

## **COVID-19 changed everything, except Canada's values of inclusiveness**

*While populists around the world have used the pandemic's many upheavals to sow fears against newcomers, Canada might never have been more sure of its broadly welcoming spirit than now*

By Michael Adams

Published in [The Globe and Mail](#) on January 2, 2021.

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What a year. A global pandemic has brought not only illness and death but also brutal economic fallout. It has also starkly illuminated frailties in our systems – from precarious working conditions for care workers to an inadequate supply of affordable housing. There have been sweeping protests for racial justice in both the United States and Canada, and clashes over Indigenous rights from British Columbia to Nova Scotia. And in the background, the anxieties over economic inequality and climate change persist.

Like societies around the world, Canada is under exceptional stress. Over the past several years, we have seen segments of many countries respond to economic pressures and cultural anxieties by turning inward: showing hostility to people different from themselves or toward the vulnerable.

Some people have become nostalgic, longing for a simpler past – perhaps one in which their status and privileges were beyond question. Some of the players promising to restore past glories have emerged in the past decade: the Brexit movement, Donald Trump, Lega Nord in Italy. Others, including France's National Rally and Hungary's Fidesz, are older but gathering new strength.

As Canada contends with higher unemployment, social isolation and fears about the future, are Canadians also going to be drawn to messages that blame “the other”? Do we risk seeing a growing hostility to immigrants, to minority groups or to voices of dissent such as those of environmental activists?

In research conducted throughout this year – and well into the pandemic and its economic fallout – we've found the answer: a resounding no.

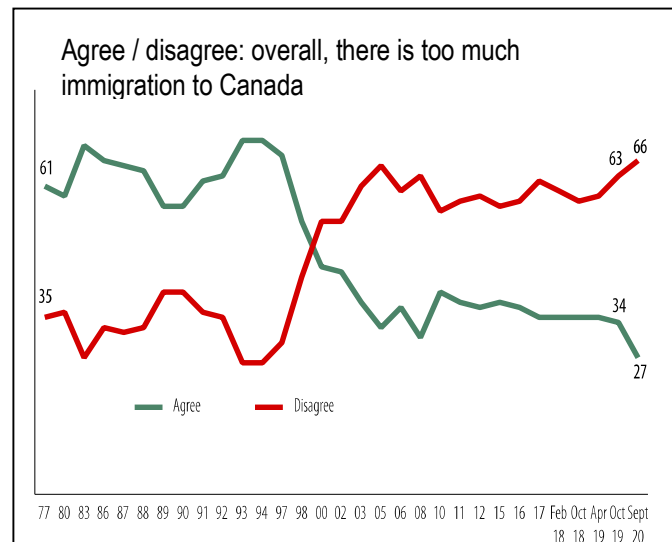
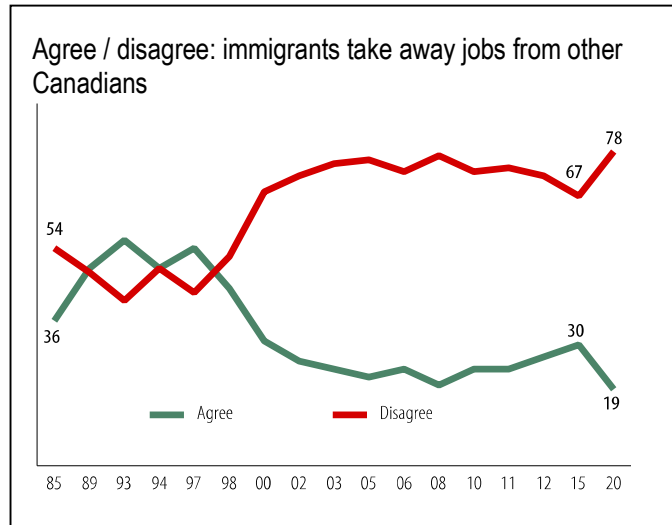
Amid the upheavals of 2020, pre-existing trends toward openness and inclusion have continued, not rolled back. Did Canadians grow more fearful of immigrants “taking their jobs” as unemployment rose? No: Strong and increasing majorities of Canadians express comfort with current immigration levels, and see immigrants as good for the Canadian economy, not as threats.

