked with their counterparts across Canada to develop a communications strategy to that end, the key element of which featured a visit to Toronto to meet with the editorial boards of the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail*. These sessions were intended to prime the media agenda in the lead-up to the 2012 CoF summer meeting, establishing the need for another injection of federal funds into the Canadian health care systems. According to provincial officials who attended the premeetings, however, the editorial boards focused less on Dexter's role as CoF chair and more on his government's brewing freedom of information scandal. The intended narrative failed to gain traction, as evidenced by the fact that only two national news stories reported directly on the 2012 CoF summer meeting — one a process story on the perennial lack of consensus among premiers, and the other a profile story on Dexter's attempts on behalf of CoF to engage intransigent Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The latter episode illustrates the extent to which CoF narratives based on national consensus on broad, often high-level principles — however difficult to achieve — often fall at the media's altar of political conflict and intrigue. For CoF, communications mechanisms are limited largely to the meeting news releases, associated reports, press conferences and postmeeting letters to the prime minister. In their current form, news releases are the least effective from a political communications perspective.<sup>62</sup> One journalist was particularly scathing in his description of CoF meeting news releases: “[T]he event is conducted in language not much used by (or exciting to) ordinary Canadians — solemn news releases parsed in the manner of old Kremlinology, tantalizing suggestions for new secretariats, ardent calls for joint-purchasing programs.”<sup>63</sup>

Given this reputation, it is not surprising that CoF meetings fail to garner much national media attention. This is made even more challenging when the federal government purposefully preempts the IGC's key messages on the eve of a

Council of the Federation news releases are the least effective from a political communications perspective.

## The National Governors Association executive committee has emphasized increasing the association's visibility on the national stage

meeting.<sup>64</sup> In the period under study, it was not uncommon for the federal government to make major announcements just hours before CoF or NGA meetings, in an effort to steal the media cycle or inoculate against demands from premiers and governors. President Obama did this with regard to education in 2009 and health care in 2010, just as Prime Minister Harper did with health care in 2011.

This said, all interviewees agreed that the media, federal government and general public are not the news releases' intended audiences. This explains why one respondent noted the "low traffic" on the CoF website, where they are located;<sup>65</sup> and why a federal government official referred to the news releases as "routine and predictable" enough to ignore.<sup>66</sup> Rather, the news releases are intended as "records of decision" for IGR officials, allowing them to carry out directions from premiers.<sup>67</sup>

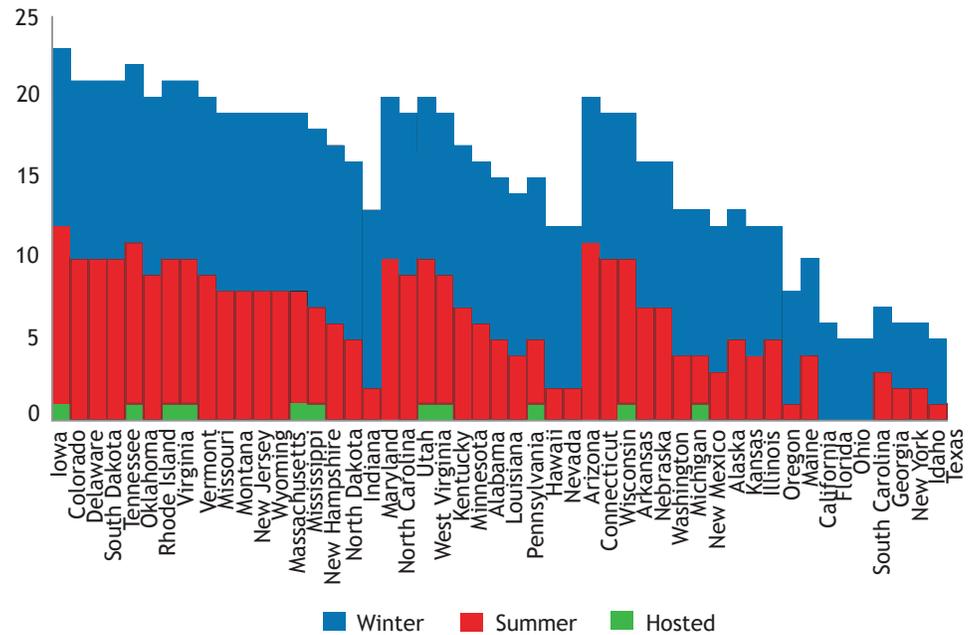
By contrast, the NGA executive committee has emphasized increasing the association's visibility on the national stage, directing staff to develop a more comprehensive traditional and social media strategy to "ensure the voice of the organization is consistently and strategically applied in every written communication we put out."<sup>68</sup> The prioritization of communications under NGA Chief Executive Officer Scott Pattison resulted in 600 percent more traditional news coverage of NGA meetings in 2017 than in 2016, and an increase of more than 1,500 percent in social media engagement.<sup>69</sup> NGA's Twitter following ballooned from 1,000 in 2015 to more than 13,000 followers as of March 2018. By comparison, CoF does not have a Twitter account.

