

**Confederation
of Tomorrow**
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

**Provincial Identity and
Autonomy**

April 2022

**Environics
Institute**
For Survey Research

**Confederation
of Tomorrow**
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

**La Confédération
de demain**
MENÉ AUPRÈS DES CANADIENS

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys are annual studies conducted by an association of the country's leading public policy and social research organizations: the Environics Institute for Survey Research, the Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation, the Canada West Foundation, the Centre D'Analyse Politique – Constitution et Fédéralisme, and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. The surveys give voice to Canadians about the major issues shaping the future of the federation and their political communities. The 2022 study consists of a survey of 5,461 adults, conducted online in the provinces between January 18 and February 10; and by telephone in the territories between January 6 and 30. For more information about the survey, contact info@environicsinstitute.org.

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Executive summary

The Confederation of Tomorrow survey tracks the views of Canadians in all 13 provinces and territories on questions related both to the division of powers within the federation, and to identity. The survey finds that Canadians are relatively comfortable with their decentralized federation, as few seek a transfer of powers from their provincial or territorial government to the federal government. At the same time, only about one in five Canadians would like to see their province do more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada. Almost as many say their province should be doing less to achieve this goal, while a plurality prefers no change. As expected, in Quebec, there is a significant difference in views between supporters of the more nationalist government and the supporters of more federalist opposition. In Saskatchewan and Alberta, however, there is also a significant difference – in this case, between supporters of each province’s conservative-leaning government, and supporters of the NDP opposition.

The survey also shows that a majority of Canadians agree that their province or territory has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada. Canadians in the three territories are much more likely than those in the provinces to hold this view. Additionally, as in previous years, most Canadians see themselves as at least partly a Canadian and at least partly someone from their province (if not both equally). The proportion identifying as a Canadian first or only has risen in Newfoundland and Labrador, P.E.I. and Alberta; while the proportion identifying with their province first or only has declined in Quebec (among francophones). These findings suggest that, in provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan and Alberta, the persistence of grievances with the way federalism is working has not had the effect in recent years of weakening the Canadian identity or reinforcing provincial identities.

Sommaire

Le sondage sur la Confédération de demain se penche sur les points de vue des Canadiennes et des Canadiens des 13 provinces et territoires sur des questions liées à la répartition des pouvoirs avec la fédération et à l'identité. Le sondage a révélé que les Canadiennes et Canadiens sont plutôt à l'aise avec leur fédération décentralisée, relativement peu d'entre eux se disant en faveur d'un transfert des pouvoirs de leur gouvernement provincial ou territorial vers le gouvernement fédéral. En même temps, seulement environ une personne sur cinq au Canada souhaiterait voir sa province en faire plus pour développer une identité distincte de celle du reste du Canada. Presque la même proportion de personnes sont d'avis que leur province devrait en faire moins pour atteindre cet objectif, alors qu'une majorité relative de personnes préfèrent qu'aucun changement ne soit apporté. Comme prévu, au Québec, il existe un écart important des points de vue entre les personnes qui appuient un gouvernement plus nationaliste et les personnes qui appuient une opposition plus fédéraliste. En Saskatchewan et en Alberta, cependant, il existe aussi un écart significatif – cette fois, entre les personnes qui appuient le gouvernement conservateur dans chaque province et les personnes qui appuient l'opposition du NPD.

Le sondage a aussi démontré qu'une majorité de Canadiennes et de Canadiens sont d'accord pour dire que leur province ou leur territoire possède une culture distincte qui est souvent incomprise par les personnes qui vivent dans le reste du Canada. Les Canadiennes et les Canadiens des trois territoires sont beaucoup plus susceptibles d'avoir ce point de vue que ceux et celles des provinces. De plus, comme dans les années précédentes, la plupart des Canadiennes et des Canadiens s'identifient au moins en partie au pays et au moins en partie à leur province (ou aux deux également, dans certains cas). La proportion de personnes qui s'identifient d'abord ou uniquement comme Canadienne ou Canadien a augmenté à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, à l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard et en Alberta, alors que la proportion de personnes qui s'identifient d'abord ou seulement à leur province a diminué parmi les francophones québécois. Ces conclusions laissent croire que, dans les provinces comme Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, la Saskatchewan et l'Alberta, la persistance des doléances envers la façon dont le fédéralisme fonctionne n'a pas eu comme effet d'affaiblir l'identité canadienne ou de renforcer les identités provinciales au cours des dernières années.

