

Focus Canada – Fall 2020

Changing opinions about the United States, China and Russia

FINAL REPORT

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about their country's relations with its international partners. This survey was conducted in partnership with the Faculty of Social Sciences' IMPACT Project at the University of Ottawa and Century Initiative. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,000 Canadians between September 8 and 23, 2020. 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

Over the past few years, the foreign policy challenges facing Canada have multiplied. The Canadian government has had to manage the “America first” policy of President Trump, a fracturing European Union, a more aggressive and even vindictive regime in China, and a Russian government suspected of nefarious interference with western democracy. In the wake of these developments, there have been significant changes in how Canadians view many of the country's erstwhile allies, along with a growing recognition that, from Canada's vantage point, the world has become a much less friendly place.

The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 was followed by a decline in the proportion of Canadians holding a favourable opinion of the United States. That proportion has declined even further over the past year, reaching a record low. More than three in five Canadians now have an unfavourable view of their neighbouring country to the south. At the same time, a growing proportion Canadians think that the two countries are becoming less alike, and for the first time, Canadians are more likely to say their country is becoming less like the U.S. than they are to say that it is becoming more like it.

Despite their worsening opinion of the United States, most Canadians remain supportive of North American free trade. Following the agreement's renegotiation, views of NAFTA remain much more positive than negative, with one in two Canadians saying that, on balance, NAFTA has helped the Canadian economy. Only half as many (one in four) say that NAFTA has hurt the Canadian economy.

Not surprisingly, President Trump remains an unpopular choice for U.S. president among Canadians. Two in three prefer the Democratic Party nominee Joe Biden, over four times the proportion who support President Trump. This is hardly a new pattern: since 2004, Canadians have consistently favoured the Democratic Party candidate for president by a large majority.

What has changed recently are opinions on whether the United States is a friend or an enemy of Canada. The proportion of Canadians who see U.S. as a friend of Canada has dropped significantly since 2013, while a growing minority (now one in ten) now considers the U.S. to be an enemy. Canadians are now more likely to see India as a friend of Canada than they are the United States.

Views of China and Russia have also deteriorated. In the case of China, the proportion seeing it as a friend of Canada is only half a large today as in 2013; one in three Canadians now see China as an enemy. Similarly, the proportion seeing Russia as a friend of Canada has fallen, while the proportion seeing that country as an enemy has tripled. In the case of both China and Russia, more Canadians now consider each to be an enemy of Canada than consider them to be a friend.

Canada-United States relations

Canadians' overall opinion of the United States has worsened significantly over the past year, dropping to its lowest point yet in almost 40 years. And for the first time, Canadians are more likely to say their country is becoming less like the U.S. than they are to say it is becoming more like it.

Opinion of the United States. Canadians' overall opinion of the United States has been on a general decline for almost a decade but, nearing the end of President Donald Trump's first term in office, this trend has accelerated.

