

All together now?

By Michael Adams and Andrew Parkin

As Canadians face the COVID-19 crisis, research shows we bring three vital social strengths (and have one important opportunity to improve)

In the Second World War, the hopes of the world rested with the bravery of the soldiers on the front lines. Yet as we now know, the war could not have been won without the dedication and ingenuity of countless scientists. Physicists invented radar, mathematicians broke codes, engineers designed new equipment and chemists split the atom. These innovations equipped the allied armies for victory.

A few weeks ago, comparisons of the fight against COVID-19 to war-time mobilization seemed exaggerated – but no more. Every aspect of normal life has been disrupted. Every citizen is learning that they have a role to play, and every available resource is being mustered in the battle. And once again, behind those on the front lines – in the hospitals, care homes and testing centres – are the medical scientists whose knowledge of viruses and epidemics is guiding the government response.

This time, the scientists are not stashed away in secret locations. They're front and centre on our television, computer and smart phone screens, speaking directly to us. They're explaining why once unimaginable restrictions are now essential and insisting that the toll the pandemic takes in our communities depends on our own choices and behaviours. With some exceptions, Canadians are listening to them – agreeing to do our part to “flatten the curve.”

This response should not surprise us. Yes, in the past years, anti-vaxxers have set back some of the progress made in efforts to eradicate well-known diseases. Yes, some celebrities have gotten richer than they already were by peddling spurious cure-alls. Yes, talk shows can always turn up flat-earthers to fill airtime on slow news days. But none of this has dented the very high levels of trust that most of the public places in scientists in general, and in medical professionals in particular.

In Canada, trust in science and trust in institutions reinforce each other

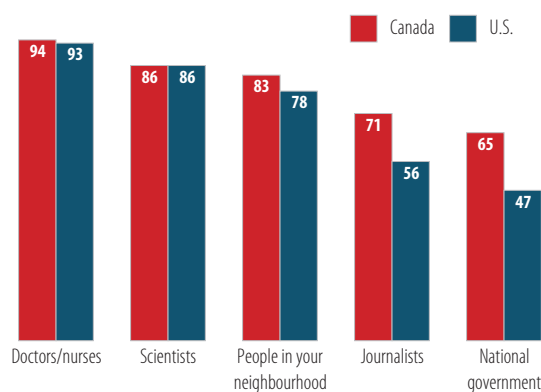
Data from the 2018 Wellcome Global Monitor, a major study of attitudes to science and health conducted by Gallup in 140 countries, shows that 72 percent of people worldwide trust scientists, and 73 percent trust a doctor or nurse for health advice over other sources, such as family, friends or religious leaders.¹ These levels of trust are even higher in Canada. The Global Monitor reports that, among Canadians, 86 percent have a lot or some trust in scientists, and 91 percent say doctors and nurses are the most trusted source for medical and health advice.

Canada's trust in scientific and medical experts is high, but not all that unusual. The Global Monitor finds trust in science is almost uniformly high among the world's most developed countries. In only one OECD country (Mexico) does the share of people who have at least some trust in science fall below three-quarters. By contrast, trust in governments and the media vary more widely across OECD countries. It's here that Canadians' high levels of trust stand out more sharply: compared to others in the OECD, Canadians are more likely than most to say they have a lot or some trust in their national government, and are among the most likely to trust journalists.

Looking across all these measures, differences between Canada and the United States are clear. Canadians and Americans are equally likely to say that they have a lot or some trust in science. But Canadians are more likely than Americans to trust both their national government (65% to 47%) and journalists (71% to 56%). At a time of pandemic, governments and the press are vitally important institutions, in part because they explain, reinforce, and amplify scientific guidance to the public. It should come as no surprise, then, that while Canadians and Americans are equally likely to turn to a doctor or nurse over other sources for medical or health advice, Canadians (78%) are once again much more likely than Americans (59%) to say that they have a lot or some trust in the medical and health advice that they get from their government. The implications for public health are real and present.

Canadians and Americans have similar levels of trust in doctors/nurses and scientists, but not journalists or the government

A lot or some trust



Source: Wellcome Global Monitor 2018

Q.

How much do you trust each of the following?

¹ <https://wellcome.ac.uk/reports/wellcome-global-monitor/2018>

Scientific literacy helps Canadians understand and follow expert advice

The Wellcome Global Monitor points to an additional factor that may shape citizens' response to the dramatic changes wrought by COVID-19: the prevalence of science education in school. Within the OECD, Canadians are among the most likely to say that they personally learned about science at primary school (88%), at secondary school (91%) and at college or university (51%).² Moreover, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) recently showed that Canadian high school students have the second-highest achievement level in science among the 36 member countries (after Japan).³

The strength of Canada's public school system in science education offers no protection against viruses and no guarantee that Canadian citizens will adapt to physical distancing any more successfully than others. But when we consider the resources that our society can draw upon in confronting the current crisis, the value of scientific literacy should not be underestimated. We should not think about the notion of trust in science or in medical experts in terms of simple deference or blind trust. In Canada, trust in leaders and experts is animated at least partly by information sharing, dialogue and understanding among members of what is, in comparative terms, a highly educated society.

As governments of all stripes rise to the pandemic challenge, public trust is affirmed and reinforced

There is another, largely invisible, source of strength in Canada's efforts to get everyone pulling in the same direction in the struggle to contain the virus: this country's federal structure. Whenever there are big things to get done – from building infrastructure to rolling out new social programs – we are accustomed to seeing federalism as an encumbrance: it takes too long to get everyone on board and typically we fail to do that. Even when we do succeed, the end result has so many exceptions and exemptions built in that it hardly counts as serious nation-building.