Background

Canada is recognized as one of the most [decentralized federations](#) in the world. Yet provincial governments often express frustration at the limits on their powers. For example, in the autumn of 2021, the premier of Saskatchewan called for his province to become more autonomous, not only in terms of its powers, but also its identity. [He argued that](#) Saskatchewan “needs to be a nation within a nation,” and follow Quebec’s model by expanding both its powers and its sense of distinctiveness.

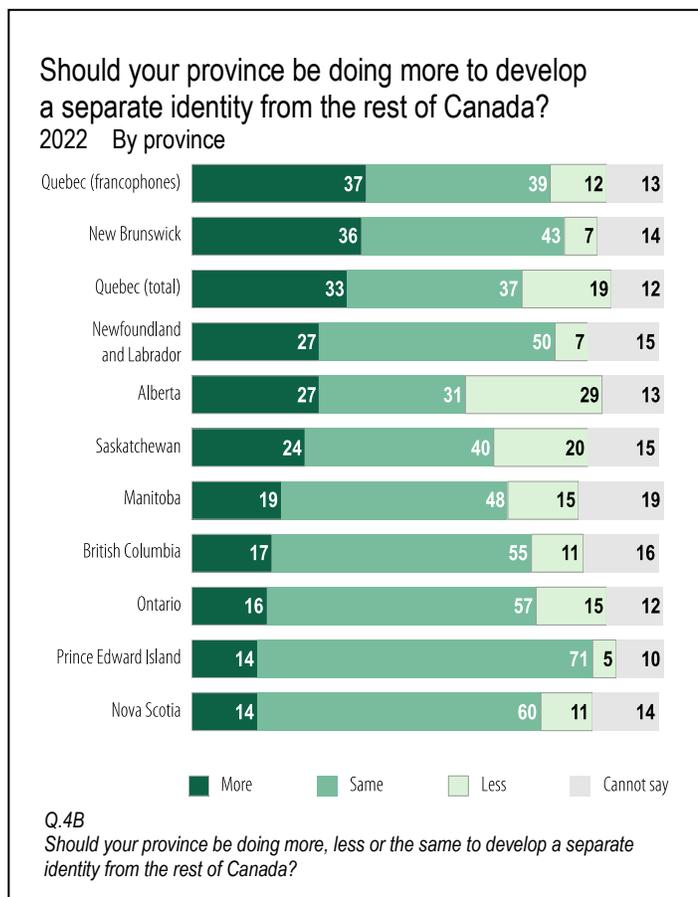
The Confederation of Tomorrow Survey of Canadians tracks the views of residents in all 13 provinces and territories on questions related both to the division of powers within the federation, and to identity. It provides information on whether support is growing for a more centralized or decentralized federation, and on the similarities or differences in views across regions.

Separate provincial identities

About one in five Canadians agree that their province should be doing more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada. Almost as many, however, say their province should be doing less to achieve this goal, while a plurality prefers no change.

Do Canadians want their province to do more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada?¹ In fact, the most popular option is the status quo. About one in two (48%) seek no change either way, and an additional 13 percent offer no opinion on the question. But about one in five (22%) agree that their province should be doing more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada. Almost as many (17%), however, lean in the opposite direction, saying their province should be doing less to achieve this goal.