Did Canadians become more persuaded that the arrival of newcomers would threaten their culture and harm the social fabric? No: By a 5-to-1 margin, the public continues to believe immigration makes Canada a better country, not a worse one, and they are most likely to say this is because welcoming newcomers makes for a more diverse and multicultural place in which to live. Indeed, Canadians are now more accepting of immigrants than we've seen in four decades of our polling.

Canadians' ease with this country's comparatively high levels of immigration does not mean that Canada is free of racism or xenophobia. This year has offered no shortage of evidence – sometimes even in the form of disturbing videos of abuse posted online for all to see – that anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism and other forms of discrimination remain live issues. Throughout 2020, thousands of Black Canadians, Indigenous peoples and their allies protested against police violence, inequality and systemic racism in Canada.

As Canadians have learned more about these experiences, their attitudes have been changing – not toward more denial, but to greater empathy. There has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of Canadians who claim that racism is no longer a problem in Canada. The proportion who believe that racial and ethnic minorities should “take more responsibility for solving their own problems” has been falling steadily since the mid-1980s, and for the first time in our polling history, it is below 50 per cent.

Today, Canadians who identify as white and those who are racialized are equally likely to agree that “it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in Canadian society.” Canadians are also more likely to believe their governments have not gone far enough – as opposed to having gone too far – in terms of advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples; this view was stronger in late 2020 than it was in January.

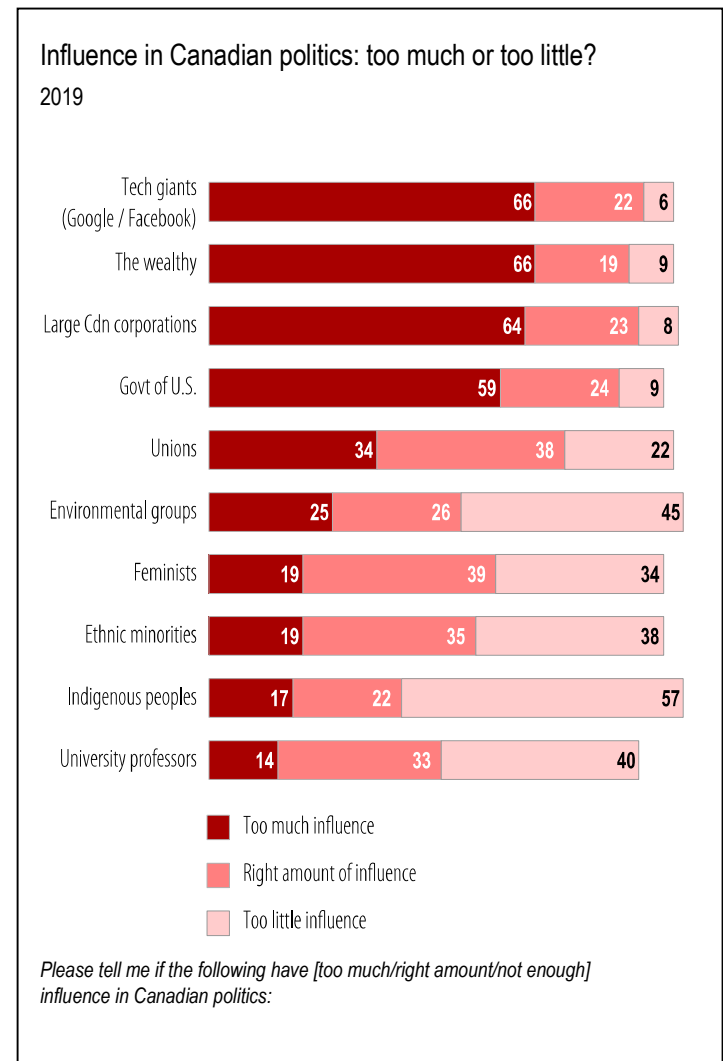
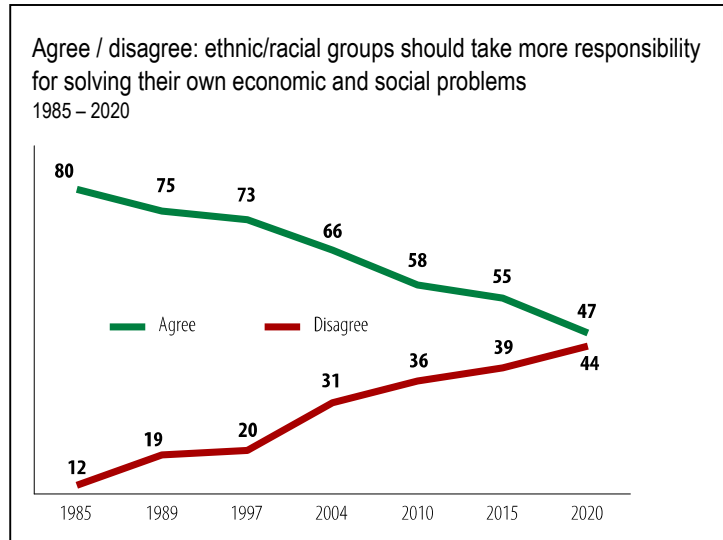


