



Focus Canada – Fall 2019

Regional Perspectives on Politics and Priorities

Final Report, November 11, 2019

The Environics Institute's Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976) tracks the evolution of Canadian attitudes on key issues. The most recent survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,008 Canadians between October 7 and 20, 2019. 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 latest Environics Institute Focus Canada survey, conducted during the last two weeks of the recent federal election campaign, highlights some of the regional differences in outlook in Canada that are now reflected in the distribution of seats in the House of Commons. Views on the economy, on the role and impact of government, on the direction of the country, and on top issues such as the environment and climate change, all vary significantly by region. Differences in opinion in Quebec and Alberta are often the starkest. In Quebec, the environment and climate change is now seen as the most important problem facing the country – but this is not the case in Alberta, where economic concerns continue to dominate. Albertans also stand out as the least satisfied with the direction of the country, the most worried about job security, and the most likely to see governments as having a negative impact on most people's lives. Quebecers, in contrast, are the most satisfied with the direction of the country, the least worried about job security, and the least likely to see governments as having a negative impact. These regional patterns of opinion underscore the extent of the current challenge of building a political consensus within Canada on the major issues facing the country, notably that of how best to address climate change while responding to Alberta's pronounced economic concerns.

Regional Perspectives on Politics and Priorities

Job security

The proportion of Canadians worried about finding or keeping a stable, full-time job varies significantly by region, with Albertans now more than twice as likely to be worried as Quebecers.

Just over two in five (44%) Canadians are very (18%) or somewhat (25%) worried about themselves or a member of their immediate family **finding or keeping a stable, full-time job**; a slightly higher proportion (55%) is not very (24%) or not at all worried (31%). Notably, the degree of worry does not vary significantly by age, gender or educational attainment.

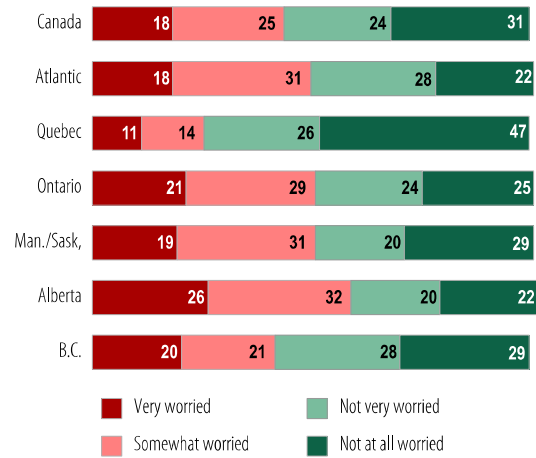
The proportion worried about finding or keeping a stable, full-time job, however, varies significantly by region. Albertans are the most likely to be worried – with 58 percent in the province being very or somewhat worried. About one in two residents of Ontario (50%), Manitoba and Saskatchewan (50%), and Atlantic Canada (48%) are also worried, as are two in five (41%) residents of British Columbia. In contrast, only 25 percent of Quebecers are very or somewhat worried about finding or keeping a stable, full-time job.

This pattern represents a dramatic change from when the question was asked a little less than two decades ago. In 2002, the proportion of Albertans that are worried about finding or keeping a stable, full-time job was 38 percent – it has increased 20 points since then. But in Quebec, the proportion that is worried has dropped by a similar margin – from 46 percent to 25 percent.¹

The proportion that is worried has also increased since 2002 in Ontario and Manitoba/Saskatchewan, and declined in Atlantic Canada and B.C.

Job security: are you worried about finding or keeping a stable, full-time job?

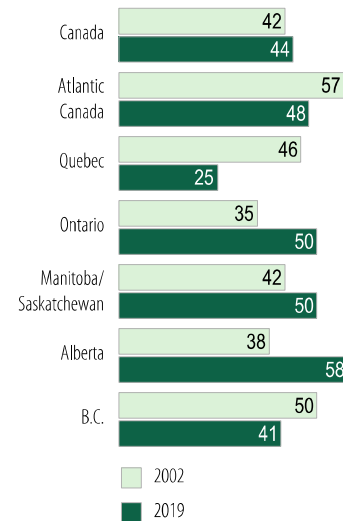
2019



Are you [very/or not at all] worried about you or a member of your immediate family finding or keeping a stable, full-time job?