There are notable differences in opinion

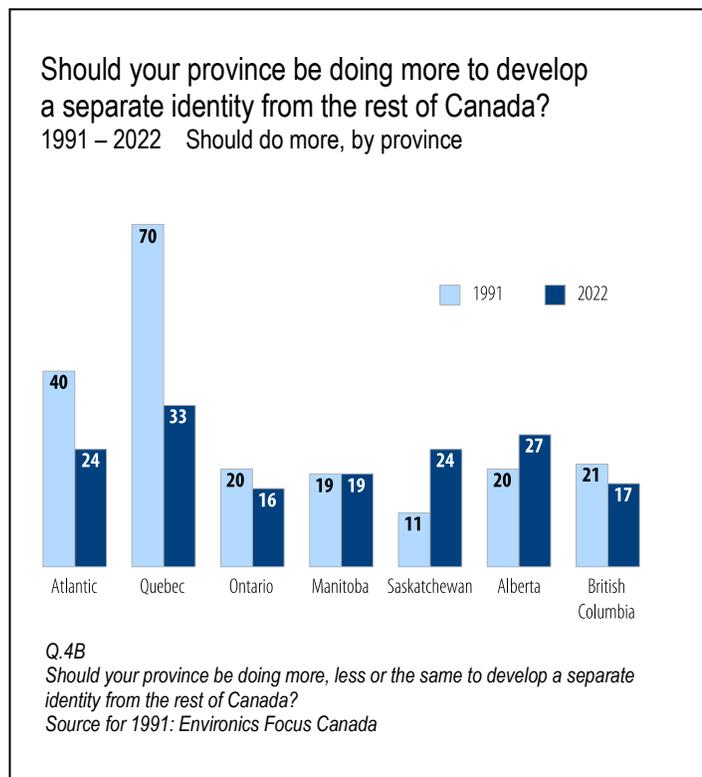


¹ This question was not asked in the territories.

across the country. In no province does a plurality favour doing more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada. But in two provinces – New Brunswick (36%) and Quebec (33%) – the proportion seeking greater distinctiveness reaches one in three. (Among Quebec francophones, the figure is slightly higher, at 37%). In three other provinces – Newfoundland and Labrador (27%), Alberta (27%) and Saskatchewan (24%) – about one in four say their province should be doing more. In the remaining five provinces (Manitoba, B.C., Ontario, P.E.I. and Nova Scotia), fewer than one in five hold this view.

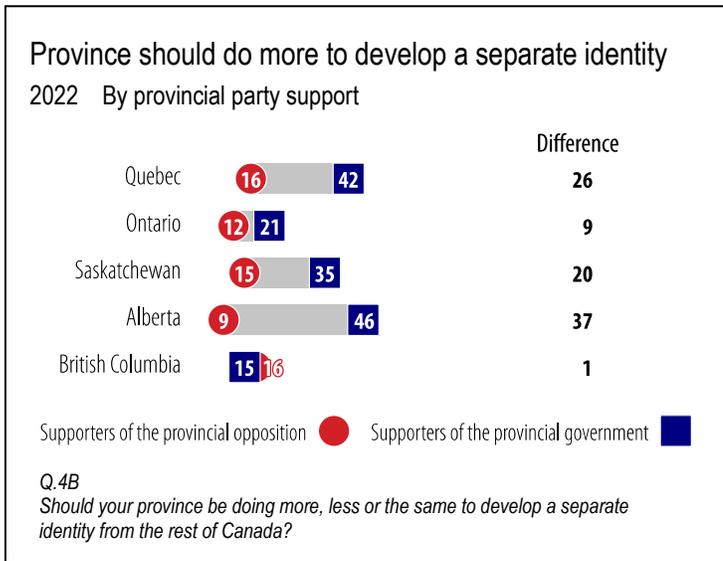
While Albertans are somewhat more likely than average to favour doing more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada, they are also the most likely to favour doing less: 29 percent of Albertans say their province should be doing less to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada (almost twice the proportion as in the rest of Canada (15%)).

There have been notable changes since this question was last asked, roughly 30 years ago. Most strikingly, in 1991, twice as many Quebecers as today said that their province should be doing more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada. This came in the wake of the constitutional crisis that followed the rejection of the Meech Lake Accord, and at a time when the sovereignty movement was gaining momentum. The fact that far fewer Quebecers today feel that more emphasis should be placed on developing their separate identity does not necessarily mean that such an identity is less important than it once was; it may be that many feel their distinctiveness is more secure than it was in the early 1990s, when the idea of Quebec as a “distinct society” – as recognized in the Meech Lake Accord – had just been rejected by other Canadians.



Atlantic Canadians are also significantly less likely today than in 1991 to say that their province should be doing more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada – though the change in this region is less dramatic than that found in Quebec. In Saskatchewan and Alberta, however, the proportion favouring this option has increased; in Saskatchewan, it is twice as high today (24%) as in 1991 (11%). While Saskatchewanians do not stand out today as being much more likely than the Canadian average to seek a more distinctive identity, they do stand out as being the most likely to have shifted their view in this direction since 1991.

