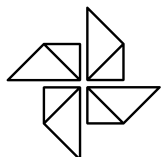


# CANADIAN YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

ON

# DEMOCRACY, GLOBAL ISSUES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

May 2021



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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The two youngest generations of Canadians – most often referred to as Generation Z (ages 9 to 24) and Millennials (25 to 40) – are two of the three largest in the country's history, and together make up more than forty percent of the population. These generations play a dominant role in today's economy, as workers and the largest consumer market in most sectors. At the same time, their influence is much less significant when it comes to how the country is governed, in terms of politics and policy. Most of the positions of power in Canada are filled with people in older generations, who often appear to pay little attention to the priorities of younger people. Because younger Canadians are less likely to vote in elections, they lack political clout in demanding to be taken more seriously.

But today's youth are literally the country's future, and are already assuming leadership roles that will expand rapidly over the next few years. It is in everyone's interest that their voice be heard and fully incorporated into society's collective decision-making. This makes it important to understand who they are today, what they view the major issues facing the country, and how they are personally engaged with the world they will inhabit well beyond those in older generations.

## THE STUDY

The Environics Institute for Survey Research partnered with Apathy is Boring to conduct a major study of Canada's Millennial and Gen Z generations to better understand their perspectives, priorities and actions in terms of:

- Confidence in the country's democracy and institutions
- Perspectives on global issues
- Strategies for addressing key issues facing Canada
- Personal engagement with issues, politics and local community

The research updates a previous study conducted with Canadian Millennials in 2016, also conducted with Apathy is Boring and other partners. This new research identifies how the perspectives and activities of Millennials has evolved over the past four years, and provides a first look at the older portion (leading-edge) of Canada's Gen Z generation (ages 18 to 24).

The research consisted of an in-depth survey conducted online with a representative sample of 5,264 Canadians ages 18 to 40 across the country, which included Millennials (ages 25 to 40) and the leading-edge of Generation Zers (ages 18 to 24).<sup>1</sup> The survey was administered by Environics Research between September 8 and November 9, 2020, and the sample was stratified to ensure representation by province, age and gender, according to the most current population statistics (2016 Census).<sup>2</sup> In addition, oversamples were collected with individuals who self-identify as Black or Indigenous, in order to provide for sufficient representation of each group for analysis. The survey was conducted in English and French (as per respondent's preference).

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The following sections of the report present results from the survey, with a focus on comparisons between the two generations, as well as by selected population characteristics such as region, gender, educational attainment, and ethnic/racial identity. The survey sample is sufficient to provide for analysis by youth who identify as white and by each of the country's four largest racialized populations in Canada (Chinese, Black, South Asian, and Indigenous). Individuals with another racialized identity were combined to form another distinct group for analysis.

The analysis examines how the perspectives and activities of Millennials have changed since 2016 (where applicable), based on comparisons with the 2016 Survey of Millennials. Reference is also made to other Environics Institute research where applicable, for purposes of placing the current findings in context with older generations and/or with results from previous years.

Detailed data tables are available under separate cover, which present the results for each survey question by population demographics and other relevant characteristics (see study project page at [www.environicsinstitute.org](http://www.environicsinstitute.org)). All results are presented as percentages unless otherwise noted.

The survey included additional questions on other topics (e.g., life aspirations, post-secondary education experience), which will be published in a separate report at a later date. This second report will also revisit the social values of Millennials (first introduced in 2016) and introduce the social values framework of leading-edge Gen Z Canadians.

<sup>1</sup> The research set a minimum age threshold of 18 for participation, per the standard applied to most national surveys of this type.

<sup>2</sup> Margin of sampling error is not an applicable statistic for surveys conducted using non-probability samples such as this one.

**Note about terminology.** Throughout the report reference is made to Millennials (defined as Canadians ages 25 to 40) and leading-edge Gen Zers (ages 18 to 24). The population under study will at times be defined as “youth”, although this term is not typically used in describing people over 30 years of age.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was made possible with the support from a number of individuals and organizations. The Environics Institute would like to acknowledge the essential financial and substantive contributions of its lead partner, Apathy is Boring (Samantha Reusch, Erika De Torres, Melina Duckett), as well as the research team at Environics Research (John Otoo, Rohit Shah, David Jamieson). The Institute would also like to express its appreciation to the 5,264 Canadians who took the time to share their perspectives and experiences.

Apathy is Boring would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the Government of Canada through Employment Social Development Canada (Canada Service Corps) and the RBC Future Launch program.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study covers a large and diverse population but it is nonetheless possible to draw from it a broad portrait of leading-edge Generation Z and Millennial Canadians. In viewing the world as it is today, Canadian youth are cognizant of the serious challenges facing society, and likely less optimistic about the future than were youth in previous generations. Apart from the immediate crisis of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, the country's younger generations are especially focused on global warming and environmental degradation as the most pressing global issue that needs to be addressed, but also attentive to other major issues such as racism and economic inequality.

As for how younger Canadians see the capacity of their country's institutions to meet these and other challenges, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, youth are more likely than not to believe their country has a functioning democracy and governments that work, albeit with major problems. Most express confidence in public and nonprofit institutions (health care, education, major charities). On the other hand, there is widespread agreement that governments need to change in a variety of ways (even if there is no consensus on which changes are most essential), and youth express lower levels of trust in the private sector and media. At the same time, there is clear evidence of hope for the future, as many believe in the potential for making real progress on major global issues such as gender inequality and racism, and in the power of collective action at the local level.

And Canadian youth are far from passive observers. Most pay close attention to news and current events, and are engaged at some level through volunteer work, participation in groups, and voting at election time (although notably, youth as a whole do not see voting as the sine qua non of political engagement). Many bridge the political divide by connecting with friends and others whose political views are very different from their own. These findings confirm Apathy is Boring's own research on youth engagement ([Together We Rise \(2020\)](#)), which documented how Canada's youth are shifting their focus from traditional forms of participation such as voting to other models of engagement with the issues of importance to them.

Canada's youth are the most ethnically and racially diverse generations in the country's history, and their backgrounds and experiences shape their perspectives and engagement with the important issues of the day. Instead of a clear divide between racialized and white youth, the research reveals a more nuanced pattern across different ethnic-racial groups in ways that are in some cases expected and in others surprising.

Leading-edge Gen Z and Millennial Canadians are now the largest generational bloc of the country's population and the most prominent in terms of what Canada is today and will be in the coming decades. This makes it essential that their perspectives be understood and embraced, to foster meaningful engagement in Canadian society and its democratic institutions, even as this may look different from what older generations may be accustomed to. Voting in elections will remain an important pillar of citizenship, but the country's institutions will need to step up to provide the spaces and resources that empower youth to bring their ideas to life, whether through enriched volunteer programs, collective action initiatives, and innovative social enterprise. Today's youth are looking to make their world a better place, and all of Canada stands to benefit from this energy.

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

**Confidence in democracy and government.** Canadian youth give a qualified endorsement to their country's democracy and governments. They are more likely than not to express satisfaction with the way democracy is working in Canada today (leading-edge Gen Zers in particular), and most believe governments are working, albeit with major problems. Those who maintain that governments are broken cite many reasons, including wasteful spending, poor decision making, not being responsive to citizen priorities, not being trustworthy, and a lack of leadership. At the same time, there is little agreement on what changes need to be made to make governments work better. Municipal governments are more likely to be seen as working, compared with federal and provincial governments.

**Confidence in Canadian institutions.** Among nine major Canadian institutions or sectors, youth express the strongest confidence in the country's health care system, major non-profit organizations (e.g., YMCA, United Way), and universities and colleges; in each case the proportion with strong confidence outweighs weak confidence by more than two-to-one. Ratings are more balanced between positive and negative as applied to the country's banks, school system, and the justice system. By comparison, youth are least apt to be confident in the federal Parliament, Canadian media, and major corporations; in each case low confidence ratings outweigh positive ones by a clear margin. Leading-edge Gen Zers are more likely to express confidence in those institutions at the top of the list, while Millennials' ratings have held steady or improved in all cases since 2016.

**Perspectives on global issues.** Given the state of world affairs in 2020, it is no surprise that Canadian youth are more pessimistic than optimistic about the direction the world is heading over the coming decade, and more so than they were two years ago. The Covid-19 pandemic is most likely to be seen as the top global issue today, but the environment (and global warming in particular) is considered to be the most important global problem if nothing is done to address it.

Youth vary in their level of confidence in making real progress on five major global issues. They are the most optimistic about progress on gender inequality, pandemics like Covid-19, and racism, and less so when it comes to climate change and poverty/economic inequality. Notably, strong confidence in making progress on racism is as strong or stronger among racialized youth compared with those who identify as white (the exception being Chinese youth who are the least confident among ethnic/racial groups). Leading-edge Gen Zers are more likely than Millennials to express confidence in future progress, especially in terms of racism and gender inequality.

**Solutions to major issues in Canada.** When it comes to how progress can be achieved on the pressing issues facing the country, youth express tempered confidence in the effectiveness of four broad types of strategies for social change. Ratings of the four are very similar, but effectiveness is most apt to be ascribed to developing community projects and grass roots programs to achieve meaningful change at the local level, and holding governments accountable through elections and voting; in both cases one in five says this strategy is very effective, with a plurality rating them to be somewhat effective. Considered only slightly less effective are launching social movements to create public debate and build public awareness, and advocating for policy reform through working with and within governments.

These less-than-enthusiastic views about social change strategies notwithstanding, Canada's youth believe in the power of collective action at the local level. Four in ten say this type of effort can make a big difference in solving community problems, with just one in ten maintaining it would make little or no difference. And seven in ten are somewhat if not very confident their generation will make a positive impact on society over the coming decades, with leading-edge Gen Zers among the most optimistic in this view.

**Attention to issues and current events.** Canadian youth follow news and current events on a frequent basis, with half doing so on at least a daily basis, compared with just one in six who reports doing so rarely or never. Over the period during which the survey was conducted (fall

2020), the Covid-19 pandemic was by far the issue attracting the most attention, followed by US politics (e.g., the 2020 election), racism, and Canadian politics. Youth rely on a variety of media sources to follow news and current events, especially social media but also traditional sources such as television, radio and newspapers. Leading-edge Gen Zers are more reliant on social media and online news platforms (e.g., Huffington Post, iPolitics), while Millennials are bigger consumers of traditional channels.

**Engagement with politics.** Not all Canadian youth follow politics, but half say they are somewhat if not very interested in this topic, with such interest strongest among those who identify with the political right. Six in ten claim to have a good, if not excellent, understanding of how democracy works in Canada, and about half report having learned about this subject in high school (being somewhat more common among leading-edge Gen Zers).

A key indicator of political engagement is voting. Just over six in ten youth ages 19 to 40 report having voted in the October 2019 federal election, with turnout increasing along with age across the two generations. Those who were eligible but chose not to vote in this election are most likely to cite motivational reasons (e.g., lack of interest, distrust or cynicism in candidates or politics generally), with a smaller proportion mentioning external barriers such as lack of time and illness. Among those eligible to vote, seven in ten youth say they voted in their last provincial election, while just over half reported to have done so at the municipal level.

**Community engagement.** Many Canadian youth are active in their communities in various ways. One-third have volunteered their time in the past year to support organizations, groups or worthwhile causes, in most cases devoting up to four hours a month of their time. Close to half have been a member or participant with a local group or organization in the past 12 months, such as unions or professional associations, and those focusing on sports, religion, education, culture and the arts. Volunteering and group participation is most common among the youngest Gen Zers (18 to 21) and declines with age (along with one's responsibilities for work and family).

Close to three in ten youth say they have been actively following or engaged with a particular cause or issue over the past year. No one type of issue predominates among this group, but the most attention is being given to the Covid-19 pandemic, racism and social justice, and environmental issues such as global warming.

**Bridging the political divide.** Canadian youth span the spectrum of political orientation, with roughly one-quarter identifying on the political right, one in five on the political

left, and four in ten placing themselves somewhere in the middle. Many youth report having friends and connections with others whose political views are very different from their own.

Regardless of political orientation, most Canadian youth do not limit their social circles to those of the same persuasion. Fewer than four in ten say all or most of their friends share their own political views, and about half say they connect with people (online and in-person) with others whose political orientation is very different from their own. Those who do so are more likely than not to say such interactions involve discussions about politics, at least sometimes if not frequently. Finally, when people have such discussions about politics with others holding opposing views, the experience is equally as likely to be interesting and informative as they are to be stressful and frustrating. Youth on the political right are more likely to report such experiences in positive terms, while those on the left are most likely to find them to be difficult.

## HOW PERSPECTIVES AND ACTIVITY VARY ACROSS CANADA'S YOUTH

The conclusions presented above broadly apply to leading-edge Gen Z and Millennial Canadians as a whole, but it is important to appreciate how the perspectives and activity vary across this diverse population on a number of dimensions, such as socio-economic status, ethnic and racial identity, and political orientation (which are not independent of one another).

**Generation.** At a broad level, the results for leading-edge Gen Zers and Millennials are notably similar in most of the areas covered in this survey, indicating there is no clear dividing line between these two generations (at least not at this point in time). Leading-edge Gen Zers are somewhat more optimistic about global issues, confident about democracy and institutions, and positive about the potential for meaningful progress; but these differences are not substantial enough to lead to different overall conclusions. Moreover, the perspectives of Millennials have held steady or in some cases improved over the past four years (for instance, in their confidence in some institutions and the effectiveness of municipal government). It is also the case that members of this older generation are now less likely to report volunteer activity, as they assume greater responsibilities for work and family.

**Educational attainment.** Education appears to play an important role in how youth view most of the issues covered in this survey. As the level of education progresses, youth are increasingly positive about democracy and government,

optimistic about global issues and collective action, and engaged in both politics and their community. This effect is most pronounced among those with a post-graduate degree.

**Ethnic and racial identity.** The survey was designed to yield results for the four largest ethnic and racial groups in Canada, and perspectives across these groups vary, often in counter-intuitive ways. The group that stands out most are South Asians: These youth are far and away the most positive and optimistic on most of the issues covered in the survey. They also happen to be most likely to have a post-graduate degree and a high level of overall life satisfaction. Black youth share this positive orientation in a number of areas, and only rarely fall below the national average. For instance, they are the most optimistic of all groups about the direction the world is heading over the coming decade, and about the impact of collective action at the local level. Black youth are also among the most active in terms of volunteer activity in their communities.

The pattern is less consistent with Chinese youth, who are very positive in some cases (e.g., satisfaction with democracy) but noticeably less so in others (confidence in addressing racism, interest in politics).

By comparison, Indigenous youth tend to be more negative than others on many issues (e.g. confidence in institutions, whether government is working or broken). Finally, youth who identify as white tend to be close to the national average (as would be the case being the largest group), but in some cases are less positive than most racialized youth (e.g., satisfaction with democracy, confidence in the Canadian media, federal Parliament and major corporations, optimism about the world's future direction). These findings demonstrate that the views of youth do not clearly divide between those who are racialized and those who are not.

