

## As many turn away from immigrants, Canada continues our embrace

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Although mass migration has been happening for decades, in recent years the flight of refugees from conflict zones in Africa and the Middle East has produced striking images of desperate people searching for a safe place to land. The current refugee crisis has inspired considerable fear and hostility. In Europe, several governments are implementing new border controls, and attacks against immigrants seem to be on the rise.

Public opinion is turning against immigration, even in countries known for welcoming newcomers, such as Germany and Denmark. In the United States, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has famously proposed a wall along the Mexican border and a "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims entering the country.

Some have asked whether this tide of xenophobic sentiment is also evident here. True, Canadians responded with compassion to the Syrian crisis, with ordinary citizens sponsoring more than 31,000 refugees. And our immigration program remains robust; this year set a record for immigrant inflows to Canada. But is the xenophobia we see elsewhere also gaining ground here? Are racist political messages in Europe and the United States emboldening Canadians to unleash previously suppressed hostility? The latest Focus Canada survey, fielded a few weeks ago and updating questions tracked since the 1970s and 80s, finds that Canadians have recently become less hostile to immigrants. Attitudes about immigration have held steady or grown noticeably more positive over the past 15 months. Most Canadians continue to believe that immigration is good for the economy, disagree that immigration levels are too high and express growing confidence in the country's ability to manage any challenges associated with immigrants and refugees.

When it comes to welcoming refugees from Syria, a strong plurality (48 per cent) are comfortable accepting current levels. An additional one in 10 would welcome more. The one-third of Canadians who believe that we are accepting too many Syrians express concern about the country's capacity to support this many refugees, and about diverting resources from other priorities, rather than fear that these newcomers pose a security threat or won't fit in.

Strikingly, the proportion of Canadians worried that too many immigrants do not adopt "Canadian values," which was previously on the rise, has now dropped to the lowest level we have seen in more than 20 years of tracking this question.

When asked to define a good citizen, Canadians cite a number of behaviours they value: obeying the law, participating in one's community, treating others with respect and tolerating difference. Nine in 10 Canadians say that someone born elsewhere is just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in this country.

These results apply generally across the country, and the positive trends noted above are evident across most groups. There is some variation across the country, with negative opinions about immigration most prevalent in the Prairie provinces (where in some cases opinions have worsened since 2015).

Residents of Atlantic Canada and British Columbia tend to be the most positive, while opinions in Ontario and Quebec generally fall somewhere in the middle. Perspectives also vary somewhat across generations, with concerns about immigration and integration most widely voiced by less educated and older Canadians (especially those over 60).

Canada rarely sees itself as an exceptional country, perhaps because our size, power and history make us more prone to self-effacing understatement. But as we prepare to celebrate our 150th birthday as a nation, and as we contemplate the recent federal panel proposal to increase our intake of immigrants from about 300,000 a year to 450,000 in order to have enough workers to support retiring baby boomers, it is worth reflecting on the factors that have led Canada to seemingly turn outward while many societies are turning inward. Canada is by no means devoid of racism and xenophobia – but it is difficult to make the case that these phenomena are socially or politically ascendant.

Why are Canadians in an open, internationalist mood while so many others are circling their wagons? To reflect on this question is not to deny our inequities or the dark parts of our history.

For those who want a fair, inclusive country, trying to understand what's going right is as worthwhile as trying to understand what's going wrong.

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