



*Confederation
of Tomorrow*

Federal-provincial relations: public perceptions

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The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 with a mandate to conduct in-depth public opinion and social research on the issues shaping Canada's future. It is through such research that Canadians can better understand themselves and their changing society.

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Confederation of Tomorrow

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys give voice to Canadians about the major issues shaping the future of the federation and their political communities. They are conducted annually by an association of the country's leading public policy and socio-economic research organizations.

The 2024 study consists of a survey of 6,036 adults, conducted between January 13 and April 13, 2024 (82% of the responses were collected between January 17 and February 1); 94% of the responses were collected online. The remaining responses were collected by telephone from respondents living in the North or on First Nations reserves.

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Executive summary | <u>1</u> |
| Federal and provincial governments: working together | <u>3</u> |
| Who is to blame for federal-provincial conflict? | <u>7</u> |
| The division of powers in the federation | <u>12</u> |
| The advantages (or disadvantages) of federalism | <u>17</u> |

Executive summary

Progress on many of the key issues facing the country today depends on effective collaboration between the federal and provincial or territorial governments. But the need for these different levels of government to work together can also bring them into conflict. This conflict often stems from the challenge of accommodating diverging regional interests in the federation; it may also be sparked by the different political leanings of federal and provincial parties and leaders.

While a certain degree of friction may be inevitable, excessive conflict risks undermining public support for the country's federal system of government. For this reason, the 2024 Confederation of Tomorrow survey explored public perceptions of the state of federal-provincial relations, and how these have changed over time. The study finds that views on whether federal and provincial governments are working well together have not changed that much over the past two decades. However, compared to the early 2000s, Canadians are less likely to blame both governments equally when conflict arises, and more likely to take sides by blaming either the federal government or their provincial government.

The study identifies several other notable trends. One is the narrowing of the gap between the opinions of Quebecers and other Canadians - not because Quebecers view federalism more positively, but because views outside the province have become more negative. Another is the consistently more negative assessment of the federal system among residents of the Prairie provinces, particularly Saskatchewan and Alberta. A third is the more negative assessment among older Canadians compared to their younger counterparts. In Quebec, this pattern represents a change compared to earlier periods; while, previously, younger Quebecers held more negative views of federalism than their older counterparts, the reverse is now the case.

Not surprisingly, the survey finds that supporters of the governing party in Ottawa offer a more positive assessment of the state of federal-provincial relations than do supporters of federal opposition parties. Patterns among supporters of provincial parties are more varied, reflecting differences in the extent to which federal-provincial relations is a salient issue in provincial politics.



Key Findings

- Over one in two Canadians say that the **federal and provincial governments are not working well together**.
- The proportion that says the federal and provincial governments are working well together has **dropped significantly since 2003 in Atlantic Canada and in the Prairie provinces**.
- Whereas **younger Quebecers** previously held a more **negative assessment of federal-provincial relations** than their older counterparts, **the reverse is true today**.
- The proportion of Canadians blaming both the federal government and their provincial or territorial government equally for intergovernmental conflict is **lower than it was 20 years ago**, while the proportions blaming either the federal government or their provincial or territorial government have both increased.
- **Canadians are more likely to favour a greater decentralization of powers in the federation** than they are to favour a transfer of powers from their province or territory to Ottawa.
- Over the past few years, **the proportion of Canadians outside Quebec who favour their province taking charge of many of the things the federal government currently does has increased**. As a result, there is now much less of a gap between the preferences of Quebecers and those of other Canadians on this question.
- In most jurisdictions, the **proportion agreeing that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages** outweighs the proportion disagreeing - but there are two exceptions: Saskatchewan and Alberta.
- In 2003, **Canadians outside Quebec were much more likely than Quebecers to agree that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages** for their province or territory; **today they are only slightly more likely to agree**.

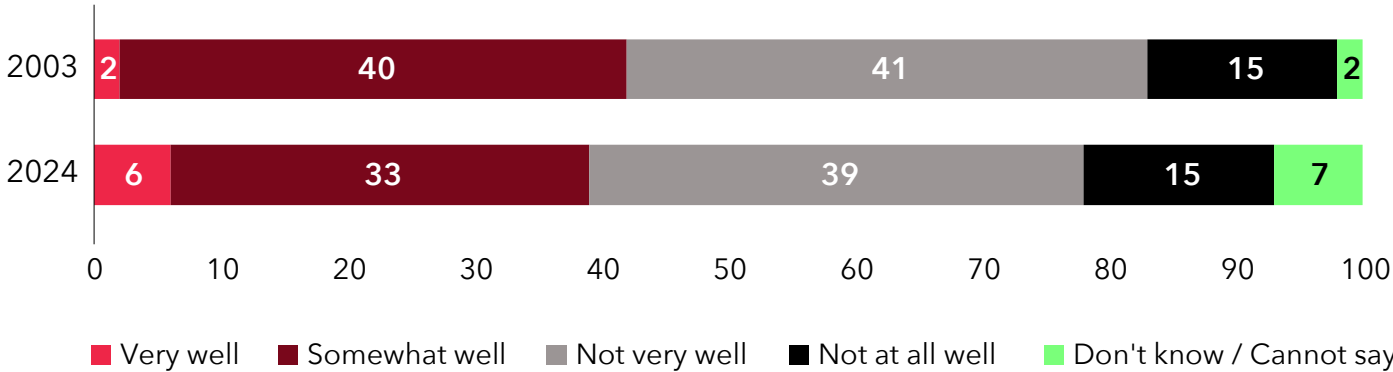
Federal and provincial governments: working together

Overall, public perceptions of the state of federal-provincial relations are somewhat divided, with over one in two saying that the federal and provincial governments are not working well together. And - across Canada overall - there has been little change in opinion compared to 20 years ago. But the situation is different in the three biggest provinces, compared to Atlantic Canada and the Prairies.

Currently, 39 percent of Canadians say the federal and provincial governments are working well together. This includes only six percent who say the two levels of government are working very well together, and 33 percent who say they are working together somewhat well. A greater proportion (54%) say they are *not* working well together, including 39 percent who say they are not working together very well, and 15 percent who say they are not working well together at all.

FIGURE 1

Are governments working well together? Canada, 2003 and 2024



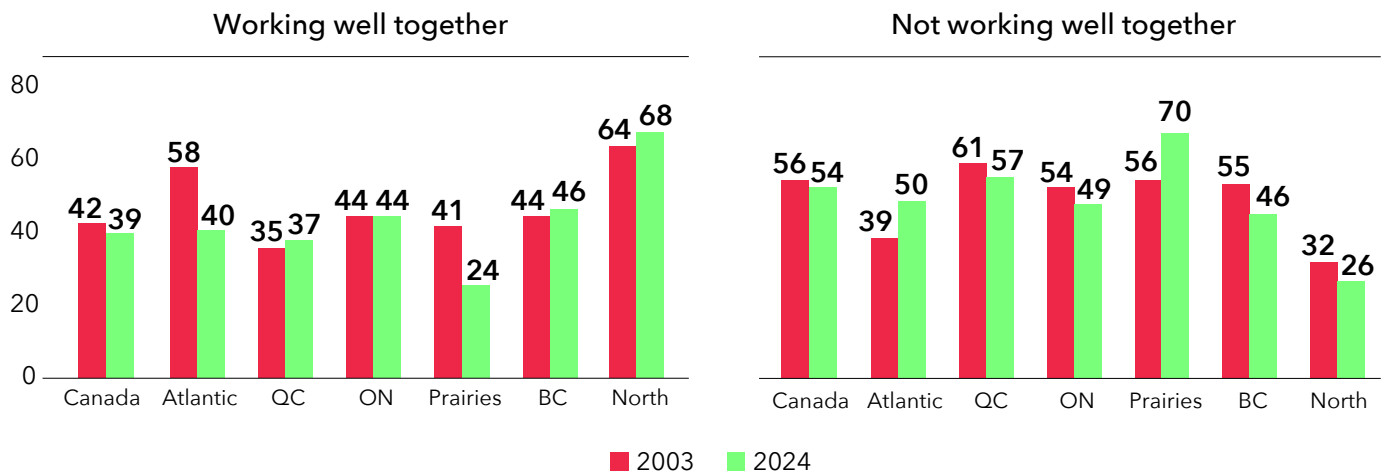
Q79. Do you think the federal and provincial governments are working very well together, somewhat well, not very well or are they not working at all well together? (Source for 2003: CRIC, Portraits of Canada)

Compared to 2003, the proportion that says the federal and provincial governments are working well together is down slightly - a drop of three percentage points (from 42% to 39%). The proportion saying the two levels of government are not working well together is also down slightly (from 56% to 54%), while the proportion that offers no opinion has increased (from 2% to 7%).

