



Focus Canada – Fall 2019

Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees

FINAL REPORT

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about immigration and refugees. This 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

The 43rd Canadian Federal Election just concluded was a tightly-contested campaign in which the incumbent Liberal Government led by Justin Trudeau found itself in a tough fight for reelection just a few years after it took office on a promise of “sunny ways” and broad political support. Many anticipated that immigration might emerge as a major election issue that would be used by some if not all parties as a wedge to energize their base or peel away support from competitors. The recent influx of asylum seekers at the southern border in Quebec and Manitoba, the emergence of a new populist party staking a position against “mass immigration”, and increasing animosity toward migrants in the US and elsewhere has fed concerns that Canadians were becoming more anxious about current immigration policies and the flow of newcomers into their communities.

It did not happen. Apart from a few anti-immigrant billboards popping up, immigration and refugees did not feature prominently in the election campaign, and the Peoples Party of Canada attracted less than two percent of the votes, failing to elect a single MP to Parliament. Why these issues did not materialize can be explained by the results of the most recent Environics Institute Focus Canada survey, which was conducted in the final weeks of the campaign. This research reveals that Canadians as a whole continue to be more positive than negative about the number of immigrants arriving in Canada and the benefits they bring to the country’s economy. Moreover, public concerns about such contentious issues as whether newcomers are adequately embracing Canadian values and the legitimacy of refugee claimants have not increased over the past year; if anything they have moderated. Immigration was not a top of mind issue for the vast majority of Canadian voters from any political party.

As on past surveys, attitudes about immigration and refugees differ across the population. Positive sentiments are most prevalent among younger Canadians and those with a university education. Negative views are most evident in Alberta, among Canadians ages 60 and older, and those without a high school diploma. In Quebec, despite the recent controversy over its new legislation banning religious dress, public opinion about immigrants is as positive if not more so than in other parts of the country.

The largest divergence continues to be along partisan political lines, primarily between supporters of the Liberal Party, NDP and Green Party, who are the most positive about immigration and refugees, in sharp contrast with those who would vote for the Conservative Party. This gap in sentiment notwithstanding, immigration is not an issue that strongly divides Canadians (as the recent election demonstrated), and this stands in sharp contrast to the current electoral divisions in other western countries.

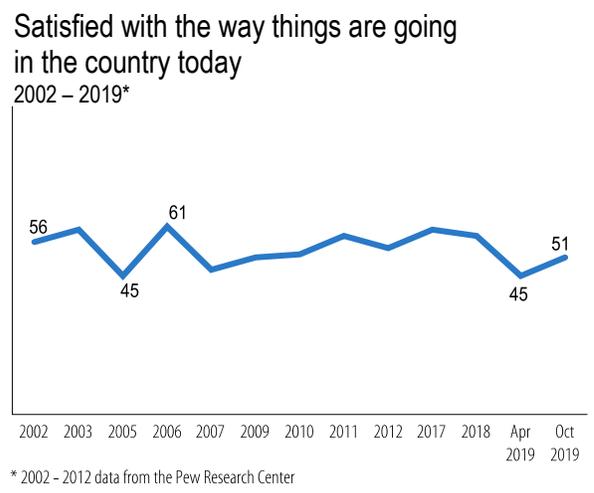
General context – Issues of public concern

Canadians' overall satisfaction with the direction of their country has rebounded over the past six months. The environment and climate change is now the top issue of concern for the country, while immigration and refugees remain well down the list and declining in salience.

Satisfaction with the direction of the country. In a month that featured polarizing rhetoric that comes with a federal election campaign, Canadians' confidence in the general direction of the country is now higher than it was in the Spring. Just over half (51%) now say they are satisfied with the way things are going in the country today, up five percentage points since April (although not yet back to the level recorded in 2017 and 2018). Four in ten (42%) express dissatisfaction (down 5 points), while another seven percent do not say either way.

This latest upward trend in public confidence is evident across most of the country, except in Atlantic Canada (45%, down 5 points). As before, confidence in the country's direction is most widespread in Quebec (62%, up 4), while least so in Alberta (34%, up 1); this difference reflects a similar gap in people's concerns about potential job losses in their household (which are strongest in Alberta and least so in Quebec).