### The importance of consensus

There are important trade-offs at stake when it comes to forming a tight internal agenda and successful external agenda-setting strategy. The NGA's relative success at influencing the US national agenda is offset by its inability to forge deep and broad consensus among governors across many policy fields. Indeed, the NGA's relative strength on the national stage may appear inflated when one considers just how many governors it represents.

Absences from NGA meetings are not uncommon.<sup>70</sup> Not only do many governors skip the annual winter or summer meetings (see figure 6) — only one jurisdiction (Iowa) has attended all meetings over the past 11 years — but many often defund the organization by revoking their membership dues. This significantly weakens the institution's image as a voice for all 55 state and territorial governors. Of note, Texas did not officially attend a single NGA meeting over this period and has not paid dues since 2000.<sup>71</sup>

**FIGURE 6.**  
Attendance at National Governors Association winter and summer meetings, 2007-17



Source: Calculations by the author based on the National Governors Association website (<https://www.nga.org/cms/meetings>).

Attendance at CoF meetings is far steadier, signalling a broader and deeper commitment to the institution. Premiers seldom skip meetings (see table 1), and when they do it is typically for personal reasons, as when Quebec’s Jean Charest attended his daughter’s wedding in 2011, or when Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams’s health kept him from consecutive meetings in 2009 (heart) and 2010 (back). (Both premiers sent proxy ministers to represent them.) The only other time a premier has missed the summer meeting was in 2017, when BC’s premier designate John Horgan scheduled his cabinet’s swearing-in ceremony at the same time as the summit. It marked the only time a jurisdiction failed to have representation at a CoF summer meeting.<sup>72</sup>

Indeed, absences at CoF are so rare that they often raise suspicion among skeptics who equate truancy with an unwillingness to engage in difficult intergovernmental conversations (free trade with the European Union in the case of Williams, pipelines in the case of Horgan and climate change in the case of Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall and Alberta Premier Jim Prentice, both of whom skipped winter meetings). This said, the regular attendance of sovereignist Quebec premiers at APC and CoF meetings over the past three decades demonstrates the deep commitment to intergovernmental collaboration among

**TABLE 1.**  
**Absences from Council of the Federation meetings, 2007-17**

Year	Fall/Winter	Summer
2007	— <sup>1</sup>	No absences
2008	— <sup>1</sup>	No absences
2009	— <sup>1</sup>	Newfoundland and Labrador
2010	— <sup>1</sup>	Newfoundland and Labrador
2011	— <sup>1</sup>	Quebec
2012	No absences	No absences
2013	Nunavut <sup>2</sup>	No absences
2014	— <sup>3</sup>	No absences
2015	Alberta <sup>4</sup>	— <sup>4</sup>
2016	No absences	No absences
2017	— <sup>5</sup>	British Columbia

Source: Calculations by the author based on the Council of the Federation website (<http://www.canadaspremiers.ca/meetings-and-events/>).

<sup>1</sup> Attendance records not available.

<sup>2</sup> Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador and Yukon joined via conference call.

<sup>3</sup> No meeting held.

<sup>4</sup> Saskatchewan joined via conference call.

<sup>5</sup> Quebec joined via conference call.

all provincial governments and signals the importance of CoF to national unity. CoF’s focus on internal consensus-building has its advantages, in this sense; while comparatively weaker in terms of influencing the national media and federal government, CoF has forged stronger, longer-term ties among premiers across a wider range of national issues. Public posturing between meetings notwithstanding, heated conflicts have historically been contained within the walls of CoF. Or premiers may opt not to attend a particular meeting in person, to avoid the short-term conflict. This can lead to high-level, even vapid, commitments to “work together” or “strike (another) working group,” which fail to capture the media’s attention; but such commitments do keep more premiers at the table to continue expanding consensus and developing pointier positions.