**Political orientation.** Perspectives on many issues vary in a consistent pattern, with youth on the political right generally more positive and confident than those who identify on the political left or place themselves somewhere in the middle (worth noting is that youth on the right tend to have more education and are more likely to be South Asian). Youth on the political right are more likely than others to report a very strong sense of belonging to their local community (which is self-defined), which is also strongly linked to positive views on almost every topic covered in the survey.

**Other characteristics.** In comparison with the dimensions outlined above, results from the survey are more similar than different across a number of other characteristics of the population, such as gender, employment status, household income, and province of residence. Notable exceptions are highlighted in the sections that follow.

PART 1

**PERSPECTIVES  
ON DEMOCRACY,  
INSTITUTIONS AND  
GLOBAL ISSUES**

# CONFIDENCE IN DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNMENT

**Canadian youth are more likely than not to be satisfied with democracy in Canada today, and to see governments as working, if not without major problems. Those who believe governments are broken cite a variety of reasons, and there is no consensus on what is most in need of fixing.**

## Satisfaction with democracy in Canada.

How do Canada’s youth feel about the way democracy works in the country today? On balance, opinions are more positive than negative but by no means reflect a ringing endorsement. Just one in ten (10%) is very satisfied, with the majority (57%) saying they are satisfied. The remaining third are somewhat (26%) or very (7%) dissatisfied.

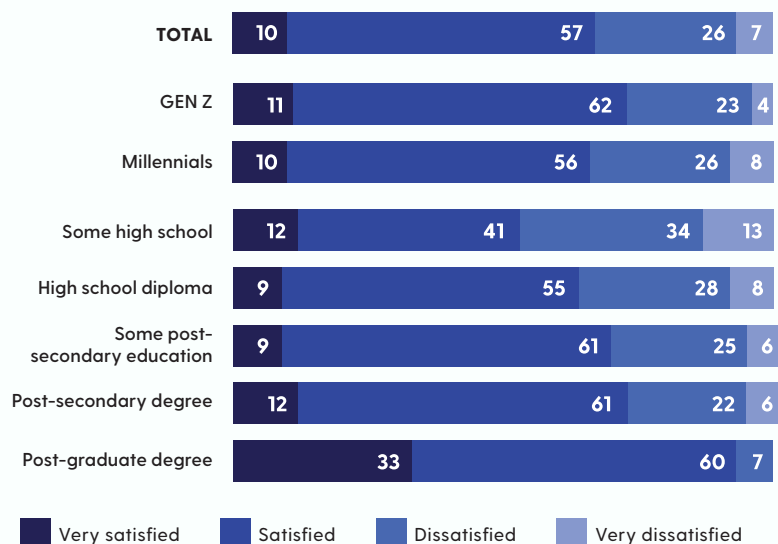
Satisfaction with democracy in Canada is somewhat stronger among Gen Zers (73% are very satisfied or satisfied) versus Millennials (66%), but there is little difference in opinions across age subcohorts within each generation. Views on this question are much more likely to be function of educational attainment: More than nine in ten (93%) youth with a post-graduate degree express satisfaction with democracy, compared with only 53 percent among those who have not yet completed high school.

Opinions about the current state of democracy in Canada also varies across ethnic/racial identity. Those who identify as South Asian are by far the most positive (85% very or somewhat satisfied), followed by Chinese (80%), Black (78%), and those with “other” racialized identities (78%). This view is least apt to be shared among those who are white (63%) or Indigenous (57%, versus 44% who are dissatisfied). Opinions are also linked to generation in Canada: Satisfaction with democracy is much higher among first generation youth (81%), compared with second generation (72%) and those whose parents were born in Canada (64%).

Other factors linked to positive views about democracy include having a very strong sense of belonging to one’s community (81% very or somewhat satisfied) and a high level of overall life satisfaction (76%). Positive opinions are also more evident among youth who identify on the right side (71%) or middle (70%) of the political spectrum, compared with those who place themselves on the political left (65%). Finally, satisfaction with democracy is similar across regions of the country, except being somewhat lower among Millennials in Alberta (55% satisfied) and leading-edge Gen Zers in Atlantic Canada (61%).

## Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada

By generation and education



Q.56

In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada?

## BENCHMARK TREND

Canadian youth assessment of how democracy is working appears to have declined somewhat over the previous year, based on comparison with the same survey question included in the latest in a series of Environics Institute AmericasBarometer surveys conducted every two to three years since 2012.\* In 2019, three-quarters of Canadians ages 18 to 44 were very satisfied (14%) or satisfied (62%) with the way democracy was working, compared with one in four who was dissatisfied (24%) (with almost no difference between those ages 18 to 29 and those 30 to 44). Notably, these 2019 results show little difference in views by education or generation in Canada.

\* Confidence in democracy and the political system: An update on trends in public opinion in Canada. political trends in Canada. Environics Institute. September 2019.

**Is government working or broken?** Given the pressing challenges facing governments in the early 21st century and the continual barrage of negative media coverage they receive, it is relevant to ask the global question: Do Canadians believe their governments are working or broken? On this survey, the question was asked in reference to each of three levels of government: federal, provincial and municipal, so to provide answers that are specific to each level, as well as for government as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

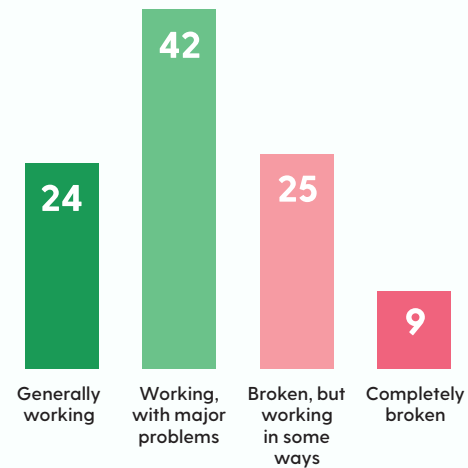
Similar to opinions about the state of Canadian democracy today, Canadian youth are more positive than negative about the functioning of their governments (as combined across the three levels). Two-thirds say governments in Canada today are generally working (24%) or are working with major problems (42%), while the remainder believe they are either broken but working in some areas (25%) or completely broken (9%).

Opinions about the effectiveness of governments are more positive than negative across the population, with variation similar to satisfaction with the state of democracy. Positive assessments of governments as generally working are closely linked to educational attainment: only 17 percent of youth without a high school diploma believe governments today are generally working, rising to 28 percent among those with an undergraduate post-secondary degree, and up to 59 percent among those with a post-graduate degree.

A related indicator is how closely people follow news and events. Youth who do so on at least a daily basis are more than twice as likely to say governments are generally working (29%), compared with those who do so rarely or never (14%; in this group 50% describe governments as broken). Across generations, leading-edge Gen Z Canadians (especially those 18 to 21) are more likely to say governments are working (generally or with major problems) (72%), in comparison with their Millennial counterparts (65%).

As with views about democracy, youth assessment of government effectiveness varies by ethnic/racial identification. Positive opinions are most widespread among those who are South Asian (35% say governments are generally working), Chinese (28%), Black (26%), and “other” racialized groups (28%), with this view least apt to be shared among those identifying as Indigenous (14%, most notably among Millennials).

### Are governments in Canada working or broken?



Q.57

Would you say that [THE FEDERAL/YOUR PROVINCIAL/YOUR MUNICIPAL] government today is generally working; working, with major problems; broken, but working in some areas; or completely broken?

### BENCHMARK TREND

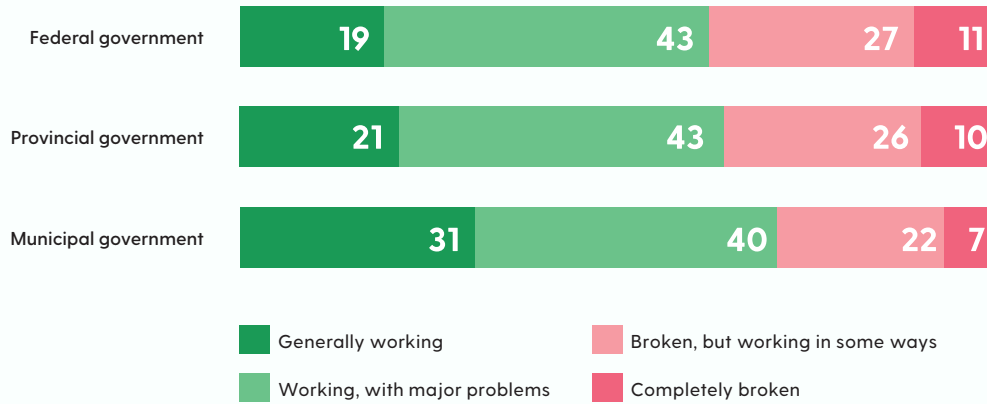
The same question was included on an Environics Institute survey conducted with the full Canadian population in 2014, which found a lower level of confidence in the effectiveness of government among younger Canadians in comparison with the current 2020 results.\* In 2014, fewer than six in ten Canadians ages 18 to 29 years of age said that governments (three jurisdictions combined) were generally working (25%) or working but with major problems (33%). Opinions were marginally more positive among those 30 to 44 years of age (28% and 34%, respectively)

\*Canadian public opinion on governance and the public service. Environics Institute and the Institute on Governance, December 2014.

<sup>3</sup> This question was borrowed from a 2013 survey of Americans conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and The Brookings Institution. It was included in two Environics Institute Surveys conducted in 2014 and 2016, in partnership with the Ottawa-based Institute on Governance. On this survey, the sample was randomly divided into three groups, with each being asked to answer the question about one of the three jurisdictions. Results are also combined to provide results for government as a whole.

### Are governments in Canada working or broken?

By level of government



Q.57

Would you say that [THE FEDERAL/YOUR PROVINCIAL/YOUR MUNICIPAL] government today is generally working; working, with major problems; broken, but working in some areas; or completely broken?

### How perceptions of government effectiveness vary by jurisdiction.

How do youth perceptions of effectiveness compare across different levels of government? As was found in 2014, municipal governments are most likely to be seen as generally working (31%), compared with provincial (21%) and federal (19%) governments.

Across Canada, youth assessment of provincial government effectiveness is largely similar, with the notable exception of Albertans where fewer than half say their provincial government is generally working (15%) or working, with major problems (33%), compared with those who say it is broken but working in some areas (29%) or completely broken (23%). This view is especially prevalent among Alberta Millennials (among whom only 11% believe their provincial government is generally working).

### BENCHMARK TREND

The assessment of federal government performance was also included on a 2016 survey of Canadians, with results showing a notable improvement in public opinion since 2014, likely as a result of the election in 2015 of a new Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau.\* Perceptions of the federal government as generally working or working with major problems increased between 2014 and 2016 among youth 18 to 29 (to 68%, up 13 points), and marginally among those 30 to 44 (to 60%, up 3 points).

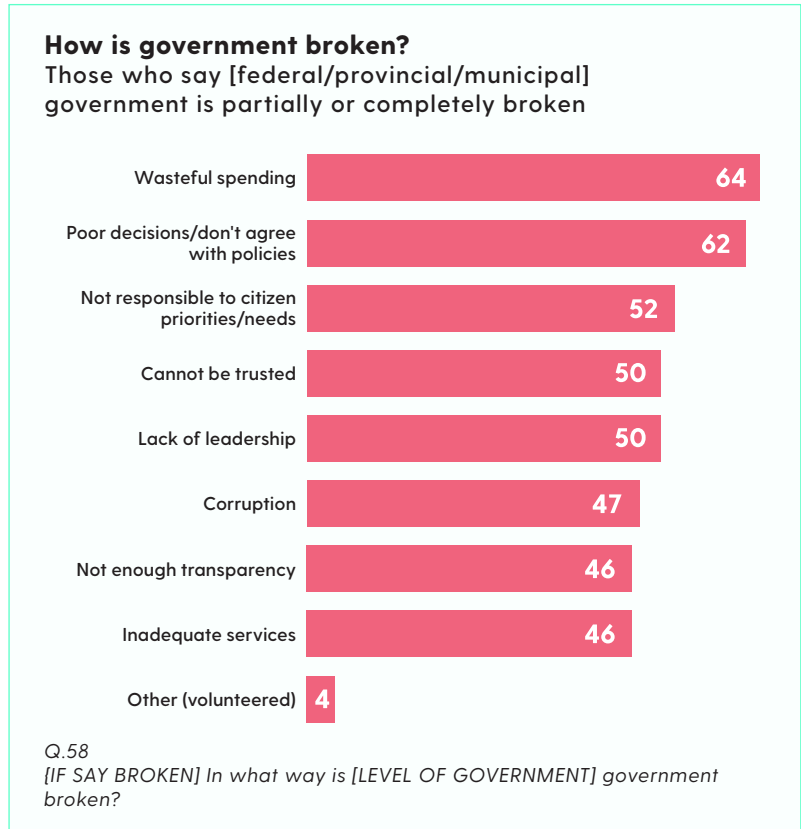
\*Canadian public opinion on governance 2016. Environics Institute and the Institute on Governance, June 2016



**How governments are broken.** The third of Canadian youth who consider governments to be broken were asked in what way they believe this to be the case, among eight response options offered. Similar to results from previous Institute surveys (encompassing the full population), youth critical of government identify multiple reasons for government brokenness, with each of the eight mentioned by more than four in ten in this group. At the top of the list are “wasteful spending”(64%) and “poor decisions/don’t agree with policies” (62%), followed by “not responsive to citizens’ priorities/needs (52%), “cannot be trusted” (50%), and “lack of leadership (50%).” Just under half cite “corruption” (47%), “not enough transparency” (46%), and “inadequate services” (46%). Survey participants were also given the option of volunteering other reasons by governments are broken, but very few (4%) did so (including 1% who mention “racism”).

The pattern of reasons for government brokenness is largely the same across the three jurisdictions, with wasteful spending and poor decisions at the top of the list, and corruption, lack of transparency and inadequate services at the bottom. The proportions naming each reason for brokenness tend to be highest for the federal government and lowest for the municipal government, as a matter of degree (for instance, wasteful spending is mentioned by 71% who say the federal government is broken, compared with 61% for provincial government, and 58% for municipal government).

Across jurisdictions, Millennials are somewhat more likely than leading-edge Gen Zers to mention each of the reasons for government brokenness (the exception being not enough transparency), with these differences most evident among younger Gen Zers (ages 18 to 21). Mention of wasteful spending, poor decisions and lack of leadership are most prevalent among youth who follow news and events on a daily basis, and those who identify with the political right.<sup>4</sup>



**BENCHMARK TREND**

The results from this survey largely reflect those recorded on the 2014 survey previously referenced. Among Canadians ages 18 to 44 who identified one or more levels of government to be broken in 2014, more than six in ten cited wasteful spending (68%), poor decisions (65%), and not being responsive to citizen priorities or needs (62%), with the other reasons each mentioned by at least four in ten.



<sup>4</sup> Subgroup analysis of these results by level of government is limited because of small subsamples (i.e., the number of participants asked about a specific level of government who consider it to be partially or completely broken).