Concern about job security: change since 2002

2002 – 2019 Very or somewhat worried



Are you [very/or not at all] worried about you or a member of your immediate family finding or keeping a stable, full-time job?

¹ The 2002 data are from the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC).

Impact of government

Albertans are much more likely than other Canadians to say that governments have a negative impact on most people's lives, while Quebecers are least likely to hold this view.

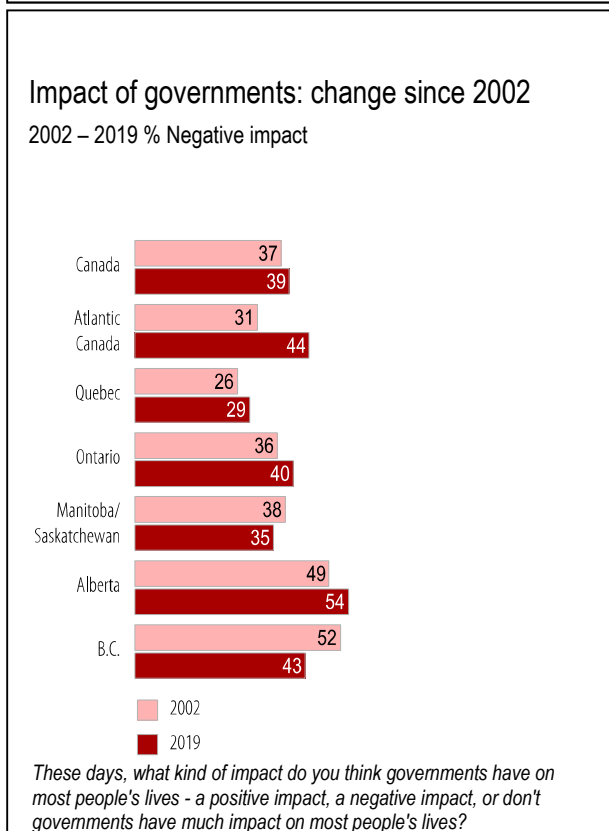
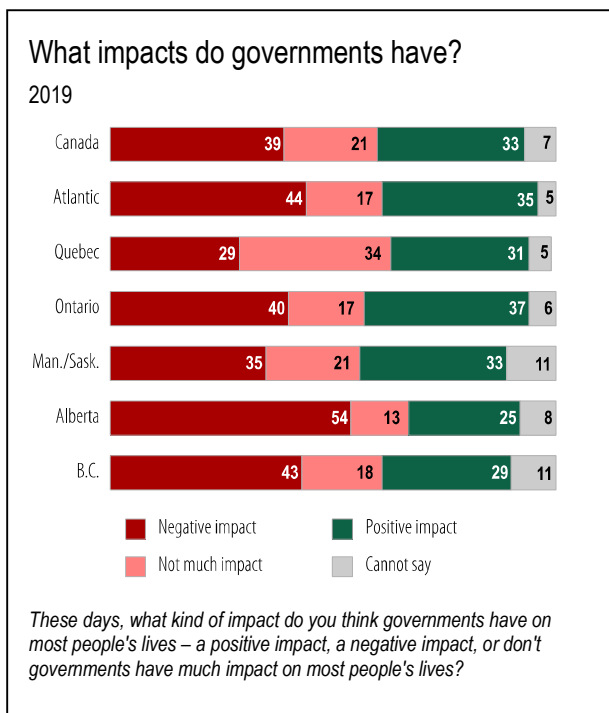
Significant regional differences are also evident when it comes to thinking about **the impact that governments have on citizens**. Overall, 39 percent of Canadians say that governments have a negative impact on most people's lives, slightly outweighing the 33 percent who see this impact as positive. An additional 21 percent say that governments do not have much impact on most people's lives, and seven percent cannot say.

