



Focus Canada – Fall 2019

Influence in Canadian Politics

FINAL REPORT

The Environics Institute's Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976) tracks the evolution of Canadian attitudes on key issues. The most recent survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,008 Canadians between October 7 and 20, 2019. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Executive summary

Concerns have long been expressed about the extent of influence exercised by powerful or well-connected groups in society over the direction of the government. The latest Environics Institute Focus Canada survey, conducted during the last two weeks of the recent federal election campaign, explores these concerns by asking Canadians about which groups have too much or too little influence in Canadian politics. The results show that Canadians are much more likely to be concerned about the influence of the wealthy or of large corporations than of other types of interests – a perspective that has not changed much over time. In fact, Canadians are almost twice as likely as to say that large Canadian corporations have too much influence as they are to say the same about unions. New technology companies like Google and Facebook are also seen by most Canadians as being too influential, as is the government of the United States.

In contrast, Canadians are more likely to say that environmental groups, Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minorities, feminists and university professors have too little influence in Canadian politics than they are to say these groups have too much. This view is most pronounced in the case of Indigenous Peoples – a majority of Canadians say that Indigenous Peoples have too little influence in Canadian politics.

While, overall, Canadians are more likely to say that environmental groups have too little influence than they are to say that they have too much, there are some important variations in opinion, notably by region. Albertans are more than twice as likely as other Canadians to say that environmental groups have too much influence in Canadian politics. In no other region outside of Alberta do a majority, or even a plurality, concur. A majority of Conservative Party supporters also say that environmental groups have too much influence, in contrast to majorities of those supporting other major parties, who say that environmental groups have too little influence.

Introduction: The issue of political influence

Representative democracies enable citizens to chart the course of government by choosing who governs. Moreover, each individual citizen, in principle, has an equal say in this process – each casting a single vote with equal weight. That said, there have always been suspicions that, in practice, governments find themselves beholden to other interests that carry more weight than those of the electorate. For some, it is the influence of money that matters more; wealthier individuals or businesses have the means to push their interests to the fore in government decision-making, at the expense of those of ordinary citizens. Others worry about the influence of foreign powers, whether through

surreptitious means or simply by virtue of *realpolitik* constraints on any government’s ability to act independently. Still others contend that every political party, once in government, ends up favouring its own set of friends and allies on the left or right of the political spectrum. In recent years, such concerns have sometimes been expressed in more populist terms, with the direct link between the government and the people seen as having been derailed by the undue influence of so-called experts, of the media, or of minorities favoured by the cosmopolitan elite over the wishes of the silent majority.

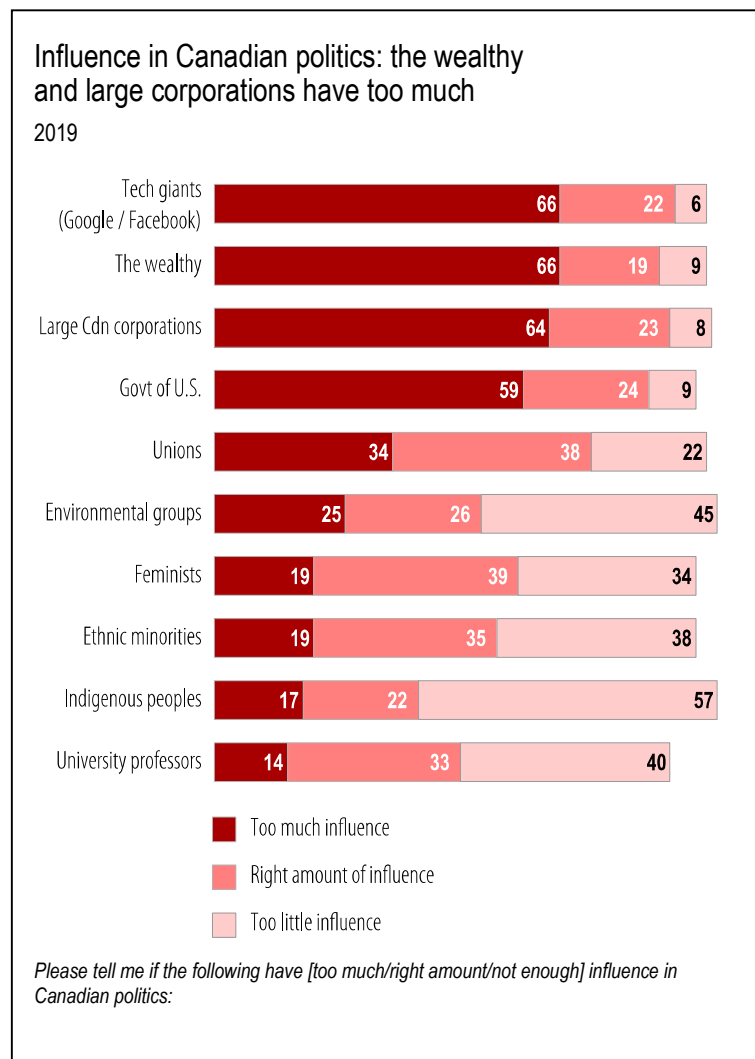
Which, if any, of these types of concerns currently shape how Canadians view their democracy? This report explores this issue by analyzing how Canadians answered the following survey question: “Please tell me if each of the following have too much, about the right amount or not enough influence in Canadian politics.” The question, mentioning 10 different groups, was included in the Environics Institute’s latest Focus Canada survey that took place in October 2019, during the final two weeks of the federal election campaign. The same question, covering six of the 10 groups asked about in the current survey, was asked in an earlier Focus Canada study in 2002, allowing for some comparison of results over time.