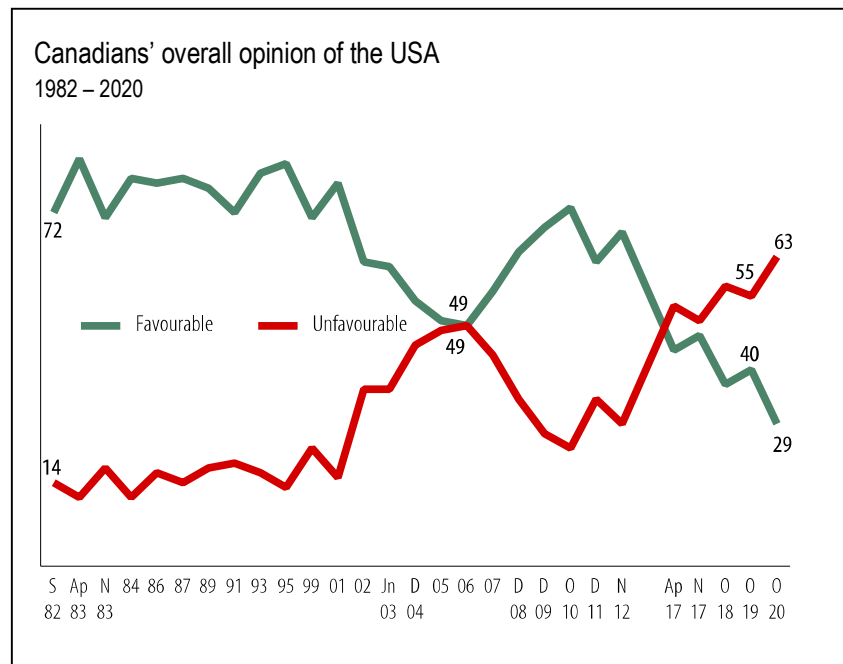
In 2010, during President Barack Obama's initial term, three in four Canadians (73%) held a favourable opinion of the United States – the highest proportion to do so since the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 2001. Following Donald Trump's entry into office, this figure fell to 44 percent, and for the first time since Focus Canada began measuring such opinions in 1982, more Canadians held a negative than a positive view of the U.S.

Over the past year, Canadians' opinions of the U.S. have declined still further: only 29 percent now have a very or somewhat favourable

opinion of the United States (down 11 percentage points since 2019, a record low dating back to 1982), compared with 63 percent who express an unfavourable view (up 8 points, also a record high). This trend could be attributed both to reactions to the policies and behaviours of the current American president, and to growing concern about the extent of social and racial strife in the United States as a whole.

Men (37%) currently are more likely than women (22%) to have a favourable opinion of the United States; a gender gap of this size has been recorded in each of the surveys conducted since the election of Donald Trump as president. Across the country, favourable opinions are today highest in Alberta (39%) and lowest in Ontario and B.C. (26% in each case). Favourable opinions are also much higher among Conservative Party supporters (45%) than among those who endorse the Liberal Party (25%) or the NDP (16%). Opinions do not vary significantly across age groups, or between white and racialized Canadians.

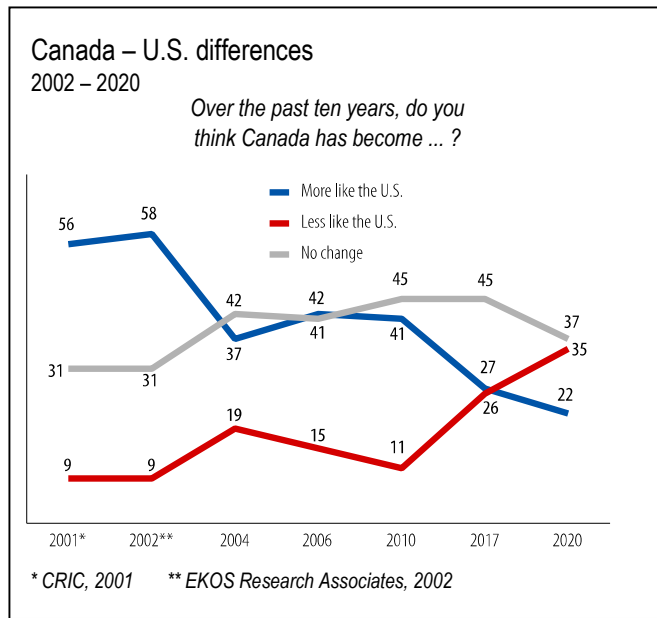
Looking at the change since last year, the drop in favourable views occurred across the country and among all demographic groups, but is most pronounced in Ontario (falling from 41% to 26%), and among Conservative Party supporters (falling from 63% to 45%).



Becoming more or less like the United States. Along with declining opinions of the US, Canadians have become less likely than ever before to believe their own country is becoming more like its neighbour to the south.