Satisfaction also continues to be stronger among first generation Canadians (62%) and those ages 18 to 29 (66%), although the latest upward movement is evident among all age groups 30 and over.

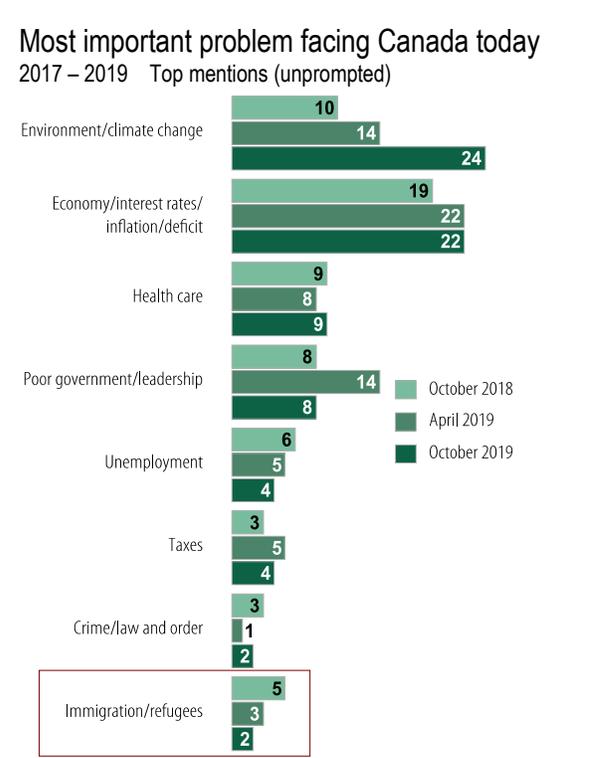


Not surprisingly, opinions are sharply polarized along the partisan divide, but satisfaction with the country's direction has improved since April across the political spectrum, and most noticeably among NDP, Bloc Quebecois and Green Party supporters. As before, the largest gap is between Liberal Party supporters (74% are satisfied with the direction of the country, up 5 points), and those who would support the Conservative Party (31%, also up 5).

Most important issues facing Canada today. What issues are most important in the minds of Canadians in this critical election month? The latest survey repeated a question asking the public to identify the single most important issue facing the country today (asked unprompted, with only one response accepted).

As in past surveys, Canadians identify a broad range of issues as most important, none of which is mentioned by more than one in four. Economic concerns (including interest rates, inflation and deficits) continue to be near the top of the list. Fewer now mention poor government leadership (declining noticeably since April).

The most significant trend dating back 12 months is the rise in mentions of the environment and/or climate change (now identified by one in four Canadians, up from only 10% one year ago) [A more in-depth analysis of Canadian public opinion trends on the most important issue will be published soon in a separate report].



Notably, immigration and refugees is well down the list of top of mind issues that Canadians consider to be most important. It is identified by only two percent (2%), down from five percent 12 months before. Immigration and refugees as a top of mind issue is of low salience across the country, and identified by no more than four percent in any identifiable group, including Conservative Party supporters who are most likely to focus on economic issues or poor government leadership).¹

Overall level of immigration

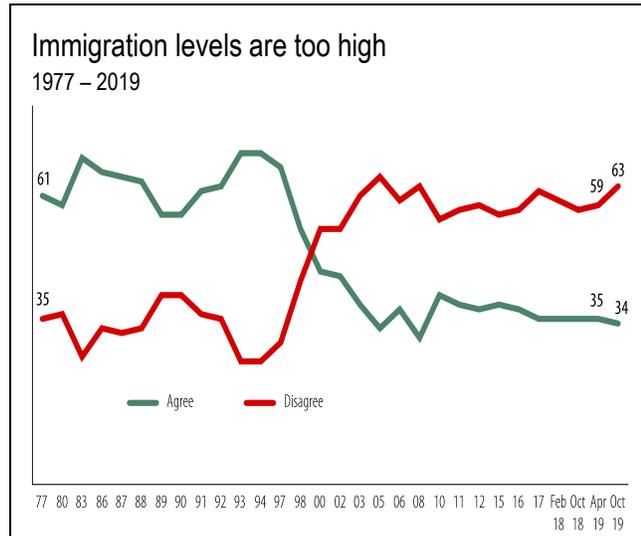
A growing majority of Canadians reject the idea that their country is accepting too many immigrants. This view is due in part because eight in ten believe that immigration is helping Canada's economy.