In sum, at a time when many are economically fearful, most Canadians are not blaming immigrants or minorities for their troubles. And instead of becoming more impatient with claims of racism and discrimination as they manage their own stresses, Canadians are increasingly convinced of the seriousness of systemic inequities and sympathetic to the efforts of those who are working to redress them.

All of this makes Canada a difficult place for politicians selling a message of xenophobic populism, as Maxime Bernier learned in the most recent federal election, when his People’s Party failed to earn a single seat, including his own. Populism is a difficult concept to pin down, but the kind of populism emerging in many societies today is fuelled by an idea of forgotten “little guys” as the only true citizens.

The proposition of these populists is that ordinary people and their culture are under threat from hostile outsiders: foreigners who aren’t “real” Americans/Britons/Hungarians, and “elites” whose ability to set the rules of the game make it impossible for the will of the people to prevail. The elite group includes not only government bureaucrats but also judges, scientists, university professors and the media – anyone who claims that they might know better than ordinary folks.

Dismissiveness of the concerns of minority groups is a hallmark of the current strain of xenophobic populism. Anyone who claims to be discriminated against, harmed or offended by Mr. Trump’s policies or language is dismissed as a snowflake, loser



or thug – not worth listening to, by these new definitions. (The famously thin skin of the movement’s “tough guy” is ironic in the extreme.)

We’ve already seen that Canadians are becoming more – not less – sympathetic to claims of racism in this country. And if social problems such as racism are real, then who should have the power to change society?

Last year, we asked Canadians who has too much and too little influence over politics; their answers were revealing. It’s no shock that Canadians are most likely to think that the wealthy and large corporations have too much influence in Canadian politics.

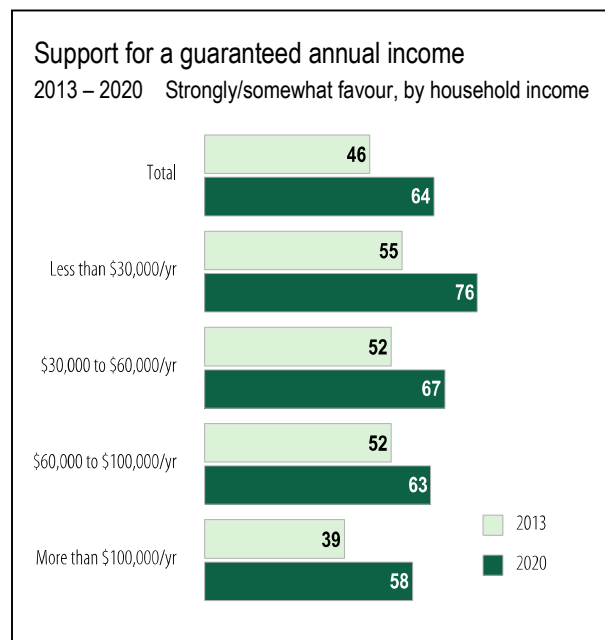
More surprising are public attitudes on who has too little influence. Environmental groups, feminists, ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples and even university professors are all groups that are more likely to be seen as having too little influence in Canadian politics, rather than too much. These groups don’t enjoy universal support, but nor are they seen by most Canadians as usurping the will of ordinary people or “real” Canadians.