Too much or too little influence

Roughly two-thirds of Canadians say that the wealthy, new technology companies like Google and Facebook, and large Canadian corporations have too much influence in Canadian politics. When it comes to environmental groups, however, Canadians are more likely to say that they have too little influence than they are to say that they have too much. A majority of Canadians also say that Indigenous Peoples have too little influence in Canadian politics.

Canadians express a range of views regarding the extent of influence exercised by different groups; while some groups are seen as having too much influence, others are seen as having too little. One clear pattern, however, is that Canadians are more likely to say that that wealthy individuals or large corporations have too much influence than any of the other groups included in the survey.

- Roughly two-thirds of Canadians say that **the wealthy (66%), new technology companies** like Google and Facebook (66%), and **large Canadian corporations (64%)** have too much influence in Canadian politics. About one in five say each of these interests has about the right amount of influence, and fewer than one in ten say they have too little influence.



- A majority Canadians (59%) also say that the **government of the United States** has too much influence, while one in four (24%) say it has about the right amount of influence, and nine percent say it has too little influence.
- While a majority say that large Canadian corporations have too much influence, only one in three (34%) think that this is case for **unions**. Canadians are more likely to say that unions have about the right amount of influence (38%), while 22 percent say they have too little influence.
- As noted earlier, the survey was conducted during the last two weeks of the federal election campaign, at a time when the environment and climate change had emerged as the issue most likely to be mentioned by Canadians as most important.¹ In this context, it is notable that Canadians are more likely to say that **environmental groups** have too little influence in Canadian politics (45%) than they are to say that they have too much (25%) – with another quarter (26%) maintaining they have about the right amount of influence.
- Two in five (39%) Canadians say that **feminists** have about the right amount of influence in Canadian politics, while one in three (34%) say they have too little. Only one in five (19%) say they have too much.
- Canadians are twice as likely to say that **ethnic minorities** have too little influence as they are to say that they have too much. About two in five (38%) Canadians say that ethnic minorities have too little influence in Canadian politics, while one on three (35%) say they have about the right amount, and only 19 percent say they have too much influence.
- Among the 10 groups or interests mentioned in the survey, only one group is seen by a majority of Canadians as having too little influence: **First Nations and Indigenous Peoples**. Fifty-seven percent of Canadians say that Indigenous Peoples have too little influence in Canadian politics, while 22 percent say they have about the right amount, and only 17 percent say they have too much influence.
- Among the 10 groups or interests mentioned in the survey, Canadians are least likely to be concerned about the amount of influence exercised by **university professors**. A plurality of Canadians (40%) say that university professors have too little influence in Canadian politics, while one in three (33%) say they have about the right amount, and only 14 percent say they have too much influence.