Agree-Disagree: "Overall, there is too much immigration in Canada." For more than a decade a clear majority of Canadians have rejected the notion that their country is accepting too many immigrants, and this perspective has strengthened over the past year.

More than six in ten (63%) now disagree with this negative statement (up 4 percentage points from April), and at its highest level since 2008. By comparison, just over one in three (34%, down 1) agrees there is too much immigration (unchanged), while the remainder (4%) have no clear opinion either way (down 2).

Rejection of immigration levels as being too high has strengthened since April across most of the country, most noticeably in the Prairies, Atlantic Canada and Quebec, while remaining unchanged in British Columbia. This view is most widely held in Atlantic Canada (71% disagree with the statement) and least so in Alberta (53%, versus 43% who agree).

As before, a positive view of immigration levels is most widespread among younger Canadians, those with more education and income, women, and those who have higher levels of income security: Concerns about immigration levels are much more evident among those concerned about potential job loss in their household (44% agree with the statement) compared with those who are not concerned (25%).



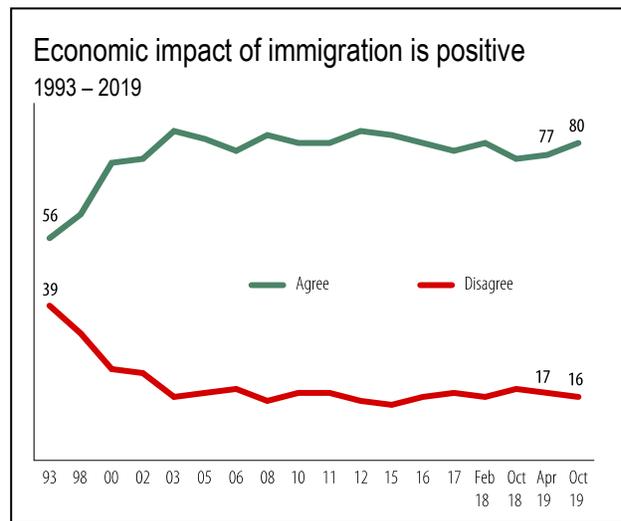
Previous Focus Canada surveys have documented how immigration and refugee issues have increasingly become politically polarized, and this continues to be the case. A positive view of current immigration levels is most widely expressed by Liberal Party (74%) and NDP (79%) supporters, followed by those who say they will vote for the Green Party (69%) or Bloc Quebecois (64%). Conservative Party supporters are more divided, with 51 percent agreeing that immigration levels are too high, compared with 45 percent who disagree. Since April, positive sentiments about immigration levels have strengthened among NDP and Bloc supporters, while diminishing among Green Party supporters.

¹ Immigration and refugees is identified as the top issue of concern by nine percent of those who say they plan to vote for the new Peoples Party of Canada, but this subsample of respondents (n=39) is too small to support statistically valid findings.

Agree-Disagree: “Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada.” Public support for immigration is based in large part on the belief that it is seen to be good for the country’s economy, and this perspective has strengthened further over the past year. Eight in ten (80%) Canadians now agree that immigration “has a positive impact on the economy of Canada”, up three points since April, and now matching the highest level recorded over the past 25 years. Just one in six (16%) disagrees with this statement (down 1), while four percent have no clear opinion to offer.

Belief in immigration as an economic driver remains the majority view across the country, and has strengthened noticeably since April in Atlantic Canada (82%, up 7 points) and B.C. (84%, up 7). Agreement with the statement is only marginally lower in the Prairies and Alberta (76% in each), where it has increased modestly since April (up 3 points and 6 points, respectively).

As before, this view is most prevalent among younger Canadians, those with higher levels of education and income, and first generation Canadians. Across political parties, a positive view continues to be shared most widely among supporters of the Federal Liberal Party (90%, up 1 since April), NDP (89%, up 3) and Green Party (82%, down 2), while least so among Canadians who support the Federal Conservative Party (68%, up 2).