The question of whether more emphasis should be placed on developing a separate provincial identity is more of a partisan political issue in some provinces than in others. In Quebec, as expected, there is a significant difference in views between supporters of the more nationalist Coalition Avenir Québec government and the supporters of more federalist Liberal opposition.² But in Ontario and B.C., the proportions of government and opposition supporters who favour doing more to develop their separate provincial identities are much smaller (or non-existent). In contrast, in Saskatchewan and Alberta, there is a significant difference between supporters of each province’s conservative-leaning government and supporters of the NDP opposition. Provinces differ from one another not only in the proportion of residents who favour doing more to develop a separate provincial identity, but in the extent of political polarization within the province on this issue.



² The difference between parties is even greater if the views of Parti Québécois supporters are taken into account. The proportion saying Quebec should do more to develop its separate identity ranges from 16 percent among supporters of the Quebec Liberal Party, to 38 percent among supporters of Québec Solidaire, 42 percent among CAQ supporters and 60 percent among PQ supporters.

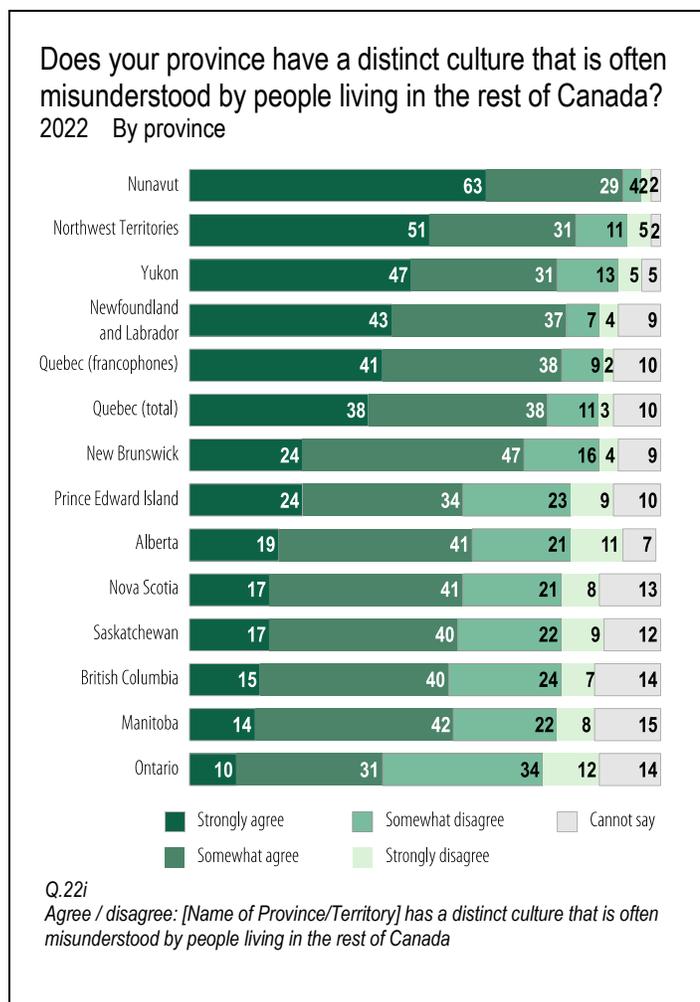
Being misunderstood by the rest of Canada

A majority of Canadians agree that their province or territory has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada. This sentiment is much more strongly expressed in the three territories than in the rest of Canada. Among provinces, agreement is highest in Newfoundland and Labrador, and Quebec.

Regardless of whether citizens feel that more should be done to develop their province’s distinct identity, many may wish that this identity was better understood by their neighbours in the rest of the country. This is in fact the case for a majority of Canadians: 56 percent strongly or somewhat agree that their province or territory has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada. One in three (32%) strongly or somewhat disagree, and 12 percent do not take a position.

Once again, opinions on this question vary considerably across the country. The region that stands out most is the North: Canadians in the three territories (53%) are much more likely than those in the provinces (20%) to *strongly* agree that they have a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada. (Combining those who strongly and somewhat agree, the figures are 83% in the territories, and 56% in the provinces.)

