



Focus Canada – Spring 2017

Canadian public opinion about immigration and the USA

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about immigration and about the USA. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted with 2,002 Canadians between April 3 and 15, 2017. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Executive summary

In the past six months, the surprising election of Donald Trump to the US presidency has sent shock waves through that country, and reverberations around to globe. His administration is charting an unpredictable new course in domestic and foreign policy, and among the first steps has been a tightening of restrictions for visitors, immigrants and refugees seeking to enter the USA. Many parts of Europe are also experiencing the emergence of anti-government sentiments, nationalism and populism, with much of the anger focused on refugees and immigrants.

Here in Canada, the Trudeau government is holding firm on its policies on diversity and inclusion, and the country has welcomed 35,000 Syrian refugees with little controversy. But a number of communities are experiencing disturbing racist or anti-Muslim incidents, and some commentators are concluding that Canadians are following the US lead in becoming less tolerant of immigrants and people who are different. To test this contention, the Environics Institute conducted a new survey to identify if and how Canadian public opinion about immigration has changed over the past six months, as well as how Canadians now view the USA in light of its new President.

The results are conclusive. Canadians' opinions about immigration remain as positive, if not more so, than last measured in October 2016. Most continue to disagree that the country is taking in too many immigrants, and there remains a broad consensus that immigration benefits the economy. Skepticism about the legitimacy of refugee claimants is diminishing, and concern about too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values – while still the majority view – remains at record low levels.

As before, opinions vary somewhat across the country. Positive views about immigration and refugees are more evident among younger Canadians, and those with higher levels of education and income; those 60 years and older are among the most negative. Alberta stands out as the one part of the country where attitudes about immigration have become more negative since last October.

While public opinion about immigration has remained notably stable over time, views of the USA have changed dramatically as a result of the Trump presidency. Fewer than half of Canadians now hold a favourable view of the USA, down significantly from 2012 and now at the lowest level recorded on Focus Canada since this was first measured in 1982. The impact of the new US political reality goes beyond impressions, with one in four Canadians reporting to have either changed, or thinking about changing, plans for visiting the US this year because of the current political climate.

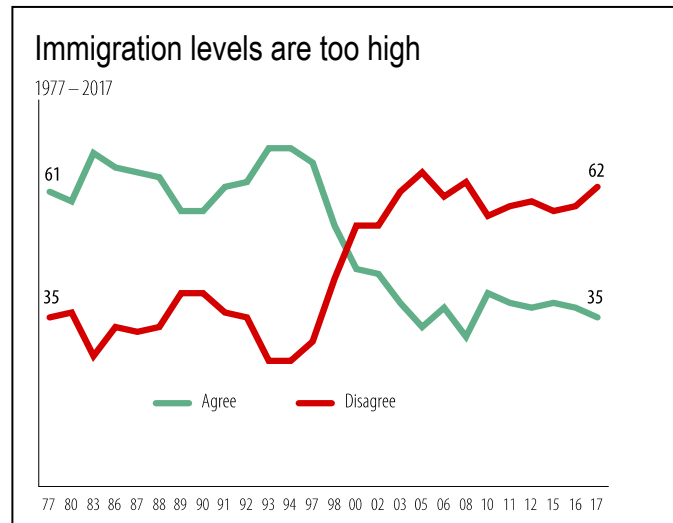
Finally, do Canadians anticipate that the anti-government populism sweeping other western nations will happen in their own country? Opinion is divided with few feeling certain about the future.

Immigration

Canadians' views about immigration are stable or more positive than last October, in terms of support for current immigration levels, confidence in the impact on the economy, and concerns about immigrants not adopting Canadian values. Public skepticism about the legitimacy of refugee claimants has declined.

