



Focus Canada – Fall 2018

Canadian public opinion about immigration, refugees and the USA

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about immigration and about the USA. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,000 Canadians between October 1 and 14, 2018. 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

The past year has been a contentious one for immigration and refugee issues in many parts of the world. In the USA, the Trump administration is taking a harsher stance on migrants (e.g. separating children from parents) and the political climate is turning ever more xenophobic. In response, a record number of asylum seekers have arrived at the Canadian border, straining the capacity of governments to manage the flow. Ontario and Quebec recently elected new right-of-centre populist leaders who may further test Canada's image as a welcoming and inclusive society. Former Conservative MP Maxime Bernier has now launched a new Peoples Party of Canada that challenges current policy and norms around immigration and multiculturalism. What impact are these events (and others) having on public attitudes about immigration and refugees? The Environics Institute conducted a national public opinion survey in October 2018 to answer this question, as well as update the public's overall view of the USA and its current President.

As has been documented on previous surveys, Canadians are more likely than not to be positive about immigration and its impact on making Canada a better place. However, opinions appear to have hardened a bit since February, in terms of the overall level of immigration, its contribution to the economy, and perhaps most noticeably the legitimacy of some refugees (an issue on which the public has been evenly divided in recent years). This shift is evident in small measure across much of the population, but is most noticeable in the Prairie provinces. At the same time, immigration/refugee issues are not among the salient top-of-mind issues facing the country, and have not become any more so over the course of the year.

The most sensitive issue for many Canadians continues to be the concern that some immigrants are not properly integrating into Canadian society, and a small majority continue to believe that too many immigrants are not adopting Canadian values. And yet this latest survey confirms previous ones in revealing that native-born and foreign-born Canadians largely agree on what values are the ones that immigrants need to adopt.

Attitudes about immigration and refugee issues vary somewhat across the population, with positive sentiments most widespread among younger Canadians, and those with a university education, and negative ones more prevalent in Alberta and among those 60 and older. The greatest divergence, however, is between supporters of Federal political parties on the left (Liberal, NDP, Green) and those on the right (Conservative, the new Peoples Party of Canada), and this division appears to be widening over time.

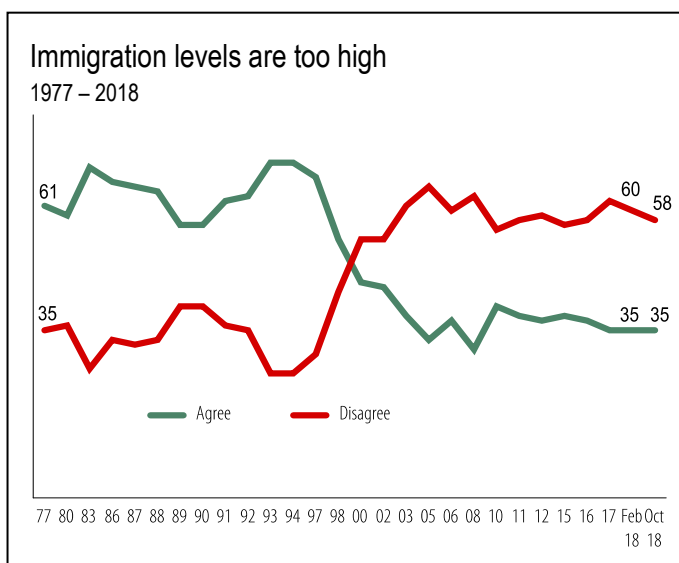
Canadians pay close attention to events in the USA, and this year they have also found their country in the crosshairs of an aggressive US administration over the renegotiation of a new continental free trade agreement. Not surprisingly, general opinion of the USA has declined sharply in 2018, with fewer than four in ten Canadians holding a favourable view; now at its lowest level since Environics began tracking this opinion in 1982. Just over one in ten say they approve of Donald Trump's performance as President.

Immigration and its impact on Canada

Canadians continue to be more positive than negative about immigration to Canada, in terms of the level of immigration and its impact on the economy. But opinions have hardened a bit since February, especially among residents in the Prairie provinces.