There are considerable differences in opinion across demographic groups. For instance, younger Canadians are more likely to say that governments have a positive impact than are older Canadians, as are those with a university degree or a college diploma compared to those with a high school education.

But region is also an important factor. At 54 percent, Albertans are much more likely than other Canadians to say that governments have a negative impact on most people's lives. In contrast, Quebecers (29%) are much less likely than average to hold this view. While Quebecers are less likely to see governments' impact as negative, they are not more likely to see it as positive; rather, Quebecers (34%) are considerably more likely than other Canadians to say that governments do not have much impact of most people's lives.

Ontarians (37%) and Atlantic Canadians (35%) are slightly more likely than average to say that governments have a positive impact on most people's lives. After Albertans, Atlantic Canadians (44%) and British Columbians (43%) are the next most likely to say that governments' impact is negative.

In the almost two decades since this question was last asked in a similar survey, the proportions of Canadians saying that governments have either a positive or a negative impact on most people's lives have both increased slightly, and the proportion who don't see government having much impact has dropped. Overall, the proportion saying that governments have a positive impact has increased five points since 2002, from 28 to 33 percent –



with this increase slightly larger in Quebec (up 8 points, from 23% to 31%) and Ontario (also up 8 points, from 29% to 37% percent).²

The proportion of Canadians saying that governments have a negative impact has only increased by two points since 2002 – but in Atlantic Canada, this increase is much larger, at 13 points (increasing from 31% to 44%); the proportion holding this view in B.C. declined by nine points, from 52 percent to 43 percent.

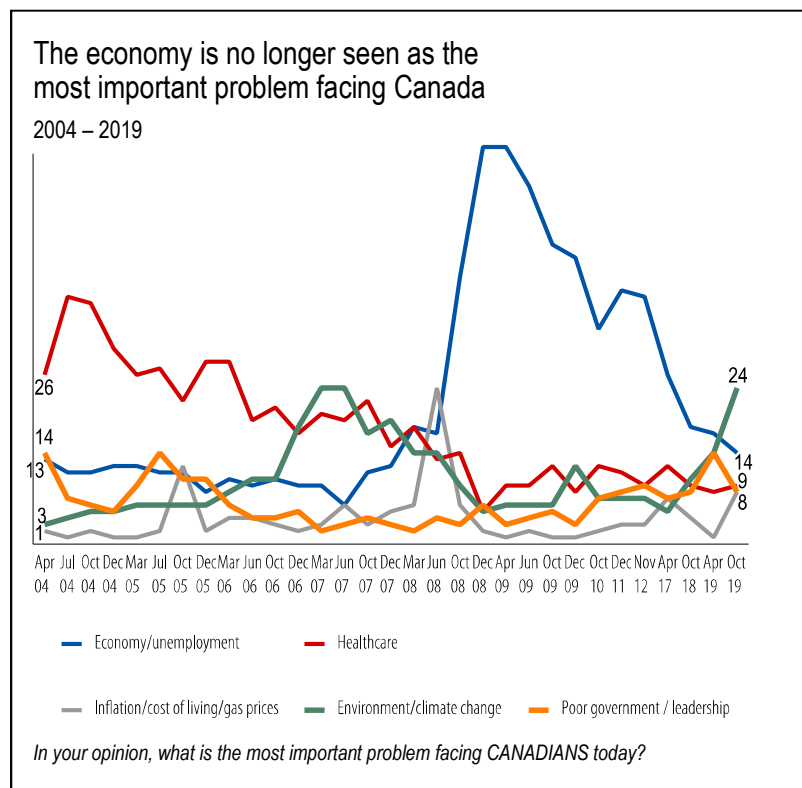
Most important issue

For the first time in over a decade, environmental issues now top the list of the most important problems facing Canadians. But views on the country's top problem are strongly related to region, with the contrast between views in Quebec and Alberta being the most striking. In Quebec, the environment and climate change dominate; whereas in Alberta, the economy and unemployment remains the number one problem.