**How governments most need to change.**

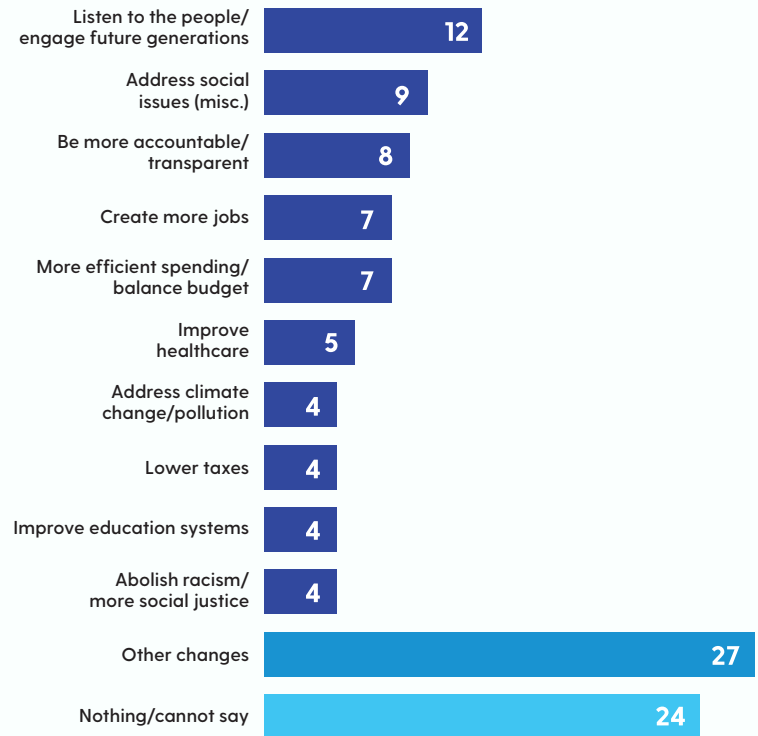
Canadian youth were asked to identify what they consider to be the single most important change governments (writ large) need to make to do a better job (this question was presented in an open-ended format, with no response options provided). Youth provide a broad range of responses, and when categorized into conceptual categories none are mentioned by more than one in ten, revealing little consensus on what most needs to be fixed.

Among the types of changes identified, the ones most commonly mentioned include the need to listen to the people (e.g., engaging future generations, prioritizing citizen needs) (12%), addressing social issues (generally or in specific cases) (9%), becoming more accountable or transparent (8%), creating more jobs (7%), and being more efficient in spending (e.g., reducing deficits, balancing budgets) (7%). No other type of change is cited by more than five percent. One in four (24%) youth did not offer any response to this question.

Responses to these questions are mostly similar across the population, with a few notable differences. More efficient spending is mentioned most often among youth on the political right (11%, versus 4% among those on the political left), while addressing racism is most apt to be emphasized among those who are Indigenous (13%) or Black (12%).

**Single most important change governments need to make**

**Top 10 categories**



Q.59  
What in your view is the single most important change government needs to make in order to do a better job?

**BENCHMARK TREND**

A similar though more truncated set of government improvements were identified by Canadian youth in 2014, with the top categories becoming more accountable or transparent (14%), better leadership (15%), and more efficient spending (11%). Racism did not emerge as a measurable response in that year. The biggest change over time is a significant reduction in the proportion of youth who did not provide a response to the question, which was 41 percent in 2014, compared with just 24 percent in 2020.

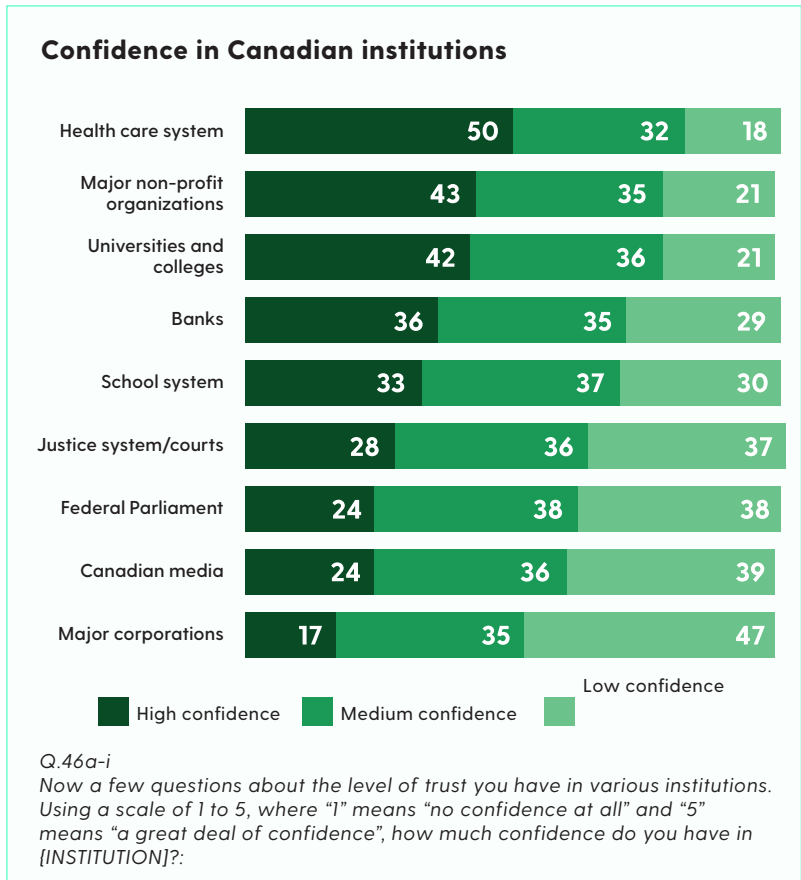
## CONFIDENCE IN CANADIAN INSTITUTIONS

**Youth express the greatest confidence in the health care system, non-profit organizations and universities/colleges, with the least confidence placed in Canadian media, the federal Parliament and major corporations (excepting banks). Education level is a key factor in views toward institutions.**

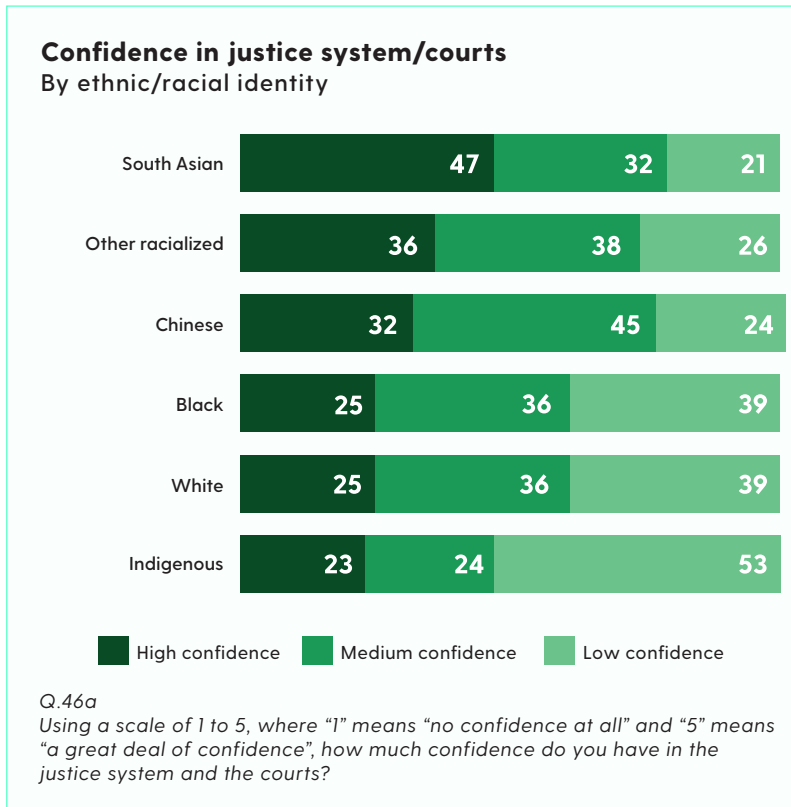
Canadian youth were asked to rate their level of general confidence in each of nine major Canadian institutions or sectors. None receive high marks by more than half of among these generations, but there is considerable variation across the list. A high level of confidence (ratings of “4” or “5” on a 5-point scale) is most widely given to the health care system (50%), followed by major non-profit organizations (e.g., YMCA, United Way) (43%), and the country’s universities and colleges (42%); in each case fewer than half as many express low confidence (ratings of “1” or “2”).



Ratings are more balanced between positive and negative in the confidence ratings given to Canada’s banks (36% high confidence, versus 29% low confidence) and school system (33%, versus 30%). High confidence ratings fall well below negative ones in terms of the justice system and courts (28% high confidence), the Canadian media (24%) and the federal Parliament (24%). Finally, Canadian youth express the least confidence in the country’s major corporations (apart from banks), with only 17 percent giving them high marks.



Opinions about the country’s institutions are broadly similar between the two generations. Leading-edge Gen Zers are somewhat more likely than Millennials to express high levels of confidence in the health care system (by a 7-point margin), major non-profit organizations (5 points), universities and colleges (5 points), and banks (9 points). Millennials’ ratings have improved somewhat since 2016 in the cases of the health care system (up 7 points), the school system (up 4), the justice system/courts (up 4), the Canadian media (up 4), and major corporations (up 5); in no cases have Millennials as a generation become less positive over the past four years about any of the institutions examined.



Across the institutions examined, confidence ratings vary significantly across sociodemographic and other characteristics. For example, education is a consistent and strong indicator, with confidence in all nine institutions increasing with educational attainment. Youth with a post-graduate degree stand out in particular, and it is among Millennials with a post-graduate degree where confidence ratings have improved most noticeably over the past four years. Confidence in institutions is also correlated with a strong sense of belonging to one’s local community and with following news and events on a regular basis (note that both indicators are closely linked with educational attainment).

Confidence levels also vary by ethnic/racial identification.<sup>5</sup> Most notably, South Asian youth are by far the most positive in their assessment of the

institutions examined. In contrast, Indigenous youth express the least confidence, except in the cases of universities/colleges, banks, and the Canadian media (where Indigenous ratings are similar to the national average). Black youth give above-average ratings of confidence to major non-profit organizations, but lower than average ones to banks and the justice system/courts. Youth who identify as white express comparatively low confidence levels (similar to those of Indigenous youth) in the Canadian media, the federal Parliament, and major corporations).

Political orientation also factors into youth confidence in some of the country’s institutions. Those on the political right are noticeably more likely to express strong confidence in the school system, the justice system/courts, banks, the federal Parliament, and major corporations. In the case of major corporations, ratings among youth on the political right are much more positive (36% high, versus 31% low), compared with those on the political left (10%, versus 64%). Those in the political middle fall somewhere in between (15%, versus 43%).

Finally, confidence levels are largely similar across regions of the country, with a few exceptions. Quebec youth are among the most positive about major non-profit organizations, universities and colleges, the school system, and the justice system/courts. Alberta youth are the least positive when it comes to major non-profit organizations and the federal Parliament. Atlantic Canadians express the least confidence in the health care system.

<sup>5</sup> Educational attainment levels vary by ethnic/racial identification, so some of the differences in the latter may be in part a function of education.

## PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL ISSUES

**Canadian youth are most likely to see the environment or global warming as the most pressing global issue, apart from the current pandemic crisis. There is qualified optimism, especially among leading-edge Gen Zers, in the potential for making real progress in addressing major global challenges.**

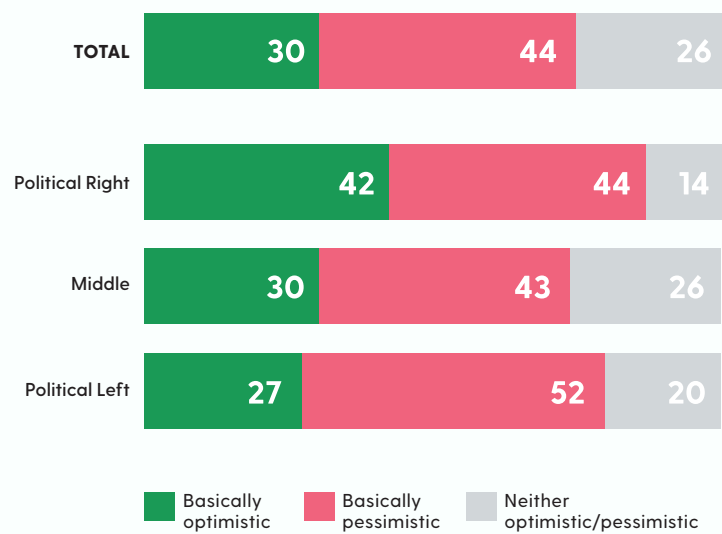
**Optimism-pessimism about the world's direction.** The world has always been in turmoil. But the last couple of years have witnessed an unprecedented degree of disruption and instability in the areas of politics, environment, and most recently public health, as the first global pandemic in more than a century is wreaking havoc in almost every inhabited corner of the planet. In this context, how do Canada's youth view the future, in terms of the direction the world is heading over the next 10 years?

Collectively, the outlook is mixed but more negative than positive. Three in ten (30%) Canadian youth say they are basically optimistic about the direction the world is taking over the coming decade, compared with more than four in ten (44%) who are basically pessimistic; the remaining 26 percent indicate they are neither optimistic nor pessimistic (a response that likely reflects a mix of ambivalence and uncertainty).

Opinions about the direction of the world depend in large part on one's current life situation. As with views about democracy and governance, an optimistic outlook is linked to having more education (especially a post-graduate degree), a strong sense of belonging to one's community, paying close attention to news and current events, and enjoying a high level of life satisfaction. There is almost no difference in the respective outlooks of leading-edge Gen Zers and Millennials, nor among youth across regions of the country.

Political orientation appears to make a difference in future outlook. Youth on the political right are more positive in their views about the world's future (42% optimistic, versus 44% pessimistic), in comparison with those on the political left (27%, versus 52%). Ethnic/racial identity also appears to play a role: Optimism about the future is more evident among youth who are Black (46%), South Asian (43%) and Chinese (38%), in comparison with those who are Indigenous (24%) and white (27%) (these two groups are among those most likely to give a "neither" response to the question).

**General view of world's direction over next decade**  
By political orientation



Q.66  
Would you say you are basically optimistic or basically pessimistic about the direction you think the world is heading over the next 10 years?

### BENCHMARK TREND

This same question was posed to Canadians on Institute surveys conducted in 2008 and 2018, in both cases showing the public to be evenly divided between optimists and pessimists.\* This research revealed that youth ages 18 to 24 were significantly more positive in their outlook than older generations (49% optimistic, versus 39% pessimistic in 2018). Comparison with the current survey suggests that youth have lost some of their optimism over the past two years.

\* The Canada's World Poll. Environics Institute, January 2008. Canada's World Survey 2018. Environics Institute, April 2018.