Not only do most Canadians refrain from pointing their fingers at minority interests as the cause of their troubles, they go further, agreeing that minority interests are Canadian interests, and they deserve a greater share of power.

Canadians are also increasingly sympathetic to vulnerable groups such as people with low incomes.

While economic stress in some contexts provokes people to become more dismissive of others’ calls for support – giving rise to statements such as, “Everyone’s got problems” – support is growing in Canada for the idea of a basic income.

Although that specific policy may not win the day, support for the principle suggests Canadians are growing more interested in a backstop for those at risk of being left behind.



Are Canadians more virtuous than other people? Are we uniquely equipped to embrace strangers with kindness and receive criticism with wisdom? Of course not. But a host of factors have conspired to create a cultural and a political landscape where xenophobic populism and hostility to minority groups have struggled to gain mainstream support.

One factor is who Canadians are and where we live. More than a fifth of us are immigrants, and the proportions of immigrants in cities – where most Canadians live – are much higher.

To win federally, political parties must win plenty of votes in big, diverse cities with lots of immigrants (and lots of so-called “visible minorities,” who are now in the majority in Toronto, the country’s largest city). Plus, our first-past-the-post electoral system makes it difficult for extreme ideological positions to

gain traction in Parliament; a proportional representation system might well have given Mr. Bernier's People's Party a seat or two, instead of shutting him out of the House of Commons.

Our history plays a role, too. A culture of compromise between French and English became foundational to Canada's political practice (unfolding, to be sure, against a backdrop of colonial violence). And our geography matters: Our only land border is with the United States, which since the Civil War has tended to attract immigrants, not send large numbers of people fleeing beyond its borders.

As a result, immigrants and even refugees to Canada have generally arrived according to rules we have set (our own immigration policies) or agreed to (refugee conventions). Canadians have controlled who comes in, and have seen the extensive benefits of welcoming talented, motivated people from around the world.

Economic factors are also worth noting. The federal government redistributes resources with the aim of ensuring that all Canadians enjoy comparable levels of public services. There is near universal consensus that this matters: Nine in 10 Canadians agree that all Canadians should have access to high-quality public services such as health care and education, regardless of where in the country they live. This ideology shapes our political culture.

For all the economic fears COVID-19 has brought – and all the unevenness of its effects on people with different work and financial circumstances – there has been a shared understanding across the country, contested by very few mainstream voices, that government redistribution should help cushion the blows.

And what about that government? What about democracy itself? If Canadians are not pointing fingers at foreigners or racial minorities, are they perhaps saving their rage for the governing elite? That doesn't seem to be the case.

Large majorities of Canadians continue to express support for and satisfaction with democracy in Canada and with the country's political system. Most Canadians have at least some trust in the institutions of government. Notably, in Canada, there is now no significant difference between those on the left and those on the right in their level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country. Again, bucking trends in other countries, we have become less, and not more, polarized.

Perhaps Canadians recognize that, in the grand scheme, at this trying moment in history, most of us have a lot to be grateful for. We live in a peaceful country whose institutions, however flawed, are among the more responsive and accountable anywhere. This is not lost on younger generations of Canadians, who now have more optimism, more belief in their power as citizens and are more politically active than their older counterparts, according to our polling.

All this good news may be cloying to those moved by the many injustices in our country. Their keen focus on the gap between what we are and what we should be is what keeps the country moving forward – and cautions us all against complacency.

If COVID-19 has revealed some strengths along with our weaknesses, it's worth remembering that advantages can be squandered: Scandals involving relief spending, a botched vaccine rollout or any number of mistakes could begin to chip away at Canadians' faith in their rules, norms, institutions and fellow citizens.

Nevertheless, the trends and attitudes described here are not blips. They are signs that under the stresses of a gruelling year, Canadians have only deepened their belief in the ideas they embraced in calmer times. Fairness and inclusion are not ubiquitous and there are lots of exceptions – historical and contemporary, in our laws and on our streets. But nor are they easily dismissed. They are aspects of an open, optimistic national personality that continues to gain strength, in good times and, we now know, even during a pandemic. And that, at least, should make for a happy new year.