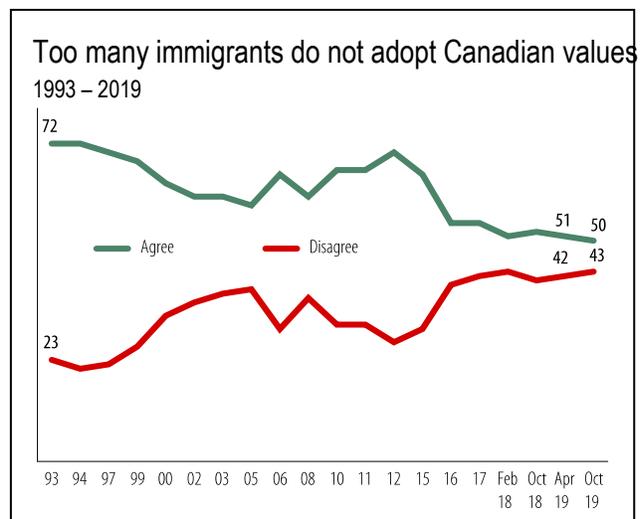


Integration of immigrants into society

Canadians continue to be divided on whether some immigrants are not adopting the right values, but this sentiment is slowly waning over time.

Agree-Disagree: “There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values.” The most contentious aspect of immigration in Canada revolves around the concerns of some that some immigrants are not doing enough to integrate into Canadian society, as it may pertain to such areas as religious practices and gender equity. This sentiment has long been reflected in this research, but over time what was once a predominant concern has been steadily declining.

The most recent survey reveals that half (50%) of Canadians agree with this statement about “too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values”, down just one point since April and now at the lowest level recorded since this question was first included on Focus Canada surveys in 1993. Roughly four in ten (43%) disagree (up 1), while another seven percent cannot say either way.



Over the past six months, agreement with the statement about too many immigrants not adopting the right values has declined in Quebec (50%, down 6 points, and for the first time aligning Quebec with the national average) and Ontario (50%, down 3), while increasing in Alberta (58%, up 3) and B.C. (51%, up 6). Public attitudes about integration and values are closely linked to age cohort, although this gap has narrowed: Canadians ages 18 to 29 are much less likely to agree about immigrants not adopting the right values (39%, up 4 points since April), compared with those 60 and older (58%, down 1).

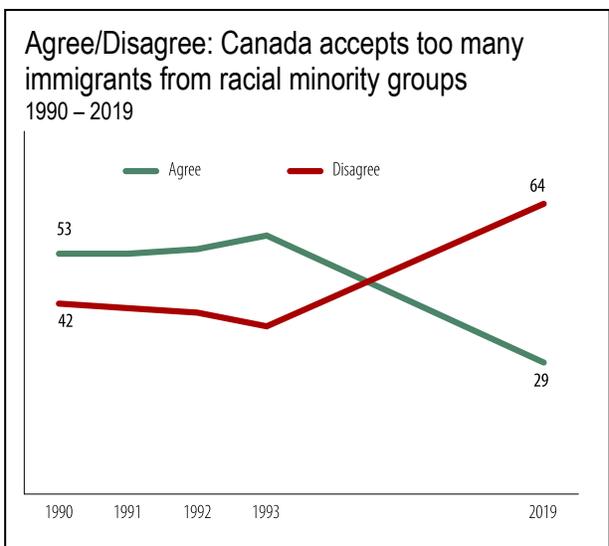
As before, views on this question remain strongly polarized across federal political party support. Conservative Party supporters (73%) are twice as likely as Liberal Party supporters (36%) to agree with the statement (and more than three times as likely to strongly agree). Agreement is also strong among those who would vote for the Bloc Quebecois (59%, but has declined by 8 percentage points since April). Opinions of NDP (34% agree with the statement) and Green Party (38%) supporters are close to that of Liberals, while Canadians who remain undecided about their electoral choice are closer to the national average (50% agree, versus 38% disagree).

Agree-Disagree: “Canada accepts too many immigrants from racial minority groups.” Some portion of public resistance to immigration stems from negative attitudes towards newcomers with specific racial and ethnic backgrounds (predominantly non-white or racialized). This continues to be evident in current public sentiment, but much less so than in previous generations.