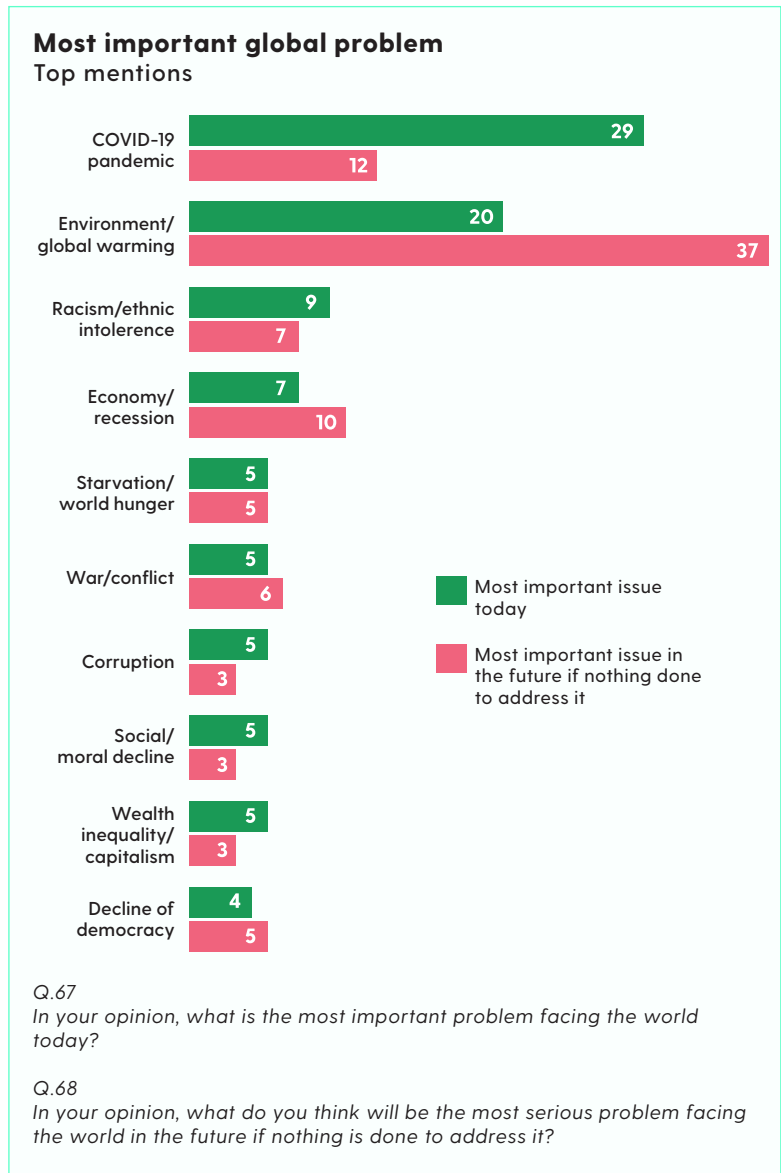
**Most important world problem.** What do Canadian youth see as the most pressing global challenges? The question was posed in two different ways, and in both cases unprompted (without offering response options that might influence the results).<sup>6</sup>

Half of survey participants were asked to name **the most important problem facing the world today**, and not surprisingly the most common response is the Covid-19 pandemic (29%), followed by environmental issues (including global warming/ climate crisis) at 20 percent. Beyond these two global problems, no others are mentioned by as many as one in ten, including racism/ethnic intolerance (9%), the economy and recession (7%), starvation/world hunger (5%), war/conflict (5%) and the unequal distribution of wealth (5%). One in six (15%) did not provide a response to the question.

The other half of Canadian youth were asked a slightly different question, to name what they consider to be **the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to address it**. Responses to this future-oriented question yield the same list of problems, but the focus on the first two are reversed: The environment/global warming is named by close to four in ten (37%) youth, with the Covid-19 pandemic mentioned by only one-third as many (12%). As with the first question, no other issue is identified by more than one in ten, and about one in six (16%) do not provide any response.

Comparing results of the two questions confirms that while the Covid-19 pandemic is currently viewed as the most pressing global problem of the moment, Canadian youth consider the environment generally, and global warming in particular, to be the principal challenge of their generation and beyond. This conclusion is supported by previous Environics Institute research conducted over the past decade.<sup>7</sup>

For the first question (most important world problem today), the list and order of top global problems today is largely similar across the youth population. Millennials are most likely to emphasize the pandemic (31%) over the environment (18%), while leading-edge Gen Zers give them equal prominence (26%, versus 27%, respectively). For both generations, youth on the political left are among those most apt to identify environmental issues as the most pressing global problem today.



<sup>6</sup> The sample was split into two randomly-selected halves, with each half given one version of the question. This approach was used so that respondents were not asked both questions in sequence, thereby avoiding the problem of the first question asked influencing responses to the second.

<sup>7</sup> The differing results between the two questions is consistent with results from previous surveys conducted over the past decade in both Canada and the USA. This research found that issues such as the economy tend to dominate the list of most important issues at present, but that the environment rises to the top when the question is framed in terms of issues in the future that can and need to be addressed.

On the second question (the most pressing global issue in the future if not addressed), the environment is the predominant response across the population. As with the first question, this issue is more broadly identified by leading-edge Gen Zers (47%) than Millennials (35%), but noticeably higher among the youngest subcohort in this generation). Across the youth population, emphasis on the environment as the most pressing future issue is most widespread among those on the political left (51%), students (52%), and Quebecers (48%). This view is least apt to be shared among those on the political right (25%; compared with 17% in this group who identify the economy/recession), youth without a high school diploma (23%), and residents of the prairie provinces (26%).



**BENCHMARK TREND**

The most important global problem today question was included in two previous Environics Institute surveys of the general Canadian population, conducted in 2008 and 2018.\* On both surveys, the environment/climate change was at the top of the list among youth (most noticeably in 2014), while older generations were more apt to cite “war/lack of peace.”

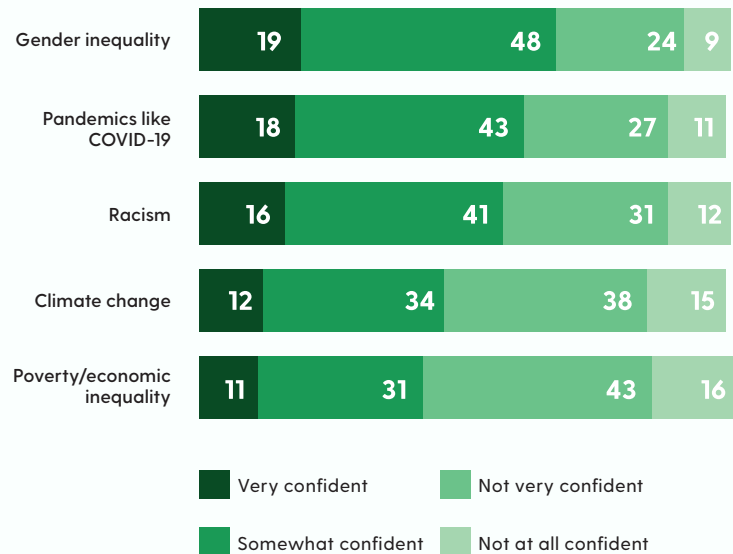
\*See previous reference.

**Confidence in addressing global issues.**

Canadian youth were asked about their level of confidence in real progress being made over time in addressing each of five major issues at the global level. Among the issues presented, youth expressed the greatest confidence in progress being made to address **gender inequality** (with two-thirds very (19%) or somewhat (48%) confident), and **pandemics like Covid-19** (18% and 43%, respectively). Just over half say they are very (16%) or somewhat (41%) confident about real progress being made on addressing **racism**.

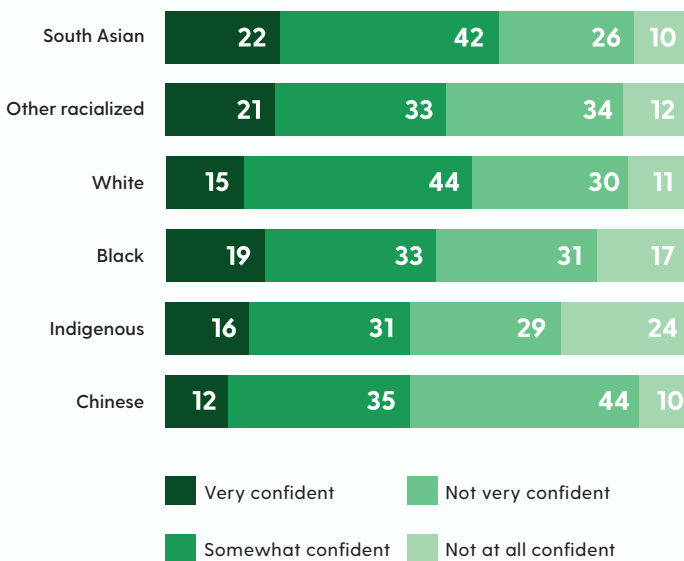
By comparison, fewer than half of Canadian youth are very (12%) or somewhat (34%) confident about making real progress in addressing **climate change** at a global level, compared with a greater proportion who are not very (38%) or

**Confidence in addressing global issues**



Q.69a-e  
How confident are you that real progress can be made over time in addressing each of the following issues at the global level?

**Confidence in addressing racism**  
By ethnic/racial identity



Q.69c  
How confident are you that real progress can be made over time in addressing racism at the global level?

not at all (15%) confident about this. Finally, the least optimism is expressed in making progress in addressing **poverty and economic inequality** at a global level; just over four in ten are very (11%) or somewhat (31%) confident about real progress on this issue.

Confidence levels are broadly similar across the population, with variations more a function of youth characteristics than of the issues considered. Across the five global issues, leading-edge Gen Zers are more likely than Millennials to express confidence in future progress, most notably in terms of racism and gender inequality. Confidence levels are also most evident among youth who have strong sense of belonging to their local community, as well as among those on the political right, and those who identify as South Asian.

As might be expected, confidence in progress on major issues is strongly linked to one’s broader sense of how the world is heading over the coming decade. Youth who are generally optimistic are more likely to express confidence in seeing progress on all five issues, especially in terms of climate change and addressing poverty/income inequality.

Notably, confidence in making real progress on addressing racism at a global level does not differ significantly by ethnic/racial identity. South Asian and “other” racialized youth are most likely to say they are *very confident* in such progress. Indigenous youth are less likely than others to share this view, and are most apt to say they are not at all confident. Chinese youth express the least confidence in making progress on racism in society.

In making progress on gender inequality, men (22%) are somewhat more likely than women (17%) to say they are *very confident*, but there is no difference in the proportions expressing little or no confidence on this issue.

Finally, confidence in addressing climate change is somewhat lower among youth who identify this issue as the most pressing issue facing the future if nothing is done to address it (only 9% of this group are very confident, versus more than six in ten who are not very (45%) or not at all confident (17%).



## SOLUTIONS TO MAJOR ISSUES IN CANADA

**Canadian youth express qualified confidence in four broad strategies for addressing major issues facing the country, in the power of collective action, and in the impact their generation can make. Positive sentiments are most evident among leading-edge Gen Zers and by youth who are South Asian and Black.**

**Effectiveness of change strategies in addressing Canadian issues.** How do Canadian youth believe positive change can happen in society today? Survey participants were asked how effective each of four broad types of social change strategies would be in addressing the major issues facing the country. All four are seen to be effective at some level, with relatively little difference among them; in each case a clear plurality rates the strategy to be “somewhat effective.”

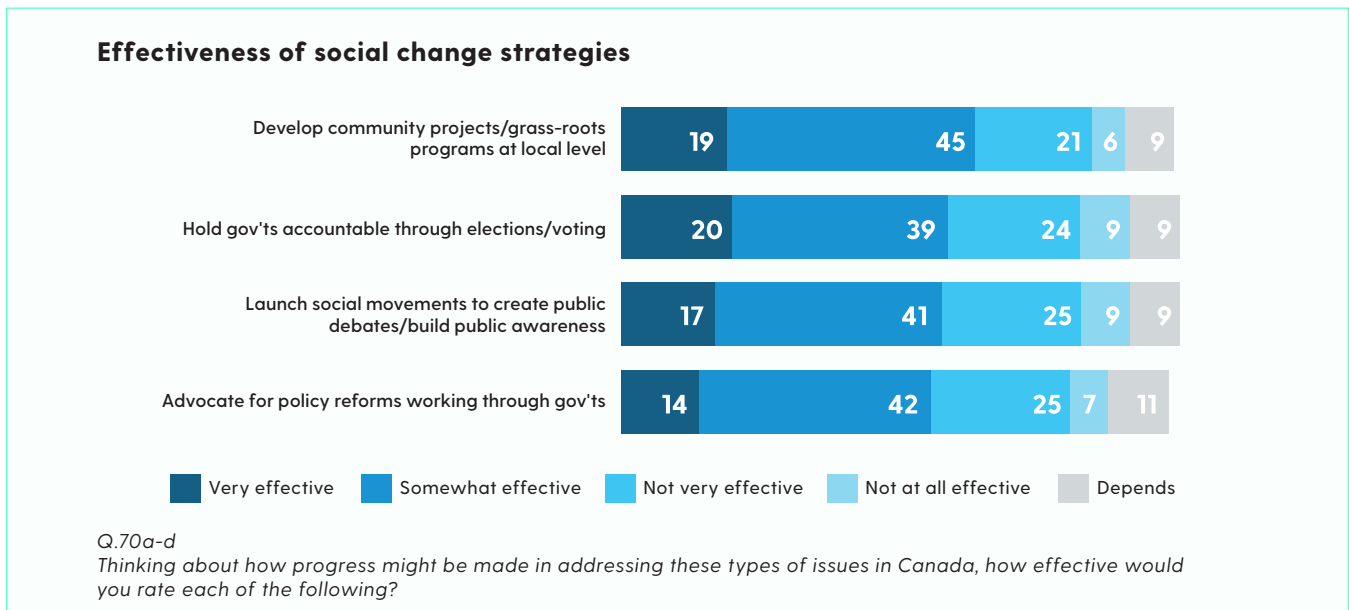
Of the four strategies presented, youth are most likely to express confidence in developing community projects and grass-roots programs to achieve meaningful change at the local level; more than six in ten say consider this to be very (19%) or somewhat (45%) effective. Similar proportions consider as very or somewhat effective holding governments accountable through elections and voting (20% and 39%, respectively), launching social movements to create public debate and build public awareness (17% and 41%), and advocating for policy reform through working with and within governments (14% and 42%).

What is evident from the data is that most youth give the same rating to all or most of the four strategies: Participants tend to be either positive or negative about all four types, and ratings are more likely to be a function of personal background and general outlook.

Across the four change strategies, leading-edge Gen Zers are somewhat more positive about effectiveness than Millennials, most notably in the case of launching social movements (in this case, the proportion who says “very effective” declines steadily across subcohorts of each generation from younger to older). More significant than generation or age, however, perceived effectiveness of these strategies is most closely linked to a sense of belonging to one’s community, and to a lesser extent ethnic/racial identity. South Asian and Black youth are noticeably more likely than others to rate each of the four strategies as very effective, and this also applies to Indigenous youth in the case of developing community projects. Chinese youth are least likely to consider any of these change strategies to be effective.

