



**Confederation  
of Tomorrow**  
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

**Most Important Problem  
Facing Canadians Today**

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**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](mailto:info@environicsinstitute.org).

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# Executive summary

Since 2019, the Confederation of Tomorrow surveys have asked Canadians about the most important problem facing the country. This year, the survey also asked about the most important problem facing one's province or territory. Not surprisingly, at the start of 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be seen as the country's most important problem. Perceptions of the top issue, other than the pandemic, are distributed, across a number of items, including: the economy or unemployment; the cost of living or inflation; and poverty, inequality or affordable housing. The pandemic is also the issue that is most likely to be seen as the most important problem facing one's province or territory. But several other concerns attract more attention in some regions than in others. Health care stands out as a greater concern in the Maritimes, Quebec and Manitoba. Affordable housing is among the top concerns in the North, as well as in B.C. and P.E.I. Albertans remain more troubled than other Canadians both with the state of the economy and with poor government leadership. At the time of the survey, in mid-January 2022, the perceived loss of freedom resulting from requirements to be vaccinated or to wear masks to contain the spread of COVID-19 was mentioned by only three percent of Canadians as the most important problem facing the country. But this figure was much higher among those who voted for the People's Party of Canada in the 2021 federal election.

## Sommaire

Depuis 2019, les sondages sur la Confédération de demain interrogent les Canadiennes et les Canadiens au sujet du problème le plus important auquel le pays fait face. Cette année, le sondage comprenait également des questions concernant le problème le plus important auquel la province ou le territoire de la personne interrogée était confronté. Sans surprise, au début de 2022, la pandémie de COVID-19 continue d'être perçue comme le problème le plus important pour le pays. Outre la pandémie, de nombreux éléments sont perçus comme le problème le plus important, notamment l'économie ou le chômage; le coût de la vie ou l'inflation; et la pauvreté, l'inégalité ou le logement abordable. La pandémie est aussi le problème le plus susceptible d'être considéré comme celui qui est le plus important pour une province ou un territoire donné. Toutefois, plusieurs autres problèmes attirent plus d'attention dans certaines régions que dans d'autres. Les soins de santé se démarquent comme étant une préoccupation plus importante dans les Maritimes, au Québec et au Manitoba. Le logement abordable fait partie des principales préoccupations dans le Nord ainsi qu'en Colombie-Britannique et à l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard. Les Albertaines et Albertains demeurent plus préoccupés que les autres Canadiennes et Canadiens par la conjoncture économique et par le mauvais leadership du gouvernement. Au moment du sondage, à la mi-janvier 2022, le manque perçu de liberté découlant des exigences relatives à la vaccination ou au port du masque pour limiter la propagation de la COVID-19 a été mentionné par seulement trois pour cent des Canadiennes et des Canadiens comme étant le problème le plus important auquel le pays fait face. Ce chiffre était beaucoup plus élevé parmi les personnes qui ont voté pour le Parti populaire du Canada lors de l'élection fédérale de 2021.

# Background

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been Canadians' top preoccupation. But interest in other issues, such as climate change, the cost of living, or the quality of political leadership, has not completely disappeared. Moreover, there remain important differences across the country in the extent of public concern about both the pandemic and other issues. Highlighting these differences is an effective way of bringing into focus each region's distinctive political, economic and social circumstances.

Since 2019, the Confederation of Tomorrow surveys have tracked Canadians' concerns by asking them about the most important problem facing the country. This year (2022), the survey also asked about the most important problem facing one's province or territory. A comparison of the changes in responses over time, and of the differences in responses to the two questions, provides a detailed portrait of Canadians' priorities – both those that are broadly shared, and those that are particular to certain parts of the country.

The 2022 survey was conducted mainly in mid-January, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The information collected therefore does not capture the heightened concern about international peace and security that no doubt followed. The survey nonetheless serves to highlight the extent to which the other priorities of Canadians are shared, or vary from one region to another.

## Most important problem facing Canadians

*At the start of 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic remained the issue most likely to be mentioned as the most important one facing the country. But Canadians are less likely to mention the pandemic than they were a year ago.*

What is the most important problem facing Canadians today? Not surprisingly, at the start of 2022, the most common answer remained the COVID-19 pandemic. One in three (34%) mention the pandemic, more than three times the proportion that mention any other issue. However, fewer mention the pandemic in 2022 than in 2021, when the proportion reached one in two. (Note that this is an open-ended question, which means that survey participants answer in their own words, rather than selecting from a list of items; only one response is permitted.)