The extent of change in the assessment of the state of federal-provincial relations, however, varies considerably by region. In the three biggest provinces (Ontario, Quebec and B.C.), as well as in the North, the proportion that says the federal and provincial governments are working well together is more or less unchanged from what it was in 2003. But this proportion has dropped by 18 percentage points in Atlantic Canada (from 58% to 40%) and by 17 percentage points in the Prairie provinces (from 41% to 24%). Seven in ten Prairie province residents now say that the two levels of government are not working well together.

FIGURE 2

Are governments working well together? 2003 and 2024, by region



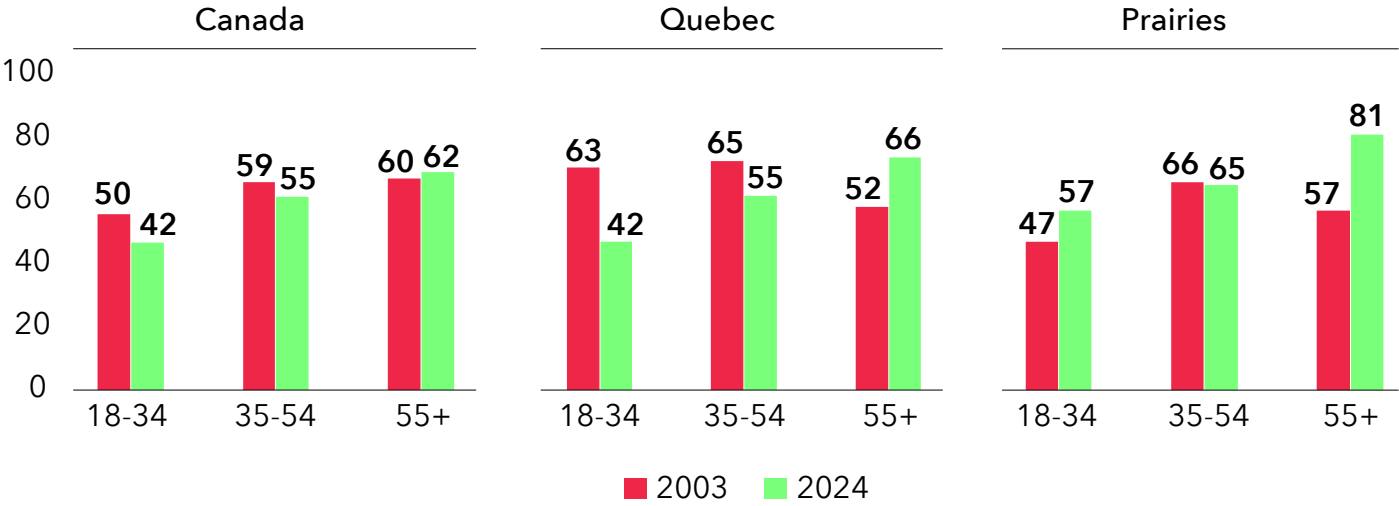
Q79. Do you think the federal and provincial governments are working very well together, somewhat well, not very well or are they not working at all well together? (Source for 2003: CRIC, Portraits of Canada)

Previously, Atlantic Canadians were much more likely than the national average to say that the federal and provincial governments are working well together, but this is no longer the case. And while residents of the Prairie provinces were previously just as likely as other Canadians (on average) to say that the two levels of government are not working well together, they are now much less likely to say so.

In addition to these regional differences, there are differences by age group: older Canadians are more likely than younger Canadians to say that the two levels of government are not working well together. This is currently the case in every region of the country. It was also the case in most regions of the country in 2003 – but at that time, the exception was Quebec. Whereas younger Quebecers previously held a more negative assessment of federal-provincial relations than their older counterparts, the reverse is true today.

FIGURE 3

Federal and provincial governments are not working well together, 2003 and 2024, by age group and region



Q79. Do you think the federal and provincial governments are working very well together, somewhat well, not very well or are they not working at all well together? (Source for 2003: CRIC, Portraits of Canada)



Finally, and unsurprisingly, the current assessment of the state of federal-provincial relations differs among supporters of the different federal political parties. A majority of Liberal Party supporters (63%) say that the two levels of government are working well together, compared to only 41 percent of NDP supporters, and 29 percent of the supporters of both the Conservative Party and the Bloc Québécois.

While most of the supporters of the party currently holding power in Ottawa say the two levels of government are working well together, this is not the case for the supporters of many of the parties holding power at the provincial level – but there is some variation.¹

A majority of supporters of the CAQ in Quebec (55%), of the Progressive Conservative Party in Ontario (55%) and of the NDP in Manitoba (53%) say that the federal and provincial governments are not working well together. In these three provinces, however, opinions among these supporters of the government are somewhat divided (meaning that sizeable minorities view federal-provincial relations more positively).

In Alberta and Saskatchewan, the views of supporters of the parties forming the provincial government are much more one-sided: 81 percent of supporters of the Saskatchewan Party in Saskatchewan, and 88 percent of supporters of the United Conservative Party in Alberta, offer a negative assessment of the state of federal-provincial relations.

B.C. is an exception to the overall pattern: in that province, a strong majority of supporters of the governing NDP (63%) hold the more positive view, saying that the two levels of government are working well together.

¹ The sample sizes are as follows: Quebec CAQ= 324; Ontario PC = 246; Manitoba NDP = 121; Saskatchewan Party = 157; Alberta UCP = 213; BC NDP = 183.

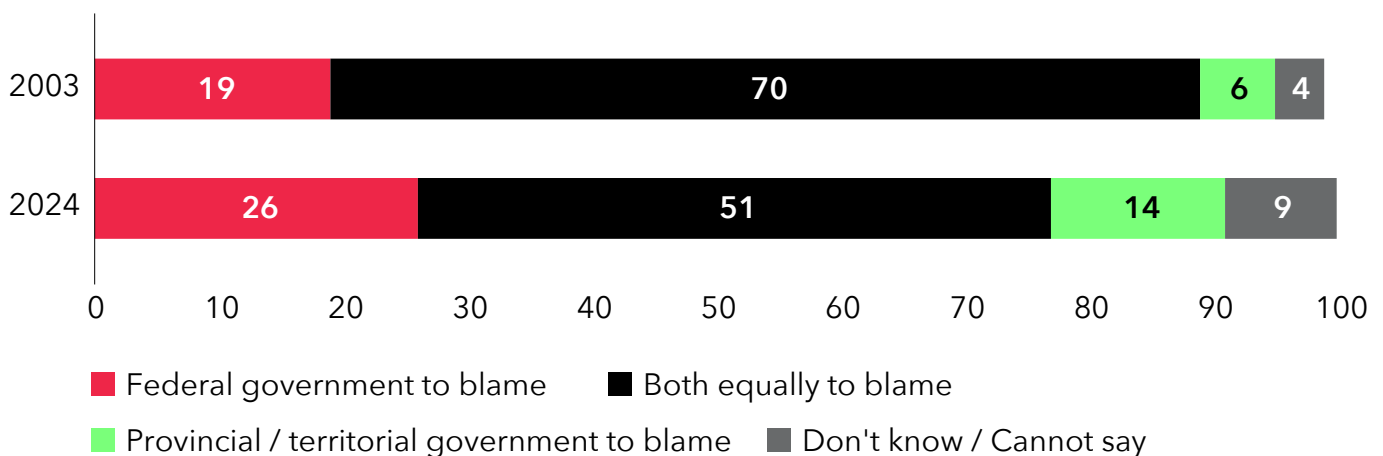
Who is to blame for federal-provincial conflict?