At the turn of the millennium, surveys reported that a majority of Canadians felt that over the previous 10 years, their country had become more like the United States. By the mid-2000s, however, the proportion saying the country was becoming more like the U.S. had dropped to about two in five, and by 2017, it had dropped further. This view has now fallen even further, to only 22 percent.

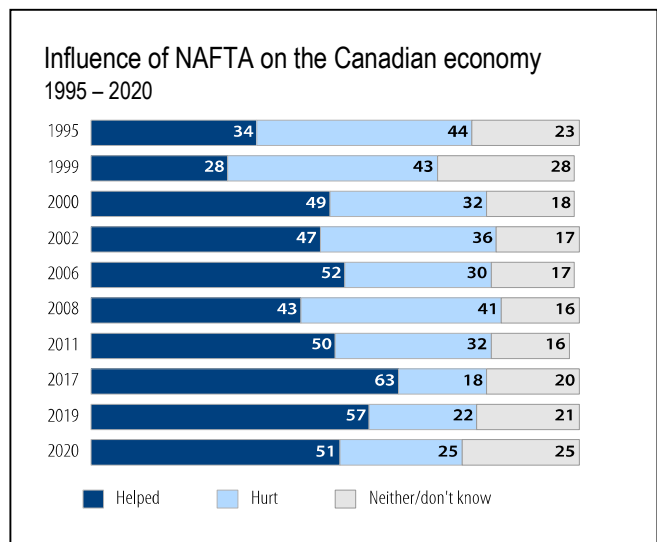
By contrast, the proportion saying that Canada has become less like the U.S. has increased from about one in ten in the early 2000s, to more than one in three (35%) today. For the first time, Canadians are more likely to say their country is becoming less like the U.S. than they are to say that it is becoming more like its neighbour. Currently, 37 percent say there has been no change either way over the last 10 years.



Younger Canadians (those between the ages of 18 and 29) are more likely than average to say that Canada is becoming more like the United States: 35 percent in that age group hold that view, compared to 20 percent of those ages 30 and older. The views of this younger age group have also not changed significantly since 2017, whereas since that time a growing proportion of those age 30 and older have come to see Canada as becoming less like the U.S.

Support for North American free trade. Earlier this year, the Canadian parliament endorsed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), the trade agreement replacing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). While, on balance, Canadian public opinion about North American free trade (NAFTA or USMCA) remains much more positive than negative, favourable views have edged downward over recent years.

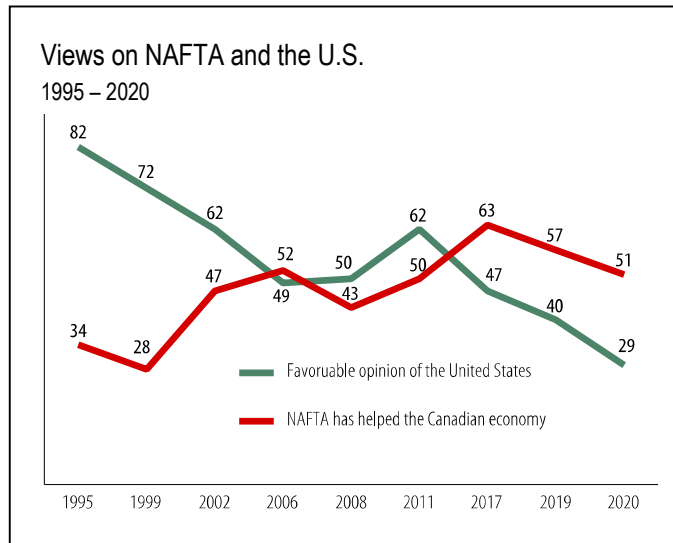
Over the last two decades, a plurality, if not a majority, of Canadians have said that, on balance, NAFTA has helped the Canadian economy. Currently, 51 percent of Canadians take this view, down slightly from the high of 63 percent recorded in 2017. One in four (25%) Canadians now says that NAFTA has hurt the Canadian economy, slightly higher than in 2017 (18%) but otherwise lower than in the period initially following the treaty coming into force in 1994. Thus, Canadians remain twice as likely to see NAFTA helping than hurting the country's economy. Another one in four currently says that NAFTA has neither helped nor hurt the economy, or cannot say.