By comparison, educational attainment appears to play a limited role in opinions about change strategies, except for those with a post-graduate degree who stand out as being the most positive in each case. Youth on the political left and right share similar views, while those in the middle are the least positive about any of the four strategies.

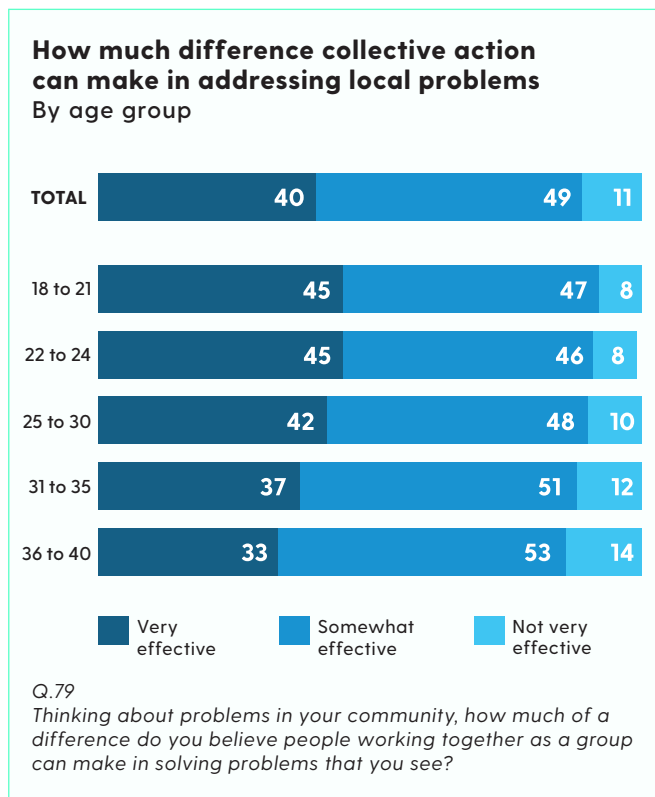
Opinions about the effectiveness of the four change strategies are also linked to opinions about democracy and governments, especially the level of satisfaction in how democracy is working in Canada today. These four strategies receive the strongest endorsement by the 10 percent of youth who are very satisfied with how democracy is working in Canada today.



**Effectiveness of local community mobilization.** The survey also asked about confidence in the impact that collective action can have on making a difference at the local level. Four in ten (40%) Canadian youth say that people working together as a group can make a “big difference” in solving problems in their community. About half (49%) believe such action can make “some difference”, while few (11%) maintain it would make “little or no difference.”

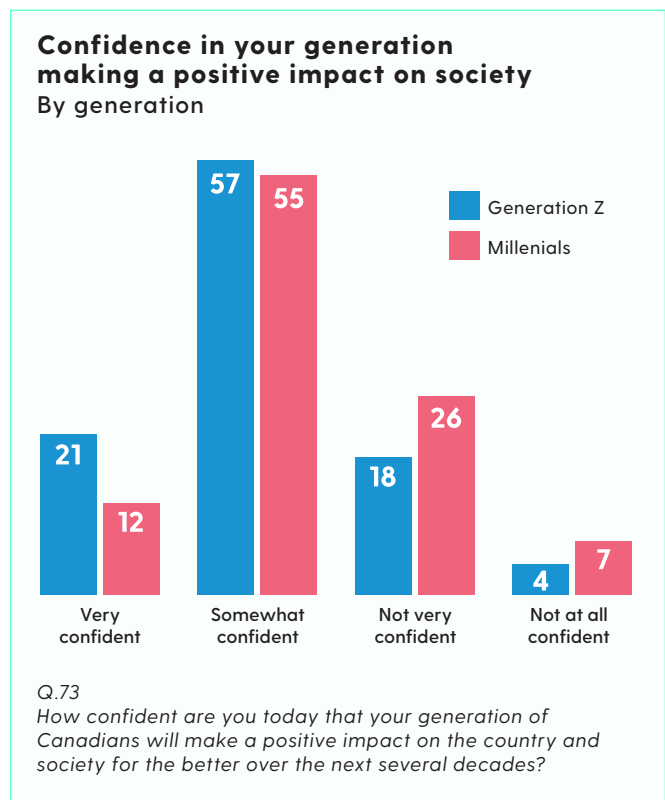
Age appears to play a role in how youth respond to this question. Leading-edge Gen Zers are the most likely to say that local collective action can make a big difference, and this is less so among Millennials and progressively so as they get older. Among Millennials, confidence in a big impact from collective action is marginally lower in 2020 than in 2016 (declining from 41% to 38%).

As with other topics covered in this survey, belief in collective action making a big difference is closely linked to one’s sense of belonging to a local community; this view is expressed by more than half (57%) of those with a very strong sense of community, compared with only one-third (32%) of those with a weak sense of community connection. Ethnic/racial identity also appears to play a role. Belief in making a big difference is most widespread among Black (56%) and South Asian (51%) youth, with this view least apt to be shared by those who are Chinese (30%).



**Impact of one’s generation.** Canadian youth are positive, if not enthusiastically so, about their generation making a positive impact on the country and society over the next several decades. Seven in ten say they are very (14%) or somewhat (55%) confident about their generation making this type of difference, with the remainder either not very (24%) or not at all (6%) confident.

Leading-edge Gen Zers (21%) are almost twice as likely as Millennials (12%) to be very confident about their generation’s future contribution to society. And as with other questions, a positive perspective is most widely expressed by youth with a strong sense of community belonging, those who closely follow news and events, those who volunteer, and those who first generation Canadians. This optimism is also most widely shared among South Asian (26%) and Black (23%) youth, while least evident among those who are Chinese (10%).



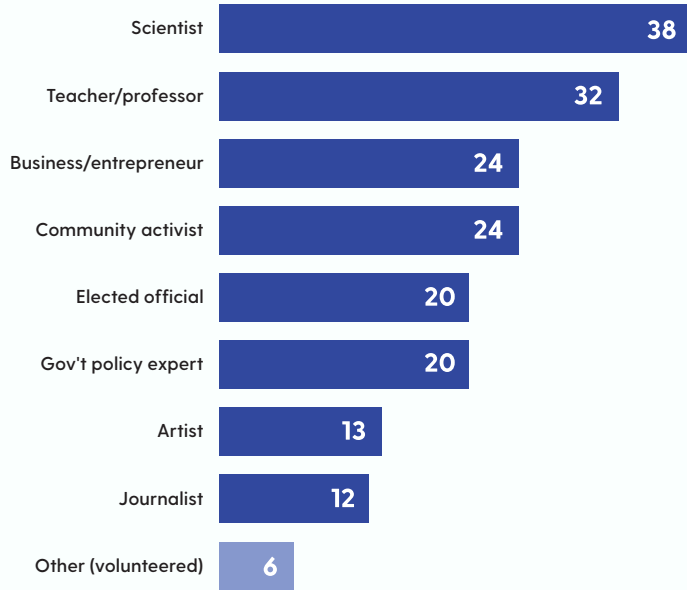
**Best career path for making a difference.**

What might youth see as the best career options for having a positive impact on society? This question was addressed by asking survey participants about the career advice they would offer to a close friend, in terms of selecting among eight possible occupations (these were presented on the survey and participants were invited to select up to three).

All eight careers received an endorsement by more than 10 percent of youth, and none were picked by as many as four in ten. At the top of the list are scientist (38%) and teacher or professor (32%), followed by business entrepreneur (24%), community activist (24%), elected official (20%) and government policy expert (20%). Careers least apt to be seen as offering the potential for making the world a better place include artist (13%) and journalist (12%). Participants were invited to volunteer other careers, and six percent did so (with no occupation mentioned by more than 1%).

Notably, the recommended career choices are virtually the same between leading-edge Gen Zers and Millennials. Scientist and teacher/professor are most likely to be selected by youth with higher levels of education, those with weak community belonging, and those on the political right, while community activist is among the top choices among those on the political left. Business entrepreneur is a preferred choice among those on the political right, as well as among first generation Canadians, and those who identify as Black. Finally, those who would advise a friend to become a government policy expert are most apt to be on the political right and identify as Black, Chinese or South Asian.

**Best career path for making the world a better place**



Q.72  
If a close friend asked your advice about what career path he or she should take to help make the world a better place, which of the following would you most likely recommend?



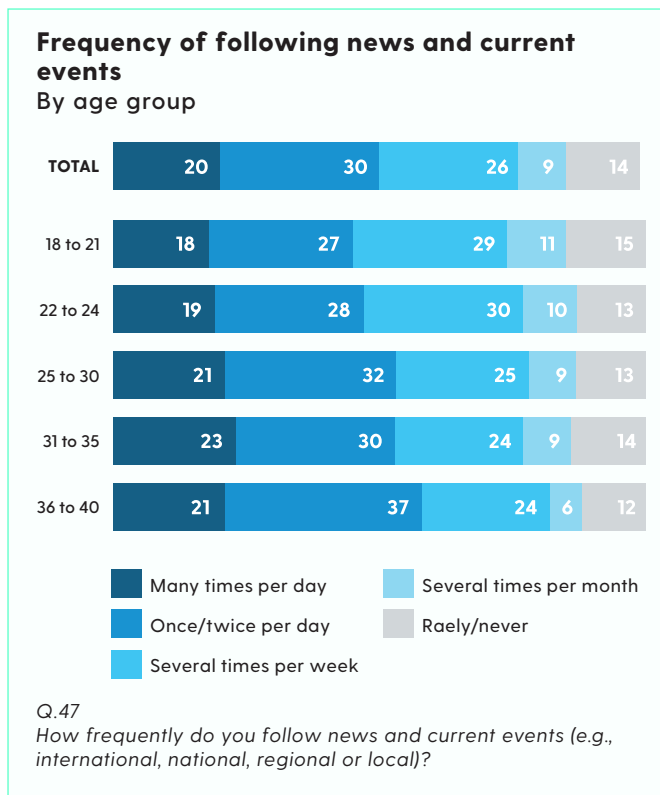
PART 2

# **CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

## ATTENTION TO ISSUES AND CURRENT EVENTS

**Canadian youth follow news and current events on a frequent basis, and across a range of sources but most commonly on social media. Among issues followed, the primary focus has been on the Covid-19 pandemic, with attention also given to US politics and racism in society.**

**Frequency of attention.** One of the dated stereotypes about Millennials is that they take little interest in what is happening in the world of politics and current events. The 2016 survey of this generation demonstrated there was little truth to this myth, and this is reaffirmed in the current research for both younger generations. Among Canadian youth ages 18 to 40, half say they follow news and current events (whether local, regional, national or international) at least once a day (30%) if not many times throughout the day (20%). Fewer than one in six (14%) do so rarely or never.

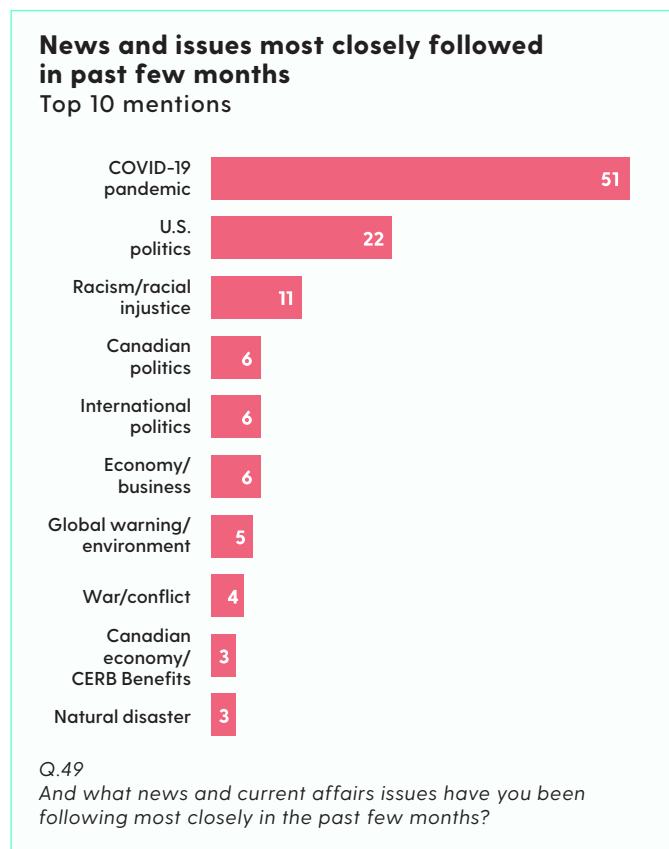


Frequency of attention is most closely linked to educational attainment, with daily or more frequent attention most widespread among youth with post-graduate degrees (73%), compared with just 43 percent among those without a high school diploma. Daily attention is also somewhat more evident among men (58%, versus 44% of women) and among youth on the political right (65%, versus 57% among those on the left). By generation, Millennials (54%) are somewhat more frequent than leading-edge Gen Zers (46%) in following

news and current events on at least a daily basis, and this generation’s practice has changed very little since 2016 (when Millennials were last surveyed on this topic).

**Issues most closely followed.** The survey asked what news and current affairs issues youth have been following most closely in the past few months (asked unprompted, with up to three issues accepted).<sup>8</sup> As might be expected, youth are most likely to say they have been following news about the Covid-19 pandemic (51%), with this the predominant response across both generations and across all relevant subgroups.

Apart from the pandemic, other issues closely followed include US politics (including the ongoing 2020 election) (22%), racism and racial injustice (11%), and a number of other issues mentioned by fewer than one in ten. Just over one in three (36%) did not identify any issues, with this response most common among youth who only rarely follow news/current events, and those 18 to 21 who have not completed high school.

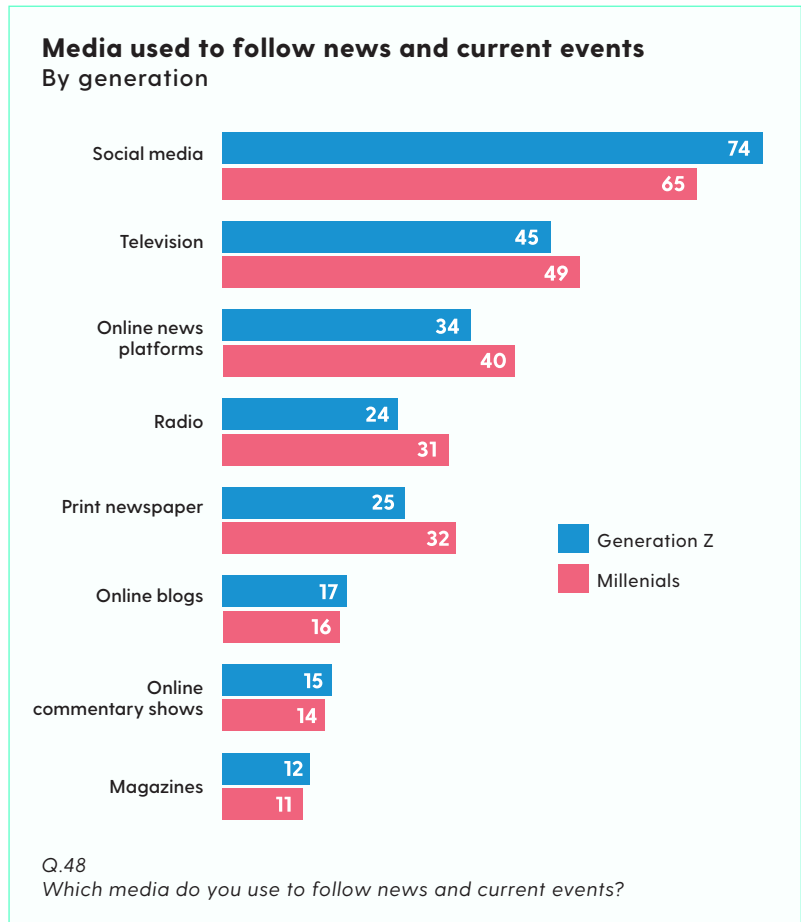


<sup>8</sup> With reference to the “past few months” time frame in the survey question, the survey was conducted in September – November 2020. This question was not asked to the three percent of youth who said they never follow news and current events.