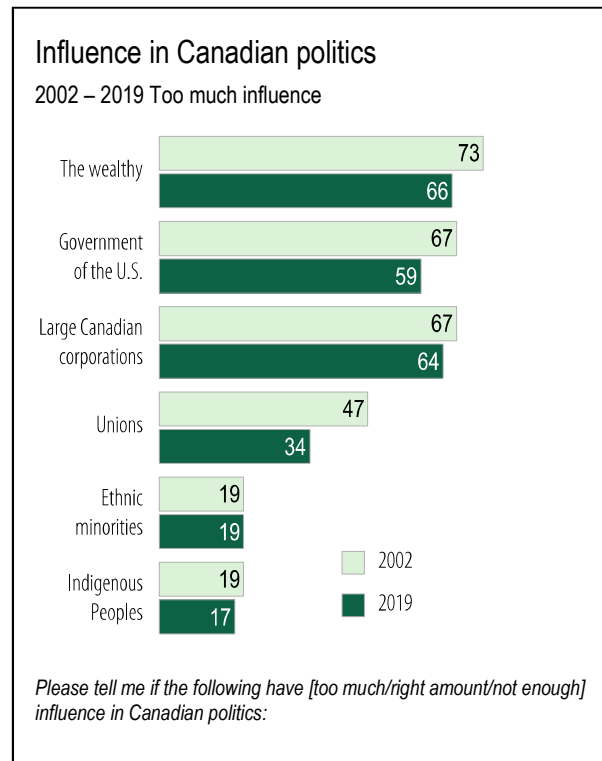
How opinions have changed since 2002

With some exceptions, there has been relatively little change over time in views on political influence. As in 2019, Canadians in 2002 were most likely to see the wealthy and large Canadian corporations as having too much influence. One exception is that Canadians are less likely today than in 2002 to say that unions have too much influence in Canadian politics. Another is that the proportion saying that Indigenous Peoples have too little influence has increased over time.

A similar question was asked of Canadians 17 years ago. In 2002, a Focus Canada survey asked about the level of influence in Canadian politics of a variety of groups and interests, including six that were covered on the current survey. On the whole, a comparison of the 2002 and 2019 results shows relatively little change over time, but there are some exceptions.

¹ Environics Institute, *Regional Perspectives on Politics and Priorities* (November 12, 2019); <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/regional-perspectives-on-politics-and-priorities>.

- As in 2019, Canadians were most likely to see **the wealthy** and **large Canadian corporations** as having too much influence – in 2002, about seven in ten Canadians held this view of these two interest groups, which is just slightly higher than the proportion seen today.
- In 2002, the proportion of Canadians saying the **U.S. government** has too much influence in Canadian politics was 67 percent – somewhat higher than the proportion today (59%).
- The most significant difference in views over time comes in the case of **unions**. In 2002, almost half (47%) of Canadians said unions have too much influence in Canadian politics, compared with one in three (34%) today. This change in perception of the influence of unions occurs at the same time as union membership (as a proportion of all workers) has continued to decline (although the decline was much more acute prior to 2002, and has been only gradual thereafter).²
- As in 2019, fewer than one in five Canadians in 2002 said that ethnic minorities or Indigenous Peoples have too much influence on Canadian politics. The proportion saying that Indigenous Peoples have too little influence, however, has increased over time (rising from 46% to 57%).



How perspectives vary across the country

In some cases (but not all), there are differences in views among different demographic groups. Men, for instance, are more likely to say that many of the groups asked about in the survey have too much influence in Canadian politics, while younger Canadians are much less likely than older Canadians to say that unions have too much influence. A more striking difference in views across the country, however, relates to region. In particular, Albertans are more than twice as likely as other Canadians to say that environmental groups have too much influence in Canadian politics.

There are considerable variations in views on these questions across the Canadian population