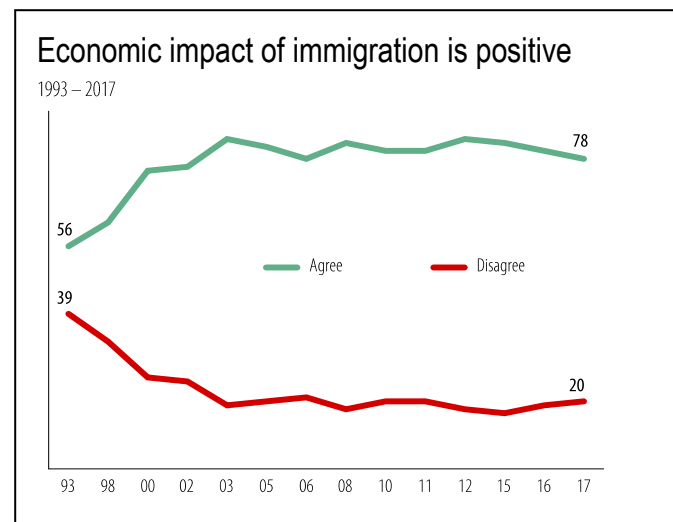
This current survey included questions that have been asked on a number of previous Focus Canada surveys, in some cases dating back more than 30 years. This provides an empirical basis by which to identify how public opinion is changing or not over time. In this section, the research updates questions last asked in October 2016 to identify how opinions have changed or not over the past six months following the election of Donald Trump in the USA and other events worldwide. The results are based on responses to a set of “agree-disagree” statements that serve as key benchmark indicators of public attitudes about immigration.

“Overall, there is too much immigration in Canada.” Despite growing controversy over immigration in the USA and Europe, Canadians are increasingly rejecting the idea that their country is taking in too many people from other countries. More than six in ten (62%) now disagree with this negative statement about the level of immigration in Canada, up four percentage points from six months ago, and now at the highest level since March-April 2008. Just over one in three (35%) Canadians now concurs with the statement (down 2 points).



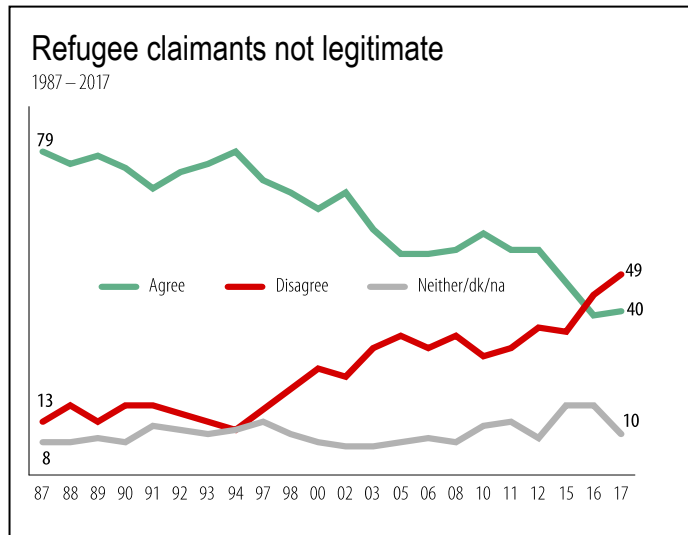
Consistent with previous surveys, disagreement with the idea of “too much immigration” is most widespread in British Columbia (66%), among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age, those with a university degree and those with higher household incomes. This view has strengthened most noticeably since last October in Ontario, the Prairies and B.C., as well as among younger Canadians. As before, concern about immigration levels is most evident in Alberta (45% agree), among Canadians 60 years and older, and those with the lowest levels of education and income; this view has strengthened since last October in Atlantic Canada. Opinions in Quebec mirror the national average and are unchanged from six months ago.

“Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada.” Canadians' level of comfort with immigration is grounded in part on their belief that it is good for the country's economy. Close to eight in ten (78%) share this sentiment, down two percentage points from six months ago, but essentially unchanged over the past 15 years.



This is the majority view across the population, but most widespread among Canadians 18 to 29 (85%) and least so in Alberta (69%, down 6 points), which accounts for much of the decline since last October. As before *strong* agreement with the statement is most evident in Toronto, among Canadians born outside the country, and those with the most education and income.