Overall, Canadians are more likely to say that both the federal government and their provincial or territorial government are usually equally to blame when there is conflict between the two, rather than blaming one or the other. But the proportion blaming both equally is lower than it was 20 years ago, while the proportions blaming either the federal government or their provincial or territorial government have both increased.

In 2024, one in two (51%) say that both governments are usually equally to blame for federal-provincial (or federal-territorial) conflict, compared to 26 percent who say the federal government is usually to blame, 14 percent who say their provincial or territorial government is usually to blame, and nine percent who offer no opinion either way.

FIGURE 4

Which government is to blame for conflict? 2003 and 2024

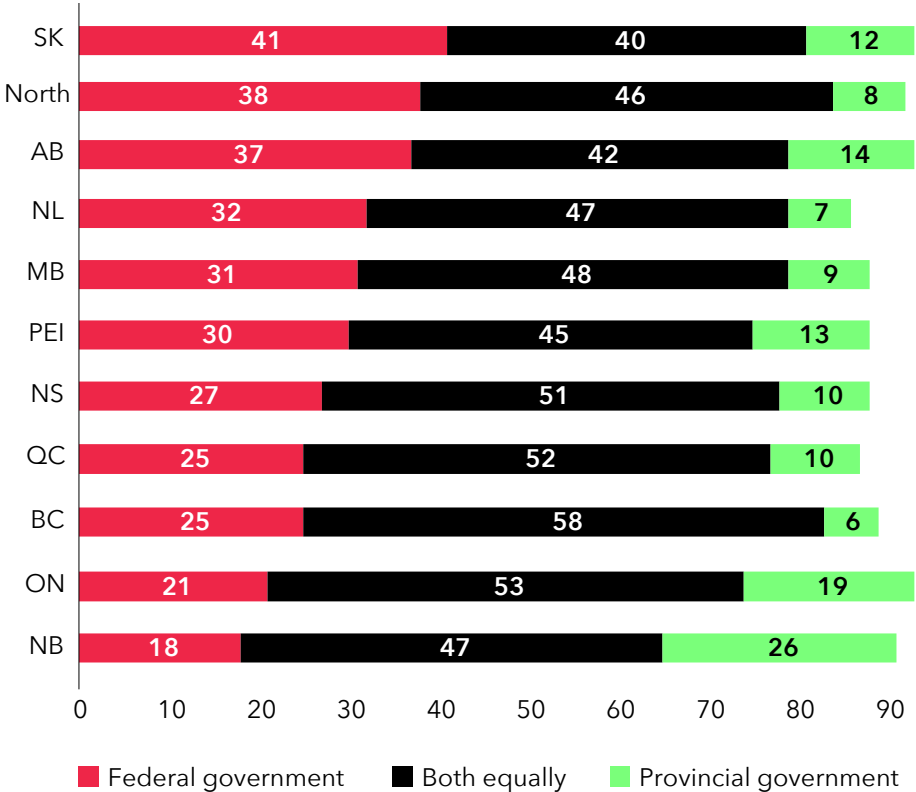


Q80. When there is a conflict between the federal government and your provincial [territorial] government, which one do you think is usually to blame: the federal government, your provincial [territorial] government or that both are usually equally to blame? (Source for 2003: CRIC, Portraits of Canada)

The proportion saying the federal government is usually to blame for intergovernmental conflict is higher in Saskatchewan (41%) and Alberta (37%), as well as in the North (38%); it is lowest in Quebec (25%), B.C. (25%), Ontario (21%) and New Brunswick (18%). The proportion saying their provincial government is usually to blame is lowest in B.C. (6%) and Newfoundland and Labrador (7%), and highest in Ontario (19%) and New Brunswick (26%). New Brunswick is the only province where residents are more likely to blame their provincial government for conflict than they are to blame the federal government.

FIGURE 5

Which government is to blame for conflict? 2024, by province or region



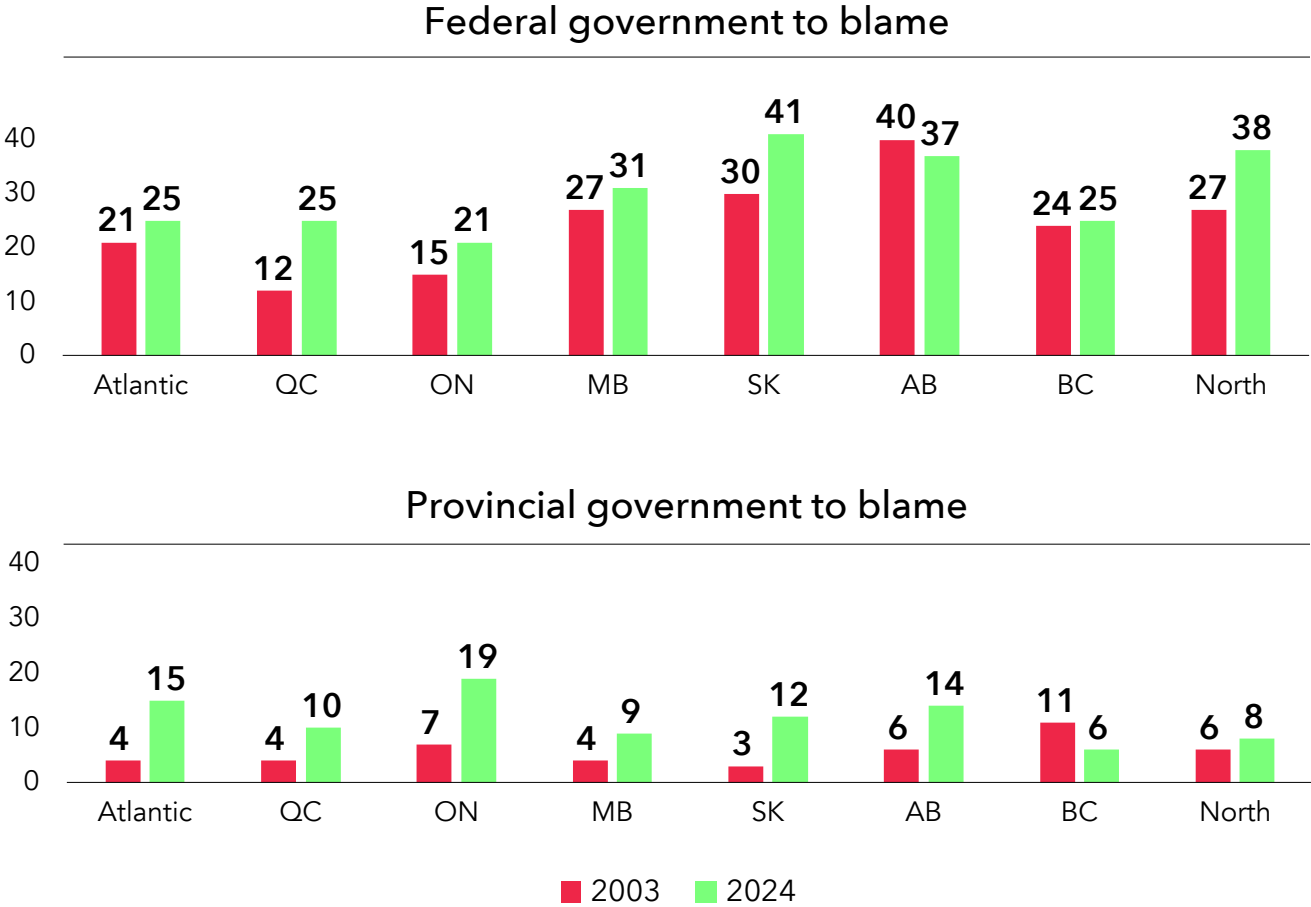
Q80. When there is a conflict between the federal government and your provincial [territorial] government, which one do you think is usually to blame: the federal government, your provincial [territorial] government or that both are usually equally to blame?