Yet in confronting the current pandemic, Canadian federalism has offered nothing but advantages. Some of these entail the classic division of labour, with the federal government making full use of its spending power while looking after international trade and travel, and the provinces overseeing the management of health care, education and other social services in a way that suits their own circumstances. But the other dimension is the motivating effect of seeing federal and provincial political leaders of different stripes working together. Those inclined to tune out the directives issued by a federal government they didn't vote for can end up having their attention grabbed when the same message is delivered by a provincial

government, often of a different political party, that they helped elect – or vice versa. It becomes harder for citizens to dismiss on partisan grounds the messages coming from their governments when those governments themselves have so successfully put partisan politics to one side. When two leaders who reliably disagree come together to implore the public with a single voice, the effect is powerful. The regionalism that tests our unity in normal times has become a unifying strength in this crisis.

It may be tempting to chalk this cooperation up to the character of the individual leaders. While the quality of leadership matters (as we see in the United States), the key ingredient in Canada is not personal but structural: in a crisis Canada's federal system makes collaboration the only realistic option. Ottawa has the money, but the provinces control the structures and systems that look after their citizens. As frustrating as this arrangement may be on days when we are trying to design a new national pharmacare program, this same structure has compelled our governments to come together during a pandemic. The efficacy of both our leaders and our system has surely reinforced the level of trust that Canadians have in both.

² This does not mean that only one in two college or university students in Canada learned about science, because the sample includes many who did not access that level of education. Canada's relatively high score in this regard therefore partly reflects the country's high level of postsecondary educational attainment.

³ <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/insights/insight-details/achievement-and-equity-in-education-in-canada-an-update>

More than 3 in 4 Canadians trust the medical and health advice from the government

Country (OECD members only)	A lot or some trust (%)	Country (OECD members only)	A lot or some trust (%)
Norway	92	Portugal	75
Luxembourg	91	Belgium	75
Austria	89	Chile	72
South Korea	87	Japan	70
Australia	86	Sweden	70
New Zealand	86	Iceland	70
Ireland	84	France	69
Germany	83	Turkey	69
Israel	82	Hungary	63
Switzerland	82	Poland	63
Czech Republic	82	Italy	63
United Kingdom	81	Estonia	62
Denmark	78	Finland	62
Netherlands	78	United States	59
Canada	78	Slovenia	58
Slovakia	78	Lithuania	55
Spain	77	Greece	44
Mexico	77	Latvia	40

Source: Wellcome Global Monitor 2018

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In general, how much do you trust medical and health advice that the government of [country] gives? A lot, some, not much, or not at all? Table shows responses for OECD member countries only.

Will this be the crisis that restores Canada's sliding rates of volunteerism and charitable giving?

None of this is to suggest that reservoirs of trust or scientific literacy are enough to see us through the pandemic. While ample supplies of both are better than deficits, they only get us so far; the outbreaks in nursing homes and other care facilities, many staffed thinly even before the crisis by precariously employed workers, have shone a harsh light on some of Canada's failures and vulnerabilities. In addition to reminding ourselves of our sources of strength and resilience as we navigate this crisis, Canadians should also ask where we, as a society, can do better.

Many Canadians' eagerness to volunteer and donate to help others through the COVID-19 crisis has been rightly held up for admiration. But this generosity runs against downward trends in volunteerism and charitable giving evident before the pandemic hit. In comparative terms, rates of volunteering in Canada match those of other Anglo-American countries such as the United States, Australia and New Zealand.⁴ But over time, our rate has at best been flat, and may even be falling: in 2013, 44 percent of Canadians volunteered, down slightly from 47 percent in 2010.⁵ The trend in charitable giving is more pronounced: over the past two decades, the proportion of Canadians donating to charities (measured through donation claims in personal income tax filings) has fallen from 26 percent to 19 percent.⁶

A period of self-isolation may not be the right time to call for more volunteers. But for those who continue to work and earn, if ever there was a time to reacquaint ourselves with charitable giving, it's now. We may have to embrace physical distancing, but by donating to good causes online, we can

still extend a hand to those in our communities who receive help from frontline non-profit agencies and charities.

While charitable giving needs no justification other than the help it can bring to those most in need, its benefits do go wider. Giving can lead to an injection of something that we all need more of in the context of the pandemic: happiness. The latest World Happiness Report, which measures and ranks countries' happiness, drew attention to six key variables that influence happiness; one was generosity. The others were wealth, health, trust, having someone to count on, and having a sense of freedom to make key life decisions.⁷ Right now, wealth and health are under strain, and so, in some ways, is freedom. Canadians, who rank 11th on happiness, seem to be holding on in terms of trust.

The data on volunteerism and charitable giving show we have room to improve on generosity. If we do extend more generosity, we'll show others that they have someone to count on – potentially boosting our own happiness as well as that of our neighbours.

A timely piece of research has found that practising kindness and generosity, whether in person or online, can even help to reduce feelings of loneliness, something we could all benefit from as we self-isolate.⁸ Those with some extra capacity can help themselves and others by exercising some generosity during this difficult time. It will not only provide urgently needed support in the short run, but it will increase the likelihood that we'll emerge from this crisis with our social fabric, and our happiness, intact.

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⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/CO4.1-Participation-voluntary-work.pdf>

⁵ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2015003-eng.htm>

⁶ Statistics Canada, Table 11-10-0130-01 Summary of charitable donors

⁷ <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/>

⁸ <https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2020/04/16/acts-of-kindness-prevent-a-downward-spiral-from-solitude-to-loneliness>