Perceptions of the top issue, other than the pandemic, are distributed across a number of items, including the economy or unemployment (9%); the cost of living or inflation (8%); and poverty, inequality or affordable housing (8%).<sup>1</sup> The fact that no single other issue

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<sup>1</sup> The proportions naming any one issue, other than COVID-19, appear relatively small because the format of the question only permits a single answer. Canadians may feel that many of these issues are

predominates is itself telling: beyond COVID-19, there is no consensus in the country about which issue is the most important.

In addition to COVID-19, issues that are *less likely* to be seen as most important in 2022, compared to 2021, include the economy or unemployment (down 4 percentage points) and poor government leadership (down 3 points). Issues that are *more likely* to be seen as most important include the cost of living or inflation (up 7 points); and poverty, inequality or affordable housing (up very slightly, by 2 points). A slightly higher proportion also do not name any issue as most important (12%, compared to 8% in 2021).

**Table 1: In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Canadians today?  
Top mentions (%), 2019 – 2022**

ISSUE	January 2019	Jan/Feb 2020	February 2021	January 2022
COVID-19	–	1	52	34
Economy / unemployment	17	12	13	9
Cost of living / inflation	8	8	1	8
Poverty / inequality / affordable housing	8	9	6	8
Poor government leadership / Trudeau	9	7	9	6
Health care / mental health	7	9	5	6
Environment / climate change	8	12	3	5
Pandemic: loss of freedom	–	–	1	3
Deficit / public debt	2	3	2	2
Immigration	7	5	1	1

One additional aspect of the pandemic that appears in the answers to this question in 2022 is the loss of freedom, presumably in connection with requirements to be vaccinated or to wear masks in order to use public transportation, enter a restaurant or cross an international border. At the time of the survey, however, only three percent of Canadians mentioned a loss of freedom specifically as the most important problem facing the country. Most of the survey responses were collected in mid-January, when anti-vaccination protestors were on their way to Ottawa, but before they had established their occupation of the city’s downtown streets. A

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important, but the percentages cited in this report represent the proportions that see this issue as the *most* important.

perceived loss of freedom may have been a motivating factor for many of those who took part in the occupation, but the survey suggests that the occupation itself did not reflect a more widespread public concern.

Not surprisingly, the pandemic is most likely to be named as the country's most important problem by Canadians in every province and territory. Among provinces, the proportion mentioning the pandemic ranges from a high of 37 percent in New Brunswick, to a low of 21 percent in neighbouring Nova Scotia (the proportion is even lower in the Northwest Territories (17%)). The economy or unemployment is also among the most frequently mentioned top issues in most jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup>

Other issues are more likely to be mentioned in some parts of the country than in others.

- Health care is among the three most frequently mentioned top issues in the Atlantic provinces, Quebec and Manitoba, but not in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, B.C. or the North.
- The cost of living or inflation is among the three most frequently mentioned top issues only in Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and B.C.
- Poverty, inequality or affordable housing is among the three most frequently mentioned issues in Nova Scotia, Ontario, B.C, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.
- Poor government leadership is one of most frequently mentioned top issues in the Prairie provinces, Quebec and New Brunswick.
- The environment or climate change is one of most frequently mentioned top issues only in Quebec, B.C. and Yukon.

## Most important problem facing your province or territory

*Perceptions of the most important problem facing one's province or territory vary by region: health care stands out as a greater concern in the Maritimes, as does poor government leadership in the Prairies, and affordable housing in the North.*

To what extent are citizens' local priorities the same as their national ones? To explore this question, the 2022 Confederation of Tomorrow survey included a question asking about the most important problem facing one's province or territory.

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<sup>2</sup> In only two jurisdictions (Manitoba and the Northwest Territories) is the economy or unemployment *not* among the three most frequently mentioned issues. However, the differences in the proportions mentioning each issue are small and, as a result, the differences in rankings are not necessarily significant.

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic once again emerges as the top preoccupation: 30 percent overall mention the pandemic as the most important problem facing their province or territory. It is most likely to be named as the most important problem facing one's province or territory by residents of most (though not all) of the 13 individual jurisdictions. This commonality notwithstanding, there is considerable variation among regions in the views as to which other issues are named.

### *The Atlantic provinces*

After COVID-19, Atlantic Canadians are more likely to see health care as the most important problem facing their province or territory. The proportion citing health care is especially high in Nova Scotia (23%), but also is higher than average in P.E.I. (13%), New Brunswick (12%), and Newfoundland and Labrador (11%). Concern with the economy and unemployment is higher than average in Newfoundland and Labrador (16%), and Prince Edward Island (16%). Residents of P.E.I. (15%) and Nova Scotia (11%) stand out for their concern about affordable housing.<sup>3</sup> One in ten (11%) residents of Newfoundland and Labrador say the cost of living or inflation is the most important problem facing their province or territory, more than in any other jurisdiction.