At the time of the survey during the final weeks of the federal election campaign, the environment and climate change had emerged as the issue most likely to be identified as **the most important problem facing Canadians today**. This represents the continuation, and even the acceleration, of a clear trend that has been unfolding over the last two and a half years. The proportion seeing the environment and climate change as the most important problem facing Canadians has steadily grown, from only five percent in April 2017 to 24 percent in October 2019. The jump over the course of this year is especially noticeable – the proportion choosing the environment and climate change as the most important problem having increased by 10 points, from 14 percent in April to 24 percent in October.

This is the first time in over a decade that environmental issues have been at the top of the public's list of most important problems. In late 2006 and early 2007, the environment briefly overtook health care as the top problem on the minds of Canadians. Soon after, both issues were themselves overtaken by the economy as the financial crisis hit in 2008. The environment was also the most often cited problem once before, in late 1989.

Currently, after the environment and climate change, the problems next most frequently cited as the most important are the economy or unemployment³ (14%), health care (9%), poor government leadership (8%) and the cost of living (8%). The proportion seeing the economy or unemployment as the top problem has been declining steadily, and is now at its



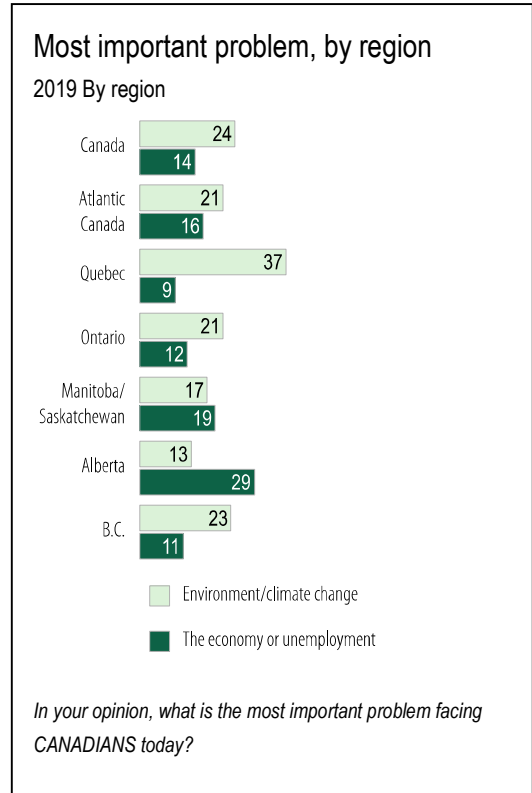
² The 2002 data are from the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC).

³ The category of the economy includes mentions of interest rates and a recession; in this report, this category is also combined with mentions of jobs or unemployment.

lowest level since it hit a peak of 61 percent in December 2008. The proportion seeing poor government leadership as the top issue declined by six points after hitting a peak of 14 percent in the April of this year.

Immigration and refugees continues to be seen as the most important issue by only a small proportion of Canadians (2%).⁴

The environment and climate change are more likely to be seen as the most important issue by younger Canadians, those with a post-secondary education and those who are less worried about finding or keeping a stable, full-time job. Among younger Canadians (those age 18 to 29), the proportion selecting the environment and climate change as the top problem increased by 23 points (from 9% to 32%) in the year between October 2018 and October 2019 – the largest increase of any age group. That said, in the most recent survey, the environment and climate change is more likely to be mentioned as the top problem than any other issue – by all age groups.



Views on the country’s top problem are also strongly related to region. The contrast between views in Quebec and Alberta on this question is the most striking. In Quebec, the environment and climate change dominate, with 37 percent seeing this as the top issue, compared with only nine percent who choose either the economy or unemployment. The reverse holds true in Alberta, where 29 percent see the economy or unemployment as the number one problem, compared with 13 percent who cite the environment and climate change.