The two provinces where residents are most likely to strongly agree that they have a distinct culture that is often misunderstood are Newfoundland and Labrador (43%), and Quebec (38% – but 41% among francophones in the provinces). About one in four of those in New Brunswick (24%) and Prince Edward Island (24%) also hold this view. In the other six provinces, no more than one in five feel strongly that their province's culture is misunderstood.



Not surprisingly, there is a clear relationship between whether someone feels their province or territory has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada, and whether someone feels their province or territory is respected in Canada. One in two (50%) of those who strongly or somewhat agree that their province or territory is

misunderstood also say it does not get the respect it deserves; among those who do not feel misunderstood, only 29 percent also feel a lack of respect. The relationship is especially strong in the three Prairie provinces, where 71 percent of those who feel their province's distinct culture is often misunderstood also say it does not get the respect it deserves, compared to only 37 percent of those who do not feel misunderstood.

Those who agree that their province or territory has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada are also much more likely to say that their province or territory has less than its fair share of influence on important national decisions, and receives less than its fair share of federal spending. These findings suggest that there is a strong relationship in Canada between identity-based grievances about the way the country works, relating to recognition, and more transactional ones relating to the distribution of power or resources.

Canadian and provincial identities

The persistence of grievances with the way federalism is working in Canada in provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan and Alberta has not had the effect in recent years of weakening the Canadian identity or reinforcing provincial identities.

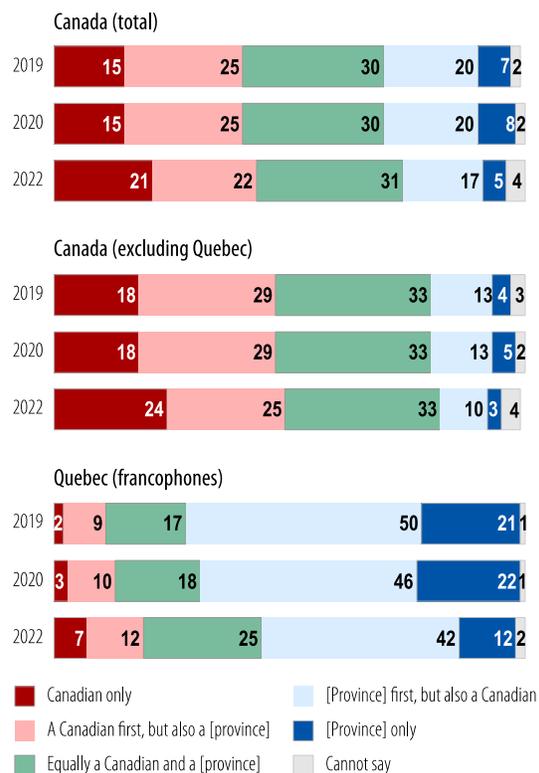
Most Canadians express a mix of Canadian and provincial identities. To explore this issue, the 2022 Confederation of Tomorrow survey asked whether Canadians consider themselves to be:³

- A Canadian only
- A Canadian first, but also a [someone from their province]⁴
- Equally a Canadian and a [someone from their province]
- A [someone from their province] first, but also a Canadian; or
- A [someone from their province] only

As in previous years, most Canadians see themselves as at least partly a Canadian and at least partly someone from their province (if not both equally): 70 percent chose one of these mixed categories, while only 26 percent identify as exclusively one or the other. This is the case both inside Quebec (where 79% of francophones express a mix of identities) and outside the province (68%).

In two provinces, however, the provincial identity predominates. In Quebec, among francophones, 55 percent say they are a Quebecer only, or a Quebecer first (but also a Canadian). In Newfoundland and Labrador, 44 percent identify with their province only or first. In the other eight provinces, residents are more likely to identify as Canadian only or first, than with their province only or first.