### *Central Canada*

Quebecers and Ontario are both most likely to name the pandemic as the most important problem facing their province, but after that, their concerns diverge. As in Atlantic Canada, health care (15%) is the second most likely issue to be named in Quebec, followed by poor government leadership (7%). Two different but related issues emerge in Ontario: the cost of living and inflation (9%), and affordable housing (9%).

### *Western Canada*

In addition to COVID-19, two other issues emerge as top concerns in both Saskatchewan and Alberta: the economy and unemployment (mentioned by 11% in Saskatchewan and 17% in Alberta), and poor government leadership (mentioned by 13% and 16%, respectively).

The list of top problems differs in both Manitoba and British Columbia. As in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, health care is the second most often mentioned problem in Manitoba (14%), followed by the cost of living or inflation (6%). B.C. resembles Ontario, as the most frequently mentioned problems, other than the pandemic, are affordable housing (16%), and the cost of living or inflation (9%).

### *The North*

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<sup>3</sup> In this section, affordable housing is considered separately from the issues of poverty and inequality, as it is more frequently mentioned on its own in several jurisdictions.



Asking about the most important problem facing one's province or territory allows the distinct concerns of residents of the territories to come to light. While most media coverage of the country's housing crisis focuses on prospective home buyers in big cities, it is in the territories where affordable housing is most likely to be singled out as a concern. In fact, in the North, affordable housing is most likely to be named as the most important problem, pushing concerns about the pandemic into second place (the figures for the two issues in the region are 19% and 11%, respectively). Residents of Nunavut (32%) are especially likely to say that affordable housing is the most important problem facing their territory. Other issues named in the region include health care (cited by 8% in both the Northwest Territories and Nunavut), and the economy and unemployment (cited by 8% in both the Northwest Territories and Yukon).

**Table 2: And what would you consider to be the most important issue facing (province/territory) today? (selected mentions (%))**

Jurisdiction	COVID-19 pandemic	Jurisdiction	Health care	Jurisdiction	Economy/unemployment	Jurisdiction	Affordable housing	Jurisdiction	Poor gov't leadership
QU	35	NS	23	AB	17	NU	32	AB	16
ON	32	QU	15	PE	16	BC	16	SK	13
MB	32	MB	14	NL	16	PE	15	QU	7
NB	29	PE	13	SK	11	YK	15	ON	6
PE	26	NB	12	NB	10	NT	13	NB	4
SK	26	NL	11	NS	9	NS	11	MB	4
AB	23	ON	8	ON	8	ON	9	NL	3
BC	22	NT	8	YK	8	NB	4	BC	2
NS	22	NU	8	NT	8	MB	2	NS	1
NL	19	YK	6	QU	6	QU	1	YK	1
YK	14	AB	5	MB	5	NL	1	NT	1
NU	9	BC	5	BC	5	AB	0	PE	0
NT	9	SK	4	NU	2	SK	0	NU	0

### Summary

Perceptions of the most important problem facing one's province or territory vary by region: health care stands out as a greater concern in Atlantic Canada (especially in the Maritimes), as does poor government leadership in the West (especially the Prairies), and affordable housing in the North. At the same time, there remain important variations within regions as well: the

top concerns in Alberta and B.C. are quite different, as are those of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

Looking at the individual issues, and setting aside the COVID-19 pandemic (which remains a concern across the country), the following patterns emerge:

- Health care is most likely to be mentioned as a province's or territory's most important problem in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Manitoba, P.E.I., New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador.
- The economy or unemployment is most likely to be mentioned in Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, P.E.I., Saskatchewan and New Brunswick.
- Affordable housing is most likely to be mentioned in Nunavut, B.C., Yukon, P.E.I., the Northwest Territories and Nova Scotia.
- Poor government leadership is most likely to be mentioned in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

## Partisan perspectives

*Supporters of each of the federal political parties are most likely to mention the pandemic as the most important issue facing Canadians today, with one partial exception: those who voted for the People's Party are less likely to mention the pandemic in general, and more likely to mention the loss of freedom associated with regulations to contain the spread of COVID-19.*

Opinions as to which issues are the most important do not only vary by province or territory. There are several other notable differences among population groups.

For instance, Canadians age 55 or older are somewhat more likely than their younger counterparts to mention either the COVID-19 pandemic or health care as the country's most important issue; they are also more likely to mention health care as the most important issue facing their province or territory. Among all age groups, Canadians between the ages of 25 and 34 are the most likely to say that affordable housing is the most important issue facing their province or territory.

The most striking differences, however, are among the supporters of the different federal political parties.