The focus on current news and issues is largely similar across the youth population. Those on the political left are somewhat more likely to pay attention to the pandemic, US politics and racism, while those on the right are more apt to mention economic and other issues. The attention given to racism and racial injustice is higher among women (13%) than men (8%), but does not differ noticeably across ethnic/racial groups.

**Media sources.** Canadian youth make use of a variety of media sources to follow news and current events. Not surprisingly, social media is most widely relied upon (67%), with notable proportions also reporting online news platforms (e.g., Huffington Post, iPolitics) (37%), online blogs (16%) and online commentary shows (e.g., Daily Show) (14%). But traditional media also figure prominently, including television (48%), radio (29%) and newspapers (print or online) (29%).

Media sources vary by generation, with leading-edge Gen Zers more reliant on social media and online news platforms, and less apt to use traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers. Media use is also somewhat different across the political spectrum: youth on the left are somewhat more likely to rely on social media and online news platforms, while those on the right (and middle) are more apt to say they use television, radio and online blogs. These differences hold for both generations.



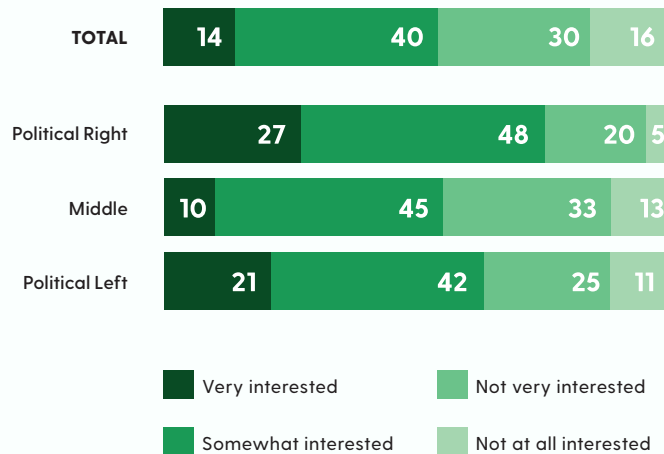
## ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICS

**Small majorities of Canadian youth express an interest in politics, claim to have a good understanding of how democracy works, and report to have voted in recent federal and provincial elections. Interest and voting increases with age across the generations.**

**Interest in politics.** How much are Canadian youth paying attention to politics in general? Just over half say they are very (14%) or somewhat (40%) interested in politics generally, with the balance indicating they are not very (30%) or not at all (16%) interested. Responses to this question are largely similar across the population, with some modest variations. Across the political spectrum, strong interest in politics is more evident among those on the right (27%), compared with those on the left (21%), and least so among those in the middle (10%).

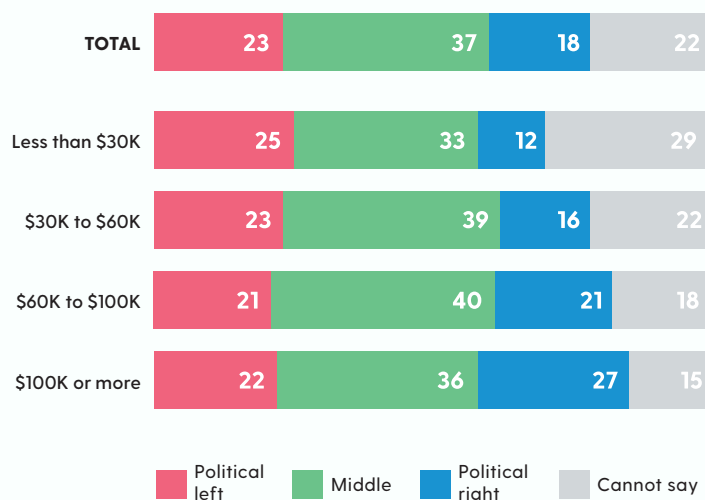
Such interest is also a function of educational attainment, with strong interest especially pronounced among youth with a post-graduate degree (37%). Gender also appears to play a role, as men are more likely to express strong or some interest (61%) in comparison with women (46%). Among ethnic/racial groups, strong interest in politics is most apt to be expressed by Black youth (21%) and least so among those who are Chinese (9%).

### General interest in politics By political orientation



Q.50  
Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?

### General political orientation By household income



Q.51  
In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where left means "0" and right means "10"?

**General political orientation.** The terms "left" and "right" have a longstanding political history (dating back to the French revolution), and this political spectrum continues to be one of the primary ways by which to describe governments, politicians, electorates and individuals. Canadians as a society have often been described as being on the "centre-left", although this term does not do justice to a country that has always had a solid conservative base on the political right.

The survey measured general political orientation using a question from the Canadian Election Study (2019) which asked respondents to place themselves on an 11-point scale from "0" (extreme left) to "10" (extreme right). As has been recorded on other surveys of Canadians, youth are most likely to occupy the middle of this spectrum (scores of 4 to 6") (37%). Just under one in four (23%) places him or herself on the political left (0 to 3), while somewhat fewer (18%) identify on the political right (7 to 10). One in five

(22%) Canadian youth did not respond to the question (either because they were unsure where to place themselves, or because they did not find the concept to be meaningful).

Identification with the political right increases with educational attainment, household income, and sense of belonging to one's community; it is also more prevalent among men (22%, versus 14% of women) and South Asian Millennials (38%). In contrast, identification with the political left is more evenly distributed across the youth population, although most evident among those with weak community ties (26%), those who follow news and events multiple times per day (31%), and those with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual or bisexual (42%). Those unable or unwilling to identify with a political orientation include women (28%), Atlantic Canadians (28%), youth without a high school diploma (32%), and those who rarely or never follow news and current events (43%).

### BENCHMARK TREND

How does the political orientation of youth compare with that of older generations? New research by the Environics Institute indicates that leading-edge Gen Z and Millennial Canadians are more apt to place themselves on the political left (compared with those over 40 years of age), but no more likely to be on the political right.\* This means that fewer youth occupy the middle of the political spectrum.

\*Confederation of Tomorrow 2021 Survey of Canadians. Environics Institute, Not yet published

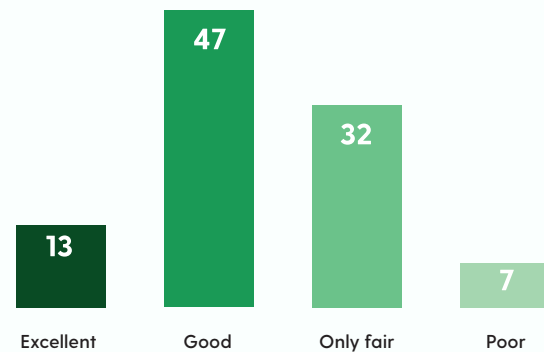
**Understanding how democracy works.** To what extent do youth understand how democracy and government institutions in Canada work? A survey like this one cannot accurately test such knowledge, but participants were asked to provide a self-assessment of their overall understanding. Six in ten youth consider their overall understanding of how democracy and institutions work in Canada to be excellent (13%) or good (47%), with the remainder rating this to be only fair (32%) or poor (7%).

As might be expected, self-rated knowledge increases with educational attainment (excellent ratings range from 11% among those without a high school diploma, to 31% among those with a post-graduate degree). This difference in education is also partially reflected in general political orientation: excellent ratings are more common among youth on the right (who tend to have more education) (23%), compared with those on the left (17%) and in the middle (11%). South Asian youth are most likely to give themselves this

strong rating (20%), while Indigenous youth are more likely than others to say their knowledge is only fair or poor (52%).

How does self-rated knowledge of democracy and institutions compare with people's satisfaction with how democracy is working in Canada today? Youth who claim to have an excellent understanding are far and away the most positive about democracy (49% of this group are very satisfied with democracy, compared with the Canadian youth average of 10%). Those who rate their knowledge as poor are among those most likely to express dissatisfaction with the country's democracy and institutions.

### Your understanding of how democracy works in Canada



Q.60

How would you rate your own understanding of how democracy and government institutions work in Canada? Would you say your understanding is:

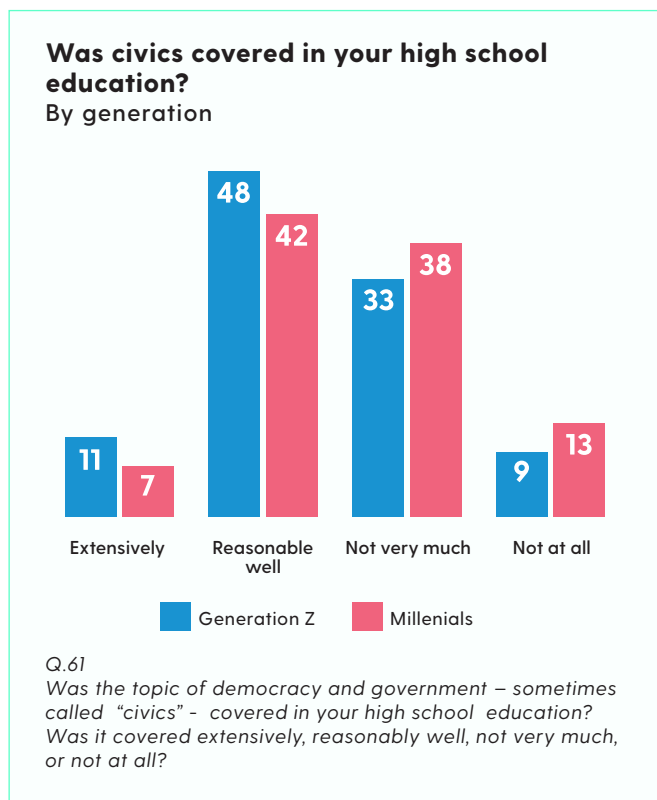
**Civics education in high school.** Key to what youth know about democracy and the country's institutions is what they learned in high school. About half of Canadian youth report that this topic (sometimes called "civics") was covered in their high school education extensively (9%) or reasonably well (43%). The remainder indicate it was not very much (37%) or not at all (12%).

Coverage of civics in high school is linked to age, and may reflect changes in school curriculum over the past decade: Leading-edge Gen Zers are more likely to report this was covered reasonably well if not extensively (59%) in comparison with Millennials (49%). There are regional differences (which may also reflect curriculum policy), with stronger coverage reported in Ontario (59%) and Alberta (57%), and least so in Atlantic Canada (41%) and Quebec (40%); in both latter cases one in five says he or she received no such education in high school.

At the same time, responses to this question also appear to be a function of people's own background and outlook.

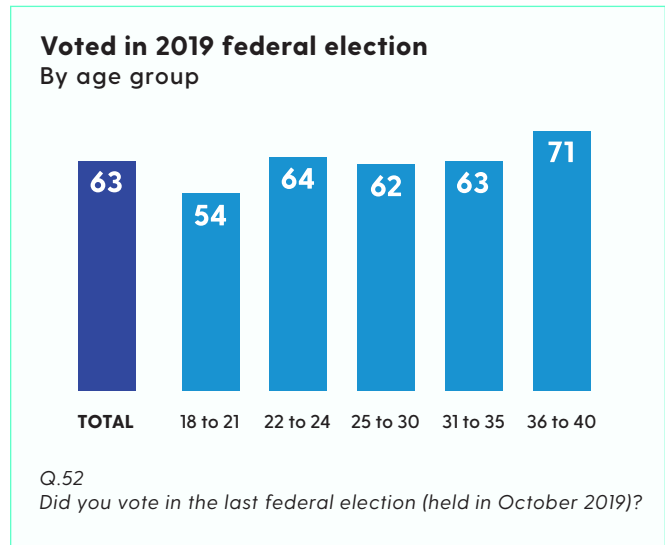
Extensive or reasonable coverage of civics in high school is closely linked to sense of belonging to one's community, ethnic/racial identity, political orientation and gender. This suggests that opinions about how civics was covered in high school is as much about expectations as the curriculum itself.

These qualifiers notwithstanding, the results suggest that civics education in high school makes a positive difference. The more Canadian youth report learning about democracy and institutions in high school, the more highly they rate their knowledge on this topic, and the more satisfied they are with how democracy is working today.



**Voting 2019 federal election.** A key indicator of engagement with politics is voting at election time. Among Canadian youth ages 19 and over, just over six in ten (63%) say they voted in the most recent federal election (held in October 2019). Among those who did not vote, two-thirds (68%) indicate they were eligible to do so in this election. This proportion is highest among Canadian youth who are third or more generation in the country (i.e., both parents were born in Canada) (85%), compared with those who are first generation (30%).

Voting turnout is positively linked to educational attainment



and household income, as well as gender (65% among men, versus 60% among women), and region (participation is 70% in Quebec, compared with 57% in Atlantic Canada and Manitoba/Saskatchewan, and 58% in B.C.). Youth on the political right (73%) are marginally more likely than those on the left (69%) to report voting in the 2019 federal election, compared with those in the political middle (64%) and those who did not identify themselves on the spectrum (46%).

Voting in the 2019 federal election increases modestly with age across the two generations, from 54 percent among youth ages 18 to 21, to 71 percent among those 36 to 40. The low turnout among youth 18 to 21 is due in part to almost half (45%) of non-voters in this group reporting they were not eligible to vote at the time of the election. Turnout among Millennials is lower for the 2019 election (65%) than for the 2015 election (75%) based on results from the 2016 survey of Millennials. This decline in voting may reflect differences in the dynamics of the two elections, with 2015 being a more hotly contested campaign between the Harper Conservatives and the opposition Liberals led by more youthful Justin Trudeau.

Voting in the last federal election also varies by ethnic/racial identification, although this is in part a function of eligibility as a higher proportion of racialized youth would not have been citizens and therefore eligible to vote in this recent election. The highest turnout is reported by youth who identify as white (66%) and Chinese (66%). Reported voting is lowest among youth who identify as Black (44%), followed by those who are South Asian (50%) and Indigenous (56%). Among youth who did not vote, the proportion who say they were eligible to vote ranges from a low of 34 percent among South Asian youth, to a high of 76 percent and 77 percent, respectively among white and Indigenous youth.

