

Executive Summary

The year 2011 stands out more for uncertainty and turmoil than stability. The aftershocks of the 2008 global financial meltdown continue to be felt in many countries (especially in the EU), and the Arab world now struggles with the promise and uncertainty of its citizen revolts. Canada, by comparison, has enjoyed a much quieter year. The 2011 Federal Election yielded an historic political re-alignment, but also the re-election of incumbent governments in eight provinces and territories. The Canadian economy remains in better shape than most, but recovery and job creation remain sluggish and governments at all levels are struggling to balance their books.

Within this context, Canadians stand out as among the most upbeat citizens worldwide. They recognize their economy is not growing as in past times, but most remain confident about their own financial security. The country elected its first Conservative majority government in 23 years, but the public's brand of conservatism is for the most part of the progressive variety (in sharp contrast to the US version). A strong majority maintain that taxes are fundamentally good in terms of what they help pay for (although this does not mean they will readily accept increases even for something as important as health care). Canadians continue to be comfortable with the country's high level of immigration and growing diversity, and the level of personal contact with people of different ethnic backgrounds is at an all-time high. Concerns about the crime rate have declined to an all-time low, although this doesn't preclude public support for tougher laws on criminals who break the law.

This is not to say that Canadians feel all is well. Public opinion is in line with the core message of the Occupy Movement in seeing an historic and growing gap between the wealthy and everyone else, and Canadians expect governments to do something about it. More broadly, Canadians continue to look to their governments as a force of good, especially in comparison with their American cousins. But overall confidence in government is down a bit from last year, and it is clear there is no longer a public consensus about bigger government being better government.

The tone of federal politics has grown increasingly divisive in recent years, but unlike the U.S. experience, this has not resulted in a growing partisan divide in Canadian public opinion. Supporters of the various federal parties do not fully agree on many of the important issues of the day, but the similarities continue to stand out more than the differences: NDP supporters are still more likely than not to support the government's new crime bill and policy balance in the Middle East, while a majority of Conservative supporters think crime prevention is better than enforcement, and consider taxes to be fundamentally a good thing.

The following are key highlights from the research:

Economy and standard of living

- Canadians are more positive (58%) than negative (36%) about the direction of their country today, and this sentiment has strengthened over the past year. Canadians remain among the most upbeat among citizens of 23 nations, ranking third behind only China and Egypt, and well ahead of the British (32%), French (25%), and Americans (21%; who have grown more negative about where their country is heading).
- Top-of-mind, Canadians increasingly identify the economy and jobs as the most important issue facing the country today, reflecting reduced confidence in the national economy over the past year (with confidence levels now at their lowest point since April 2009, early in the recovery from the global financial meltdown). This trend is most evident in all regions, but most noticeably in Ontario and B.C.
- At the same time, Canadians are not losing confidence in their ability to buy the things they need and want, and are notably upbeat about their personal financial outlook over the coming year. Close to half believe their finances will improve in 2012, compared with three in ten who expect them to get worse. Optimism is strongest in Quebec and the Prairies, and among youth.

- The public is more likely than not to feel the country's tax system is unfair to the average taxpayer, and this sentiment has strengthened marginally over the past year. At the same time, Canadians continue to believe that, fundamentally, taxes are positive rather than negative, and this perspective has gained modest strength since 2010 (most noticeably in B.C. and Ontario, reversing a downward trend likely resulting from the introduction of a new HST).
- Two-thirds of Canadians believe the income gap between the wealthy one percent in this country and everyone else is larger than it has ever been historically, in most cases because of structural inequities in the way capitalism works, government and tax policies, and other disparities (e.g., regional). The public tends to think this country's income gap is smaller than the one in the USA and developing countries such as India and China, but about the same as that in European countries such as Germany and France.
- Income inequality is not widely seen as a major public policy issue in Canada, but a strong majority believe governments should actively find ways to reduce the gap between the wealthy and others less fortunate (with 52% who strongly agree). But this sentiment likely does not extend to clamping down on large corporate profits, which most Canadians do not seem to have a problem with.

