

Executive Summary

The world at the end of the first decade of the 21st century has become an anxious and unpredictable place, still reeling from the recent global financial meltdown, unable to stop growing poverty and income disparities, struggling with geopolitical tensions, piracy on the high seas, increasing religious tensions and witnessing an apparent spike in catastrophic natural disasters on every continent. Canada has been fortunate to avoid much of this turmoil, and this fact helps to explain how Canadians feel about their country, institutions and prospects for the future.

What emerges from this comprehensive research is a people who on the whole feel good about their country. The Canadian mood stands in sharp contrast to the American outlook, which is arguably the gloomiest it has been in generations.

Canadians feel as proud as they ever have of their country, and confident in their core institutions (if less so in the people running them). They have maintained their faith in the country's social welfare foundations, including support for the public health care system and a strong role for government in addressing pressing issues like the environment and poverty, although at the same time less tolerant of the inefficiencies that may result. The public remains comfortable with the growing diversity of the population (now among the most multicultural in the world) and acknowledges the presence of the country's Aboriginal peoples. Canadians have never felt safer in their communities, and believe that prevention rather than enforcement is the best route to keeping crime rates low. Public support for the death penalty remains at an all-time low.

In sharp contrast to the oft-stated anti-American bias, the people of Canada are judging the U.S.A. according to its actions and leadership, and ready to admire (and even follow) when they believe their southern neighbour is heading in the right direction. Looking to the international scene, Canadians are broadening their view of how their country can constructively engage with the world, which still includes a prominent role for being peacekeepers in areas of conflict.

In looking at the data over the past several decades, what is most notable is the striking stability of public opinion on most issues. There is a notable absence of dramatic shifts that one might see in places or in eras of social and political upheaval. By comparison, Canada seems to be a boring place, and Canadians seem to like it that way.

At the same time, also apparent is an evolution in social values as Gen X and Gen Y cohorts gradually replace their pre-Boomer grandparents in the population. Over the past decade or so, Canadians have become more progressive in their attitudes about such issues as abortion, gun control and same-sex marriage. And most do not believe economic uncertainties are any excuse to slow down efforts to tackle environmental challenges like climate change.

Apart from generational change, other factors influencing the evolution of public opinion include the generally robust economy, an increasingly educated population, and a media environment in which communication and self-expression have exploded. This raises the question of whether Canadians have confidence in their leaders and their current approach to governance in a wired, egalitarian, globalized urban world. This research reveals Canadians are proud of their country – especially its democracy – and tend to think it is on the right track. Perhaps for this reason there is little public pressure for the kind of social media-driven revolution now brewing in some other countries. The public's dissatisfaction with its leaders across the political spectrum suggests that they simply want them to exhibit some of the wisdom, dignity and idealism that our institutions seem to point them toward.

The following are key highlights from the research:

Economy and standard of living

- Canadians are more positive than negative about the direction of their country today, and this stands out in comparison to views in most other countries. Half (52%) of Canadians are positive, second only to the Chinese (87%), and well ahead of British (31%), Americans (30%), French (26%) and a number of other societies.

- The public's confidence in the national economy has improved noticeably from the recent global recession of 2008-09, but Canadians have yet to become optimistic about current economic conditions and most do not feel it is a good time to return to pre-recessionary levels of personal spending.
- At the same time, the recent recession does not appear to have had a lasting impact on how Canadians view their standard of living. Most are at least somewhat satisfied with their current standard of living, and a strong plurality say they have made progress over the past decade. Nine in ten believe they enjoy a better quality of life than do residents of the United States.
- Canadians are more likely than not to believe that the current tax system is unfair to the average taxpayer, although this view is less widespread than it was through the 1980s and 1990s. As well, a strong majority continue to believe that taxes are fundamentally a good thing because they help support the high quality of life enjoyed in this country.
- Two-thirds of Canadians believe the disparities in income between rich and poor in this country are growing, although this proportion is smaller than in 2008 and for most of the previous two decades. Eight in ten believe government has a responsibility to reduce such disparities, but the strength of this opinion has also declined in the past two years.