Of course, CoF is not always able to contain fractious debates among its members. Internal trade and environmental disputes between Alberta and British Columbia (over pipelines) and between Alberta and Saskatchewan (over government procurement) have resulted in boycotts, threats of retaliation and promises to challenge opponents in court or before domestic trade tribunals. Alberta’s dispute with BC has also drawn the federal government into the fray, with Alberta demanding that the Prime Minister declare the building of the Trans Mountain Pipeline in the national interest.

These tensions have peaked between regular meetings of CoF, raising important questions about the body’s ability to generate consensus at its 2018 summer

meeting. Whether issues such as the Alberta-BC disagreement appear on the agenda of the New Brunswick meeting and, if so, whether all premiers attend, will be key signals as to CoF's strength as a consensus-building body.

The same cannot be said of major policy debates in the United States, particularly in the polarized environment of the Trump presidency. The NGA has managed to forge consensus on issues such as the importance of NAFTA and a path forward for addressing opioid abuse; yet it has remained conspicuously silent or vague on many other areas of national policy-making.

In this context, narrowing CoF's agenda and building more room for political and permanent secretariat staff would certainly strengthen CoF's external agenda-setting function, but it could also draw resources and emphasis away from CoF's area of strength: its ability to build deeper and broader consensus among provinces and territories, itself a main objective in the council's founding agreement. In sum, while internal agenda formation is a prerequisite for effective national agenda-setting, both IGCs have value and serve important functions in coordinating federalism in Canada and the United States.

## Conclusion

In sum, premiers and governors cannot influence, let alone drive, the national agenda if they cannot formulate their internal agendas and promote them effectively.

IN SUM, PREMIERS AND GOVERNORS CANNOT INFLUENCE, let alone drive, the national agenda if they cannot formulate internal agendas and promote them effectively. The foregoing comparative analysis has illustrated the extent to which relatively weak institutionalization combined with diverse sets of jurisdictional interests have divided Canada's premiers, resulting in bloated internal agendas with many priorities, few common positions and even rarer unity on strategy and tactics in dealing with the national media and federal government. The deep division of American governors along party lines, which has narrowed the number of issues on which governors could find common ideological ground, and a robust institutional structure have resulted in a more focused internal agenda at the NGA table, with far fewer topics up for discussion from year to year. Consequently, governors have had greater opportunity to develop short-term strategy and tactics and have had full-time, dedicated communications and political staff to pursue them. These differences help to explain why the governors have proven more successful at influencing the national agenda in the United States than the premiers in Canada.

Armed with these findings, critics of CoF may urge provincial and territorial officials to adopt NGA-style institutions. Borrowing from the NGA's practice

of visiting Washington once a year, CoF could hold its summer meetings in Ottawa to boost visibility and perhaps spur an annual meeting with the prime minister. Or CoF could hire full-time, permanent staff to engage the media and the federal government. In separate interviews, Coyle<sup>73</sup> and Benzie<sup>74</sup> noted that having a communications office could assist premiers with “selling themselves” and “raising their profile” on the national stage. Those are two feasible, short-term options.

The trade-offs involved must be kept in mind, however. Moving CoF’s summer meetings to Ottawa would mark a substantive change to the organization’s DNA. The option was present at CoF’s inception and has been raised from time to time by jurisdictions eager to engage the prime minister and national press gallery. Indeed, a federal government respondent confirmed that — combined with the lack of an autonomous and well-resourced secretariat — the rotating chair practice makes it more difficult to build stable, forward-looking relationships between CoF and the Government of Canada.<sup>75</sup>

Yet premiers have opted to keep the meetings rotating from province to province and have even hosted them in smaller urban and rural centres as a means of showcasing the uniqueness of certain regions and demonstrating the strength of the institution through its diversity. The approach has worked, according to journalists interviewed for this study. As Coyle<sup>76</sup> put it, CoF meetings being held throughout Canada constitute a “rolling seminar in the ongoing education of a reporter” when it comes to the unique interests and cultures of provinces and territories. This, in turn, helps promote a broader and deeper understanding of Canada’s regions in national news coverage.

Adding full-time, politically minded communications staff to the CoF bureaucracy could help premiers better market themselves on the national stage, but it would weaken the influence of the provinces’ IGR officials, whose day-to-day negotiations have helped generate broad-based consensus across a fairly wide array of policy areas.