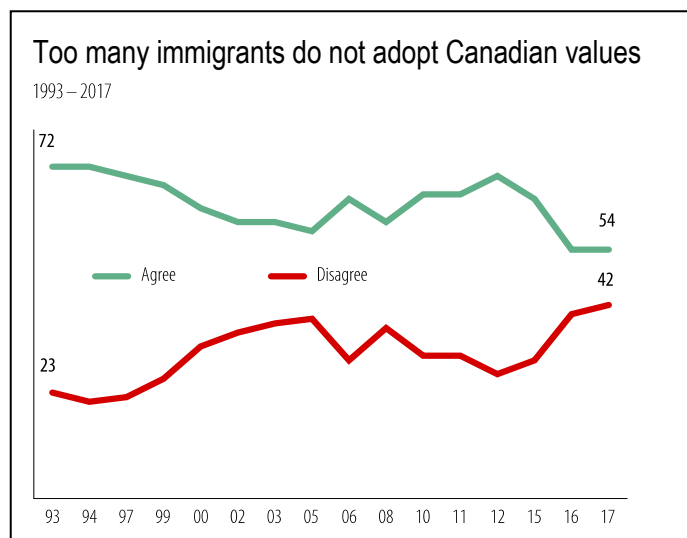
“Most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees.” The past year has seen the country welcome an unprecedented number of refugees (mostly from Syria), and more recently there has been an estimated few thousand individuals crossing the border from the USA. While some commentators have suggested this is giving rise to growing public concern about the types of individuals seeking refuge, the opposite is the case. A growing proportion of Canadians now disagree with this statement about refugees not being legitimate (49%), up five percentage points from last October and continuing an upward trend dating back to 2015. Disagreement is now at its highest level since this was first measured in 1987. Four in ten agree with the statement (unchanged), while fewer (10%, down 7) are now unsure or have no opinion.



This trend away from questioning the legitimacy of refugees is evident across much of the country but most noticeable in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and B.C., among Canadians 18 to 29 and those with the highest incomes. The reverse trend since last October has taken place in Alberta and among those with the lowest incomes. Opinions on this issue are most divided in the Prairies and Toronto, among Canadians 60 and older, and among immigrants. Once again views among Quebecers are at the national average, but fewer in that province now have no opinion.

“There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values.” Research has shown that the most sensitive issue for many Canadians is how immigrants integrate or fit into the country once they arrive. This latest survey confirms this perspective, but at the same time reveals that such concerns have not grown over the past six months. Just over half (54%) of Canadians now agree with this statement about too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values, unchanged from October 2016 and remaining at the lowest level recorded in more than 20 years.

Across the country, concern about immigrants not adopting Canadian values is now most widespread in Alberta (65%, up 8 points since October 2016), followed by Quebec (59%, up 2). In contrast, this view is least apt to be shared in B.C. (47%, unchanged). As before, opinions are strongly related to age, education and income levels. Agreement with the statement is expressed by six in ten (61%) Canadians aged 60 and older, compared with only 44 percent among those 18 to 29 (with little change in either group since October 2016).



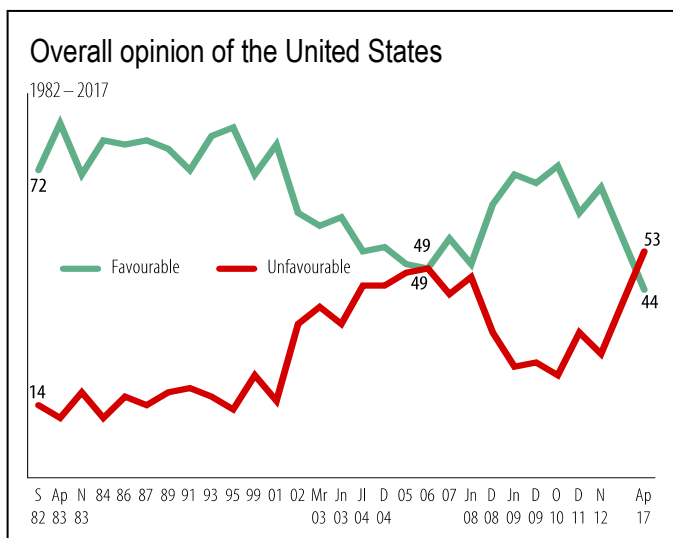
Views on this question are similar whether one is born in Canada or in another country.