The proportion saying both governments are usually to blame is highest in the three largest provinces - B.C. (58%), Ontario (53%) and Quebec (52%), as well as in Nova Scotia (51%).

There have been significant increases since 2003 in the proportions saying the federal government is usually to blame for intergovernmental conflict in Quebec (up 13 percentage points), Saskatchewan (up 11 points) and the North (up 11 points). While fewer blame their provincial or territorial government, the proportions doing so have increased in Ontario (up 12 points), Atlantic Canada (up 11 points), Saskatchewan (up 9 points) and Alberta (up 8 points).

FIGURE 6

Which government is to blame for conflict? 2003 and 2024, by province or region

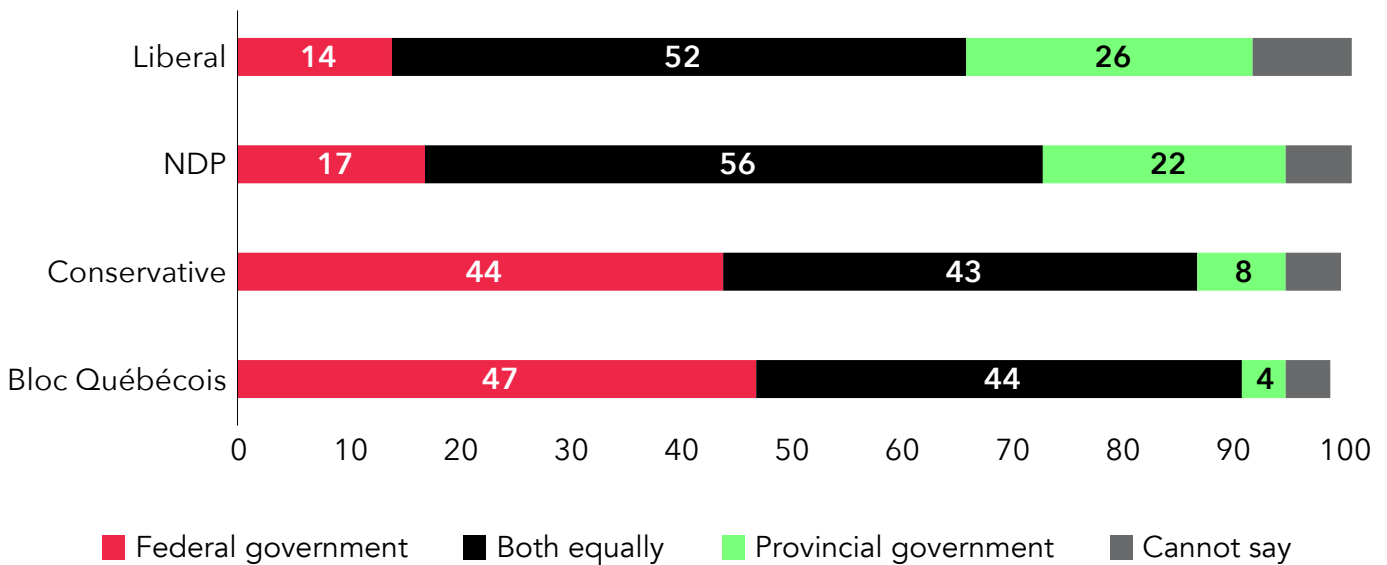


Q80. When there is a conflict between the federal government and your provincial [territorial] government, which one do you think is usually to blame: the federal government, your provincial [territorial] government or that both are usually equally to blame? (Source for 2003: CRIC, Portraits of Canada)

Not surprisingly, supporters of the governing federal Liberal Party (14%) are much less likely to say that the federal government is usually to blame for intergovernmental conflict than are supporters of the Conservative Party (44%) or the Bloc Québécois (47%). Supporters of the NDP at the federal level (17%) are also less likely than average to blame the federal government.

FIGURE 7

Which government is to blame for conflict? 2024, by federal vote intention

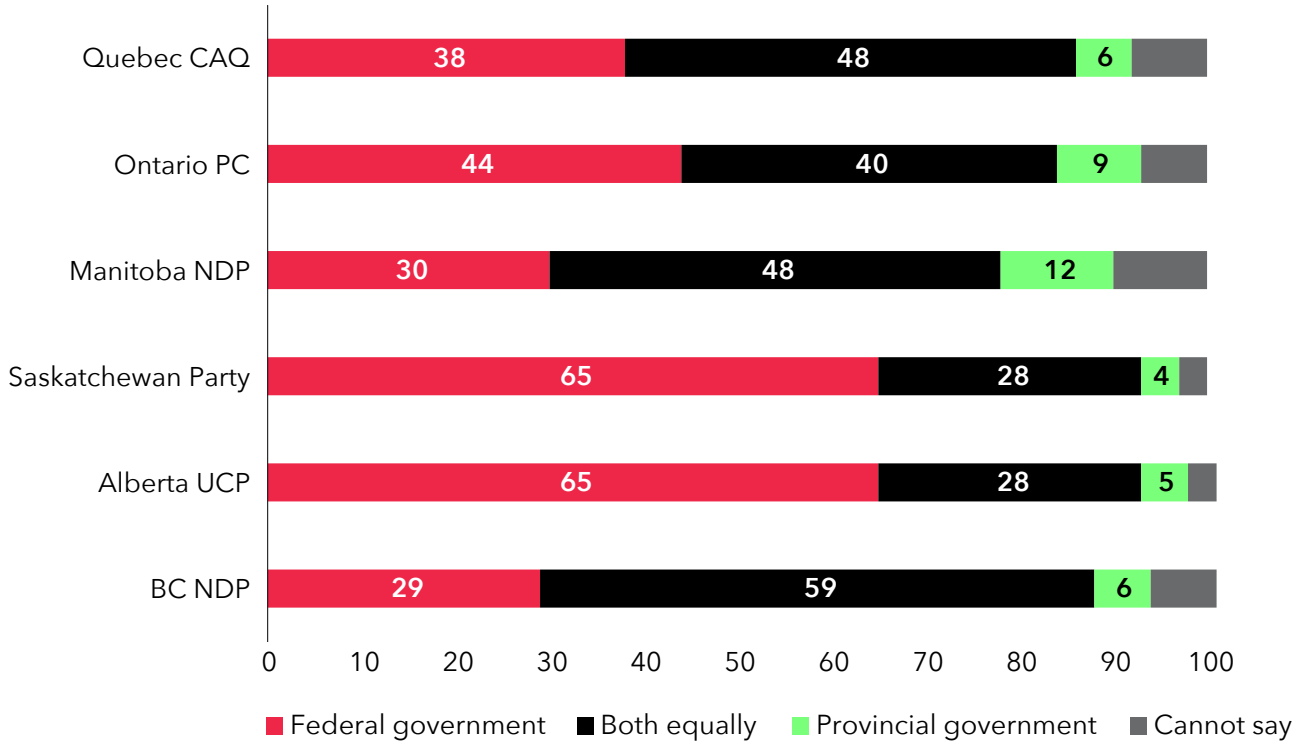


Q80. When there is a conflict between the federal government and your provincial [territorial] government, which one do you think is usually to blame: the federal government, your provincial [territorial] government or that both are usually equally to blame?