Climate change is also favoured as the top problem in B.C. (with 23% selecting it, compared to 11% for the economy or unemployment), Ontario (with 21% selecting it, compared to 12% for the economy or unemployment) and, to a lesser extent, in Atlantic Canada (with 21% selecting it, compared to 16% for the economy or unemployment).

The pace at and extent to which the environment and climate emerged as a priority in recent years also varies by region.

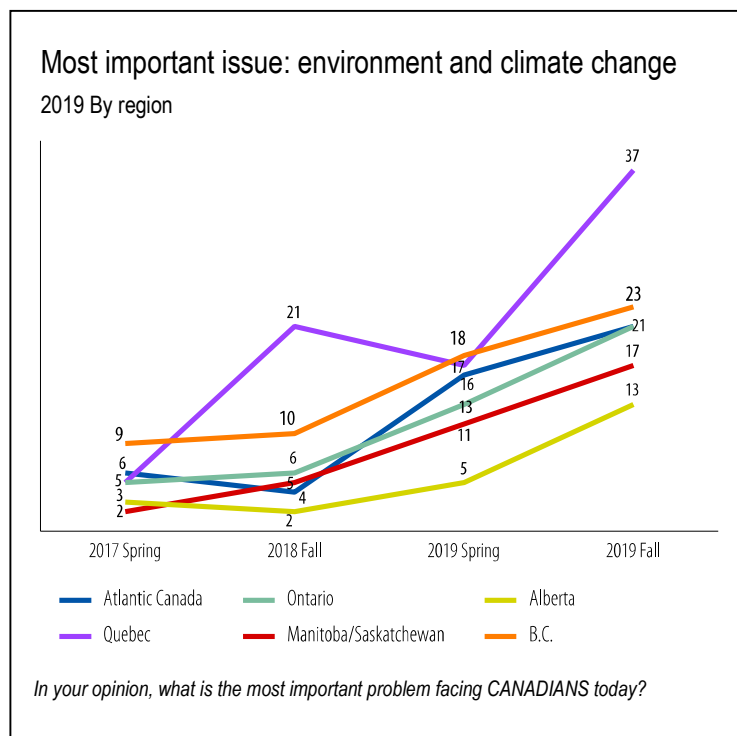
- The change has been most dramatic in Quebec, where the proportion seeing climate change as the most important problem increased from five percent in April 2017 to 37 percent in October 2019. The environment and climate change had overtaken the economy and health care as the top concern in Quebec by October 2018, earlier than any other province.

⁴ See: Environics Institute, *Public Opinion on Immigrations and Refugees* (November 5, 2019); <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-on-immigration-and-refugees>

- By April 2019, the environment and climate change had also emerged as the top choice for the most important problem in British Columbia; in that province, the proportion seeing climate change as the most important problem increased from nine percent in April 2017 to 23 percent in October 2019.

- It is only in the current survey (October 2019) that the environment and climate change also emerges as the top choice for most important problem among residents of the Atlantic provinces and Ontario.

- While the proportions seeing the environment and climate change as the most important problem increased in both Manitoba/Saskatchewan and Alberta, in both cases it did not overtake the economy and unemployment as the most frequently cited top problem.