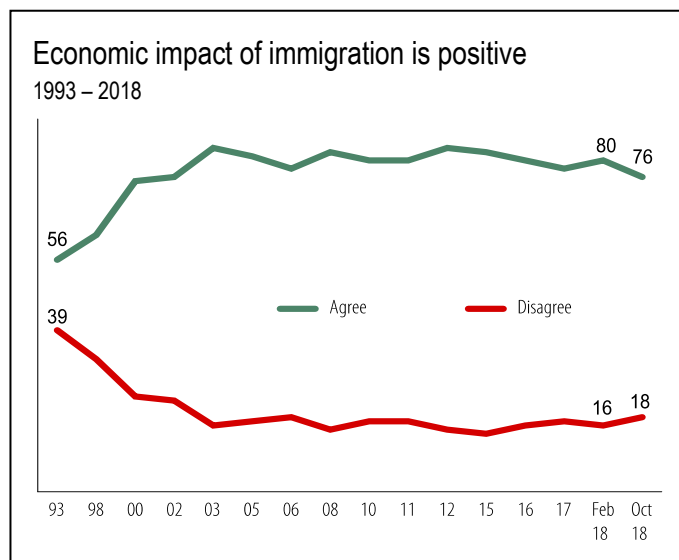
This survey updates questions from previous Focus Canada surveys, in some cases dating back 30 plus years, to provide an empirical basis for identifying how public opinion is changing or not over time. In this section, the research updates questions last asked in February 2018, and in response to recent events such as the increased number of asylum seekers at the Canada-US border.

Agree-Disagree: “Overall, there is too much immigration in Canada.” Over the past decade a clear majority of Canadians have rejected the notion that their country is accepting too many immigrants, but this perspective appears to have hardened over the past 18 months. Close to six in ten (58%) continue to disagree with this negative statement, but this proportion is down two percentage points since February 2018, and follows a similar decline over the previous year. The proportion who agree there is too much immigration has held steady at 35 percent, while those with no clear opinion either way is up slightly (to 7%, up 2 points since February).



Across the country, rejection of the idea that immigration levels are too high has inched downward among many groups, but this decline is most noticeable in the Prairie provinces (reversing a previous upward trend), as well as among Canadians with the least education. As before, a positive view of immigration levels is most widespread in British Columbia (63% disagree with the statement), among Canadians under 45 years of age (62%), and those with a university degree (70%), while a negative perspective is most evident in Alberta (42% agree with the statement), and those who would vote for the Federal Conservative Party (52%) or the new Peoples Party of Canada (47%).¹ As on the last several surveys, opinions in Quebec are stable and close to the national average.

Agree-Disagree: “Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada.” Canadians’ level of comfort with immigration is grounded in part on the belief that it is good for the country’s economy. This view persists, but appears to have softened over the year. Just over three in four (76%) now share this sentiment, down four percentage points since February, and reversing a two-point increase over the previous period. Just under one in five (18%, up 2) disagrees with this statement.

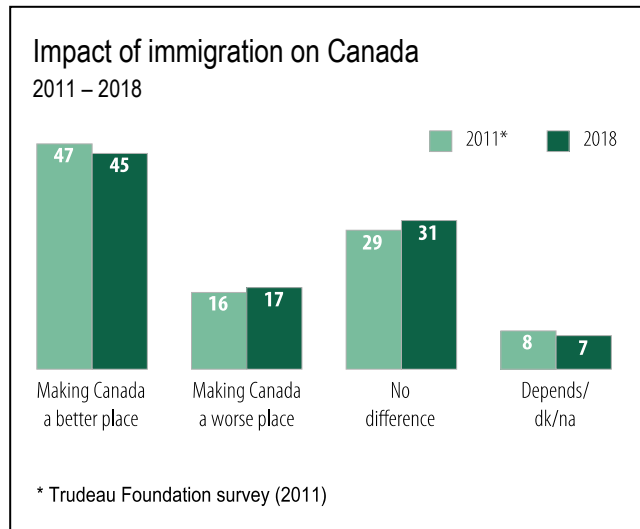


Belief in immigration as an economic driver remains the majority view across the country,

¹ Support for the Peoples Party of Canada is voiced by a very small sample of survey respondents (3%, or 63 individuals), so that caution should be used in interpreting the results from this subgroup.

but this recent decline is evident in all regions and demographic groups. As with views about immigration levels, this downward shift is most evident in the Prairie provinces. Positive views about the impact of immigration continues to be most widespread among younger Canadians, those with higher levels of education and income, and supporters of the Federal Liberal Party (89%), while least so in Alberta (64%, down 10 points), Canadians with no more than a high school diploma (66%) and Federal Conservative Party supporters (65%).