Supporters of political parties currently forming government provincially are more likely than average to blame the federal government for intergovernmental conflict, but the extent to which this is the case varies – following the same pattern as for the question about whether federal and provincial governments are working well together. Only 29 percent of BC NDP and 30 percent of Manitoba NDP supporters say the federal government is usually to blame for conflict, compared to a higher proportion among Quebec CAQ (38%) and Ontario PC (44%) supporters, and to a much high proportion among Saskatchewan Party (65%) and Alberta UCP (65%) supporters.

FIGURE 8

Which government is to blame for conflict? 2024, by provincial vote intention



Q80. When there is a conflict between the federal government and your provincial [territorial] government, which one do you think is usually to blame: the federal government, your provincial [territorial] government or that both are usually equally to blame?

In certain provinces, there is also relatively little difference in opinion on this question between supporters of the provincial government and supporters of the largest opposition party (in terms of popular support at the time of the survey). This is the case, for instance, between CAQ and PQ supporters in Quebec, and between NDP and Conservative supporters in B.C. In other provinces, however, there are considerable differences, with government supporters much more likely to blame the federal government, and opposition supporters much more likely to blame the provincial government for conflict. This is the case in Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta. In these three provinces, the issue of the management of federal-provincial relations is one that differentiates the main provincial political parties from one another.



The division of powers in the federation

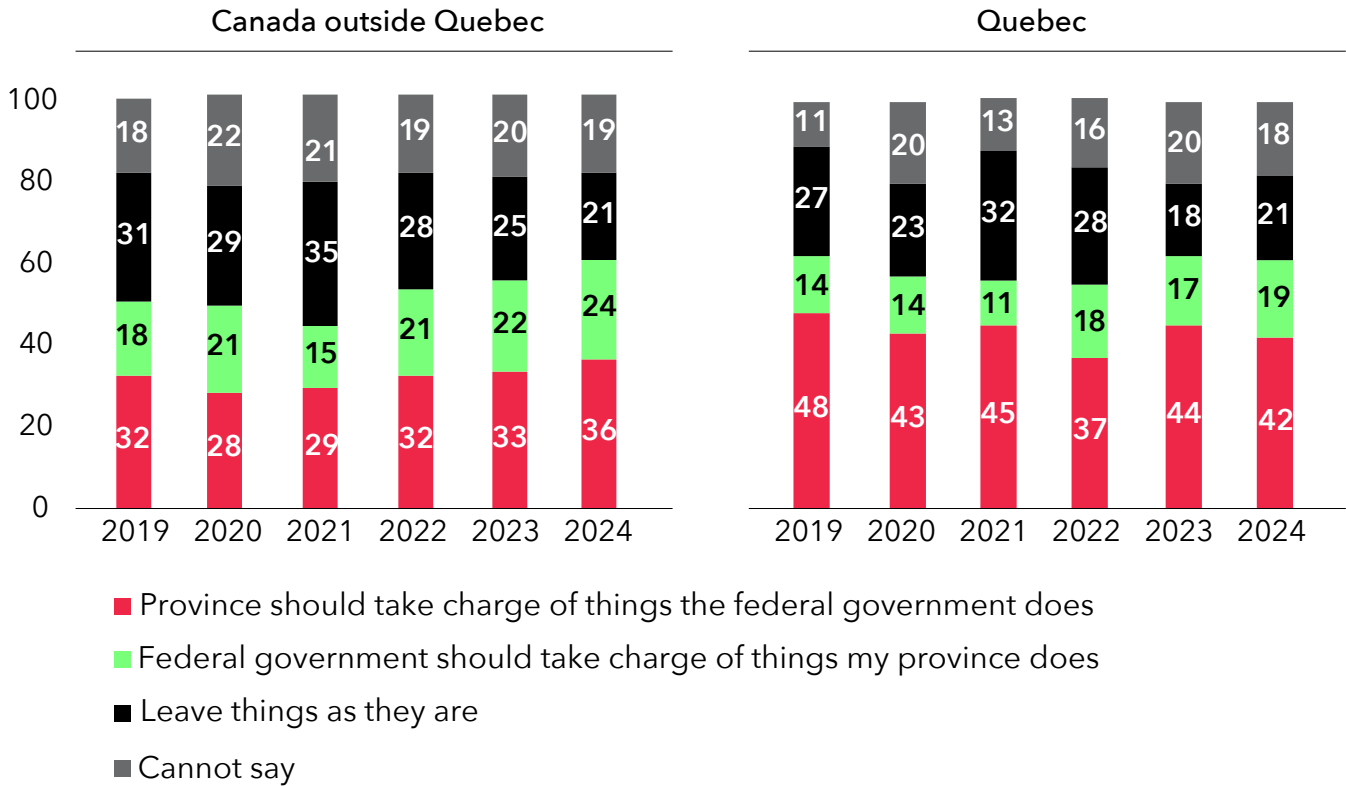
On the whole, Canadians seem comfortable with their comparatively decentralized federation. About one in four (23%) favour a shift in powers from their province or territory to the federal government. A greater share (38%) would prefer a shift in the other direction - saying that the government of their province or territory should take charge of many of the things the federal government does right now.

Historically, Quebecers have been more favourable toward greater decentralization than Canadians outside the province (taken together). Over the past few years, however, the proportion of Canadians outside Quebec who favour their province taking charge of many things the federal government currently does has increased (up 8 percentage points between 2020 and 2024, from 28% to 36%), while the proportion of Quebecers holding this view has held steady (down 1 point, from 43% to 42%). As a result, there is now much less of a gap between the preferences of Quebecers and those of other Canadians on this question (a 15-point gap in 2020 has narrowed to only 6 points today).

Historically, Quebecers have been more favourable toward greater decentralization than Canadians outside the province (taken together). But there is now much less of a gap between the preferences of Quebecers and those of other Canadians on this question.

