

**Confederation  
of Tomorrow**  
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

**Atlantic Canada and the  
Federation**

October 2022

Doug Brown

**Confederation  
of Tomorrow**  
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

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

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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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# Background

The Confederation of Tomorrow survey released in January 2022 is the fourth in an annual study of public opinion on key issues related to the ongoing operation of the Canadian federation. Its sample is large enough to have meaningful results for the smaller units in the federation – such as the four Atlantic Provinces, and the three northern territories – as well as for Indigenous Peoples. It provides a continuing snapshot, not only of opinion in the Atlantic region as a whole, but also among its four provinces – a relative rarity in Canadian surveys.

This presents an excellent opportunity to take a closer look at what the surveys tell us about the Atlantic region – with some perhaps predictable results, and some rather surprising ones. There are patterns of convergence, divergence and differentiation. With convergence, we see the region mirroring Canada-wide, national trends. It constitutes evidence of shared opinions, and probably shared values, between Atlantic Canada and the rest of the country. Instances where opinions in the Atlantic region diverge significantly from the national average are not as common, but when they occur, they highlight the unique realities in the region. Lastly, we explore survey outcomes where opinion in the Atlantic region as a unit breaks down, and where individual provincial results stand out – limiting the regional consensus, but demonstrating the value of more fine-tuned, province-specific data.

# Converging opinions

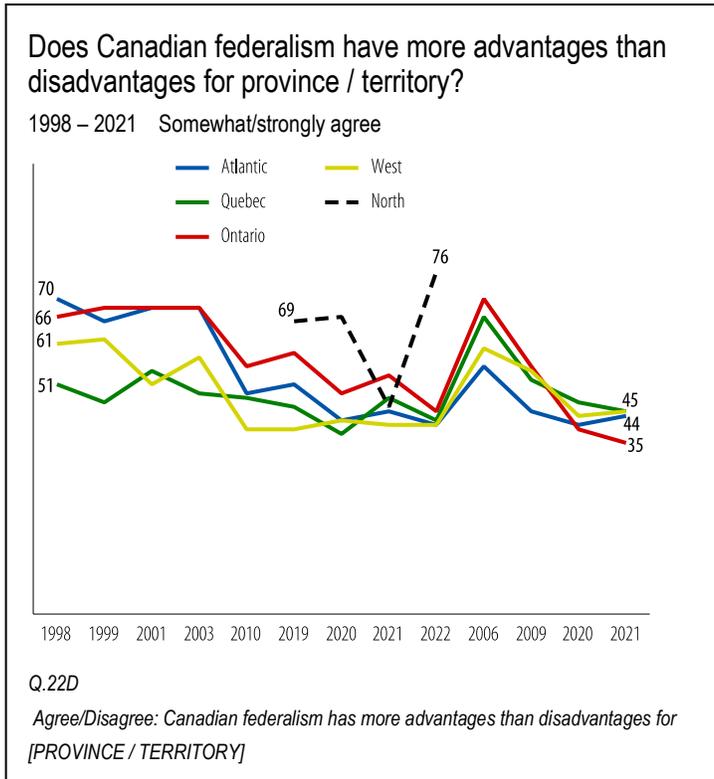
Examples of converging opinions are found in the responses to both general questions about the federation, and in more topical issues of major intergovernmental or national significance.

On the state of the federation, opinion in Atlantic Canada is about the same as that in the rest of the country, and suggests that the federation is getting increasingly challenging to govern. On questions about our ability to resolve differences, about whether the advantages of federalism outweigh the disadvantages, and about “the way things are going in the country today,” Atlantic Canadians now respond much as other Canadians do.

What has changed is that respondents in Atlantic Canada no longer stand out as unusually happy campers and now (in 2022) seem to be getting as miserable as everyone else! In 1998, for instance, Atlantic Canadians were about 10 points more likely than Westerners, and about 20 points more likely than Quebecers, to agree that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province. But the level of agreement in Atlantic Canada has declined since then, to the point that no significant differences across these regions remain.

On the question of satisfaction with the state of the country, each of the four Atlantic Provinces diverged from the national average at the beginning of 2021, reflecting the better containment of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region at the time. But, by early 2022, satisfaction in the region had declined and once again matched the national mood.