Overall impact of immigrants on Canada. There is no public consensus on the overall impact that immigration has on the country, but the balance of opinion is clearly in a positive direction, and has held steady over the past seven years. By an almost three-to-one margin, Canadians say that immigration is making Canada a better place (45%) rather than a worse place (17%), with the remainder saying it is not making a difference either way (31%) or is unable to offer a clear response (7%). These results are essentially the same as those recorded on a survey conducted in 2011 by Environics Research on behalf of the Trudeau Foundation.



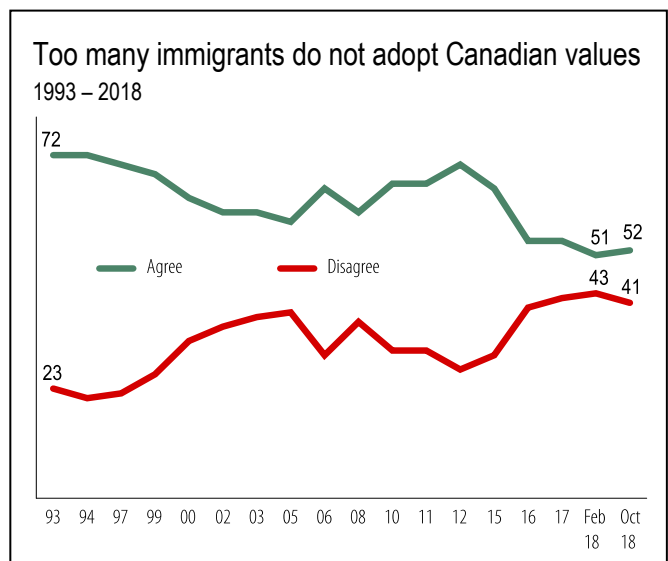
As with other attitudes about immigration covered in this survey, a positive view about the impact of immigration is most widespread among younger Canadians, those with higher levels of education and income, and Federal Liberal Party supporters, and also notably among first generation Canadians (54% say better, versus 15% who say worse). Those most apt to say that immigrants make the country worse include Albertans (30% worse) and supporters of the Federal Conservative Party (31%) and Peoples Party (34%). Since 2011, positive opinions about the impact of immigration have declined moderately among Atlantic Canadians and Albertans, Canadians 60 plus, and those with a university degree, while improving among Canadians 18 to 29.

Integration of Immigrants into society

A substantial number of Canadians continue to express concerns about too many immigrants not adopting the right values for fitting in. At the same time, native-born and foreign-born Canadians are largely on the same page in identifying what values are most important for newcomers to adopt.

Agree-Disagree: "There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values." The most sensitive issue for many Canadians is how immigrants integrate or fit into the country once they arrive, and this continues to be the case although opinions have changed little since February.

A bare majority (52%) agree with this statement about too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values (up 2 points since February), compared with four in ten (41%, down 2) who disagree. Despite this latest uptick, concerns about this issue remain lower than for most of the past 25 years.



Opinions on this question have shifted slightly up and down across different parts of the population, but has increased noticeably in the Prairies where agreement with the statement is up in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (55%, up 9 points), while declining in Alberta (55%, down 7). The belief that too many immigrants are not integrating is now most widespread among Canadians 60 and over (60%), those with no more than a high school diploma, and supporters of the Federal Conservative Party (70%). This view is least apt to be shared among Canadians aged 30 to 44 (42%), those with a university degree (40%), and Federal Liberal Party supporters (38%).