FIGURE 9

The division of powers in the federation, 2019 - 2024

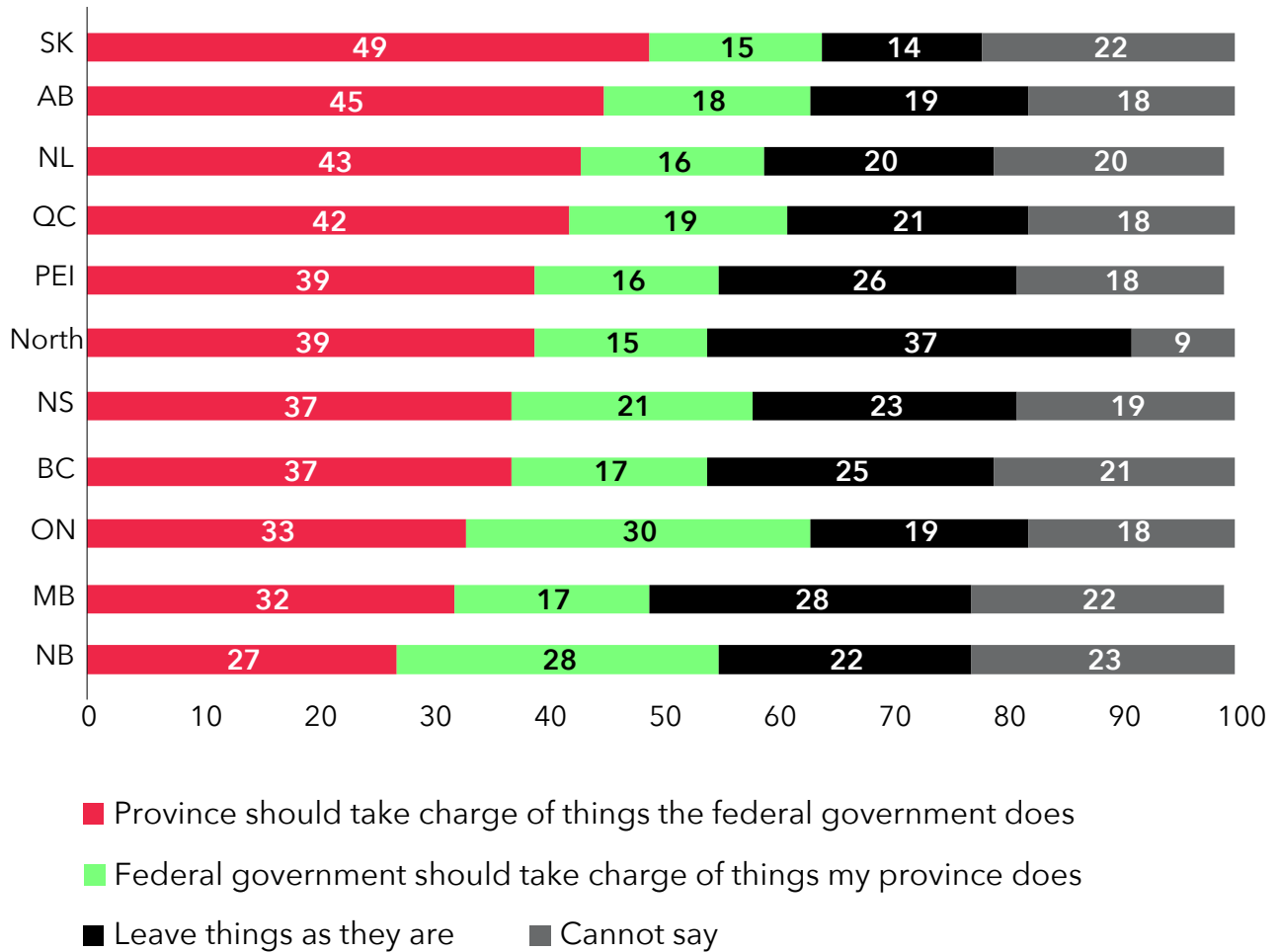


Q.23 Which of the following statements is closest to your own view of how governments should work in Canada?

Looking at the opinions of residents of each individual province and territory, support for a shift of powers away from Ottawa is currently highest in Saskatchewan (49%), Alberta (45%), Newfoundland and Labrador (43%), and Quebec (42%). It is lowest in Yukon (30%) and New Brunswick (27%). Support for a change in the opposite direction - a shift of powers from the province or territory toward the federal government - is highest in Ontario (30%) and New Brunswick (28%).

FIGURE 10

The division of powers in the federation, 2024, by province or region



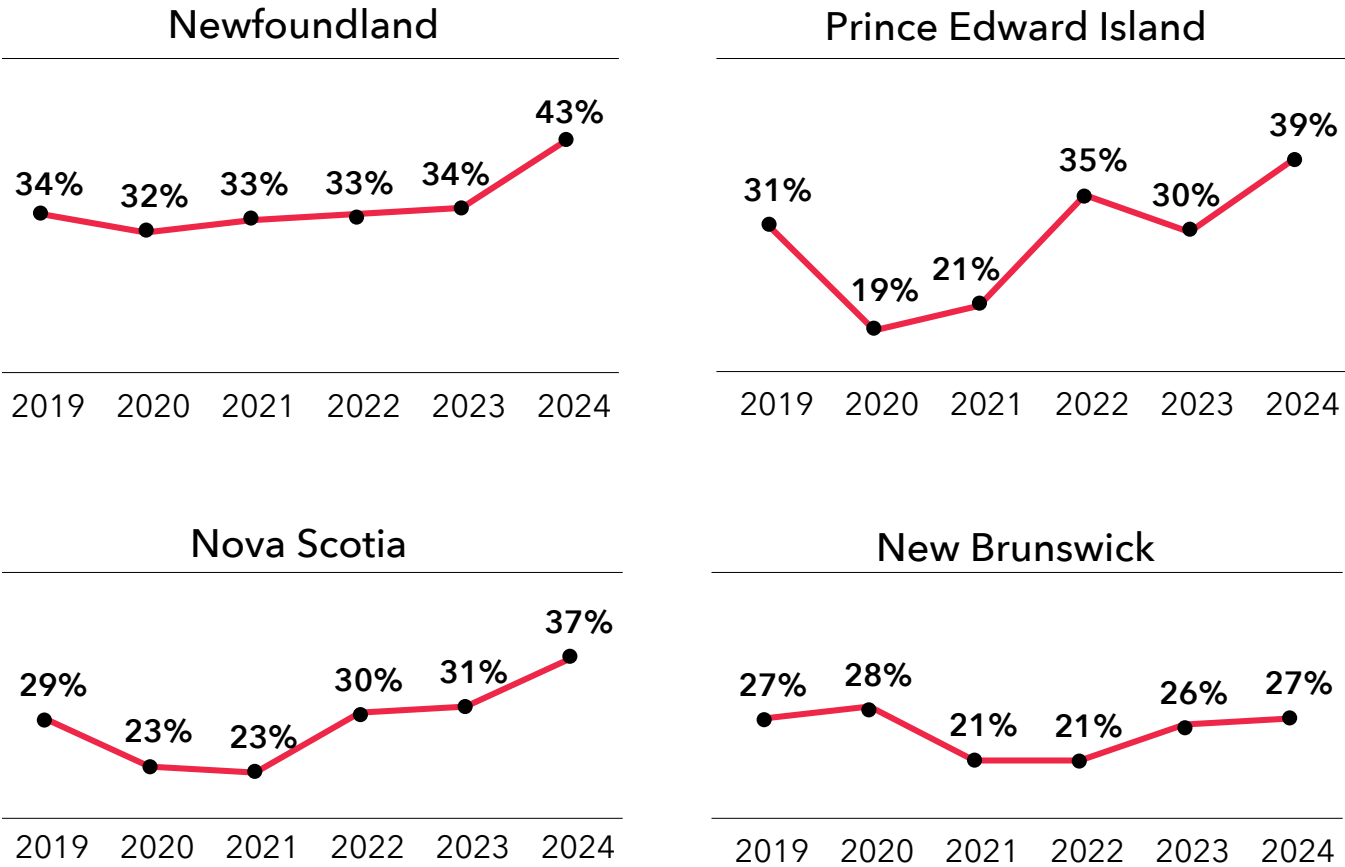
Q.23 Which of the following statements is closest to your own view of how governments should work in Canada?

Ontario and New Brunswick are the only jurisdictions where opinions are more or less evenly split between the two options (centralization or decentralization). In every other province or territory, the proportion favouring decentralization outweighs that favouring centralization.

The overall increase since 2020 in the proportion of Canadians outside Quebec favouring their province or territory taking charge of many of the things the federal government currently does is more pronounced in some jurisdictions. This includes the Atlantic provinces, with the exception of New Brunswick (Newfoundland and Labrador (up 11 points), PEI (up 20 points) and Nova Scotia (up 14 points), as well as Ontario (up 10 points).