Canada – USA relations

The election of Donald Trump has had a negative impact on Canadians' overall opinion of the USA, and is now at its lowest level in 35 years. One in four Canadians has changed plans for US travel this year or is considering it. Opinion is divided on whether the anti-government populism happening elsewhere will arrive in Canada soon.

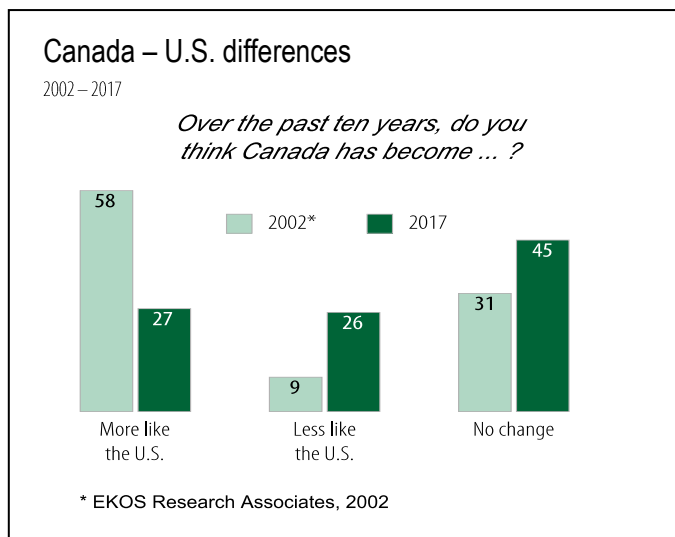
Overall opinion of the USA. The unexpected election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency last fall delivered a major jolt to that country's political and cultural fabric, and has also had a dramatic impact on how Canadians view their neighbour to the south. Fewer than half now hold a very (9%) or somewhat (35%) favourable overall opinion of the USA, down substantially since Fall 2012, during the lead up to Barack Obama's reelection victory (when 68% held a positive opinion). This represents the lowest favourable rating of the USA since Focus Canada began measuring it in 1982. A majority say their overall opinion of the USA is somewhat (33%) or very (20%) unfavourable (with very unfavourable ratings almost tripling since 2012).

This significant decline in favourable impressions of the USA is evident across the country, but most noticeably in eastern Canada, among those Canadian-born, and women (only 38% of women are positive, down 32 percentage points from 2012). Favourable impressions are comparatively higher among residents of the Prairie provinces (54%) and men (51%). Very unfavourable ratings are highest among Canadians in the lowest income bracket (29%) and those born in another country (27%).



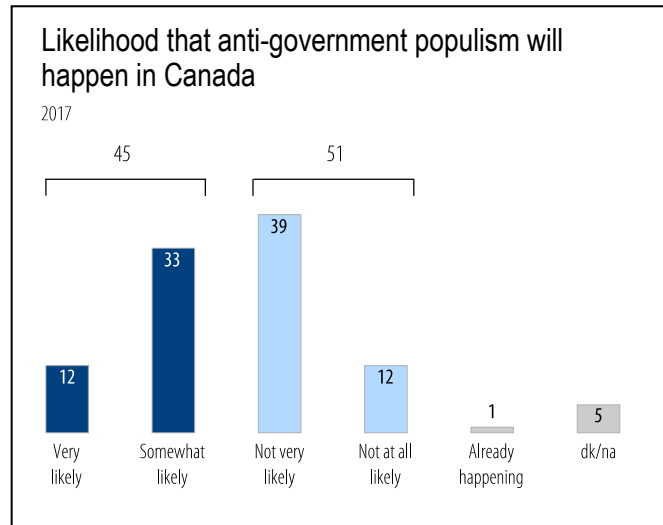
Are Canada and the USA becoming more alike? Fifteen years ago, research conducted by EKOS Research showed that most Canadians were of the opinion that their country was becoming more like the USA. In 2017 this is much less likely to be the case. Only one in four (27%) now subscribes to this view (down from 58% in 2002), with a comparable proportion (26%) saying Canada has become *less* like the USA (up 17 points). A growing plurality (45%) maintains there has been little change over the past decade.