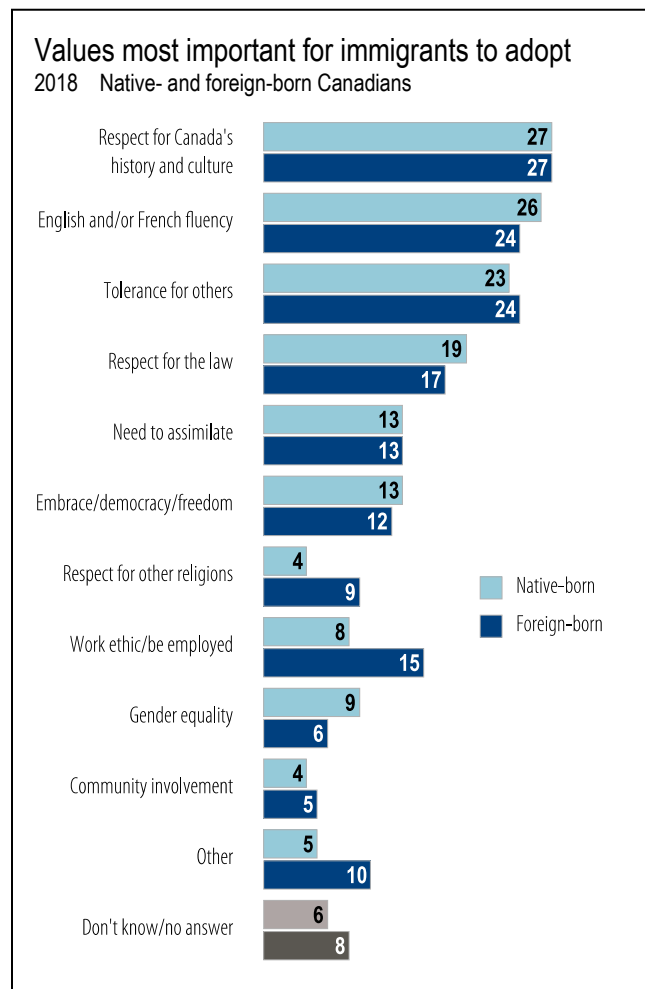
Quebecers are more likely than residents of other provinces to agree with the statement (56% agree, versus 35% disagree), but opinions in this province have changed little over the year. Across the country, opinions on this question are notably consistent across first, second and third plus generations of Canadians.

What Canadian values are most important for immigrants to adopt? The survey repeated a question first asked on the 2011 Trudeau Foundation survey in which respondents identified what they considered to be the Canadian values most important for immigrants to learn and adopt when they move to this country (this question was asked “open-ended”, without offering response options). Canadians identified a number of values they consider to be important, and both the list and relative priority assigned to each, is strikingly consistent to the results recorded in 2011.

At the top of the list is respect for Canada’s history and culture (27%), and fluency in either English or French (25%), both mentioned by essentially the same proportions as did so seven years ago. Others commonly mentioned include tolerance for others (23%), respect for the law (19%), the need to assimilate (13%) and respect for other religions (11%). In most cases, the values are mentioned by somewhat higher proportions than in 2011, with fewer unable to identify any.

Opinions about important Canadian values for immigrants to adopt are notably similar across the population, with some minor variations. Quebecers are somewhat more likely to emphasize respect for Canada’s history, language fluency and gender equality, while younger Canadians are most apt to identify tolerance for others.

Of particular note is the fact that, as in 2011, there is little difference in the perspectives of native-born and foreign-born Canadians; they largely agree on what values are the ones immigrants need to adopt, with one exception: Foreign-born respondents are twice as likely to emphasize the importance of immigrants adopting a strong work ethic and/or gaining employment (15% versus 8%).