Indeed, CoF’s primary strength has been in forging agreements among governments with varied political and economic interests. The media may not make much of accords like the Canadian Energy Strategy or the pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance (pCPA), as harmony tends to attract less attention than discord. Yet these two agreements did establish the foundation for ongoing, albeit tense, negotiations with the federal government on a national approach to climate change<sup>77</sup> and pharmaceutical purchasing (the federal government joined the pCPA in January 2016). Thus CoF’s groundwork may have failed to set the

The Council of the Federation appears more effective in its agenda-forming than its agenda-setting function.

Increasing the Council of the Federation's institutional capacity as an agenda setter might boost premiers' collective influence on national politics, but this could come at the expense of its ability to assuage disagreements among its members.

national agenda in the short term, while the remaining divisions continue to garner media attention.

This study adds to the debate among proponents and skeptics of greater institutionalization in Canadian IGR.<sup>78</sup> As it stands, CoF appears more effective in its agenda-forming than its agenda-setting function. When it comes to finding common priorities, positions, strategies and tactics among 13 jurisdictions, national English-language newspapers seldom convey CoF's successes to their readers; they prefer to highlight ongoing divisions and tensions. Moreover, the federal government has been slow (if not dismissive) in its response to premiers' policy demands.

This agenda-setting weakness is particularly evident when CoF's influence on the national stage is compared with that of its US counterpart, the NGA. Increasing CoF's institutional capacity as an agenda setter might boost premiers' collective influence on national politics, but this could come at the expense of its ability to assuage disagreements among its members. Enhancing the organization's political communications function would likely mean narrowing its internal agenda to a few priority issues most likely to garner media attention, particularly those involving conflict with the federal government. This, in turn, would mean sidelining issues of importance to certain premiers or offending those who support the federal government's approach. Would-be reformers should keep these trade-offs in mind when considering changes to the way CoF operates.

## Appendix A: Interviews

The following is a list of confidential phone interviews performed for this paper, arranged in random order. As many of the interviewees continue to work in the field, their names, positions and jurisdictions have been withheld at their request and to comply with the ethics protocol approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Roles listed reflect those most pertinent to the research at hand. Interviewees may or may not have held that position at the time of interview. Interview dates are included in year-month-day format.

- A: Provincial government intergovernmental relations official from Atlantic Canada (2017-11-02).
- B: Premier's office communications official from Western Canada (2017-11-21).
- C: Provincial government intergovernmental relations official from Western Canada (2017-10-23).
- D: Provincial government intergovernmental relations official from Central Canada (2017-11-08).
- E: Premier's office communications official from Central Canada (2017-11-01).
- F: Provincial government intergovernmental relations official from Atlantic Canada (2017-11-07).
- G: Premier's office communications official from Atlantic Canada (2017-11-08).
- H: Confidential intergovernmental relations official (2017-11-15).
- I: Confidential group interview, NGA officials (2018-03-19).
- J: Confidential Government of Canada intergovernmental relations official (2018-03-13).

Interviews were also conducted with the following journalists: Robert Benzie, *Toronto Star* (2018-02-08); and Jim Coyle, *Toronto Star* (2018-02-09).

## Notes

The author thanks Wilissa Reist and David Jones for research assistance, interviewees for their input and anonymous reviewers for their feedback. In the interests of transparency, the author discloses that he worked for five years (2011-2016) as a director of intergovernmental relations in a provincial government central agency. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study was submitted to, and approved by, the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. All content analysis was conducted by research assistants, with intercoder tests indicating over 80 percent reliability. All interview transcripts were provided to participants for review and verification, and member checks of this manuscript were obtained from participants willing to provide feedback on the findings and interpretations.