Gender

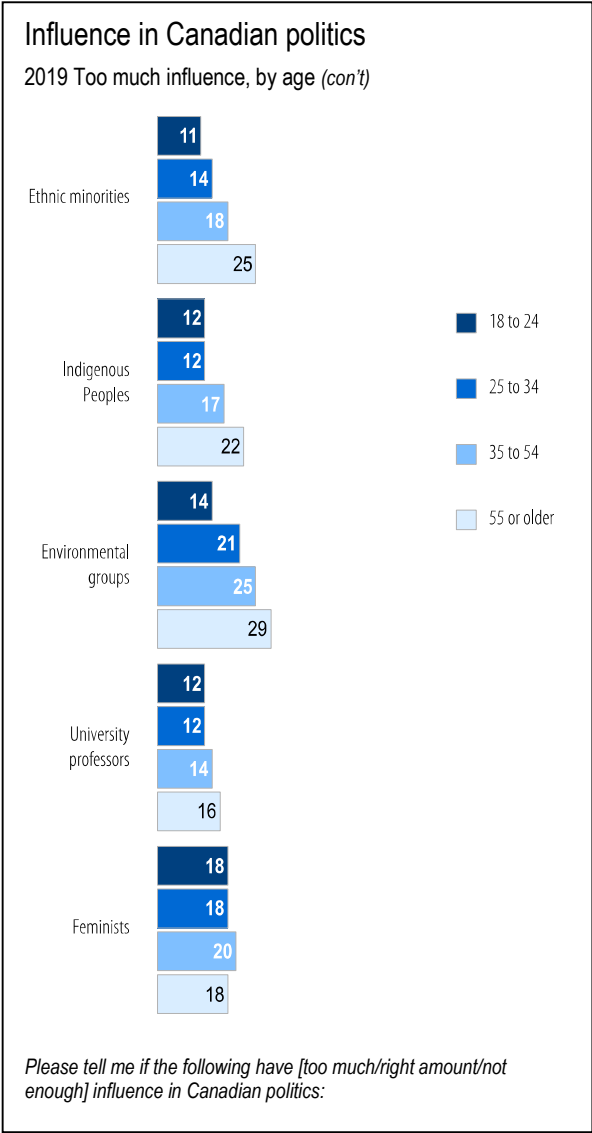
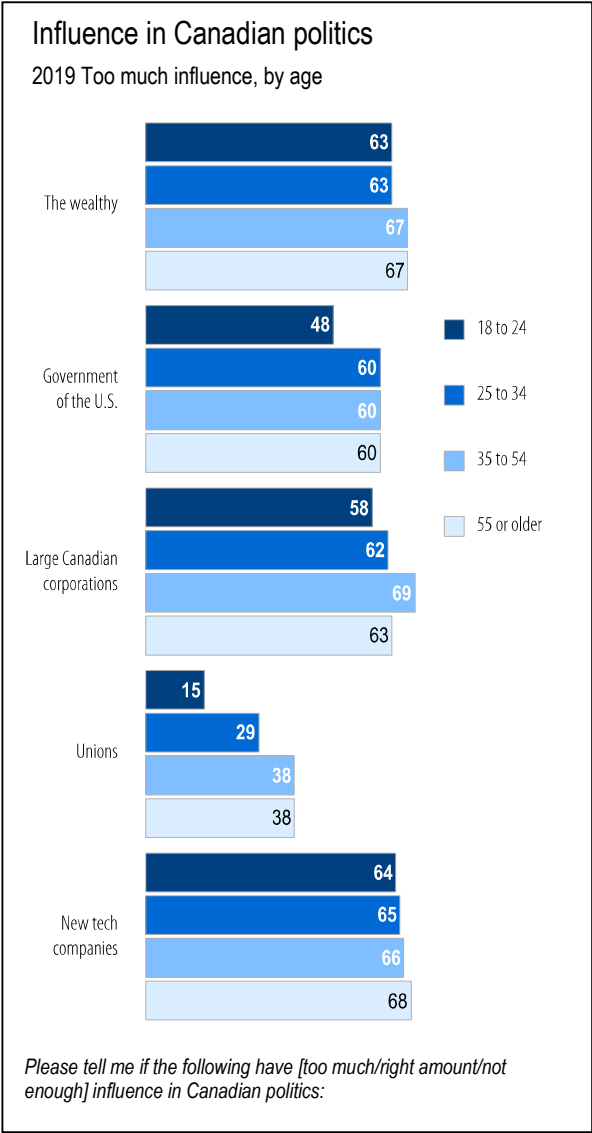
- There is very little difference between the views of men and women when it comes to the influence of **the wealthy** or of **large corporations**. However, men (40%) are more likely than women (28%) to say that **unions** have too much influence in Canadian politics.
- Men are consistently more likely to say that many of the other groups asked about in the survey have too much influence. One of the biggest differences between men and women relates to **environmental groups**: men (34%) are twice as likely as women (16%) to say that these groups have too much influence. One in two women (52%) say that environmental groups have too little influence, compared to 38 percent of men.

² See Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0129-01.

- Similarly, men are also more likely than women to say that each of the following have too much influence: **ethnic minorities** (23% vs. 16%), **Indigenous Peoples** (21% vs. 13%) and **university professors** (21% vs. 8%).
- Finally, 25 percent of men, compared to 13 percent of women, say that **feminists** have too much influence in Canadian politics; conversely, the proportion saying that feminists have too little influence is lower among men (28%) than among women (40%).