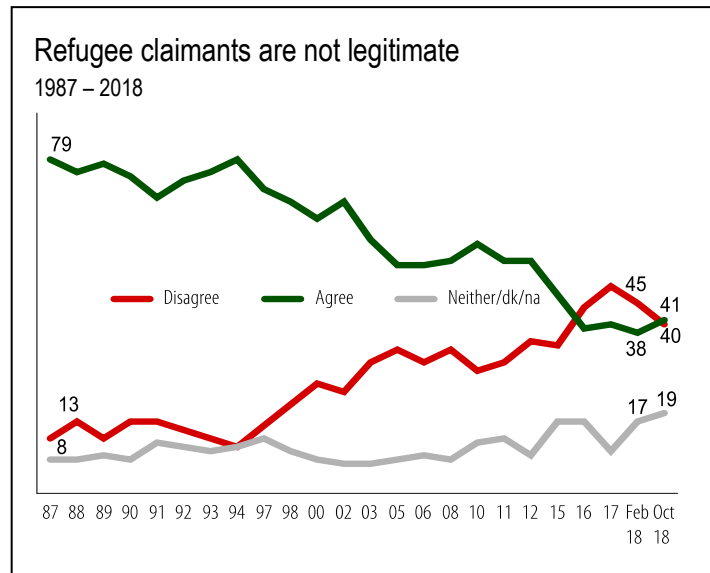
Refugees

Canadians are divided on whether or not refugees represent a problem for Canada, and concerns about illegitimate claims have increased marginally since February. But the view that refugees place a severe strain on the welfare system is dramatically lower than a generation ago.

Agree-Disagree: “Most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees.” The past year has seen a record number of asylum seekers arriving at the US-Canadian border, creating new challenges in processing their entry and fresh controversies about how best to manage the inflow. These developments appear to have had a small impact on Canadian public opinion at a national level.

Opinions on this statement about some refugees not being legitimate have long been divided, but the balance has shifted slightly in a negative direction over the past eight months, and reversing a previous trend that peaked in Spring 2017. Four in ten (41%)

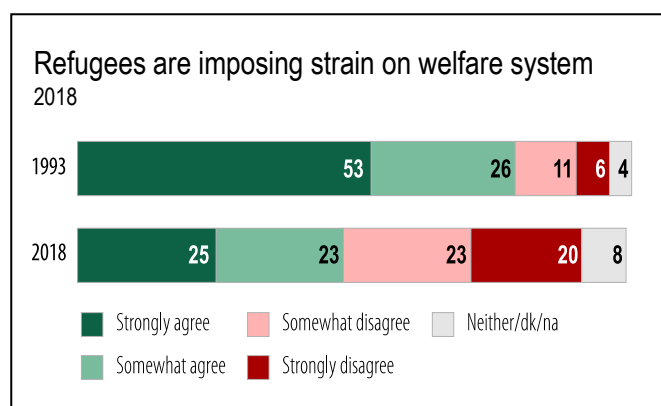
Canadians now agree that most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees (up 2 points since February), compared an equal proportion (40%, down 5) who disagree; the remaining one in five do not have a clear opinion (19%, up 2).



Hardening attitudes towards refugees over the past eight months is evident across much of the population, but is most evident in eastern Canada, Manitoba and Saskatchewan (but, notably, not in Alberta). In central Canada where most asylum seekers have arrived, opinions have worsened more noticeably in Quebec (36% disagree, down 7 points) and to a lesser extent in Ontario (43%, down 3).

As before, positive sentiments about refugees are most widespread among younger Canadians, and those with higher levels of education and income, and least so in Alberta (50% agree with the statement), Canadians 60 plus (50%), and Federal Conservative Party supporters (50%; along with those now supporting the new Peoples Party, at 55%). Views are notably similar between native-born and foreign-born Canadians, but it is second-generation Canadians who stand out as being the most sympathetic to refugees.

Agree-Disagree: “People coming to Canada claiming to be refugees are imposing a severe strain on our welfare system.” One of the most contentious issues arising out of the increased numbers of asylum seekers is the resources required to support them once they arrive in the country, and the capacity of local communities to manage this inflow. This issue has not been covered by Focus Canada in recent years, but the current survey updated a question last asked 25 years ago, as a way to compare how perspectives have changed over a generation.



Current opinions are now evenly divided, with close to half (48%) of Canadians agreeing somewhat or strongly that refugee claimants are imposing a severe strain on the welfare system, versus 44 percent who disagree; these numbers loosely reflect the division about the legitimacy of refugees (see above), and the two issues are clearly linked. At the same time, the current perspective has changed dramatically since the early 1990s (a period that witnessed no significant influx of refugees), when eight in ten Canadians agreed with this statement (and 53% said they “strongly” agreed with it).