1. E. Collins, "Alternative Routes: Intergovernmental Relations in Canada and Australia," *Canadian Public Administration* 58, no. 4 (2015): 591-604.
2. G. Anderson and J. Gallagher, "Intergovernmental Relations in Canada and the United Kingdom," in *Constitutional Politics and the Territorial Question in Canada and the United Kingdom*, ed. M. Keating and G. Laforest (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1119-46.
3. C.S. Weissert, "The National Governors Association, 1908-1983," *State Government* 56 no. 2 (1983): 44-52.
4. J. P. Meekison, "The Annual Premiers' Conference: Forging a Common Front," in *Canada: State of the Federation 2002: Reconsidering the Institutions of Canadian Federalism*, ed. J.P. Meekison, H. Telford, and H. Lazar (Kingston: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, Queen's University, 2002), 141-82; M.A. Adam, J. Bergeron, and M. Bonnard, "Intergovernmental Relations in Canada: Competing Visions and Diverse Dynamics," in *Intergovernmental Relations in Federal Systems: Comparative Structures and Dynamics*, ed. J. Poirier, C. Saunders, and J. Kincaid (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2015), 135-73.
5. But see E. Collins, *Coming into Its Own? Canada's Council of the Federation, 2003-16*, IRPP Insight 15 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2017).
6. N. Behnke and S. Mueller, "The Purpose of Intergovernmental Councils: A Framework for Analysis and Comparison," *Regional and Federal Studies* 27, no. 5 (2017): 507-27.
7. Following the lead of scholars such as Abbott and Snidal, the present study views IGCs through a combination of functionalist, rationalist and constructivist lenses; K.W. Abbott and D. Snidal, "Why States Act through Formal International Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 1 (1998): 3-32. As Guzman suggests, IGCs "engage in action intended to achieve some specific objective such as the elimination of disease; they provide a forum for negotiation among states and a platform from which states themselves can speak (as distinct from the organization speaking); the organization itself sometimes speaks in ways intended to have influence; and they provide a formal dispute resolution system"; A. Guzman, "International Organizations and the Frankenstein Problem," *The European Journal of International Law* 24, no. 4 (2013): 999-1025. Much like international organizations, states use IGCs "to create information, ideas, norms, and expectations; to carry out and encourage specific activities; to legitimate or delegitimize particular ideas and practices; and to enhance their capacities and power" (Abbott and Snidal, "Why States Act," 8).
8. Abbott and Snidal, "Why States Act."
9. Council of the Federation founding agreement.

10. Emphasis added. The remaining three objectives include: “a) strengthening interprovincial-territorial co-operation, forging closer ties between the members and contributing to the evolution of the Canadian federation;...c) promoting relations between governments which are based on respect for the constitution and recognition of the diversity within the federation; and d) working with the greatest respect for transparency and better communication with Canadians” (Council of the Federation founding agreement, 1).
11. Emphasis added. Council of the Federation founding agreement.
12. Emphasis added. National Governors Association, NGA, *About* (accessed December 20, 2017) <https://www.nga.org/cms/about>.
13. S. Princen, “Agenda-Setting in the European Union: A Theoretical Exploration and Agenda for Research,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 14, no. 1 (2007): 21-38; S. Princen, “Agenda-Setting Strategies in EU Policy Processes,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 18, no. 7 (2011): 927-43.
14. Princen, “Agenda-Setting in the European Union.”
15. S.N. Soroka, *Agenda-Setting Dynamics in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).
16. Due to a lack of data, this comparative analysis does not examine the relationship between IGC agendas and the so-called public agenda. The latter is typically measured through national public opinion polls, particularly through the “most important issue” (MIP) reported by respondents. MIP data are readily available in the United States through quarterly Gallup polls. While election-period data are available through the Canadian Election Study, no interelection MIP data are available in Canada (let alone the granular, quarterly data required to assess correlations between IGC and public agendas). A future US-focused study is warranted in this regard, as is a forward-looking analysis using MIP surveys in Canada.
17. This research was approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Extensive efforts were made to conduct similar interviews with US federal government officials and journalists, but requests over several months went unanswered.
18. Only substantive news releases were coded. Those pertaining to meeting logistics were not included.
19. CoF winter meetings tend to be more operational, focusing largely on interim updates on working group activities and emerging issues, while NGA summer meetings are focused on state-to-state collaboration, rather than federal engagement. For these reasons they have been excluded from analysis. Special meetings of CoF, outside the summer/winter schedule, were also excluded for consistency.
20. New codes were added to this codebook, based on the following issue areas: public service, Northern issues and citizen engagement. Subcodes were added to the Indigenous issues topic, detailing reconciliation, violence against Indigenous women and girls, Indigenous children in care, Indigenous economic development, Indigenous health and Indigenous accessibility, cooperation and duty to consult. Soroka’s codebook was, in turn, based on the Policy Agendas Project approach.
21. Interview I.
22. NGA articles were found using the keywords *National Governors Association*, *winter* and *meeting*. CoF articles were found using *Council of the Federation*, *summer* and *meeting*. Future research will examine CoF coverage in French-language media.
23. Benzie interview, 2018.
24. Interview E.
25. Benzie interview, 2018; Coyle interview, 2018.
26. Benzie interview, 2018.