Canadian identity and symbols

- Canadians' pride in their country today is as strong as it has been since the 1980s. Three-quarters say they are very proud to be Canadian, and even in Quebec a comparable proportion are at least somewhat proud. This pride is based on a number of attributes, the top being that Canada is a free and democratic country, but also because of its quality of life, caring people and multiculturalism.
- Most Canadians outside Quebec identify personally more with the country than with their home province, and this proportion is up noticeably from a decade ago. In Quebec, just over one-third identify more strongly with Canada, with this proportion largely stable since 2000. Among immigrants, eight in ten identify more with their adopted country than their country of origin.
- Canadians continue to place strong importance on a number of established symbols of national identity, and in all but one case these attachments have strengthened since 2007. At the top of the list are the country's health care system, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Canadian flag and National Parks; all seen as very important by at least seven in ten. By comparison, only one in six place similar importance on the Queen as a symbol of national identity, unchanged since 1997.

National unity and governance

- Canadians' confidence in a number of major governing institutions remains strong; the military, Supreme Court and justice system inspire particular confidence. In sharp contrast, since 2007 public confidence has declined significantly in the case of Parliament and political parties, and this trend is evident across the country.
- This trend notwithstanding, Canadians also now express a record high degree of confidence in the country's underlying system of government, continuing an upward trend stretching back to 1991. This trend may well explain the stagnant levels of public support for changing the current political system to one based on proportional representation (favoured by a small but stable majority).
- Canadians' views about the relative spending priorities of the federal government have remained largely stable over the past decade, with some areas seen as having higher priority (e.g., reducing child poverty, education, health care) and others having lower priority (national defence, justice system, foreign aid). Since 2008, however, the priority on spending more has declined across most areas, suggesting a reduced appetite or expectation for growing government expenditures in response to the recession and/or the government's recent stimulus spending.
- Public support for bilingualism is now at an all time high, as it applies to both the country as a whole and Canadians' own province. Support for bilingualism in Canadians' own provinces remains highest in eastern Canada (notably Quebec) and lowest in the west, but has increased since 2003 in every province except Manitoba. This trend notwithstanding, Canadians are placing less importance than ever before on actually learning the other official language; one might say they are merely paying lip service to language-learning.

- Public sentiments do not reveal any rising threat to national unity. Quebecers are expressing less satisfaction with the status quo than in recent years, but desire for independence or sovereignty remains well below levels needed to make any referendum plausible. Western Canadians' sense of alienation with their place in Confederation is at an all time low, but is now more evident in B.C. than in the Prairie provinces.

Health care

- Canadians are more likely than not to believe the country's health care system is in a state of crisis, but this view has been diminishing since 2002 and is now at an all-time low. Over the same time period, the public has increasingly come to believe that the main source of problems is inefficient management rather than a lack of adequate funding.
- Despite concerns about the health care system overall, Canadians maintain a strikingly confident view about the capacity of the system to provide quality health care when it's needed, and care for those who are most vulnerable. Three-quarters continue to believe Canada's health care is among the best in the world.
- Along with this confidence comes strong public support for maintaining the current publicly-funded, single tier health care system. At the same time, a small but increasing majority of Canadians also favour allowing individuals to purchase private health care services to ensure timely access that may not be possible through the public system.

Environment

- The environment has been and remains a major source of public concern, which has persisted through the recent economic downturn. At the same time, Canadians continue to be markedly positive about the environmental quality where they live, as they have been since the mid-1980s.
- Canadians remain divided on whom they view as the greatest threat to the environment in this country, between industry (which manufactures products that pollute) and consumers (who buy, use and throw out the products that industry produces). Only one in ten feel strongly that both industry and consumers are equally responsible for environmental problems.

- As well, there is no public consensus on the most effective approach for ensuring that Canadian industries reduce their impact on the environment. A plurality (43%) advocate a regulatory approach involving strict laws and heavy fines, while others believe in economic levers such as tax breaks (33%) or public reporting to embarrass companies into cleaning up (18%). Views on this issue have changed little over the past five years.