This shift in attitudes about refugees straining the welfare system has taken place across all groups identified in the survey, save one: Canadians who support the Federal Conservative Party are almost as likely to hold this opinion as they did a generation ago (71% currently agree with the statement, compared with 76% in 1993). In 2018, agreement is comparatively stronger in the Prairie provinces (53% agree with the statement), among Canadians 60 plus (57%), and those with lower levels of education and income. This view is least apt to be shared among Quebecers (43%), Canadians under 45 (39%), and supporters of the Federal Liberal Party (33%), NDP (35%) and Green Party (35%).

Salience of immigration/refugee issues

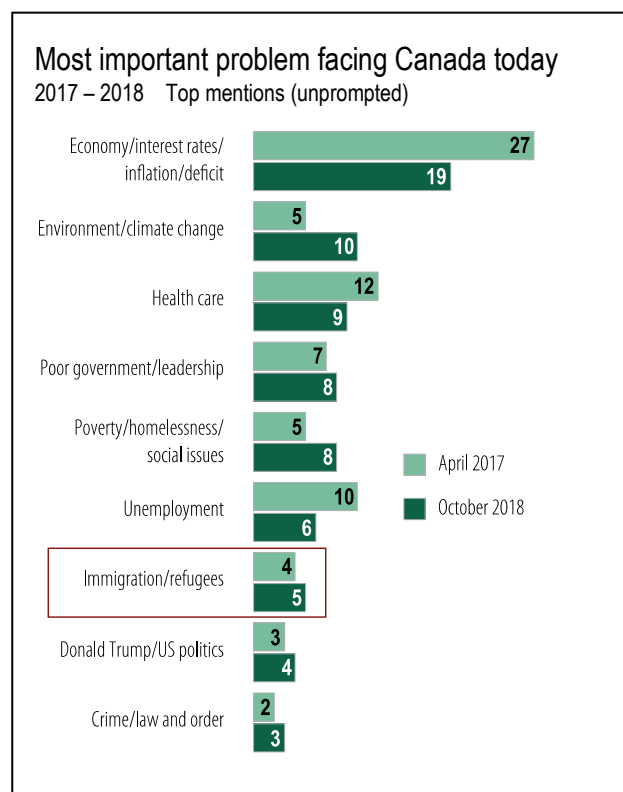
Public concerns about immigration and refugees notwithstanding, these issues are well down the list when Canadians think about the most important issues facing the country today.

Most important issue facing Canada today. Apart from the expressed opinions of Canadians when specifically asked, how salient are the issues surrounding immigration and refugees in the broader context? This is best answered through a commonly used survey question that asks the public to identify the single most important issue facing the country today (asked unprompted, with only one response accepted).

Results from the current survey show that Canadians identify a broad range of issues as most important, none of which is mentioned by more than one in five. Responses to this question have changed somewhat in comparison with those recorded in April 2017, but immigration and refugee issues remain well down the list. Only five percent of Canadians identify this issue unprompted, compared with four percent in 2017.

The salience of immigration and refugee issues as a national problem is low across regions and demographic groups, edging only as high as seven percent among Quebecers and Canadians with no more than a high school diploma.

Across political party lines, mention of immigration/refugee issues is low across the established parties, but significantly higher among those who say they will vote for the new Peoples Party of Canada: 19 percent of this group identify immigration/refugees as Canada’s top problem, closely behind the economy and interest rates (21%).