On the current survey, two-thirds (64%) of Canadians disagree with the statement about Canada accepting too many immigrants from racial minority groups, very similar to the proportion who reject the premise that immigration levels are too high (and these are in fact predominantly the same respondents). This reflects a significant shift in public attitudes since the early 1990s, when a majority of Canadians agreed with the statement.

Agreement with the statement is the minority view across the country, but most notably among Canadians 18 to 29 (21%), those with a university degree (19%) and supporters of the Federal NDP (13%). The view that Canada accepts too many immigrants from racial minorities is most evident among Canadians without a high school diploma (42%) and household incomes of less than \$30,000 (40%).

The significant change in acceptance of racialized immigrants to Canada since the 1990s has taken place to a similar degree across all groups within the population, although less so among voters who support the Federal Conservative Party (43% of current supporters agree with the statement, down 11 points from the proportion of those supporting the Progressive Conservative Party in 1993).²



Legitimacy of refugees

Many Canadians continue to believe that some refugees are not legitimate, but such concerns have held steady over recent years, and remain well below levels recorded in the past.

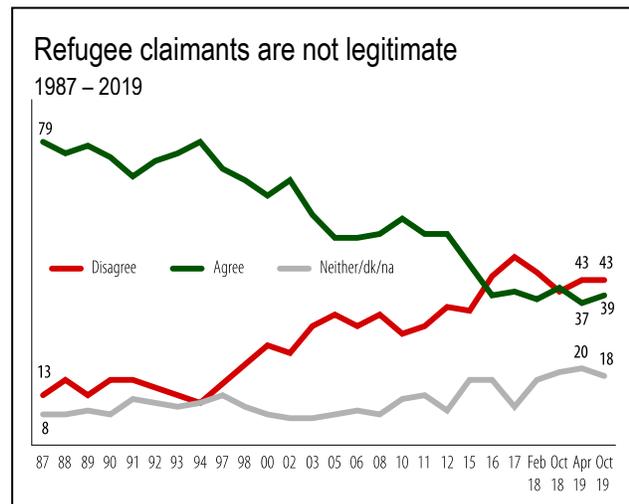
Agree-Disagree: “Most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees.” Refugees make up a very small percentage of newcomers arriving each year, but their profile has risen dramatically due to the unprecedented influx of refugees from Syria and a record number of asylum seekers arriving at the southern border. These events have attracted greater public attention, but have not hardened public opinion toward the legitimacy of refugees, which remains much more positive than in previous decades.

On the current survey, just under four in ten (39%) Canadians agree with the statement about “most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees”, up two points from April, but well below levels recorded prior to 2016. A greater proportion (43%, unchanged) disagree with the statement, while close to one in five (18%) have no clear opinion either way (down 2).

² Today’s Conservative Party includes voters who in the 1990s supported the Reform Party. In 1993, 67 percent of Reform Party supporters agreed with the statement about Canada accepting too many racial minorities, which along with Bloc Quebecois voters (65%) expressed the most anti-immigrant sentiments at that time.

Views about the legitimacy of refugees diverge noticeably across regions, with the most positive sentiment expressed in Atlantic Canada (where only 28% agree with the statement, versus 53% who disagree), followed by Manitoba and Saskatchewan (37%, versus 53%). The most negative opinions are voiced in Alberta (47% agree versus 38% disagree) and in B.C. (44% versus 36%), where agreement has increased 10 percentage points since April.

As with other questions on this survey, opinions are closely linked to generation. Concerns about refugee legitimacy are lowest among Canadians ages 18 to 29 (18% agree with the statement; down 10 points), rising to 47 percent among those 60 plus (up 5).



This is also an issue on which there is growing political polarization. Almost two-thirds (64%) of Conservative Party supporters now agree with this statement (up 11 points since April), compared with fewer than half as many supporters of the Liberal Party (29%, unchanged), NDP (17%, down 6) and Green Party (32%, up 5). In Quebec, Bloc Quebecois supporters are now evenly divided (41% agree (down 3 points), versus 41% disagree (up 4)).

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.

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