The sense that NAFTA has helped Canada's economy is shared fairly evenly across the country and among all age groups. This view is, however, more widely shared among men (56%) than women (46%), among those with a university education (57%) compared to those with a high school education or less (43%), and among those with household incomes over \$100,000 per year (63%) compared to those with lower incomes.

Canadians' support for free trade with the United States – in the form of NAFTA and now USMCA – initially did not rise or fall in line with opinions about the United States itself. In the 1990s (in the years following NAFTA's ratification), Canadians had very favourable views of the U.S. but were more likely to see NAFTA as hurting rather than helping their economy.

Subsequently, support for NAFTA grew significantly, while opinions of the U.S. became much less favourable. More recently, however, public support for free trade between Canada and the U.S. and favourable views of the U.S. have both been trending downwards. It is not yet clear, however, whether this parallel in trends is only a temporary development, tied to reaction to the current U.S. administration.



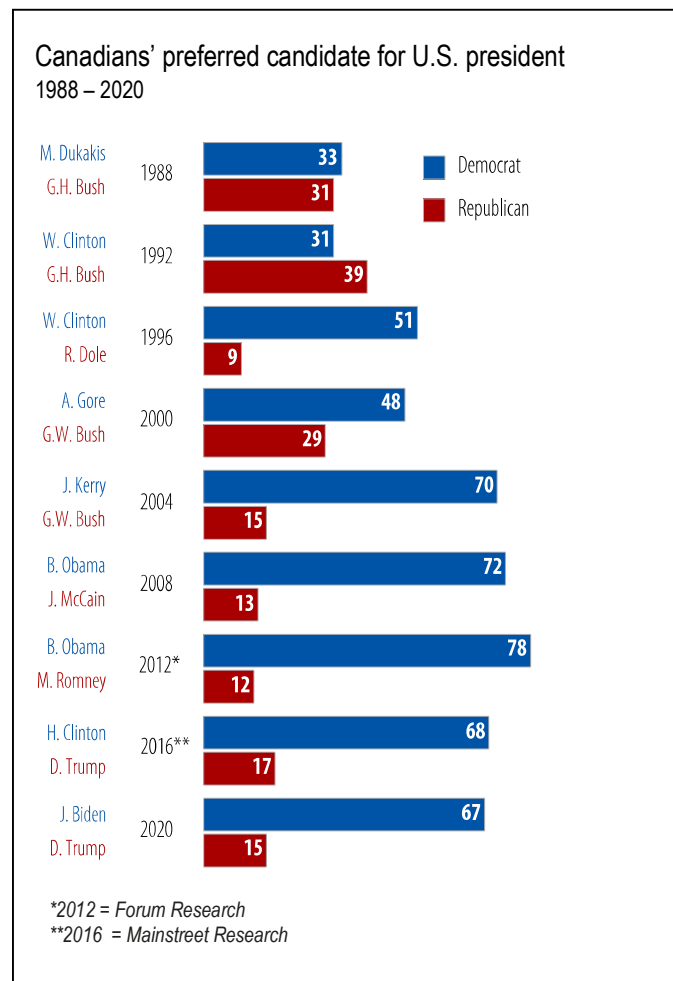
The 2020 U.S. Presidential election

Two in three Canadians favour Democrat Joe Biden in November's U.S. presidential election – over four times the proportion who prefer President Trump. This strong preference among Canadians for Democrat over Republican candidates for president has been consistent in U.S. elections since 2004.

Choice for U.S. president. This survey confirms previous research showing the unpopularity of Donald Trump among Canadians. However, over the past two decades, Canadians have consistently favoured the Democratic Party candidate for president by a wide margin.