Next, we come to questions that test national consensus on major issues that require significant degrees of inter-regional and intergovernmental cooperation. Since 2019, two have been especially notable: climate change and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

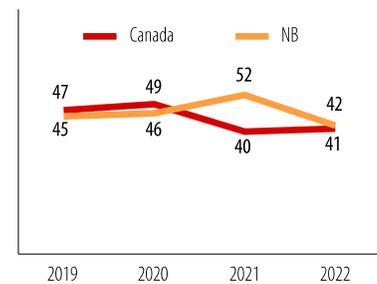
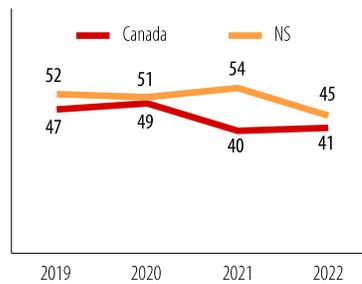
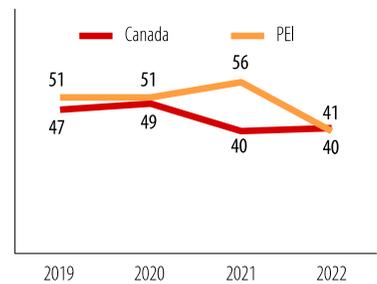
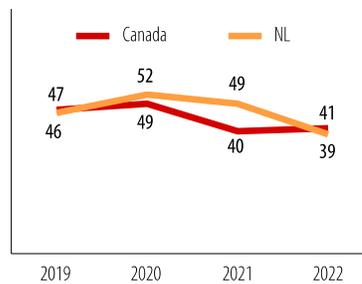


On climate change, Canadians' views as probed by our surveys over the past four years have not changed much. Atlantic Canadians are among the plurality of Canadians who support the gradual phasing out of fossil fuel use. And, as in other regions, Canadians in the Atlantic region are more likely to trust the federal government than their provincial government to address the climate change issue.

On reconciliation, there has been a slow movement to greater support for measures to advance the process and for obtaining Indigenous consent for resource development on their traditional lands. The Atlantic Provinces hover near the national average of support on these issues, in contrast to the Prairie Provinces, where opposition is stronger.

Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in our country today?

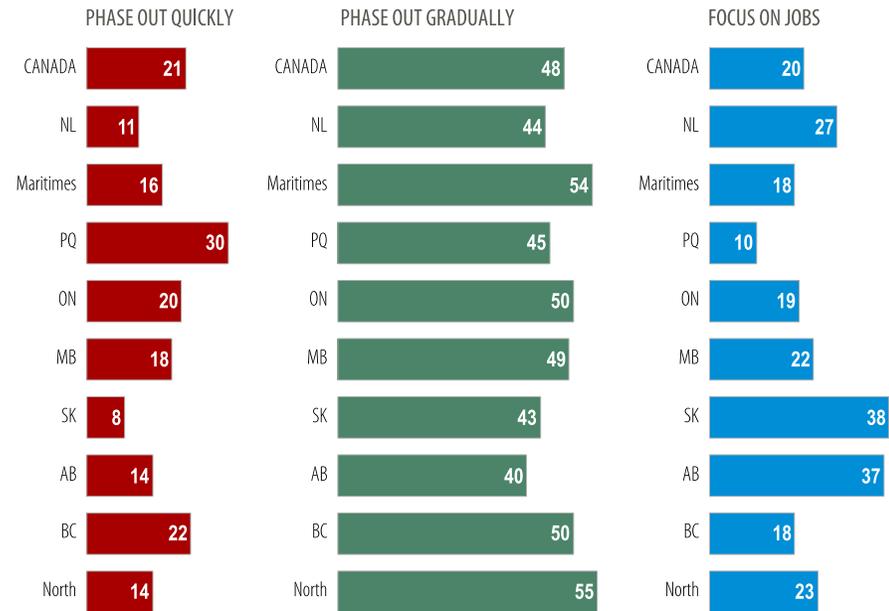
2019 – 2022 Very or somewhat satisfied



Q.1 Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in our country today?