**Reasons for not voting in the 2019 federal election.**

Youth who were eligible to vote in the 2019 federal election but did not do so (24% of the total youth population) were asked (unprompted) why they did not vote. A range of reasons are given, with most fitting into one of two themes: motivation and barriers.who did not identify themselves on the spectrum (46%).

Six in ten (59%) eligible non-voters say they did not vote in the 2019 federal election for motivational reasons, which include not trusting or liking candidates, inability to decide who to support, lack of interest, distaste for politics, and cynicism about anything changing. By comparison, one in four (26%) cite reasons related to external barriers, such as lack of time to vote, medical reasons, and being out of town. Notably, these reasons for not voting are essentially the same as those given by Millennials who were eligible but did not vote in the 2015 election. As well, the pattern of reasons for not voting is essentially the same between Millennials and leading-edge Gen Zers.

**Reasons for not voting in 2019 federal election**

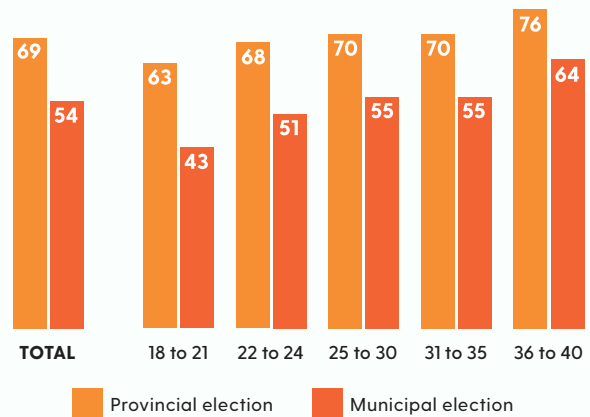
Those eligible who did not vote

	%
<b>MOTIVATIONAL REASONS</b>	<b>59</b>
Didn't trust candidates	14
Couldn't decide who to vote for	12
No interest in voting	11
Don't like politics/don't like to vote	11
Cynical (nothing changes/doesn't matter)	7
Lazy/forgot	5
<b>BARRIERS</b>	<b>26</b>
No time/too busy	14
Sick/medical reasons	5
Out of town	4
Couldn't get ride	2
Didn't receive voting card	1
<b>OTHER REASONS</b>	<b>5</b>

Q.54  
[IF DID NOT VOTE] What is the main reason you did not vote in the last federal election

**Voting in provincial and municipal elections.** The survey also asked youth who were eligible to vote in federal elections whether or not they voted in recent provincial and municipal elections. Seven in ten (69%) report to have voted in their most recent provincial election, while just over half (54%) did so at the municipal level.<sup>9</sup> As with voting in the 2019 federal election, participation rates in provincial and municipal elections increase with age.

**Voted in last provincial and municipal elections**  
By age group



Q.55a-b  
[IF ELIGIBLE TO VOTE] Did you vote in: a) the last provincial election in your province? b) the last municipal election held in your city or town?

As with age, voting patterns at the provincial and municipal level are generally similar to those reported at the federal level. Reported turnout increases along with educational attainment and household income, as well as among those who follow news and current events closely. At the provincial level, reported voting is highest in Quebec (77%) and Alberta (70%), and lowest in Atlantic Canada (59%), and Manitoba and Saskatchewan (60%). The best predictor of voting in these jurisdictions is turnout at the federal level. Among those who voted in the 2019 federal election, 94 percent also voted in their last provincial election, and 93 percent in their most recent municipal election.

Voting in provincial elections is also most widely reported by youth who identify as South Asian (77%), Chinese (74%) and other racialized groups (73%), and least so among those who identify as Black (60%) and Indigenous (62%). This pattern is largely repeated at the municipal level: Voting is highest among those identifying as Chinese (67%), and lowest among those who identify as Black (47%) and Indigenous (50%).

<sup>9</sup> These voting percentages are not directly comparable to the federal vote result because the question for provincial and municipal voting was directed only to those who previously indicated they were eligible to vote in Canada. By eliminating those not eligible to vote, the provincial and municipal totals will be somewhat higher.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

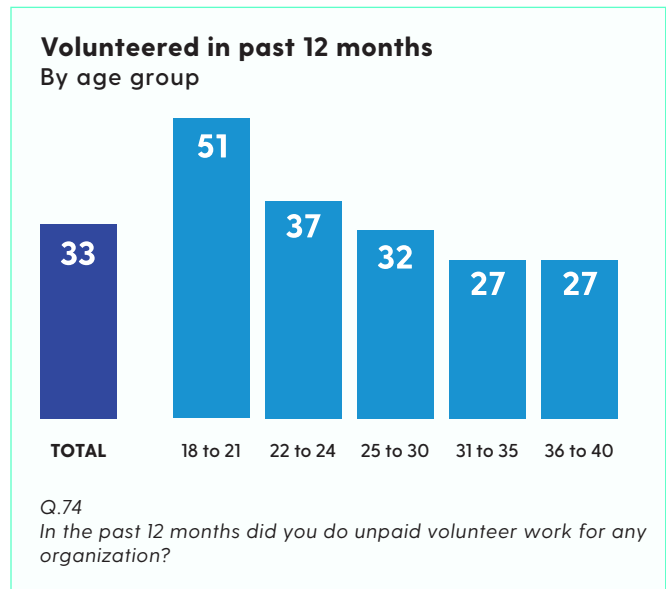
**Many youth are active in their communities, through volunteering and participation in local groups and organizations, with this involvement declining with age. About one in three reports actively following a cause or issue, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic, racism and global warming.**

**Volunteer activity in past year.** An important type of civic engagement is volunteering one’s time to an organization, group or worthwhile cause. One in three (33%) Canadian youth reports having done unpaid volunteer work in the past 12 months. This activity is closely linked to educational attainment, and is especially prevalent among youth with a post-graduate degree (45%).

Age also emerges as an important factor in the likelihood of volunteering, as this activity declines progressively over time (reported by 51% among youth 18 to 21, compared with fewer than half as many (27%) among those 31 to 40). As well, Millennials in 2020 are less likely to report volunteer work in 2020 (29%) than they did in 2016 (36%). This pattern is likely connected to life stage and work commitments; youth with full-time employment (33%) have less time and energy for volunteering than those working part-time (42%), self-employed (44%) or students (44%). But time availability does not appear to tell the whole story, as the lowest levels of volunteer participation are reported by youth who are not employed, whether looking for work (28%) or not (15%).

Among Millennials, volunteer work is more prevalent among youth on the political right (37%, versus 28% among those on the left), as well as among those who identify as Black (43%) and South Asian (42%), and lowest among those who identify as white (26%). Among youth generally, the likelihood of volunteer activity in the past 12 months does not vary by gender, household income, or province of residence.

Finally, attitudes about democracy and collective action do not appear to play a significant role in whether youth commit to volunteer work in their community. Reported volunteer activity is only moderately more evident among those who are satisfied with the state of democracy in Canada, are optimistic about the direction of the world, believe their generation can make a positive contribution to society, and believe that collective action at the local level can make a big difference (all of which are linked to educational attainment).



**Extent of volunteer effort.** Among youth who report volunteer work over the past year, the extent of involvement varies, based on the number of hours of volunteer work per month reported. Two-thirds in this group say they have given relatively small amounts of their time – less than an hour per month (21%) or between one and four hours per month (46%). One in ten (11%) has made a more substantial commitment, giving 15 or more hours to volunteer work on a monthly basis.

Once again, leading-edge Gen Zers who volunteer are also more likely to put in a greater number of hours (38% giving 5 or more hours per month, compared with 30% among Millennials). And Millennials currently volunteering are now devoting fewer hours to this activity than they were in 2016 (when 38% reported 5 plus hours per month). Among youth who volunteer, level of effort does not vary noticeably by educational attainment, household income or ethnic/racial identity, but devoting five or more hours per month is more prevalent among volunteers on the political left (34%) and middle (33%), in comparison with those on the political right (25%).

**Type of volunteering.** Youth who report volunteering in the past year have done so in a variety of ways. The most common include teaching, educating or mentoring (26%), canvassing or fundraising (25%), and organizing or supervising events and activities (24%).

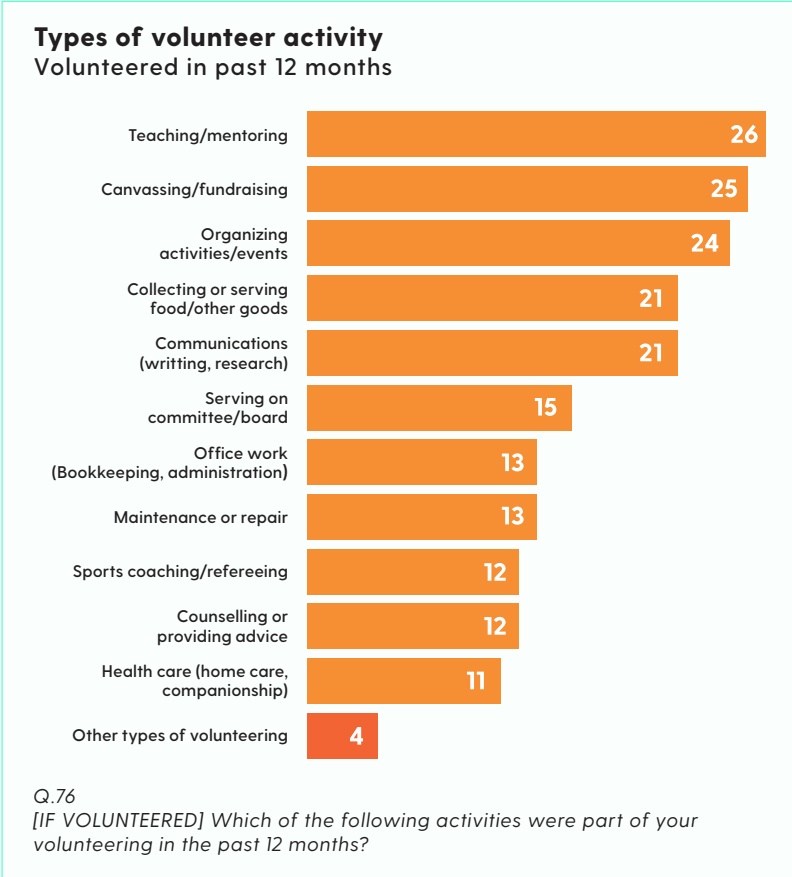
Other forms of volunteering encompass “white collar” activities such as serving on a committee or board, communications (research, writing, social media), and office work, while others have been involved in “hands ‘on” types of support, such as delivering or serving food, maintenance and repair, coaching sports, and providing health care supports (e.g., elder or child care).

Type of volunteer activity is more or less evenly distributed across the youth population. Leading-edge Gen Z and Millennial volunteers are equally likely to report involvement in the same types of activity (except for Millennials being more apt to serve on boards and committees).

**Group participation.** Another form of civic engagement entails membership or participation in groups and organizations, which may be formally constituted or informal groups of individuals who get together regularly for activities or discussion. Among Canadian youth, fewer than half (45%) report belonging to or having participated in any of eight broad categories of organizations or groups in the past 12 months. As with volunteering, leading-edge Gen Zers (53%) are more likely than Millennials (43%) to participate in one or more such groups (slightly lower than the 46% of this latter generation who reported such involvement in 2016).

Across the eight types, youth are most likely to belong to or participate in unions or professional associations (13%) and sports or recreation leagues/clubs (12%), followed by school groups (9%), religious groups (9%) and cultural organizations (7%). Participation by type is similar across generations, with Millennials somewhat more apt to participate in unions/professional associations, while leading-edge Gen Zers are more likely to report involvement with school groups.

Youth who belong to groups and organizations also tend to be the ones who volunteer (74% who volunteer also belong to one or more groups, compared with only 31% of those who do not). Participation in one or more groups is most commonly reported by those with higher levels of education and income, and those employed part time or are students. Participation is also more evident among youth on the political right (60%) compared with those in the middle (45%) or on the political left (46%). Across ethnic/racial identity, such involvement is most prevalent among youth who identify as Black (59%) and least so among those who identify as white (43%) and Indigenous (42%).



**Active engagement in causes and issues.** Apart from voting, following current events and getting involved in their local community, are Canadian youth actively engaged in particular causes and issues?

Just under three in ten (28%) identify one (or more) causes and issues in which they have been actively following or engaged with over the past 12 months (this question was unprompted, so respondents were not provided with a list to choose from).

Active engagement in a cause or issue is equally reported across the two generations, but increases with educational attainment. It is also more evident among youth who volunteer (36%), those on the political left (36%) and those who identify as Black (34%), while least so among those unemployed and not looking for work (18%).

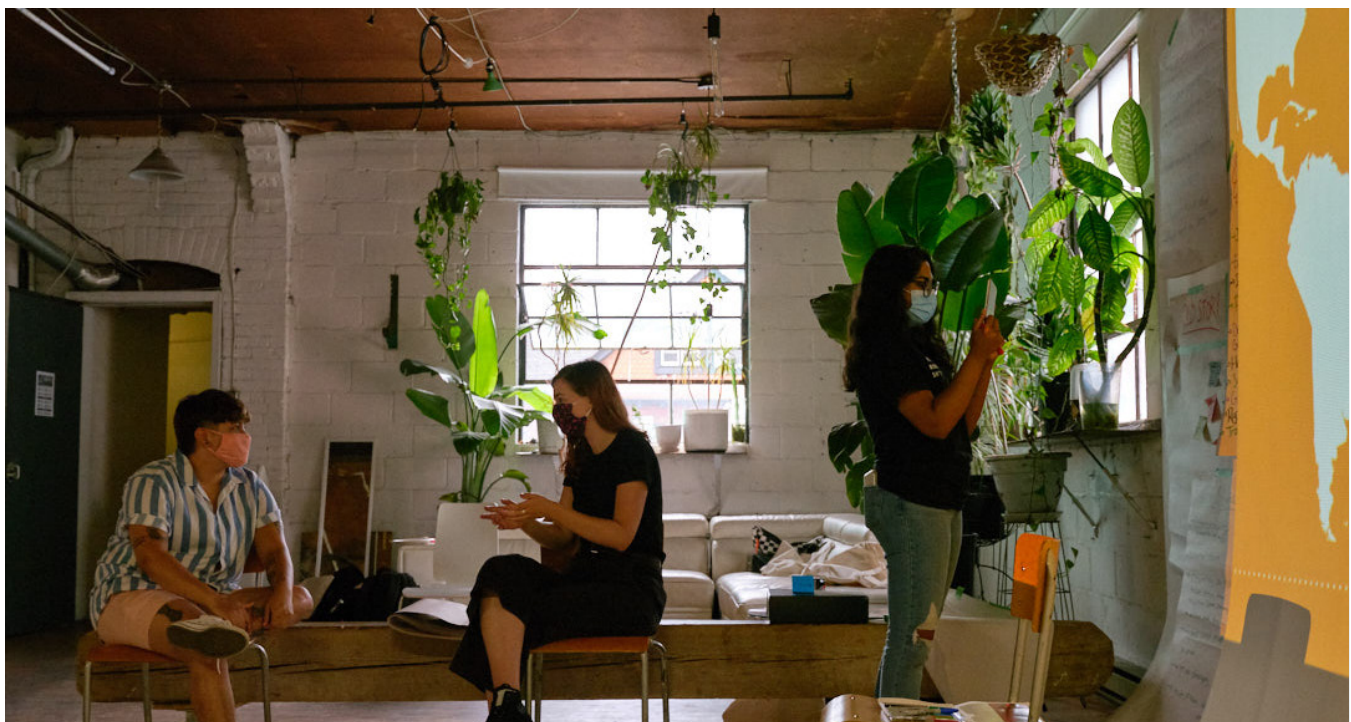
The list of causes and issues identified is extensive, but none are identified by as many as one in ten. Social justice is the most common theme, including racism (7%), social justice and equality (3%), homelessness (2%) and Indigenous issues (1%). Other issues mentioned include the Covid-19 pandemic (8%), global warming and the environment (5%) and politics (including Canadian and international) (3%). No other cause or issue is identified by more than one percent of the youth surveyed. As might be expected, youth on the political left are among those most likely to be actively engaged with racism, global warming and other social justice issues, while those who identify as Black are most apt to name racism (14%).