FIGURE 11

Support for decentralization (% more powers for provincial government), Atlantic provinces, 2019 - 2024

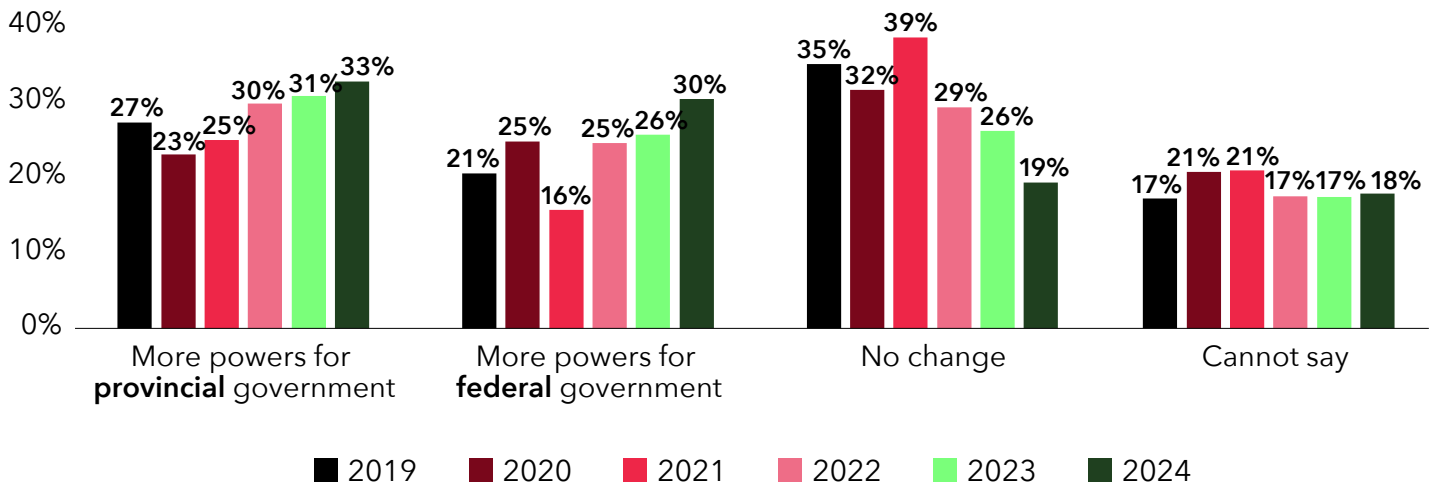


Q.23 Which of the following statements is closest to your own view of how governments should work in Canada? "The government of my province should take charge of many of the things the federal government does right now."

The case of Ontario is interesting because the proportion favouring a change in the opposite direction (greater centralization) has also increased over the same period (by 6 points). The proportion favouring no change or expressing no opinion has declined by 16 points. More Ontarians, in other words, are taking a position one way or another – favouring either more or less centralization of powers in the federation.

FIGURE 12

Division of powers: Ontario, 2019 - 2024



Q.23 Which of the following statements is closest to your own view of how governments should work in Canada?

This development in Ontario is occurring because the supporters of the different provincial political parties are moving in opposite directions. Among supporters of the governing Progressive Conservatives, there has been an 18-point increase since 2020 in the proportion favouring more powers for the province. Among supporters of the NDP, which forms the official opposition in the province, support for a shift of powers to Ottawa is up eight points over the same period; this opinion has also grown more popular among supporters of the provincial Liberal Party (up 12 points). These changes suggest that the questions of federal-provincial relations and the division of powers are becoming a more salient political issue in the province, with government and opposition supporters both becoming more likely to take a position – but moving in opposing directions.

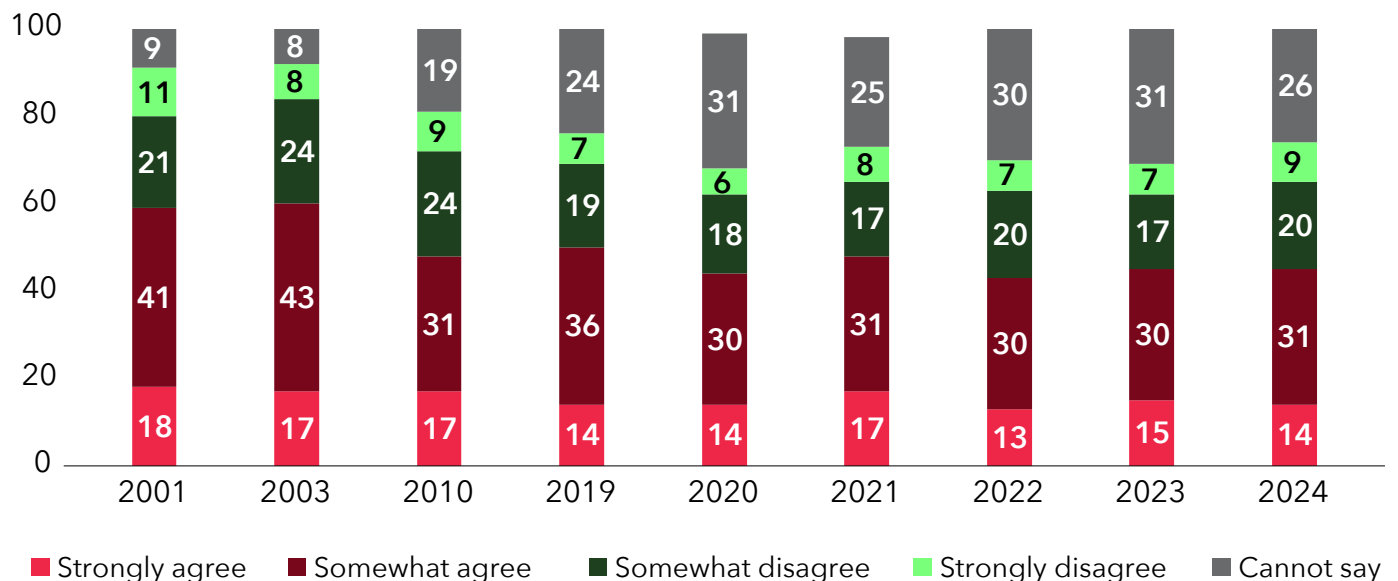


The advantages (or disadvantages) of federalism

Fewer than one in two Canadians agree that federalism in this country has more advantages than disadvantages for their province or territory (45%). While this is less than a majority, it nonetheless outweighs the proportion that disagrees (29%), as a significant minority (26%) does not express an opinion either way.

FIGURE 13

Does Canadian federalism have more advantages than disadvantages for province / territory? 2001 - 2024