27. J. Simpson, "The Mystery of the Premiers' Annual Gabfest," *Globe and Mail*, August 29, 2007.
28. J. Coyle, "Native Leaders Want Action, Not Talk," *Toronto Star*, August 10, 2009.
29. M.R. Cohn, "Plenty of Talk, Plenty of Wine, but Where's the Substance," *Toronto Star*, July 26, 2013.
30. R. Pear, "At Governors' Meeting, A Vice Presidential Buzz." *New York Times*, February 25, 2008.
31. Also, it is important to keep in mind that coverage of each IGC was dominated by a small number of print journalists, who have approached their craft from unique perspectives. Together, *Toronto Star* contributors Jim Coyle (five stories) and Robert Benzie (eight stories) wrote over one-third of the national stories on CoF summer meetings between 2007 and 2017. Dan Balz (8) and Robert Pear (14) combined to contribute a comparable proportion of NGA winter meeting coverage over the same time period. The fact that Benzie and Pear overwhelmingly preferred policy stories and Coyle process stories helps to explain some of the tilt in these findings. If different writers had been assigned to the IGC beat, these findings might well have been different.
32. I. Budge, H.D. Klingemann, A. Volkens, J. Bara, and E. Tanenbaum, eds., *Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors, and Governments, 1945-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
33. C. Dunn, *Harper without Jeers, Trudeau without Cheers: Assessing 10 Years of Intergovernmental Relations*, IRPP Insight 8 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2016).
34. Anderson and Gallagher, "Intergovernmental Relations," 35.
35. D. Lowery, V. Gray, and F.R. Baumgartner, "Policy Attention in State and Nation: Is Anyone Listening to the Laboratories of Democracy?" *Publius* 41, no. 2 (2011): 286-310.
36. Interview C.
37. Interview G.
38. Interview H.
39. Interview B.
40. C. Hebert, "Premiers Running Out of Excuses for Inaction," *Toronto Star*, August 26, 2014.
41. Collins, "Coming into Its Own?"
42. As Collins ("Coming into Its Own?") reports, premiers successfully developed a joint purchasing strategy for pharmaceutical drugs. As of mid-2016, it had saved governments \$712 million.
43. Interview C.
44. Interview B.
45. Interview F.
46. Interview G.
47. Interview H.
48. Interview F.
49. Interview B.
50. One exception was the 2012 dispute between Alberta Premier Alison Redford and BC Premier Christy Clark, which several officials reported as casting a pall over the summer meeting in Halifax. Most other disagreements were either overblown in the media or resolved by one of the premiers simply not showing up at the meeting.
51. D. Thomas, *Whistling Past the Graveyard: Constitutional Abeyances, Quebec, and the*

- Future of Canada* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1997).
52. Benzie interview, 2018; Coyle interview, 2018.
  53. Interview D.
  54. Interview H.
  55. Interview H.
  56. Interview I; M.N. Herian, *Governing the States and the Nation* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).
  57. Interview B.
  58. Interview E.
  59. Interview B.
  60. Interview G.
  61. Interview C.
  62. Interview D; Interview F; Interview G.
  63. J. Coyle, "BC Premier Wants Olympic Efforts," *Toronto Star*, August 6, 2010.
  64. Interview A.
  65. Interview C.
  66. Interview J.
  67. Interview D; Interview G.
  68. Interview I.
  69. Interview I.
  70. A.O.M. Bowman, "Intergovernmental Councils in the United States," *Regional and Federal Studies* 27, no. 5 (2017): 623-43.
  71. While they may not register for the NGA meeting itself, governors often attend the Governors' Ball (Interview I).
  72. Considered by many to be an occasion to check in on initiatives launched at summer meetings, CoF winter gatherings have typically had fewer premiers around the table, with some choosing to join the discussion via teleconference. Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall attended three meetings this way between 2013 and 2015, publicly citing travel budget constraints and the lack of meeting substance as his reasons. In winter 2015, Alberta Premier Jim Prentice sent his Municipal Affairs minister in his place, stating that his presence was required at home to formulate his government's first budget. Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak was on the campaign trail when she skipped the 2013 fall CoF meeting.
  73. Coyle interview, 2018.
  74. Benzie interview, 2018.
  75. Interview J.
  76. Coyle interview, 2018.
  77. T. Snoddon and D. VanNijnatten, *Carbon Pricing and Intergovernmental Relations in Canada*, IRPP Insight 12 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2016).
  78. See Adam, Bergeron and Bonnard, "Intergovernmental Relations in Canada."



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