Currently, 67 percent of Canadians say they would most like to see Democratic Party nominee Joe Biden win November's U.S. presidential election, compared with 15 percent who prefer President Trump. Preference for Biden is strongly expressed across the country, but support for Trump is higher than average in Alberta (31%), and among supporters of the federal Conservative Party (33%) – one in three Conservatives prefer Trump to Biden, compared to fewer than one in ten supporters of any of the other main federal parties.

In each case, however, Biden remains the preferred winner of the election (53% of Albertans favour the Democratic candidate, as do 47% of Conservatives). Trump is also twice as popular among men (20%) than among women (10%). Low support among Canadians for the Republican candidate for U.S. president is not new. Since the 2004 election, Canadians have preferred



Democratic candidates over Republican ones by at least a four-to-one margin. In fact, Canadians have consistently preferred the Democratic to the Republican candidate in every presidential election since 1996. This is true not only of Canadians in general, but also of supporters of the federal Conservative Party more specifically. In most elections since 1996, about one in two Canadian Conservatives has preferred the Democratic candidate for President, compared with about one in three who has preferred the Republican – with the exception of 2008, when support for Democratic candidate Barak Obama reached 62 percent among supporters of the Conservative Party.

One noticeable change over time is that, prior to 2004 (and thus in elections held prior to the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S.), far more Canadians were undecided about which U.S. presidential candidate they preferred, or supported an independent candidate or offered no opinion. Since 2004, as Canadians have become increasingly attentive to politics and events in the United States, at least four in five Canadians have expressed a preference for the Democratic or Republican candidate one way or the other.

Canada’s friends and enemies

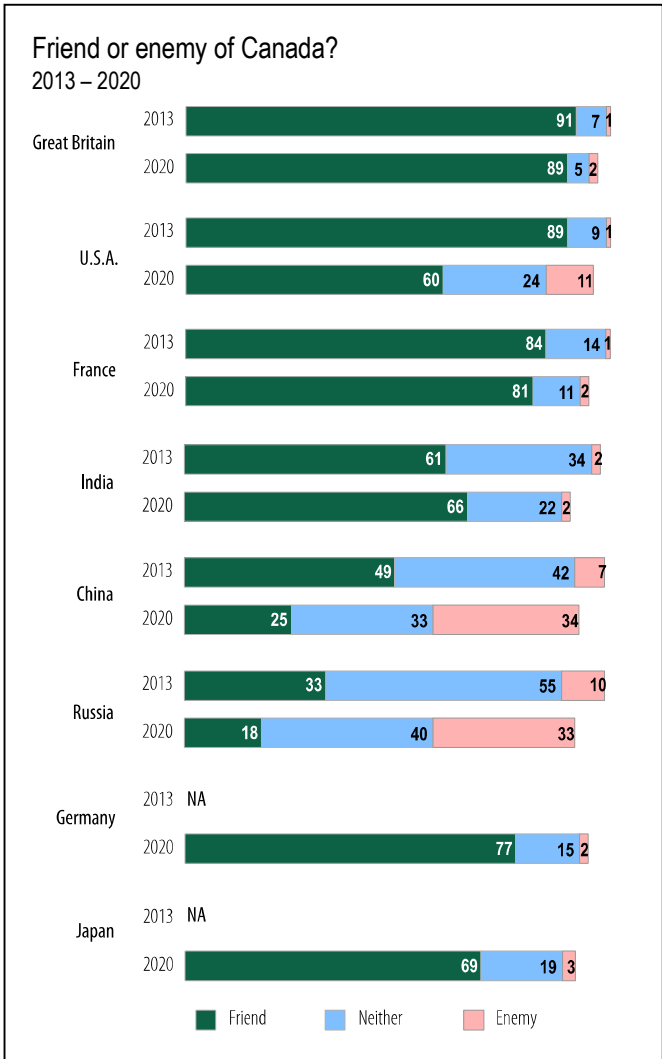
Over the past decade, the proportion of Canadians who consider the United States to be a friend of their country has dropped significantly. And Canadians are now more likely than not to view both China and Russia as enemies rather than as friends.