## Options to fight climate change: should we phase out the use of fossils fuels?

2022

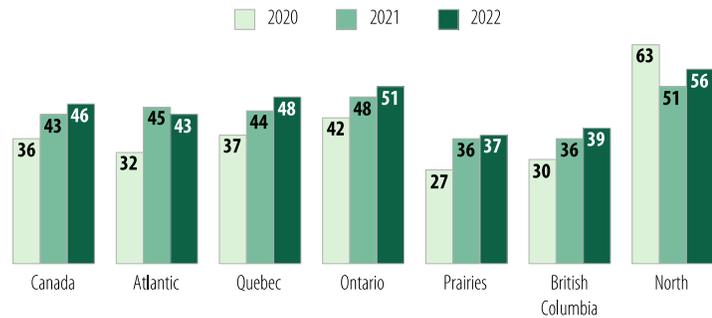


Q.28

*Some people say that in order to fight climate change, countries like Canada should phase out the use of fossil fuels like oil and gas, and should replace them with more renewable sources of energy. Thinking about this, which of the following three options do you prefer.*

The surveys have also addressed two classic federation issues: the equalization program and constitutional reform. Support for the equalization program, by which the federal government makes payments directly to poorer provinces, continues to enjoy very high support across Canada. This is despite a high-profile campaign led by Alberta last year aimed at significantly curtailing the program. The Atlantic region's strong support for the program matches the national consensus, but is not significantly higher, except on the question of whether the program should involve higher levels of funding where, not surprisingly, there's strong support. It is notable that opinions about Equalization in Newfoundland and Labrador, which currently does not receive equalization payments, are much closer to those in the Maritimes, and resemble those of other non-recipient provinces such as Ontario and B.C., rather than those of Saskatchewan and Alberta.

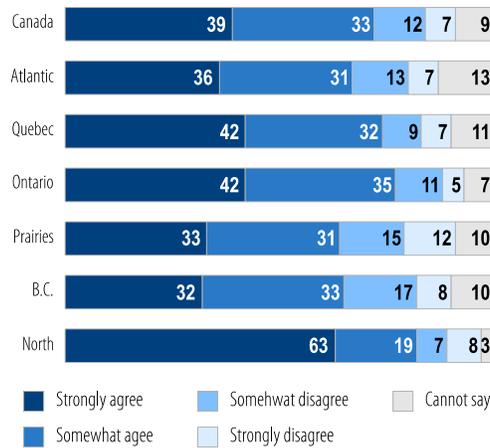
**Governments have not gone far enough to advance reconciliation**  
2020 – 2022



Q.36

*In your opinion, have governments in Canada gone too far or have they not gone far enough in trying to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples?*

**Development of natural resources on Indigenous land**  
2022

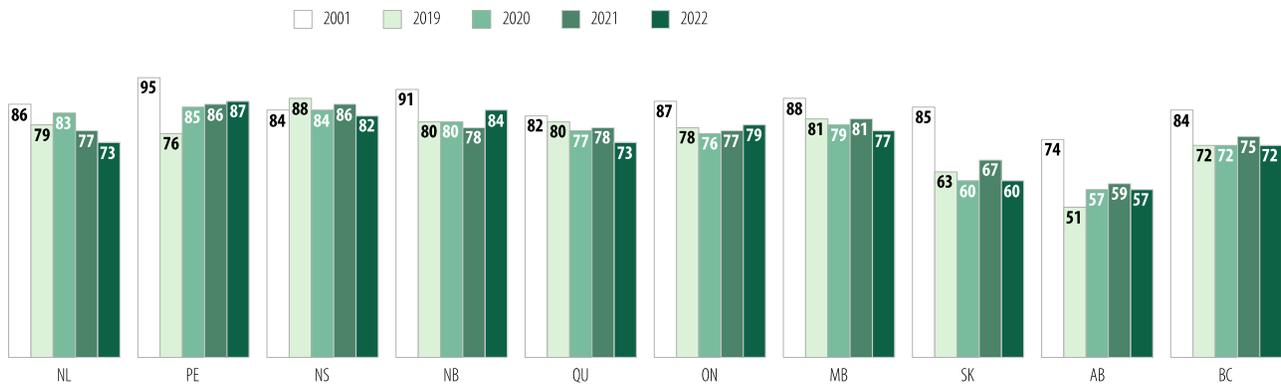


Q.22h

*How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? No one should be allowed to develop natural resources on Indigenous land unless the Indigenous community that lives there agrees.*

In recognition of the 40th anniversary of the 1982 *Constitution Act*, this year’s survey asked Canadians their views on the need to reopen the Constitution to further reform. The response has to be considered as lukewarm across Canada, with only a minority supporting new constitutional talks to deal with one or more of a range of issues. Atlantic Canadians are generally in line with the national average.