Age

- There are few differences between the views of different age groups when it comes to the influence of **the wealthy** or of **large corporations**. Younger Canadians may be more familiar with new communication technologies, but they are no less likely than other Canadians to say that **new technology companies** have too much influence in Canadian politics.



- Younger Canadians, however, are much less likely than older Canadians to say that **unions** have too much influence (although a plurality within each age group says unions have about the right amount of influence). This is notable, as union membership (as a proportion of the workforce) is lower among younger workers in Canada than among older workers.³

³ See Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0129-01.

- Younger Canadians are also somewhat less likely than older Canadians to say that **ethnic minorities**, **Indigenous Peoples** and **environmental groups** have too much influence.

Age and gender

As mentioned, men are more likely than women to say that **feminists** have too much influence in Canadian politics (and less likely to say that feminists have too little influence). The gap between men and women, however, is larger among younger Canadians than older Canadians. This is because the relationship with age is different within each gender.

- Younger women are slightly less likely than older women to say that feminists have too much influence, and slightly more likely to say they have too little influence.
- Conversely, younger men are more likely than older men to say that feminists have too much influence, and slightly less likely to say they have too little influence.
- The net result is that younger women are almost twice as likely as younger men to say that feminist have too little influence, whereas older women are only somewhat more likely than older men to hold the same view.

The fact that younger men are somewhat less supportive of feminism than older men was also observed in a recent Environics Institute report on perceptions of gender and political leadership.⁴

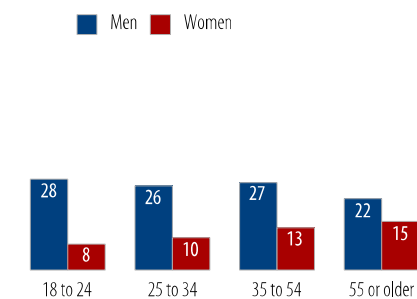
Income and education

There is no clear and consistent relationship between views on who has too much or too little influence in Canadian politics, by income or education.

- Canadians with higher or lower incomes, for instance, are equally likely to say that **the wealthy** and **new technology companies** have too much influence.
- In the case of **large Canadian corporations**, those with the lowest incomes, or with a high school education or less, are actually somewhat less likely to say that they have too much influence.
- A clearer exception is views about **unions**, where the relationship with income is stronger. One in four (25%) of those with the lowest household incomes (under \$30,000 a year) say that unions have too much influence in Canadian politics, but this rises to 40 percent among those with the highest incomes (over \$100,000 a year).

Feminists have **too much** influence in Canadian politics

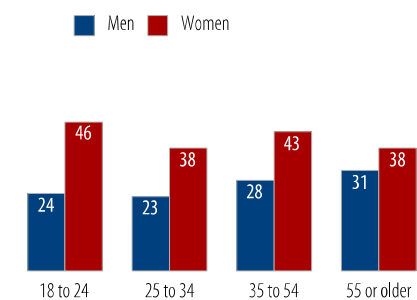
2019 Too much influence, by age and gender



Please tell me if the following have [too much/not enough] influence in Canadian politics:

Feminists have **too little** influence in Canadian politics

2019 Too little influence, by age and gender



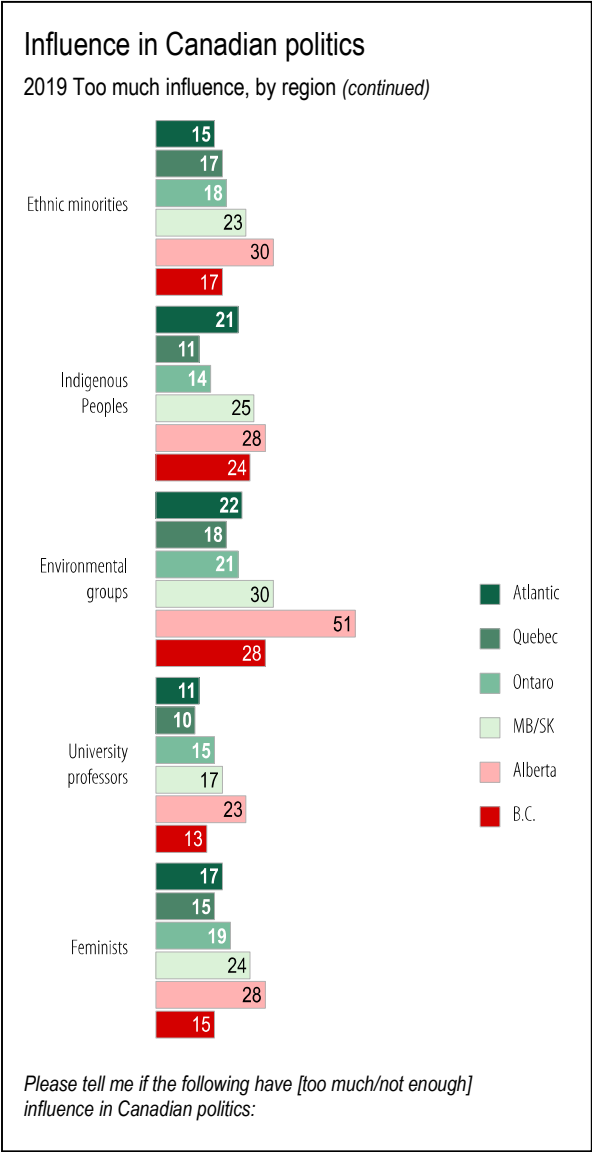
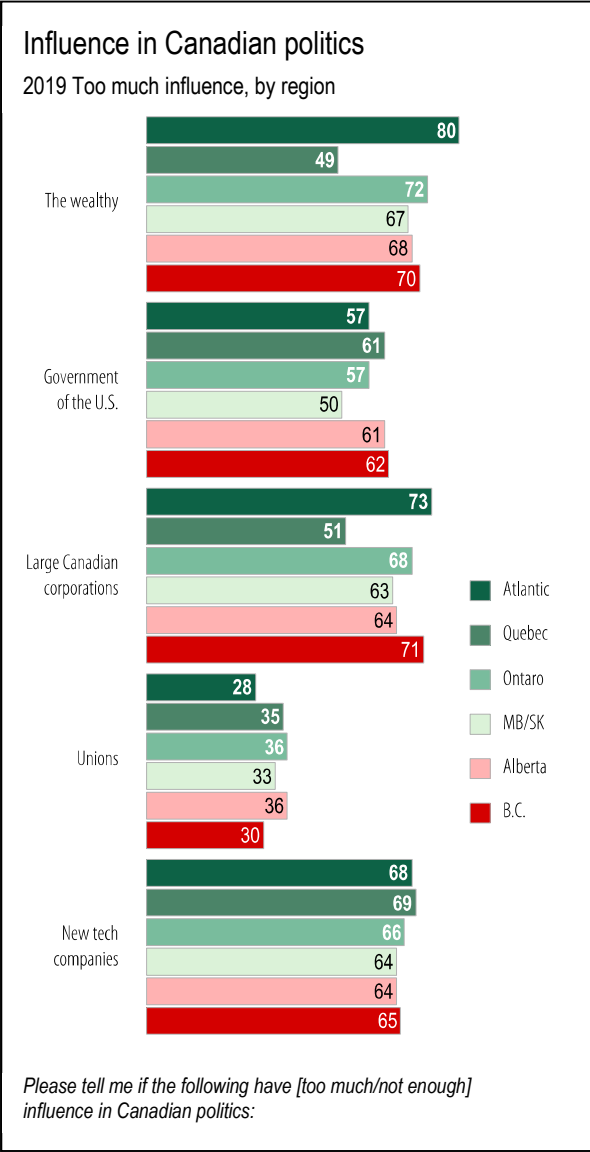
Please tell me if the following have [too much/not enough] influence in Canadian politics:

⁴ See Environics Institute, *Perceptions of Gender and Political Leadership* (September 5, 2019); <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/perceptions-of-gender-and-political-leadership>.

- Canadians with a university education are somewhat more likely to say that **feminists** have too little influence – but the relationship with education is much clearer in the case of women. Women with a university education are much more likely than women with a high school education or less to say that feminists have too little influence, but this is not the case for men. As a result, roughly the same proportion (about 30%) of women and men with a high school education say that feminists have too little influence, while there is 14-point gap between the proportion of university-educated women (45%) and men (31%) who hold this view. This pattern holds even when looking at only those within the younger age group (age 18 to 34).

Region

In several cases, there are only minor variations in opinion across the country’s regions – but there are some exceptions. In some cases related to economic interests, Quebec stands out as somewhat distinct. But Alberta forms a more striking exception in the case of environmental groups.