Satisfaction with the direction of the country

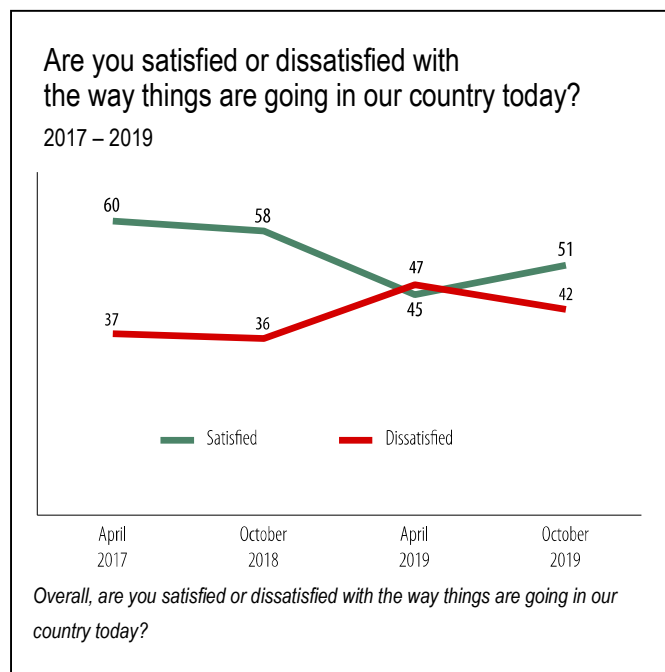
Satisfaction with the direction of the country has rebounded somewhat, having previously been on a downward trend. At the same time, a wider gap has opened up in the level of satisfaction expressed in different regions of the country.

One in two Canadians are currently **satisfied with the way things are going in our country today**, while slightly fewer (42%) are dissatisfied; the remainder (7%) cannot say.

Satisfaction with the direction of the country has rebounded somewhat, having previously been on a downward trend. Satisfaction fell from 60 percent to 45 percent in the two years between the Spring of 2017 and the Spring of 2019, before rising six points to the current level of 51 percent.

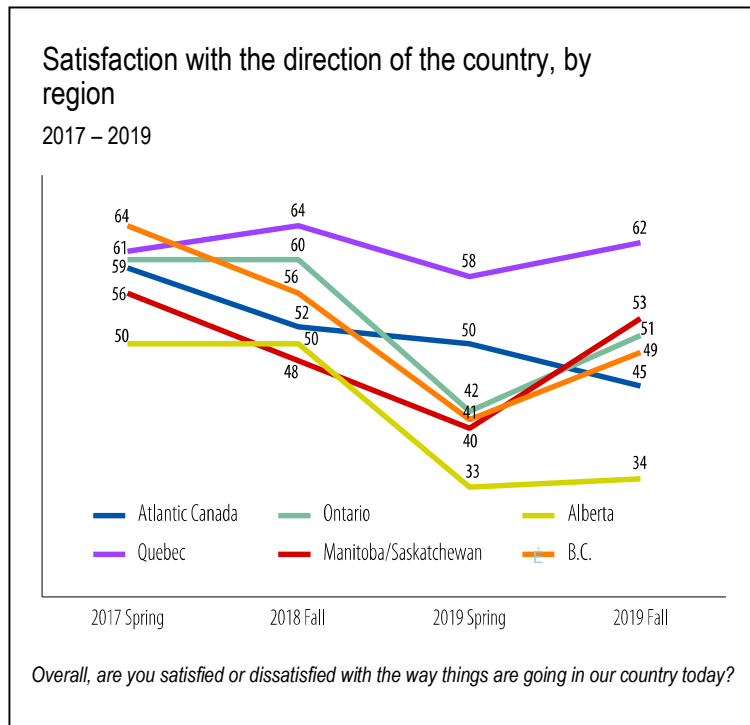
The modest recovery in satisfaction is not evident in all parts of the country.

- The trends in Ontario, Manitoba/Saskatchewan and British Columbia follow the national one, with satisfaction declining between the Spring of



2017 and the Spring of 2019 before partially recovering this Fall.

- The trend in Quebec is much more stable; satisfaction in that province has remained higher than average over the past two and a half years, and took a much more modest dip in the Spring of this year.
- Atlantic Canada has seen a steady decline in satisfaction, from 59 percent in the Spring of 2017, to 45 percent in the current survey. There was no rebound in satisfaction in Atlantic Canada between the Spring and Fall of this year.
- Satisfaction with the way things are going in our country has remained lower in Alberta over the past two and a half years, declining from 50 percent in the Spring of 2017 to 34 percent in the current survey. There was no rebound in satisfaction in Alberta between the Spring and Fall of this year.



The net result of these different trends is that a wider gap has opened up in the level of satisfaction expressed in different regions of the country. Two and a half years ago, there was a 11-point difference between the levels of satisfaction in Quebec and Alberta; today that gap stands at 28 points.