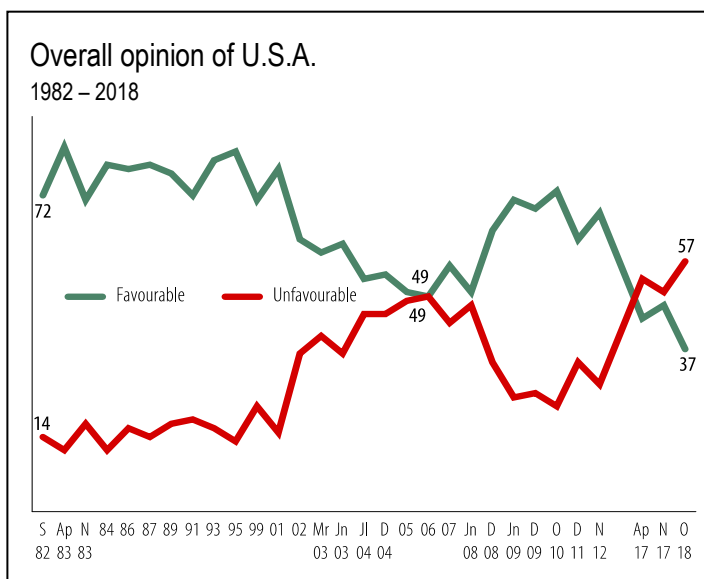
Canada – USA relations

Canadians’ overall opinion of the USA has declined over the past eight months to its lowest level in almost four decades. Little more than one in ten expresses approval of US President Donald Trump.

Canada has been in the US government’s crosshairs in 2018, with a contentious renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This, and the increasingly acrid political and cultural divides wrenching the US domestic agenda, has contributed to driving Canadians’ opinions of the USA to an historic low.

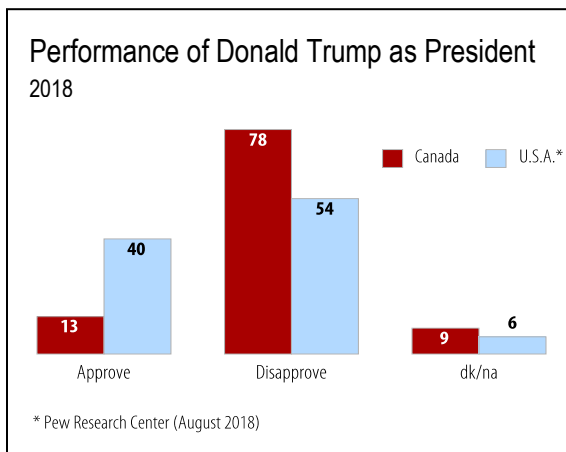
Overall opinion of the USA. Fewer than four in ten Canadians currently hold a very (8%) or somewhat (29%) favourable view of the United States, down 10 percentage points from November 2017 and now at its lowest point since Focus Canada began measuring this opinion in 1982. A clear majority (57%) hold an unfavourable impression, with one in four (26%) saying it is “very unfavourable” (by comparison, only 6% expressed a “very unfavourable” opinion in 2012).

This declining view of the USA is evident across most of the country, but most noticeably among older Canadians and those with lower levels of education and income. Albertans are the most likely to have a positive impression of the USA (46%, although down 7 points from a year ago), as do men (44%, versus 31% of women). As with views about immigration, opinions of the USA are politically polarized. Favourable opinions are much lower among Canadians who support the Federal Liberal (28%), NDP (23%) and Green (26%) parties, in sharp contrast with those voicing support for the Federal Conservatives (57%) or Peoples Party of Canada (63%). Compared with 2012, views about the USA have become increasingly polarized across party lines.



Donald Trump’s performance as President. Canadians’ overall impressions of the USA are based on various considerations, but seem to be most strongly influenced by who is occupying the White House. This link is further supported when the public is asked to evaluate Donald Trump’s performance as President of the United States. Just over one in ten (13%) Canadians voice approval of his job performance, compared with 78 percent who disapprove and another nine percent who do not offer a clear opinion either way. By comparison, the most recent assessment by Americans shows a much more divided public, with 40 percent voicing approval, versus 54 percent “thumbs down.”

As with overall opinions of the USA, approval of Trump’s performance is comparatively higher among Albertans (24%), men (19%, versus 8% of women), and younger Canadians (17% among those 18 to 29 years of age). And once again, there is a clear political cleavage among Canadians: approval ratings are significantly higher among supporters of the Federal Conservatives (30%) and Peoples Party (47%), in contrast to those who would vote Liberal (4%), NDP (5%) or for the Green Party (7%).



The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established in 2006 as an independent non-profit organization to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or keith.neuman@environics.ca