Identity: Canadian or other?
2022 Non-Indigenous respondents



Q.3a

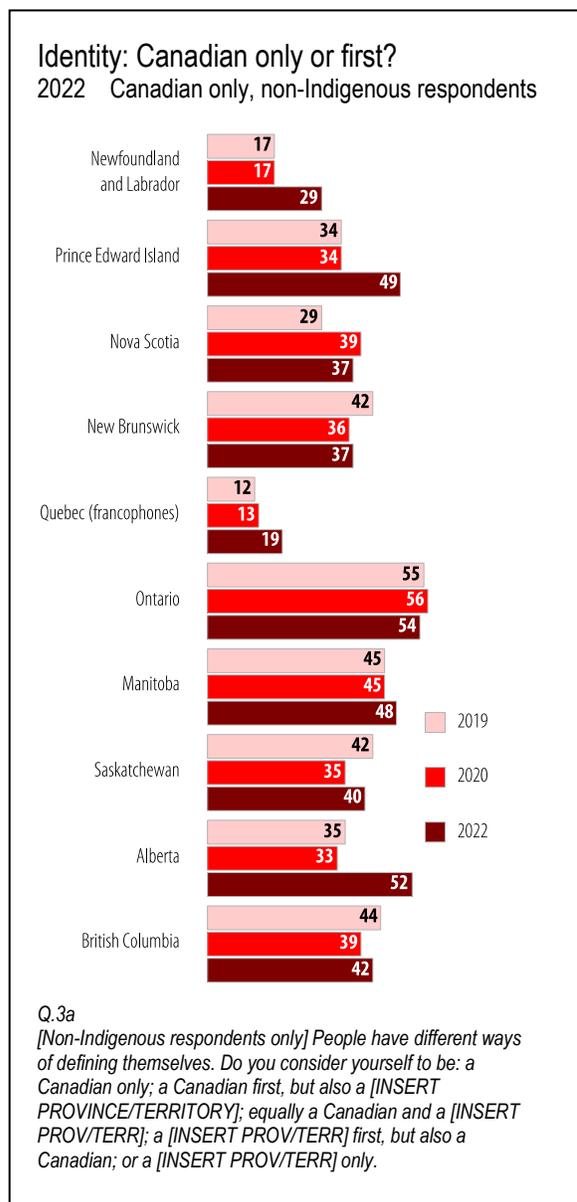
[Non-Indigenous respondents only] People have different ways of defining themselves. Do you consider yourself to be: a Canadian only; a Canadian first, but also a [INSERT PROVINCE/TERRITORY]; equally a Canadian and a [INSERT PROV/TERR]; a [INSERT PROV/TERR] first, but also a Canadian; or a [INSERT PROV/TERR] only.

³ This question was asked only to those who do not identify as Indigenous (and was not asked in the territories). A separate question was asked to Indigenous Peoples, and will be covered in a future report.

⁴ For example, an Albertan, an Ontarian, a Quebecer, etc.

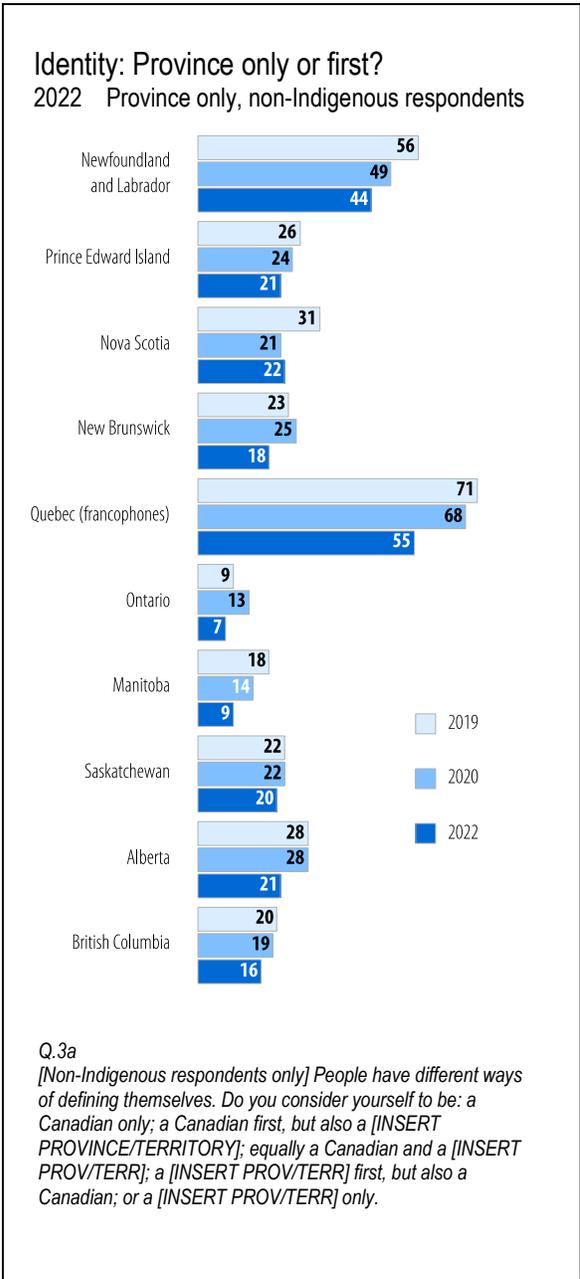
There is a clear relationship between whether people identify more with Canada or with their province, and the other survey questions about provincial identities, discussed earlier. Those who agree that their province has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada are more likely than those who disagree to identify only or first with their province. The same is true of those who want their province to do more to develop a separate identity, compared to those who want it to do less. Nonetheless, outside of Quebec, both those who agree that their province's culture is misunderstood, and those who want their province to do more to develop their separate provincial identity, nonetheless remain more likely to identify as Canadian only or first than as someone from their province only or first.