- Atlantic Canadians, for instance, are the most likely to say that **the wealthy** and **large Canadian corporations** have too much influence in Canadian politics, while Quebecers are the least likely.

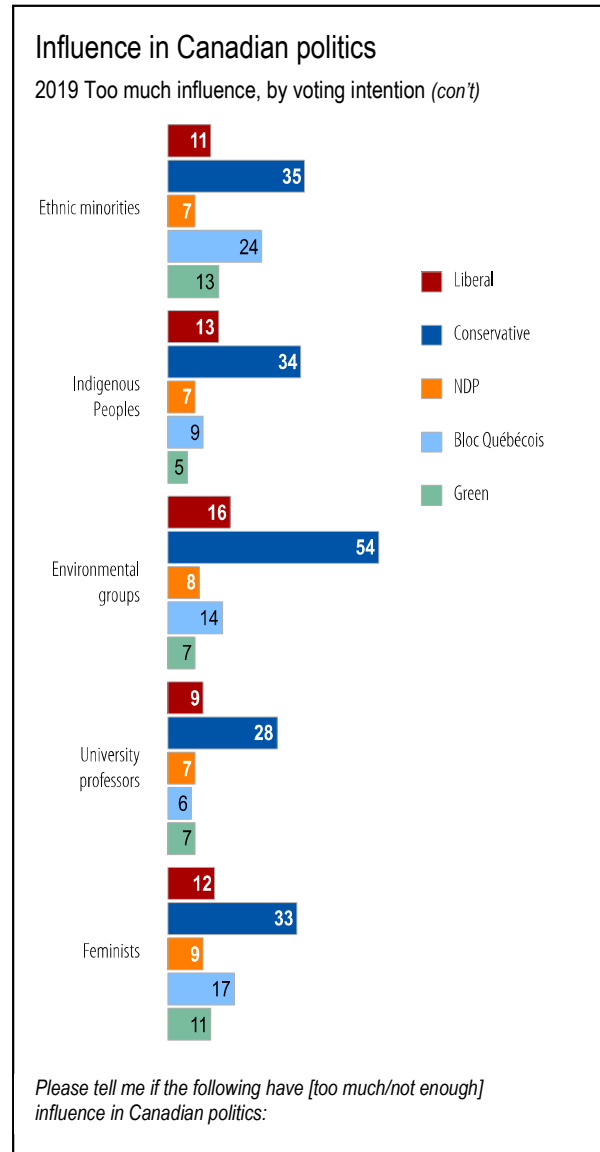
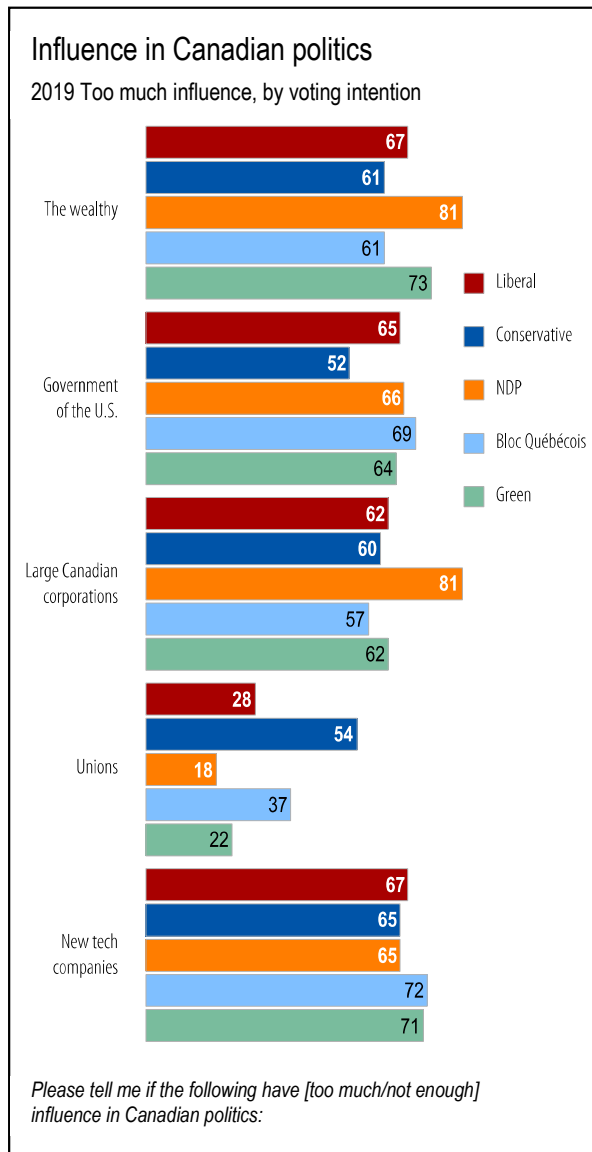
- The difference between the views of Quebecers and those of other Canadians on these two questions are especially significant: Quebecers are 22 points less likely than other Canadians to say the wealthy have too much influence, while in the case of large Canadian corporations, the difference is 17 points.
- Interestingly, there is no significant difference in views across regions about the influence of **new technology companies** like Facebook and Google: about two-thirds of Canadians in all parts of the country, including Quebec, see them as having too much influence.
- The other striking regional difference in opinion concerns **environmental groups**. Albertans (51%) are more than twice as likely as other Canadians (22%) to say that environmental groups have too much influence in Canadian politics. In no other region outside of Alberta does a majority, or even a plurality, say that environmental groups have too much influence. In fact, in other regions, the more common view is that environmental groups have too little influence. This is the view of a majority of Quebecers (52%), as well as pluralities of those in Ontario (49%), Atlantic Canada (41%), B.C. (41%) and, by a smaller margin, Manitoba/Saskatchewan (36%). Taken together, 47 percent of Canadians outside of Alberta say that environmental groups have too little influence, compared with 27 percent of those inside the province.