Opinions on this question are generally similar across the population. The view that Canada is becoming more like the USA is most evident in Alberta and B.C. and among Canadians with the lowest household incomes. The opposite view is comparatively more prevalent in Atlantic Canada and among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age, as well as among those with higher levels of education and income.



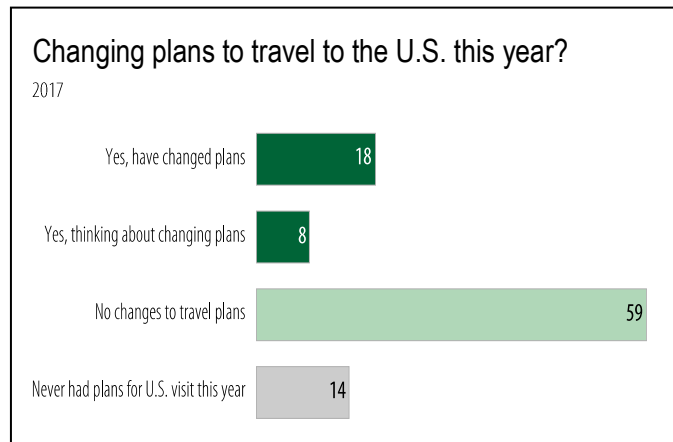
Anti-government populism: Can it happen here? The election of Donald Trump is part of a broader trend sweeping countries in Europe and elsewhere that might be described as anti-government populism and a backlash against progressive politics and values that until recently have been on the ascendency in much of the western world. Will this trend find its way to Canada?

On this question, Canadians are divided, with few holding definitive views. Nearly half believe is it very (12%) or somewhat (33%) likely that this type of anti-government populism will happen in Canada over the next few years, compared with a bare majority who say it is somewhat (39%) or very (12%) unlikely. One percent insists that it is already happening.



Public opinion on this question is notably consistent across the country, with a few exceptions. Albertans are the most likely to anticipate the arrival of anti-government populism (52%, including 19% who say it is very likely to happen). At the other end of the spectrum, only one-quarter (25%) of Vancouverites share this view. Education and income appear to have a modest influence on perspectives; those with higher levels are somewhat less apt to believe this trend will happen in Canada.

Changing travel plans to the USA. One of the first steps of the new Trump administration involved new travel restrictions placed on visitors who hold citizenship with selected countries in the Middle East. This has created problems at the border for Canadians holding such passports and some organizations (e.g., public schools) have cancelled plans for US travel. The chill created by the new US policies is causing many Canadians to rethink their travel plans.



Close to one-fifth (18%) of Canadians surveyed say they have already changed their plans for visiting the USA this year because of the current political climate in that country, with another eight percent who say they are thinking about doing the same. Six in ten (59%) have not done so, while another 14 percent report they never had any plans for US travel this year.

Rethinking travel to the USA is evident across all groups of the population, but most noticeably among residents of Ontario (30% already changed plans or thinking about it) and B.C. (32%), as well as women (31%, versus 21% among men). Canadians born outside the country (22%) are somewhat more likely than native born (17%) to have already changed plans for such travel.

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. The focus of the Institute's mandate is to survey individuals and groups not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org, or contact Dr. Keith Neuman at 416-969-2457 or keith.neuman@environics.ca