

Focus Canada – Fall 2016

Canadian public opinion about immigration and citizenship

As part of its ongoing Focus Canada public opinion research program, the Environics Institute partnered with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation to ask Canadians about immigration and citizenship, to update its ongoing research on these topics dating back to the 1970s. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 2,000 Canadians between October 3 and 16, 2016. 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

Migration levels are now at an all-time high worldwide, due in large part to massive numbers of refugees fleeing conflict in such countries as Syria and Iraq. Many are seeking a safe refuge in European countries, where governments are implementing new border controls, and the number of attacks against immigrants is on the rise. Public opinion in many western countries is turning against immigration, including some with a reputation for welcoming newcomers such as Germany and Denmark. In the United States, Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump has notoriously promised to build a wall to keep Mexicans from illegally crossing his country's southern border, and has called for a "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims entering the country.

In light of this global trend and Canada taking in a record number of immigrants (including more than 31,000 sponsored refugees from Syria to date), some are raising questions about whether the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment elsewhere is also happening here. Is growing international xenophobia and racism catching hold in Canada or emboldening Canadians to more explicitly express previously suppressed politically incorrect views? The results of the latest Focus Canada survey of Canadian public opinion confirm the answer is no. This survey – conducted in October 2016 and updating trends dating back to the 1980s – shows that Canadian attitudes about immigration have held steady or have grown noticeably more positive over the past 15 months. Most Canadians continue to believe that immigration is good for the economy, and there is growing confidence in the country's ability to manage refugees and potential criminal elements.

There are differing viewpoints about the country sponsoring 31,000 plus Syrian refugees this year, but a strong plurality of Canadians are comfortable with this number. The one-third who believe that we are taking in too many are concerned primarily about the capacity to support this many refugees or how it may divert resources from other priorities, rather than discomfort about these newcomers not fitting in or posing a security threat.

Of particular note is the finding that fewer now express concern about too many immigrants not adopting "Canadian values"; the proportion articulating this view is now the lowest recorded in more than 20 years. Public expectations for what is expected of newcomers when they settle in Canada mean a number of things – being a good citizen involves obeying the law, active community participation, treating others with respect, and being tolerant of others who are different. But nine in ten continue to 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 older Canadians (especially those 60 plus).