Role of government

- Most Canadians express overall satisfaction with their country's system of government, but somewhat less so than in 2010, reversing an upward trend dating back to the 1990s. This latest trend is driven by declining confidence in Quebec but also in Ontario, while satisfaction has increased in the Prairies and B.C. Public confidence in government is notably stronger in Canada (68%) than in the USA (44%).
- While governments and politicians are often criticized for what they do or don't do, most Canadians believe they play an essential role in our society. Majorities say governments are essential to finding solutions to important problems (rather than the source of such problems), and often do a better job than most people

give them credit for. By comparison, Americans are much more divided about the role of government in their country.

- Public confidence in the role of government does not translate into support for expanding its role. Canadians are divided on whether they prefer bigger government providing more services, or smaller governments providing fewer services. This division cuts across most segments of the population, but is an issue that clearly separates federal NDP and Conservative supporters. Americans are similarly divided, but more apt to favour smaller government with fewer services.

Political engagement

- While declining voter turnout is an unmistakable trend across the country, three-quarters of Canadians maintain that voting is worthwhile and that their own vote makes a difference. When asked why *others* no longer vote, the public explains this as either problems with the current political system (e.g., no difference between who is in office, lack of honest politicians, ineffective policies) or a lack of commitment among voters themselves (apathy, busy lives, laziness).
- Voters may also be turning off to what appears to be increasingly partisan politics at all levels of government. Six in ten Canadians would prefer their elected officials to make compromises with people they disagree with, rather than stick to their positions; this view is most widely held in Quebec, among those with higher socio-economic status and supporters of federal progressive parties. Americans, by comparison, are more apt to want their politicians sticking to their positions.

Public sector unions

- Union membership has been declining over the past 30 years, but a majority of Canadians continue to believe unions have too much power for the good of the country. This sentiment has declined somewhat since 1994, continuing a trend dating back to the 1980s. At the same time, an even stronger majority also believe that unions are important and effective institutions, in terms of protecting employees' rights in the workplace and improving working conditions for *all* Canadians.

- Positive views of unions notwithstanding, the public is evenly divided about whether public sector unions should have the right to strike when negotiations with management break down. This division extends across the country, but pro-strike sentiments are more evident in B.C. and Saskatchewan, among younger Canadians, and those who support the federal NDP and Green Party. Anti-strike sentiments are more apparent among top income earners and Conservative supporters.

Immigration and multiculturalism

- Canadians continue to hold largely positive views about the current level of immigration to this country. Most continue to disagree with the view that current immigration levels are too high and that immigrants take away jobs from other Canadians. Eight in ten believe immigration is good for the Canadian economy.
- The arrival of illegitimate refugees has been a public concern since the 1980s, but is becoming gradually less so over time. Just over half of Canadians now agree that many people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees, with this proportion down modestly over the past year, and now close to historically low levels.
- The public's greatest concern about immigration remains centred around newcomers' cultural integration. Two-thirds continue to agree that too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values, unchanged since 2010, and similar to levels recorded over the past two decades. Concerns about immigrant integration are most apt to be expressed by older and less educated Canadians.
- Canadians' personal contact with individuals from other ethnic groups has increased since 2006, and is now at the highest levels recorded (dating back to the 1980s). Three-quarters report having frequent or occasional contact with others who are Black or Chinese, with smaller majorities reporting such contact with those with South Asian backgrounds and Aboriginal Peoples. In all cases, frequency of contact is higher in urban areas, but the increase since 2006 is mostly in smaller communities.
- Many Canadians take pride in their country's multicultural reality, but there is also widespread belief that ethnic groups experience discrimination on an ongoing basis.

As in 2006, the public is most likely to feel that Muslims experience discrimination (often or sometimes), followed closely by Aboriginal Peoples, South Asians and Blacks. By comparison, members of the Chinese and Jewish communities are less widely seen as experiencing a comparable level of discrimination.

- Another significant minority group consists of the LGBT community. Two-thirds of Canadians say they often or occasionally have contact with individuals who are gay or lesbian, with frequent contact most widespread in Toronto and Montreal, and those under 30. Three-quarters believe that gays and lesbians experience ongoing discrimination, placing them near the top of the list when compared with ethnic groups.