Generally speaking, the ways in which Canadians in different provinces identify themselves have remained stable over the past four years, with some exceptions. The proportion identifying as a Canadian first or only is notably *higher* today than in 2019 in Newfoundland and Labrador, P.E.I. and Alberta. The proportion identifying with their province first or only is notably *lower* today than in 2019 in Quebec (among francophones). In the other Western provinces outside of Alberta (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and B.C.), there has been little change.



It would appear, then, that the persistence of grievances with the way federalism is working in Canada in provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan and Alberta has not had the effect in recent years of weakening the Canadian identity or reinforcing provincial identities.

Two other, perhaps related, explanations are possible for some of the observed changes, at least in Quebec and Alberta. One is a polarizing effect of each of these provincial government’s attempts to position themselves as defenders of the provincial identity, which could be having a countervailing effect among the governments’ respective opponents. In Alberta, the shift toward the Canadian identity is much more pronounced among supporters of the opposition NDP than among those of the governing UCP; in Quebec, the shift away from the Quebec identity is much more pronounced among supporters of the opposition Québec Solidaire than among those of the governing CAQ. The second possible explanation is a reaction to each government’s response to the pandemic. In both provinces, disapproval of the provincial government’s management of the pandemic increased over the past year, at a time when the federal government has been gaining visibility through the provision of emergency benefits and the procurement of vaccines.⁵ It is possible that this had repercussions at the level of identity. Both of these possible explanations require further investigation.



⁵ The level of approval of the provincial government’s management of the pandemic is much higher in Quebec than in Alberta; but, in both provinces, approval declined between 2021 and 2022.