Supporters of each of the federal political parties are most likely to mention the pandemic as the most important issue facing Canadians today, with one partial exception to be mentioned below. However, those who voted Liberal in the 2021 federal election are the most likely to take this view: 48 percent of Liberal voters mention the pandemic, compared to 27 percent of Conservative voters and 30 percent of those who voted for the NDP.

Supporters of the main parties differ somewhat in terms of order of the problems that are most likely to be mentioned, other than the pandemic:

- Those who voted Liberal mention health care (8%); inflation or the cost of living (7%); and the economy or unemployment (7%).
- Those who voted Conservative mention the economy or unemployment (14%); poor government leadership (14%); and inflation or the cost of living (10%).
- Those who voted for the NDP mention inflation or the cost of living (11%); poverty, inequality or affordable housing (10%); and the environment or climate change (9%).
- Those who voted for the Bloc Québécois mention the economy or unemployment (10%); and the environment or climate change (8%).
- Those who voted for the Green Party mention the environment or climate change (13%); poverty, inequality or affordable housing (9%); and the economy or unemployment (9%).

The party supporters who stand out as the most distinct, however, are those who voted for the People's Party of Canada in the 2021 federal election. As is the case with other party voters, PPC voters are preoccupied with the pandemic. But unlike those who voted for the other parties, PPC voters are less likely to mention the pandemic in general (17%), and more likely to mention the loss of freedom associated with public health regulations to contain the spread of COVID-19 (18%). The contrast between the 18 percent of PPC voters who see the loss of freedom as the most important issue facing the country, and the three percent of Conservative voters who do so, is especially notable.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Note that, when asking what makes voters for the People's Party stand out, the answer is the proportion who are concerned with a loss of freedom. But when asking what makes those concerned with a loss of freedom stand out, it is that they did not vote or spoiled their ballot: about one in three of those in this group did not vote or spoiled their ballot in the 2021 federal election, compared with a little less than one in five who voted PPC, and a similar proportion who voted Conservative. While those concerned with a loss of freedom are more or less equally likely to vote PPC or Conservative, they made up a much smaller share of Conservative voters, but a larger share of PPC voters.

**Table 3: In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Canadians today?  
Selected mentions (%), by 2021 federal election vote**

	Liberal	Conservative	NDP	Bloc Québécois	Green	PPC
COVID-19 pandemic (general)	48	27	30	31	30	17
Economy or unemployment	7	14	6	10	9	5
Inflation or cost of living	7	10	11	6	6	2
Poor government leadership	1	14	4	7	5	21
Health care	8	6	8	4	1	6
Environment or climate change	5	1	9	8	13	0
Pandemic: loss of freedom	0	3	2	1	3	18

The distinctive position that the People’s Party currently occupies in Canadian politics can also be illustrated by looking at how views on this question vary according to political ideology. There are only modest differences between those who place themselves on the left, in the centre or on the right of the political spectrum.<sup>5</sup> In each case, the pandemic is, unsurprisingly, the issue most likely to be seen as the most important. In terms of other issues, those in the centre are more likely to mention the environment or climate change; and those on the right are more likely to mention the economy or unemployment, or poor government leadership. But in no case – left, centre or right – do more than three percent mention the loss of freedom associated with the pandemic. This illustrates the extent to which the concerns of PPC voters are distinct, not only from those of the other federal political parties, but also from those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum.

<sup>5</sup> Survey participants are asked: In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on the scale below? (0 = left; 10=right); in the report, “left” = 0 to 3 on the scale; “centre” = 4 to 6; and “right” = 7 to 10.

# Conclusion

Traditionally, issues such as the economy, unemployment, health care, the environment or national unity have dominated the political agenda in Canada. Over the past two years, however, these have understandably been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The persistence and mutability of the virus, and the tenacity of public health measures, will determine whether the pandemic will soon recede from the top of the list of most important issues as quickly as it arose.

Concern with issues other than the pandemic remains, but, Canada-wide, no single issue predominates. Certain issues, however, attract more attention in some regions than in others. Health care stands out as a greater concern in the Maritimes, Quebec and Manitoba. Affordable housing is among the top concerns in the North, as well as in B.C. and P.E.I. Albertans remain more troubled than other Canadians both with the state of the economy and with poor government leadership.

One issue that few mention as the country's post important problem is the loss of freedom associated with measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. This is notable, as the survey was conducted mainly in mid-January, just prior to the arrival in Ottawa of the protestors against vaccine mandates. The perceived loss of freedom does rise to the top of the list of concerns for a small group of Canadians, namely those who voted for the People's Party of Canada in the 2021 federal election. But the more notable finding is the very low proportion of other Canadians who feel the same way.