### Support for equalization 2001 – 2022

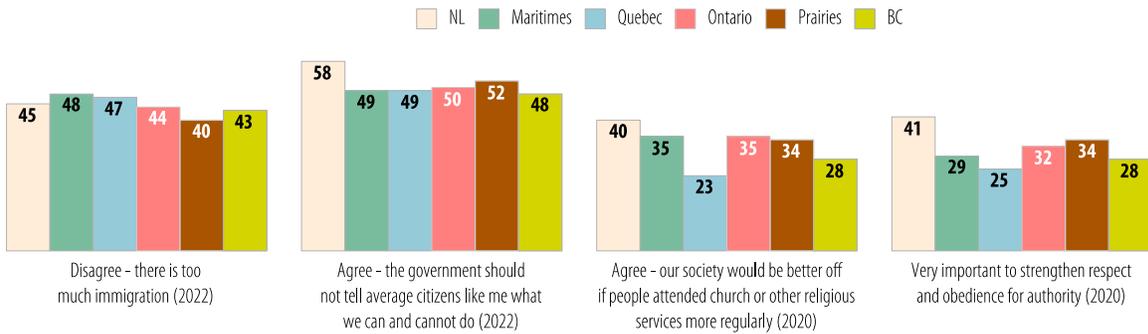


Q.17

*As you may know, under the federal equalization program, the federal government transfers money to the poorer provinces, in order to ensure that Canadians living in every province have access to similar levels of public services. How much do you support or oppose the equalization program?*

Finally, our surveys confirm a longer-term trend of convergence of opinion on more general political and social values. There is less regional variation than might be expected on questions such as: "Is there too much immigration?"; "Is it important to strengthen respect for authority?"; and "Do you agree that our society would be better off if people attended church more regularly?" – with the exception that Quebecers respond quite differently on questions related to religion. For our purposes, the key finding is that Atlantic Canadians are not noticeably more conservative than those in the rest of Canada, perhaps contrary to Canadian stereotypes (Newfoundlanders are a little more conservative than Maritimers and other Canadians, though there is evidence to suggest that this difference disappears among the younger generations).

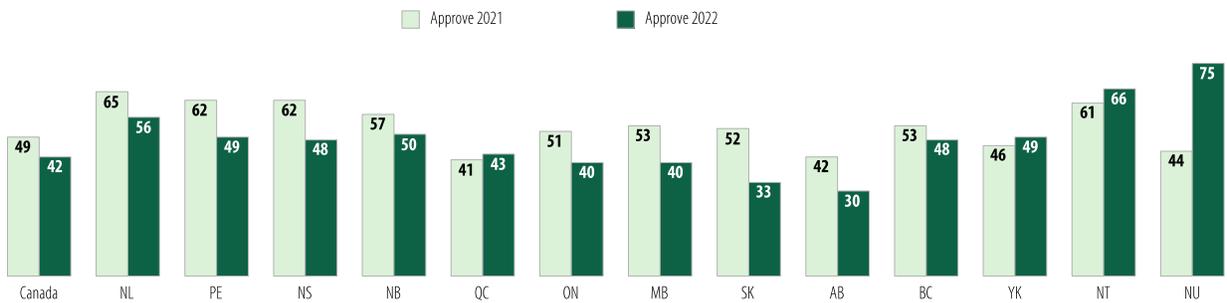
## Regional differences – various 2020 – 2022



## Diverging opinions

Clear examples of where the Atlantic region differs significantly from the rest of Canada are harder to find, but three do stand out: on the pandemic, on climate change and on priority problems faced by the region.

### Approve of the **federal government's** handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far? 2021 – 2022



COV4A

To what extent do you approve or disapprove of the federal government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?