**Actively followed/engaged in issues in past 12 months**

	%
COVID-19	8
Racism/racial injustice/Black Lives Matter	7
Global warming/environment	5
Social justice/equality	3
Politics (canada/U.S./International)	3
Homelessness/poverty	2
Health care	1
Indigenous issue	1
Other issues	10
None/No issues	72

Q.78

*What, if any, particular causes or issues are you have been actively following or engaged, if any, over the past 12 months.*



## BRIDGING THE POLITICAL DIVIDE

**Most youth in Canada know and engage with others whose political views are very different from their own. This type of bridging across political divides is more commonly reported by those on the political right, who also tend to find such interactions to be worthwhile.**

Over the past decade or so politics and political discourse have become increasingly polarized, creating divides between parties and voters. This trend has not emerged in Canada anywhere close to what it has become in the US and some other countries, but nevertheless presents significant challenges to effective governance and a unified country. Polarization is accelerated (and in some cases created) by the fracturing media environment in which a declining proportion of people get their information from common channels.

This raises the question about youth in Canada today, and whether those on the two ends of the political spectrum share much in common. This topic was addressed on the survey through a series of questions about interactions and engagement with people who have a different political perspective.

**Proportion of friends with similar and different politics.** Youth were asked to estimate the proportion of their friends who share their own views about politics. Four in ten say that all (7%) or most (32%) of their friends share their own political views, compared with close to half who say that some (37%) or only a few (10%) do so. Another one in six (14%) is unable to say (e.g., don't know their friends well enough or don't discuss politics).

The balance of friends' politics is largely similar across the youth population, with a few notable variations. Leading-edge Gen Zers are somewhat more likely to report all or most friends have the same views (46%), while Millennials are a bit more apt to say they don't know.

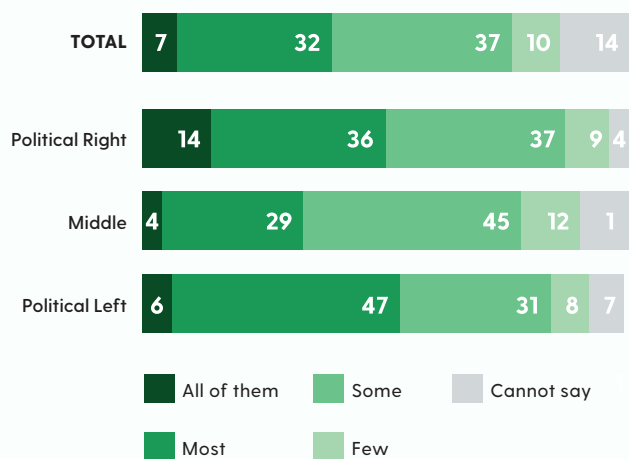
Youth on the political right are the most likely to say all of their friends share their own political views (14%), but it is those on the left who are least likely to indicate they have friends with views that are different from their own (39% say only some or few do so). It is those individuals in the political middle who are most apt to bridge the political divide, in terms of having a high proportion of friends who do not share their own political viewpoint.

Friendship patterns vary somewhat by education, with bridging across the divide declining somewhat as attainment increases. Results do not vary noticeably by province or region, household income, ethnic/racial identification, gender, or sexual orientation.



### Proportion of friends sharing your own political views

By political orientation



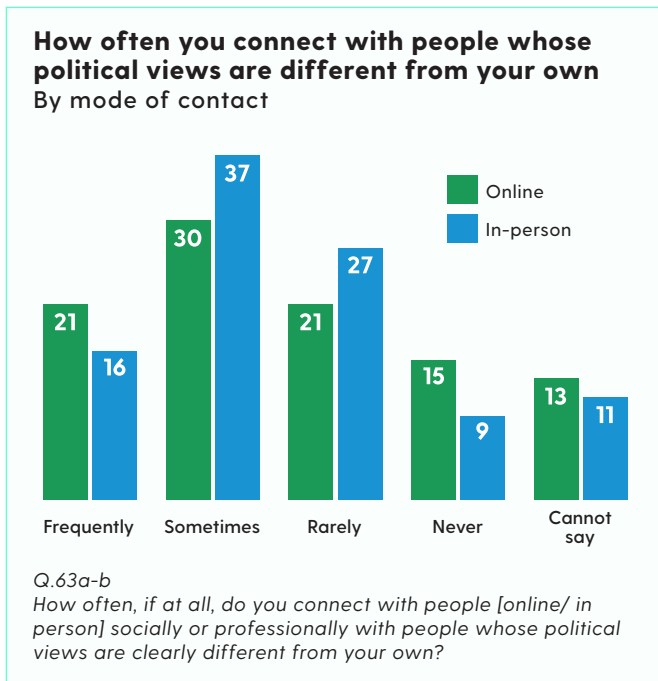
Q.62

When you think about your friends, what proportion do you believe share your own views about politics?

**Connecting with people who have different political views.** Apart from friendships, to what extent do youth come into contact and connect with others whose political views are different from their own?

Results from the survey reveal that this happens on a regular basis, both online and in-person.

Just over half report they connect *online* with people (socially or professionally) whose political views are different from their own, either frequently (21%) or sometimes (30%), compared with those who do so rarely (21%) or never (15%). Another 13 percent cannot say (e.g., don't know the politics of people they interact with online). Such contact is somewhat less common when it comes to *in-person* interactions: 16 percent report doing so frequently, although only nine percent indicate they never do so.

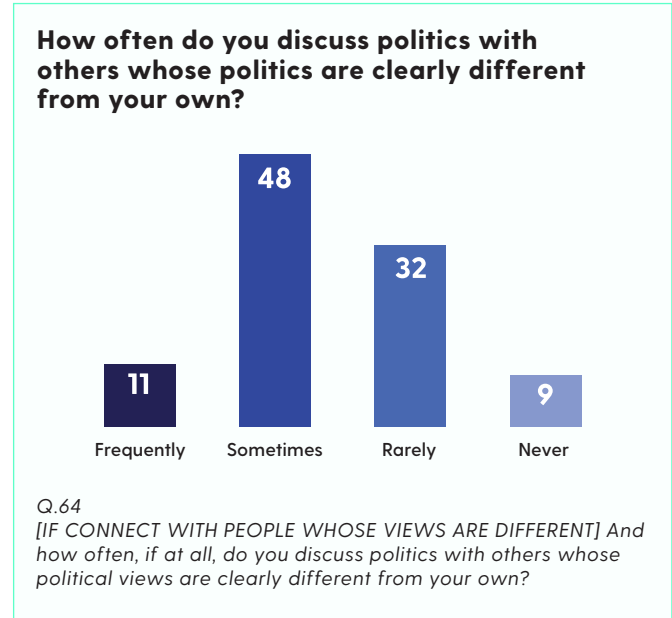


Frequency of connecting with those having different political views is generally consistent across the youth population. Both online and in-person connections are somewhat more likely to be “frequent” among younger age groups, as well as among individuals on the political right, those with a post-graduate degree, and men (women are more apt to say they never do so, or cannot say).

Perhaps what is most intriguing is that frequent connections with people having a different political persuasion is by far most common among those who report *all of their friends* share their own political perspective (47% for online interactions, 37% for in-person). While counter-intuitive, these results may reveal something about the volume of contact

with others: Those who have friendships mostly with people like themselves may also be the most active in connecting with other people in general, including those with views unlike their own.

**Discussing politics across the divide.** Among youth who connect with others having political views different from their own (at least rarely), how often if at all do they discuss politics? Results from the survey demonstrate that



this is a common occurrence among Canadian youth. More than half say they have such conversations frequently (11%) or sometimes (48%), compared with one-third indicating this happens rarely (32%), and only one in ten (9%) who says never.

As with making connections, youth on the political right are most likely to report having frequent discussions with others whose views are different from their own (21%; with only 4% of this group saying they never do so). This experience is also more commonly mentioned by youth who identify as Black (20%) and South Asian (19%). Youth who say they rarely or never have such conversations are most apt to have a weak sense of community belonging (50%) and rarely or never follow news and current events (64%). Not surprising, these discussions are most common among those who have the most frequent online and in-person interactions with people with a different political perspective.

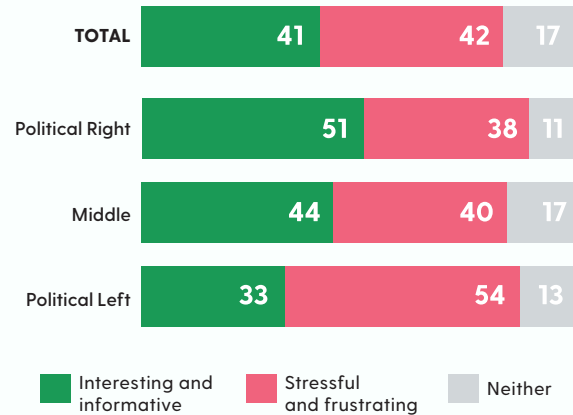
Finally, for those who have discussions with politics with those whose views are different, how do they find the experience? Youth are evenly divided between those who describe such conversations as interesting and informative (41%) and those who find them stressful and frustrating (42%).

Positive discussions with those one disagrees with is most common among youth who are most engaged, in terms of

community belonging (60%) and following news and current events (52%), as well as among those who identify as Black (56%) and South Asian (52%). The most notable difference is by political orientation: Youth on the political right are more likely to say such discussions are interesting and informative (51%) versus stressful and frustrating (38%), while the reverse holds for those on the political left (33%, versus 54%).

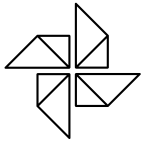
As might be expected, the experience of having discussions with others with whom one disagrees improves the more frequently they take place. Youth who report having frequent conversations of this type are much more likely to say they are interesting and informative (65%), in comparison with those who have them sometimes (45%) or rarely (28%).

**Experience of discussing politics with people you disagree with**  
By political orientation



Q.65  
[IF DISCUSS POLITICS WITH OTHERS WHOSE VIEWS ARE DIFFERENT] In your experience, when you talk about politics with people who you disagree with, do you generally find it to be:





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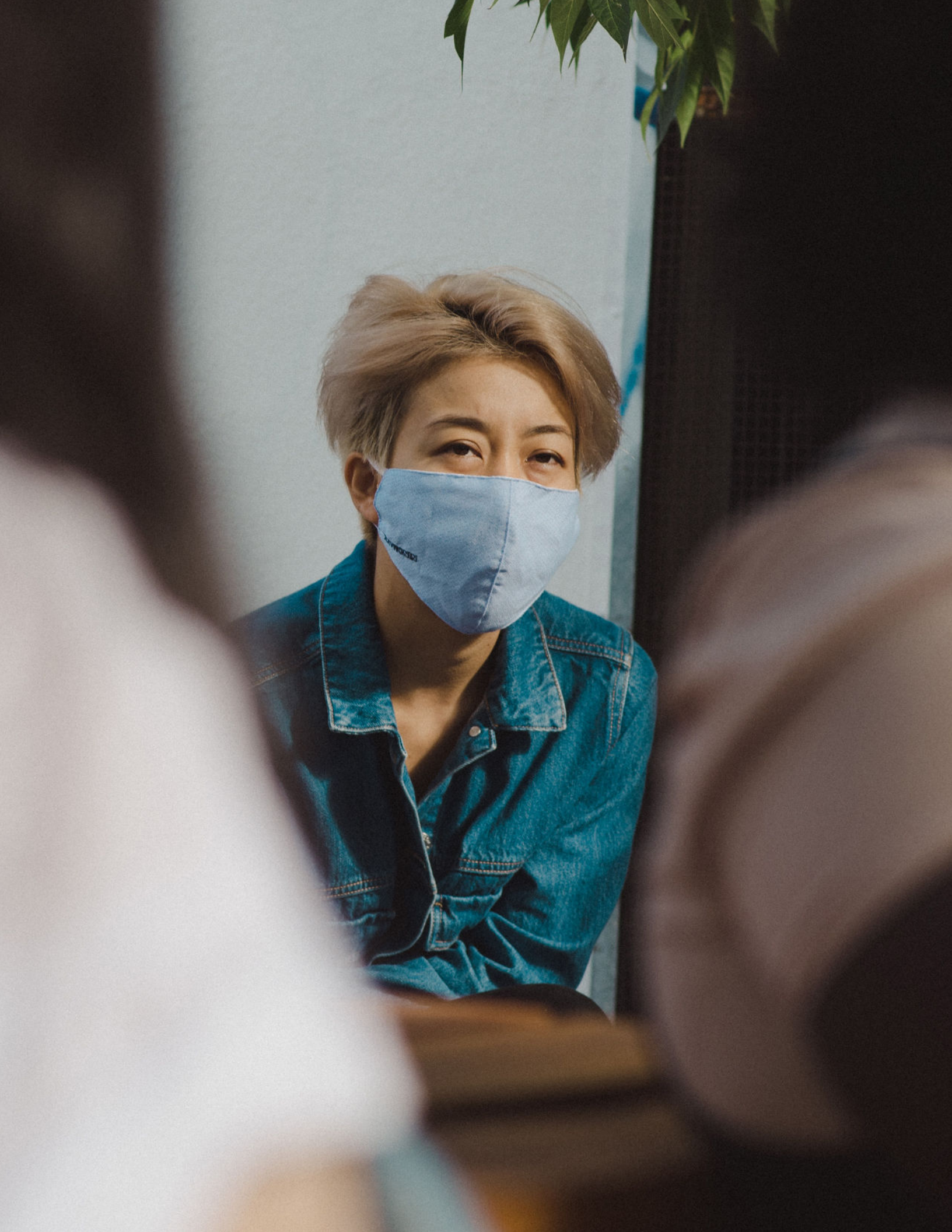
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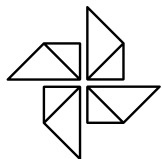


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