Canada’s friends and enemies. Most Canadians consider European countries such as the U.K., France and Germany to be friends of Canada, but the proportions of Canadians considering either the United States, China or Russia to be a friend of Canada has declined significantly since 2013.

Less than a decade ago, the world seemed a relatively friendly place when viewed through Canadian eyes. In a 2013 survey conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with the Trudeau Foundation, nine in ten viewed the United States and the United Kingdom as friends of Canada, and four in five felt the same about France. Fewer felt the same about India, China or Russia, but most of those who didn’t consider these countries to be friendly had a neutral rather than a negative view of them; very few considered them to be enemies of Canada.

Europe. The current survey finds that perspectives on Canada’s relationships with the United Kingdom and France have not changed, with large majorities still considering each of these countries to be a friend of Canada. The 2020 survey also asked about two other G-7 countries: Germany and Japan.

Views of both are also very positive, with 77 percent of Canadians seeing Germany as a friend, and 69 percent saying the same of Japan. Most of the remainder say these countries are neither a friend nor an enemy, with very few seeing them as enemies.



India. Views of India are also largely positive and have improved somewhat since 2013. Two-thirds of Canadians (66%) – up from 61 percent in 2013 – now consider India to be a friend of Canada. Very few (2% in each survey) see India as an enemy.

United States. Views have change more significantly – and more negatively – in the cases of the United States, our closest ally, as well as China and Russia. The proportion considering the United States to be a friend of Canada has dropped by 29 points, from 89 to 60 percent since 2013. One in four (24%) now says that the U.S. is neither a friend nor an enemy of Canada – up from nine percent, and 11 percent (up from 1%) now consider the U.S. to be an enemy of Canada. Canadians are now more likely to see India as a friend of Canada than they are the United States.

China. In the case of China, the proportion seeing it as a friend of Canada has declined by almost half since 2013 (falling from 49% to 25%). One in three (34%) now see China as an enemy (up 27 points, from 7%). The proportion taking a neutral view has fallen from 42 to 33 percent.

Russia. Similarly, the proportion seeing Russia as a friend of Canada has fallen, from 33 percent in 2013 to 18 percent today, while the proportion seeing that country as an enemy has tripled from 10 percent to 33 percent. In the case of both China and Russia, more Canadians now consider each to be an enemy of Canada than consider them to be a friend.

Views on the different countries vary among different demographic groups, but in somewhat different ways for each of the countries in question. In the case of the United States, a significant gender gap has opened up. While the proportion of men seeing the U.S. as a friend of Canada declined by 18 points between 2013 and 2020 (from 88% to 70%), the drop among women is twice as large (from 89% to 50% -- or 39 points).

The decline in the proportion seeing the U.S. as friendly is also somewhat larger among older Canadians than their younger counterparts. There is currently little significant variation in views of the United States across regions of the country, or between white and racialized Canadians.

The decline in the proportion seeing China as friendly is also somewhat larger among older Canadians compared to younger generations. But in the case of China, there is a regional dimension as well: the proportion seeing China as friendly has declined more sharply in the West, where views were previously more positive. Two in five (41%) of those living in the Prairie provinces now see China as an enemy of Canada (up from seven percent in 2013)

Opinions on these countries also vary among supporters of the different federal political parties. Supporters of the Conservative Party are much more likely to consider the United States as a friend of Canada (70%) than are supporters of the Green Party (58%), the Liberal Party (55%), the NDP (51%) or the Bloc Québécois (49%). In the case of China, supporters of the Conservative Party (45%), along with Bloc Québécois supports (44%), are more like than others to see that country as an enemy of Canada.

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. www.EnvironicsInstitute.org.

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