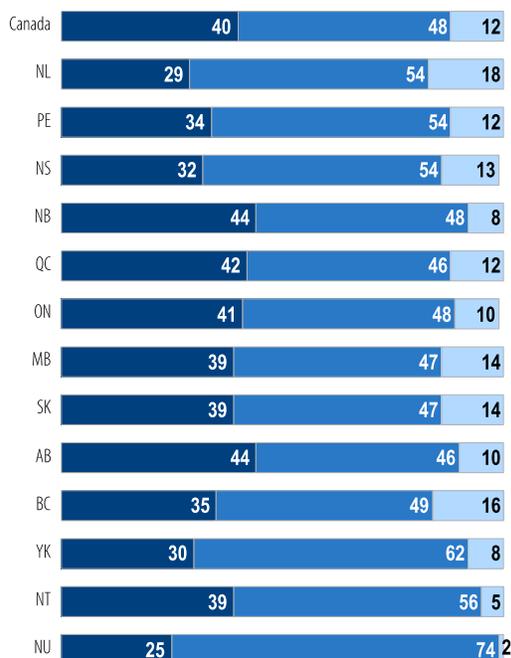
The Atlantic region shares national opinion on pandemic issues, notably on approval of the federal government's handling of the crisis (although that approval is declining everywhere) and on a cautious approach to removing pandemic restrictions (note: latest opinion sampled in January 2022). However, where the Atlantic Provinces are true outliers is revealed in their high levels of support for their provincial governments' handling of the pandemic – those

governments have been more stringent than those of the other Canadian provinces on pandemic measures.

In January 2022, when asked about plans to reopen society by removing pandemic restrictions, almost one in two Canadians say go slowly. But this result is even more pronounced in Atlantic Canada. Also, the region is a clear outlier in retaining stronger approval of their provincial governments' management of the crisis (with some exception in New Brunswick). Atlantic Canadians are more likely to approve the modified zero case strategy for dealing with the pandemic adopted by all four Atlantic provincial governments, especially given that it has resulted in fewer cases and deaths per capita than other parts of Canada, except the North.

On climate change, as noted, respondents in Atlantic Canada are close to the national average on most questions, but it is worth noting that they stand out as second only to the Prairie Provinces in supporting the idea that governments prioritize jobs when phasing out fossil fuels. This seems contradictory to the general response, but reflects the importance of energy resource development to the region, and oil and gas employment in particular in Newfoundland and Labrador.

### How quickly to reopen the economy 2022 By province/territory

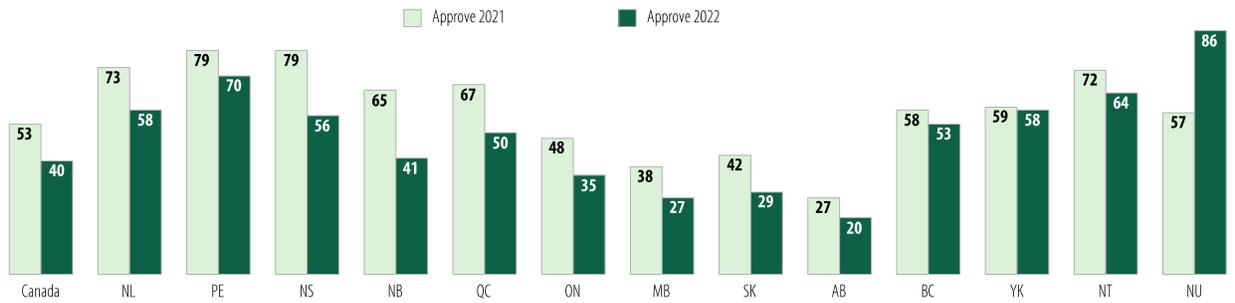


- Governments should re-open the economy faster than they are doing now, even if that means that more people might end up getting sick from COVID-19
- Government should keep people as safe as possible from the spread of the COVID-19 virus, even if that means re-opening the economy more slowly.
- Cannot say

#### Q.COVID-9

*As you know, governments in Canada are trying to find the right balance between the need to keep people safe from the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and the need to reopen the economy and get people back to work. Which of the following do you think is the best approach?*

Approve of your **provincial/territorial government's** handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?  
2021 – 2022



COV4A

To what extent do you approve or disapprove of your provincial/territorial government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?

Perhaps the most telling divergence from the opinion of other Canadians is found on the question of which is the most important issue facing your province, an open-ended question allowing true local priorities to emerge. Here, health care makes the top 10 across Canada, but only in Nova Scotia does it land in a virtual tie with COVID-19 as the number one issue. And in two Atlantic Provinces (Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island), affordable housing is also among the top issues (as it is in British Columbia).

The emphasis on health care may be tied to the pandemic, in that the latter is seen as exacerbating conditions in an already stressed health care system. Health care is a long-standing concern across Atlantic Canada, given its older and less healthy population, and chronic fiscal disparities. In Nova Scotia, it was the dominant issue in the 2021 provincial election campaign.