There are differences among other demographic groups in terms of satisfaction with the way things are going in our country today, with younger Canadians, women, those with a university education and immigrants all being more satisfied than average.

The political landscape

Over the past 12 months, the proportion of Liberal supporters citing the environment and climate change as the country's most important problem tripled; while among Conservatives, there was no change.

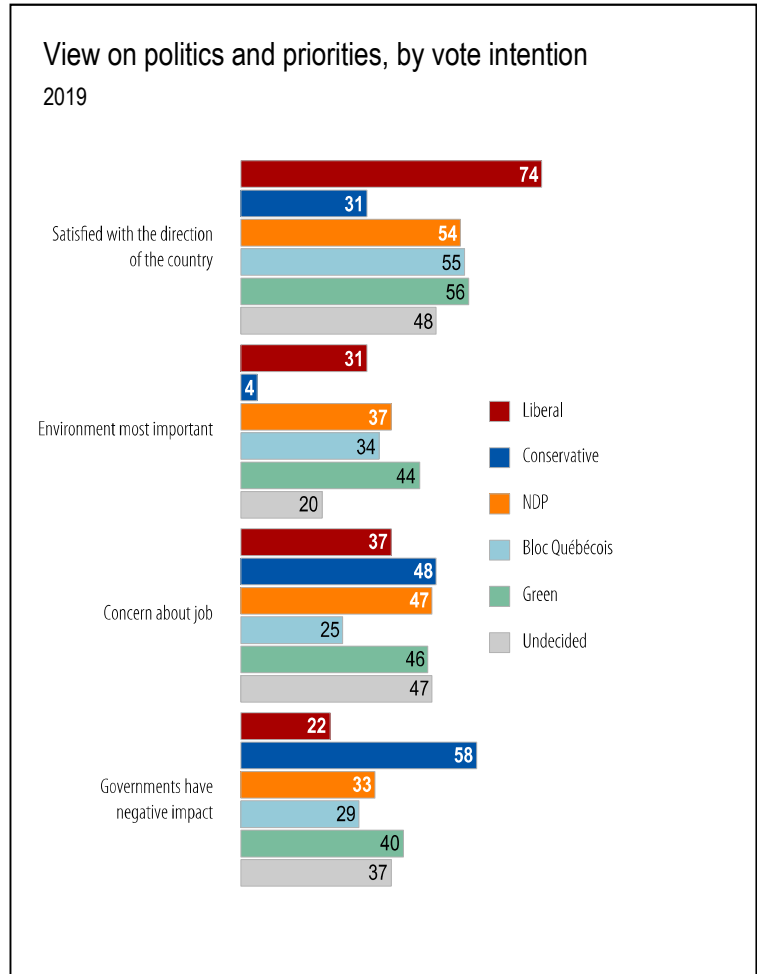
As mentioned, this survey was conducted during the last two weeks of the 2019 federal election campaign. Not surprisingly, it shows that there are significant differences in opinion among the supporters of the different political parties competing in the election. For instance, three in four (74%) Canadians intending to vote Liberal are satisfied with the way things are going in the country, compared with only 31 percent of Conservative supporters, and 54 percent of those intending to vote NDP.

Some of the differences of opinion reflect the parties' different regional bases of support. Supporters of the Bloc Québécois, located only in Quebec (where the economic mood is improving), are much less concerned about themselves or a member of their immediate family finding or keeping a stable, full-

time job than are supporters of the Conservatives, a significant portion of whom (20%) are residents of Alberta (where the economic mood remains sour).

Other differences are more a reflection of the ideological orientation of the parties. Conservative supporters, for example, are much more likely than are supporters of other parties to say that governments have a negative impact on most people’s lives. Among Conservative supporters, 18 percent say governments’ impact is positive and 58 percent say it is negative; the pattern is reversed for Liberal supporters, 53 percent of whom see it as positive, while 22 percent see it as negative.