Partisan perspectives

In some cases, there are modest differences in views among supporters of the different political parties that align with the traditional left-right ideological spectrum. But the more striking difference is that between supporters of the Conservative Party and supporters of other parties on the perceived influence of different social groups and movements. Most notably, Conservative supporters stand out in their views on the influence of environmental groups. A majority of Conservative supporters say that environmental groups have too much influence, while majorities of those supporting any of the other parties say that environmental groups have too little influence.

When thinking about who has too much and too little influence in Canadian politics, there are notable differences in views among supporters of the different federal political parties. Some reflect differences in perceptions of economic interests along the traditional left-right ideological spectrum. Others, however, reflect differences in perceptions of the role of different social groups and movements.

- Not surprisingly, NDP supporters are the most likely to say that **the wealthy** and **large Canadian corporations** have too much influence, and the least likely to say that this is so in the case of unions.
- There is relatively little difference between how Liberal and Conservative supporters gauge the degree of influence exercised by **the wealthy** and **large Canadian corporations**; there is a significant difference, however, when it comes to **unions**. A majority of Conservative supporters say that unions have too much influence in Canadian politics, compared to 28 percent of Liberal supporters (and 18% of those intending to vote for the NDP).
- Notably, there is no significant difference among supporters of any of the five political parties in their views on the influence exercised by **new technology companies** like Google and Facebook; roughly two-thirds of all Canadians, regardless of what party they intend to vote for, say that these companies have too much influence.
- Conservative supporters (52%) are slightly less likely than others to say that the **U.S. government** has too much influence in Canadian politics; those intending to vote for the Bloc Québécois (69%) are the most likely to hold this view.



- Where Conservative supporters stand out the most, however, is in their views of the influence of **environmental groups**. Among Conservative supporters, a majority (54%) say that environmental groups have too much influence, while 24 percent say they have about the right amount of influence, and 19 percent say they have too little influence. In contrast, majorities of those supporting any of the other parties – including 68 percent of Greens, 66 percent of NDPers, 59 percent of Bloquistes, and 52 percent of Liberals – say that environmental groups have too little influence.
- Conservative supporters are also more likely than supporters of the other parties to say that **ethnic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, feminists** and **university professors** have too much influence – although in these cases, only a minority of Conservative party supporters hold this view. Supporters of the NDP are the least likely to say that any of these groups have too much influence.
- Among supporters of all parties, except for the Conservatives, the proportions saying that **Indigenous Peoples** have too little influence is particularly high. Three in four (75%) NDP supporters, 68 percent of Greens, 63 percent of Bloquistes and 63 percent of Liberals say that Indigenous Peoples have too little influence in Canadian politics.

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established in 2006 as an independent non-profit organization to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Andrew Parkin at andrew.parkin@environics.ca