Crime, justice and social issues

- Government and police statistics document declining crime rates, and public opinion continues to match this trend. The view that crime is on the increase in Canada has declined over the past year and is now at its lowest point on record (since 1994). Fewer than half now believe crime rates are on the rise, while an equal proportion say crime is declining.
- Personal experience with crime is holding steady, with seven percent of Canadians reporting having been a victim of a criminal act in the previous six months. This proportion is essentially the same as has been reported over most of the past three decades.
- In terms of how governments are expected to protect their citizens, Canadians increasingly place greater confidence in prevention strategies (e.g., education) than in law enforcement (detecting crime and punishing lawbreakers), now by a two-to-one margin and the largest yet recorded.
- At the same time, many Canadians also see value in tougher laws for those convicted of crime. There is majority public support for the federal government's new omnibus crime bill that would increase jail time for some offences and reduce judges' discretion in sentencing. This legislation attracts majority support across the country, but most widely in Alberta, smaller communities and among allophones.

Canada's role in the world

- Canadians now identify economic issues, top-of-mind, as the most pressing challenge facing the world today. This marks a significant shift from just a year ago when starvation/world hunger, the environment and war/conflict shared the top spot. At the same time, the public is now marginally more optimistic about the direction the world is heading than in early 2008 (prior to the global financial meltdown).
- Peacekeeping continues to be most widely identified as the country's positive contribution to the world, but less so than in 2010, continuing a steady decline since 2004. Other important contributions include foreign aid (also down from 2010), the country's economic system, multiculturalism and generally setting an example for other countries.
- The Canadian population is making an impact on the world independently of government policies and foreign aid. Close to half have donated money to organizations that address issues in other countries (projecting to a total of \$8.4 billion), and one in four have provided financial support to family members and others they know living in another country (totalling \$12.4 billion). In both categories, the participation rate has increased since 2008, although the average dollar contribution is less.
- Canadians' overall impression of the USA has declined sharply over the past year, reversing a positive trend following Barack Obama's election in late 2008. Six in ten now have a favourable impression, now at its lowest point since June 2008 (when Bush was still president). This trend unlikely reflects a declining opinion of the President, as seven in ten would like to see him re-elected in 2012, compared with one in ten who favour the eventual Republican nominee.
- Although opinions of the USA generally are on the decline, Canadians remain largely supportive of closer ties with their neighbour to the south. The public remains more positive than negative about the impact of NAFTA on the Canadian economy, and more than six in ten continue to endorse a common policy on immigration and border controls.

- Despite the federal government's strengthening ties with Israel, Canadians continue to be more likely than not to feel their government's policy in the Middle East is balanced, compared with a modest minority who says it is too pro-Israel, and a tiny proportion who insist it favours the Palestinians. Fewer than half of Canadians hold an opinion about the Palestinians' bid for statehood at the United Nations, but support for this bid outweighs opposition by a three-to-one margin.

Religion in Canada

- Canadians' connection with organized religion continues its gradual decline. Seven in ten report a religious affiliation, now at its lowest point ever (based on Statistics Canada data). Roman Catholics continue to make up the largest single group, followed by mainline Protestants (United, Anglican), conservative/evangelical Protestants and other Christians. Five percent identify with a religion other than Christian, while one in four have no religious beliefs or affiliation.
- Although religious affiliation is declining, it encompasses a majority of the population and its focus on faith is sustaining. Three in ten say they attend services at least once a week and four in ten say religion is a very important part of their life (both up marginally over the past several years). Among all Canadians – religious or not – eight in ten say they believe in God or a universal spirit, including a majority with no affiliation.
- Religion does not appear to be a source of division within Canadian society today. Most Canadians say the friends and family members they spend time with include a mix of religious and non-religious people, with this pattern consistent across denominations and those without an affiliation. As well, more than half believe they share common values on most things with those whose orientation to religion is different from their own, and this is the same among religious and non-religious Canadians.