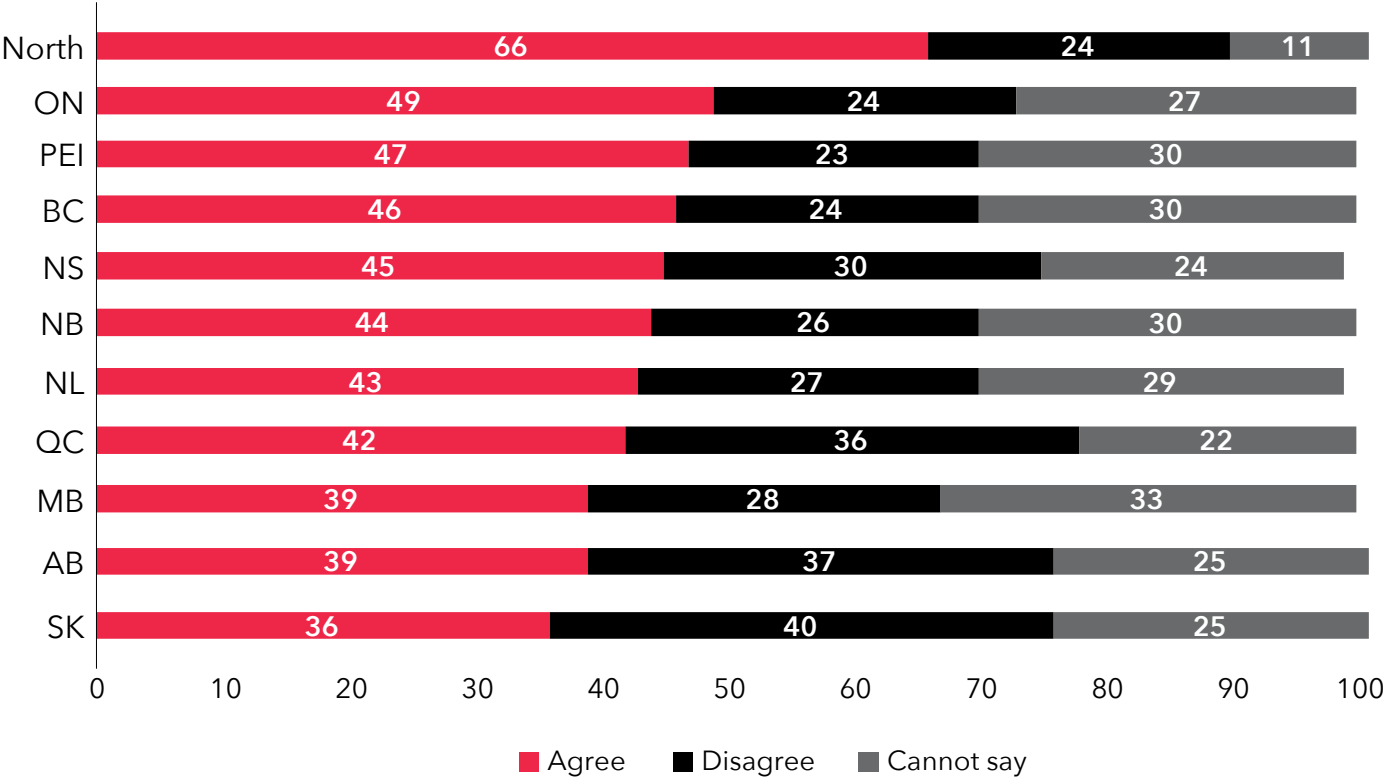


Q22d. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements: Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for [name of province / territory]. (Source for 2001 and 2003: CRIC; Source for 2010: Mowat Centre)

The proportion agreeing that Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province or territory is currently much higher than average in the North (66%). Among the provinces, it is highest in Ontario (49%), B.C. (46%) and the Atlantic provinces (44%). It is just below the national average in Quebec (42%) and is lowest in the Prairie provinces (38%).

FIGURE 14

Agree or disagree: Canadian federalism have more advantages than disadvantages for my province or territory? 2024, by province or region



Q22d. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements: Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for [name of province / territory].

In most jurisdictions, the proportion agreeing that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages outweighs the proportion disagreeing - but there are two exceptions. In Alberta, the proportions agreeing (39%) and disagreeing (37%) are more or less equal. In Saskatchewan, the proportion agreeing (36%) is slightly lower than the proportion disagreeing (40%).

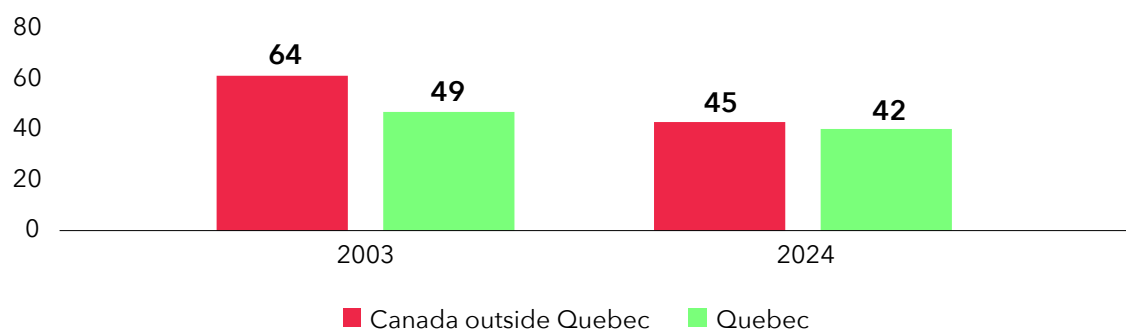
The proportion of Canadians agreeing that Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province or territory has changed very little since this series of annual surveys began in 2019; between 2019 and 2024, agreement has oscillated between 45 and 50 percent. However, the proportion agreeing is lower than it was at the beginning of the 2000s, when it reached 60 percent.² The proportion disagreeing has not increased since that time; rather, it is the proportion expressing no opinion that has increased (which is partly a result of the change in the way the surveys are administered).³

Since 2019, the proportion agreeing has declined noticeably in Atlantic Canada (down by 7 percentage points) and Ontario (down 9 points), but held more or less steady elsewhere.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a much greater change in opinion outside Quebec than inside that province. In 2003, for instance, Canadians outside Quebec were 15 percentage points more likely than Quebecers to agree that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province or territory; today they are only three points more likely to agree.

FIGURE 15

Does Canadian federalism have more advantages than disadvantages for province / territory? 2003 and 2024 (% who strongly or somewhat disagree)



Q22d. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements: Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for [name of province / territory]. (Source for 2003: CRIC, Portraits of Canada)

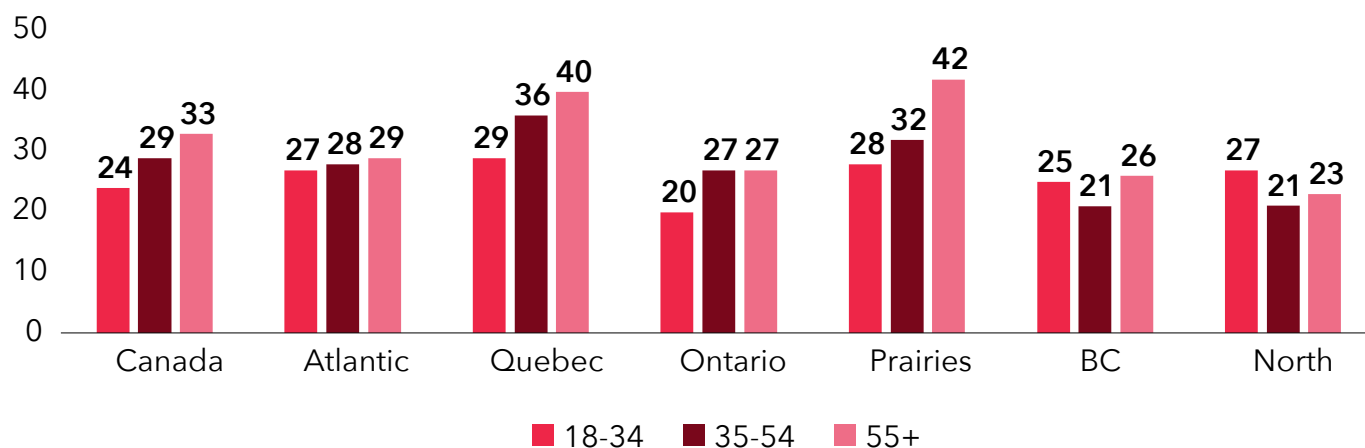
² Based on results from the CRIC Portraits of Canada annual surveys.

³ The survey in the early 2000s were conducted by telephone, while the Confederation of Tomorrow surveys are conducted online. Telephone surveys do not initially offer respondents the option of saying they have no opinion; this response is recorded only when respondents choose not to select any of the opinions mentioned by the interviewer. For this reason, telephone surveys generally produce fewer “don’t know” responses than do online surveys.

Finally, opinions on this question differ among age groups, with younger Canadians being less negative in their assessment of federalism. Specifically, those age 18 to 34 (24%) are less likely than those age 35 to 54 (29%) or age 55 and older (33%) to disagree that federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province or territory. This difference among age groups is more pronounced in some regions than others. It is more or less absent in the Atlantic provinces and B.C. However, in Quebec there is a difference of 11 percentage points between the youngest and oldest age groups, while in the Prairies there is a difference of 14 points.

FIGURE 16

Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for province / territory, 2024, by age group (% who strongly or somewhat disagree)



Q22d. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements: Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for [name of province / territory].

In both of these regions (Quebec and the Prairies), this age difference is consistent over the current period covered by the Confederation of Tomorrow surveys (2019 to 2024), but absent from the period covered by earlier surveys (the early 2000s). In Quebec, younger people used to feel more negatively about federalism than their older counterparts, but this is no longer the case. In the Prairies, younger people today are less likely to express negative views about federalism than they were two decades ago; there has been no such change in opinion among older residents of that region.



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