The priority on affordable housing in a smaller jurisdiction such as PEI is interesting, as concern over affordability is more commonly associated with rapidly rising house prices in major urban centres in Central and Western Canada.

**Table 1: What would you consider to be the most important issue facing (province/territory)? today? (selected mentions (%)) 2022**

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

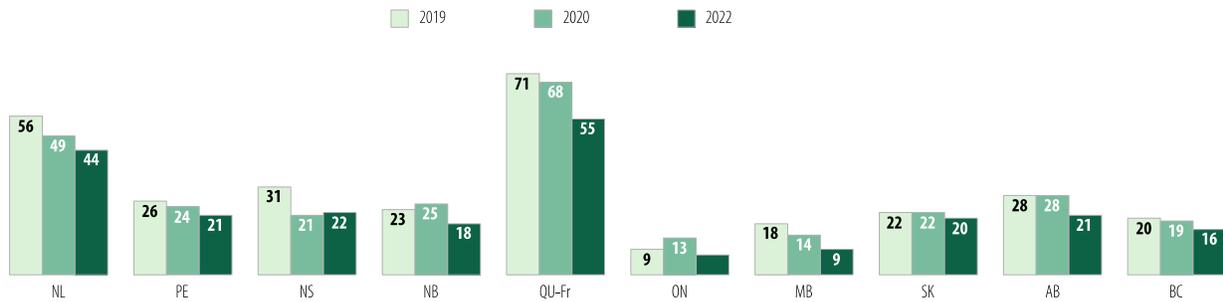
## Important provincial differences

Some of the survey results illustrate strong localized opinion differences. Some of these may come and go over time, but others point to long-standing divides that put into question the utility of a regional focus in the first place.

The most illustrative case here is Newfoundland and Labrador. It joined Canada in 1949, much later than the three Maritime Provinces, which joined in 1867 and 1873, and ended up lumped into a new regional grouping called the Atlantic Provinces. The official view of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is, however, that the province should be considered its own region, and that one cannot assume (as is often the case in political and other circles in Canada) that its values or interests are identical to those of the original Maritime Provinces. That said, the results of our survey over the past four years show a strong convergence of opinion between Newfoundland and Labrador and the Maritime Provinces on most of the issues covered.

## Identity: province only or first?

2019 – 2022 Province only or first, Non-Indigenous respondents



Q.3A

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

Still, important exceptions remain. The surveys show a consistent set of characteristics that mark out, at the least, evidence of a unique regional identity and self-perception. These include findings that Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are second only to Quebecers in identifying with their province more than with Canada (the only two provinces where this is the case); that Newfoundland and Labrador is a strong supporter of provincial control over energy and resources, similar to Alberta and Saskatchewan; and that Newfoundland and Labrador has a stronger overall sense of regional alienation, again similar to Alberta and Saskatchewan.

None of the other Atlantic Provinces show the same degree of regional distinctiveness as does Newfoundland and Labrador. We noted previously that Nova Scotia sticks out as being the only province where health care is on par with the COVID-19 pandemic as the number one pressing public issue today, although these two issues are clearly related. However, in the past two years, New Brunswick has also stood out on pandemic issues, partly due to the facts on the ground. Sharing a boundary with Maine and Quebec, New Brunswick was much less able to sustain an isolated, zero-case COVID-19 strategy as successfully as the other three Atlantic Provinces. Support for early removal of restrictions (and the implied opposition to those restrictions) is clearly also more significant in New Brunswick. The province is marked by a greater division of opinion on the pandemic, and higher per capita case numbers and deaths. In this regard, New Brunswick starts to look more like one of the three Prairie Provinces. Like them, it has a Conservative government with a more skeptical approach to pandemic restrictions. Also like them, it has a divided population on pandemic issues, reflected in greater levels of dissatisfaction with the provincial government's handling of the issues.

# Conclusion

What do we make of these past four years of findings in the Atlantic Provinces? One final observation can be ventured. Public opinion in Atlantic Canada on issues about the federation do seem to be significantly converging with average responses and trends in Canada as a whole. Residents of this region clearly feel increasingly integrated with the rest of Canada.

This sharing of national consensus is best illustrated by overall values and attitudes, but less so when specific regional interests are affected. Divergences and differences emerge over on-the-ground issues, reflecting specific economic, financial and social circumstances. This sort of diversity is, of course, common to all federal unions around the world, and is seen in other parts of Canada too.