Federal and provincial powers

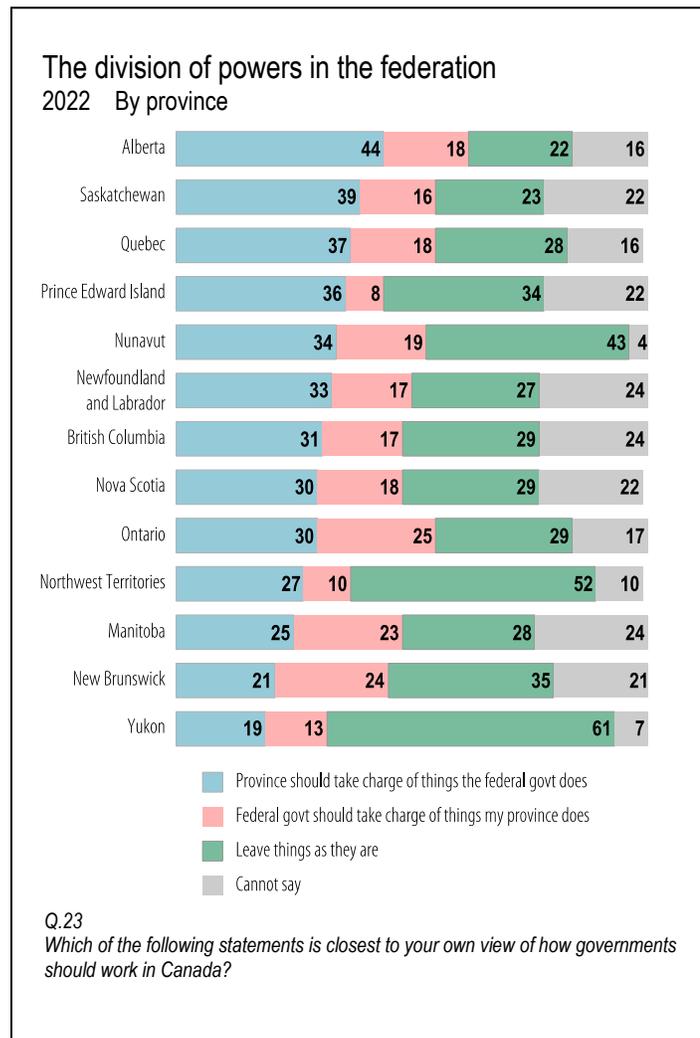
Canadians are relatively comfortable with their decentralized federation, as few would like the federal government to take charge of many of the things their provincial or territorial government does right now. Overall, preferences regarding the federal-provincial division of powers remained unchanged despite the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his remarks about the need for Saskatchewan to become a “nation within a nation,” the province’s premier referred not only to its identity, but to its powers relative to those of the federal government. Is there growing popular support for a shift of federal powers to the provinces?

Overall, Canadians are relatively comfortable with their decentralized federation: only one in five (21%) think the federal government should take charge of many of the things their provincial or territorial government does right now. Support for a shift in the other direction is higher: one in three (33%) prefer that the government of their province (or territory) take charge of many of the things the federal government does right now. Twenty-eight percent support the status quo, with no change either way, and 18 percent do not offer an opinion.

Support for the provincial or territorial government taking charge of many of the things the federal government does right now is highest in Alberta (44%), Saskatchewan (39%) and Quebec (37% – but 41% among francophones in the province). At least one in three also prefer this option in P.E.I. (36%), Nunavut (34%) and Newfoundland and Labrador (33%). Support for a shift in the opposite direction, with the federal government taking charge of many of the things their provincial or territorial government does right now, is highest in Ontario (25%), New Brunswick (24%) and Manitoba (23%).

Overall, when looking at the Canadian average, there has been little change in preferences over the past four years. In each year since 2019, about one in three have expressed a preference for



a shift in powers toward the provinces (or territories), and no more than one in five have favoured more powers for Ottawa. Given the experience of the pandemic, this stability is rather remarkable. [As reported in 2021](#), despite the need for the federal government to implement a range of emergency measures to deal with the crisis, “the pandemic has not prompted Canadians to rethink their preferences regarding the optimal division of powers in the federation.”

Underneath this overall pattern, however, there have been some changes in individual provinces and territories. Compared to last year, support for a shift of powers to the provinces has *increased* in several provinces, namely P.E.I. (by 14 points), Nova Scotia (by 7 points), and Alberta (by 7 points). Support for a shift of powers to the provinces has *declined* in Quebec (by 8 points) and Manitoba (by 8 points).

Conclusion

On questions related both to provincial identities and provincial powers, the weight of public opinion favours the status quo. Some (about one in five) want their province to do more to develop a separate identity from the rest of Canada. And slightly more (one in three) want their provincial government to take charge of many of the things the federal government does right now. But in each case, higher proportions favour no change or express no opinion.

There appears to have been little change in overall views over the short term (though in Quebec, interest in doing more to develop a separate identity is much lower today than it was at the time of the constitutional crisis of the early 1990s). But less visible at first are some partisan differences related to identity in some provinces. In the case of Quebec, these differences are familiar: identification with Canada and with Quebec naturally vary in the province depending on one’s views on federalism and sovereignty. In Alberta, there are signs of some polarization over identity, as supporters of the government and the opposition move further apart. This reinforces a more general finding from both the current and recent Confederation of Tomorrow surveys, which is that political divisions are often wider within Alberta, than between Alberta and the rest of Canada.