Immigration and multiculturalism

- Canadians continue to hold largely positive views about the high level of immigration to this country, although opinions have moderated somewhat since 2008, possibly a result of the recent recession. Clear (although reduced) majorities disagree with the view that current immigration levels are too high and that immigrants take away jobs from other Canadians. Eight in ten continue to agree that immigration has a positive impact on the economy overall.
- Over the past several years, the public has grown somewhat more concerned about the legitimacy of refugee claims, but at the same time have gained greater confidence in the country's ability to keep criminals out of the system. As well, the past 25 years have seen growing sympathy for accepting political refugees who would not otherwise qualify for immigration.
- Despite generally positive attitudes toward immigration, Canadians remain concerned about how newcomers integrate culturally into the country. A growing majority agree too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values, and believe ethnic groups should blend into mainstream society. At the same time, there is increasing acceptance of the notion that ethnic and racial groups need support from others in order to succeed in this country.
- Canadians remain uncertain about Muslims living in this country. A majority continue to believe they want to remain distinct rather than adopt mainstream Canadian customs, although this view has declined marginally since 2006. And a growing proportion now endorse a ban on Muslim head scarves in public, with this sentiment most prevalent in Quebec.

Aboriginal peoples

- A majority of Canadians feel they are somewhat, if not very, familiar with Aboriginal issues in the country today. This feeling of awareness is higher than in 2007 (likely due to the federal government's apology about residential schools), but remains below the record-high level recorded in 2005.
- Reflecting on who bears responsibility for the problems experienced by the country's Aboriginal peoples, Canadians are almost twice as likely to point the finger at government policies and the attitudes of non-Aboriginals as they are to blame Aboriginal peoples themselves. But this perspective remains unchanged since 2005, and is even less evident that it was 20 years ago. As well, one-third believe Canada has treated its Aboriginal population better than other countries have treated their own Indigenous groups, compared with one in ten who say Canada's record has been worse.
- In terms of addressing current issues facing Aboriginal peoples in Canada today, the public places the greatest priority on improving living and social conditions on reserves, followed by promoting economic development and improving social conditions in urban areas. By comparison, less priority is given to settling land claims and moving toward self-government.

Crime, justice and social issues

- Government and police statistics document declining crime rates, and public opinion reveals the same trend. Half of Canadians now believe crime rates are increasing, the lowest proportion recorded since the early 1990s. Strong majorities continue to feel safe in their own neighbourhood, consistent with opinions expressed as far back as the mid-1970s.
- In terms of how governments are expected to protect their citizens, Canadians continue to place greater faith in prevention strategies (e.g., education) than in law enforcement (detecting crime and punishing lawbreakers), with the former perspective strengthening modestly since 2008. A clear majority support current federal gun regulations (including the national registry), with the level of strong support up noticeably since 2005.
- A small majority (53%) of Canadians continue to support capital punishment for certain crimes, but this proportion remains at an all-time low. Such support is most evident

in Saskatchewan and among rural Canadians, while least evident in Quebec.

- Public support for same-sex marriage is at an all-time high, with seven in ten Canadians now supporting the current law of the land. Strong support outweighs strong opposition by a two-to-one margin. Rising support since 2006 is evident across most regions and demographic strata.
- Also growing is public support for a woman's right to have an abortion. Three-quarters of Canadians now support this choice, reflecting a steady rise dating back to the early 1990s, when only a small majority expressed this view. Growing support for abortion rights is evident across most of the population.

Canada's role in the world

- Canadians feel generally positive about their country's role in the world today, and this view has strengthened over the past few years. The public is most likely to consider peacekeeping as their country's top international contribution, although this view is less prevalent than before. An increasing proportion consider foreign aid to be an important contribution, although there is also declining support for increasing spending in this area.
- The 2008 election of Barack Obama as U.S. president proved to be a turning point in Canadians' views on the U.S.A.: three-quarters now say their overall opinion is positive, almost back to the levels recorded during the Clinton presidency. Those still holding a negative opinion are most likely to say this is because of what they see as an American attitude of arrogance or superiority, U.S. foreign policy (e.g., wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) and unfair trade policies.
- Canadians are more likely than not to feel their government's policy in the Middle East is balanced, although a slightly increased minority believes the approach is too pro-Israel (compared with very few who say it overly favours the Palestinians). A solid (although declining) majority continue to believe that Canada can play a constructive role in promoting peace in the Middle East.
- Canadians' overall view of China is somewhat mixed, with half (48%) saying they have a favourable opinion of this country, reflecting a gradual downward trend since 2005. At the same time, four in ten now say they believe China will be more important to Canada than the U.S.A. will be 10 years from now.