In the context of the election and its outcome, however, one of the most important differences among party supporters is in what they see as the most important issue facing Canada today. The environment and climate change is the most frequently cited issue among those intending to vote for the Liberal Party; among Conservative Party supporters, the most frequently cited issue is the economy and unemployment. Forty-four percent of Greens, 37 percent of NDPers, 34 percent of Bloquistes and 31 percent of Liberals say that the environment and climate change is the country’s most important problem, compared with only four percent of Conservatives. Those who were undecided at the time of the survey were also most likely to cite the environment and climate change as the country’s top problem (20% of undecideds mentioned the environment and climate change, while 13% mentioned the economy or unemployment).



The change over time is equally striking. In the year between the Fall of 2018 and the Fall of 2019, the proportion of Liberal supporters citing the environment and climate change as the country’s most important problem jumped from 10 percent to 31 percent; among Conservatives, there was no change. The economy and poor government leadership remained the top issues among Conservatives over the course of the year leading up to the election. It is curious that the cost of living, which featured as a key issue in the Conservative Party’s campaign, was no more likely to be cited as the most important problem by Conservative supporters than by Liberal supporters.

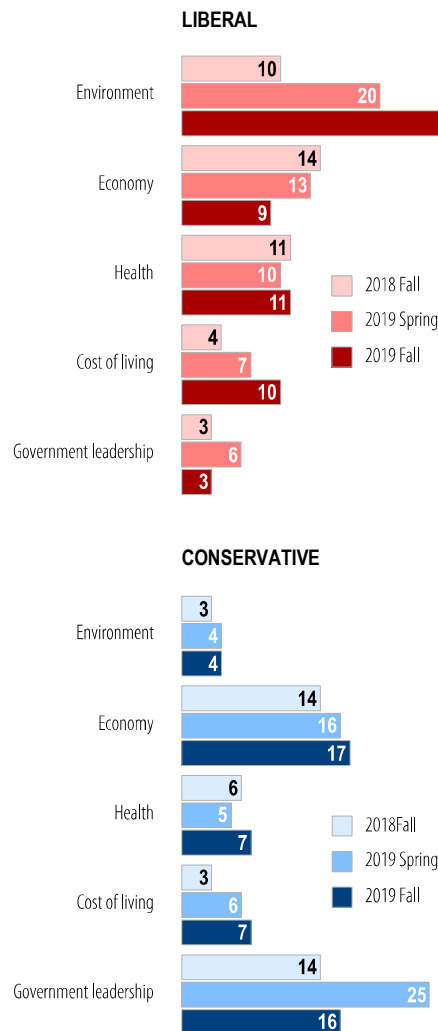
Conclusion

As we have seen, there are considerable differences in opinion among regions in Canada regarding the state of the economy, the direction of the country, on the role of government, and on priorities such as the environment and climate change. Differences between Quebec and Alberta are often the starkest (though they are by no means the only ones of note). Albertans stand out in this survey as the least satisfied with the direction of the country, the most likely to see the economy or unemployment as the country's top problem, the most worried about job security, and the most likely to see governments as having a negative impact on most people's lives. Quebecers, in contrast, are the most satisfied with the direction of the country, the least likely to see the economy or unemployment as the country's top problem, the least worried about job security, and the least likely to see governments as having a negative impact. The environment and climate change is now the issue most likely to be cited as the country's most important problem – in the view of Quebecers, but not Albertans.

Given these regional differences in outlook, it is not surprising that the distribution of seats in the House of Commons that resulted from the vote on October 21, 2019 is regionalized as well (though, of course, the election results are linked to a much wider range of factors than those touched on in this report). These patterns also serve to underscore the extent of the current challenge of building a political consensus across Canada on the major issues facing the country, notably that of how best to address climate change while responding to Alberta's pronounced economic concerns.

Most important problem, by vote intention

2018 – 2019 Selected mentions



In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing CANADIANS today?

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. Andrew Parkin at andrew.parkin@environics.ca

