



Political Identities in Western Canada

An Analysis of the Looking West 2006 Survey

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The NEXT West Project

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The Looking West 2006 Survey is the fourth survey in the Looking West series (previous Looking West Surveys were conducted in 2001, 2003, and 2004). The Looking West Surveys tap into the views and opinions of western Canadians on a number of key public policy topics. The purpose of the Looking West Surveys is to inform the public, community leaders, government staff, and elected officials about the views and perspectives of western Canadians. Previous Looking West Survey reports can be found at www.cwf.ca.

Additional reports based on the results of the Looking West 2006 Survey include *Consistent Priorities*, released by the Canada West Foundation in May 2006, *Democracy in Western Canada* released in July 2006 and a future report on young adults in western Canada that will be released in fall 2006.

Researchers: Interested in Using the Looking West 2006 Survey Data?

As part of the Canada West Foundation's commitment to encouraging ongoing research on western Canadian public policy issues, the Looking West 2006 dataset will be made available, free of charge, for nonprofit purposes to post-secondary institutions, academics, students and nonprofit agencies. Dataset availability is anticipated in January 2007. For more information, please contact Robert Roach, Director of Research (roach@cwf.ca).

Executive Summary

Conducted in February and March 2006, the Looking West 2006 Survey included a wide range of questions on public policy priorities, political identity, and democratic participation and attitudes. The objective of the survey is to help western Canadians and their governments better understand the opinions and attitudes of western Canadians. *Political Identities in Western Canada* presents an analysis of the political identity data. The public policy data can be found in *Consistent Priorities*, released by the Canada West Foundation in May 2006. The democratic attitudes and behaviours data can be found in *Democracy in Western Canada*, released by the Foundation in July 2006. Both reports are available at www.cwf.ca.

Key political identity findings of the Looking West 2006 Survey include:

- The data collected suggest that geographic identities matter more than personal identities: respondents are more likely to identify with their country, province, local community or region than they are to identify with their age peers, or people who share their ethnic background, religion or faith, or political beliefs.
- Western Canadians report very similar levels of national and provincial identities. Simply put, western Canadians identify with their provinces as much as they identify with Canada as a whole.
- The high number of respondents who identify with western Canada as a region is striking, particularly given that the region does not have an institutional form or political role. Over 6 in 10 western Canadians identify closely or very closely with western Canada as a region, placing regional identities just behind local identities.
- The strongest form of personal identity is age, with over 5 in 10 western Canadians closely or very closely identifying with people who are close to them in age.
- Ethnic background is another important form of personal identity, with 4 in 10 western Canadians stating that they closely or very closely identify with people who share their ethnic background.
- Over one-third of western Canadians report that they closely or very closely identify with people who share their religion or faith. At the same time, almost one-quarter expressed no identification ("not at all close") based on religion or faith—a higher number of no identification responses than any other personal identity category.
- When asked to place themselves on a five-point left-right political spectrum, western Canadians' survey responses formed a near-perfect bell curve. About 50% of respondents categorize themselves as a 3 (centre), 15% categorize themselves as either a 2 (somewhat left of centre) or a 4 (somewhat right of centre), and 7% of respondents categorize themselves as either a 1 (very left of centre) or a 5 (very right of centre). Less than 5% of respondents report that these political categories do not apply to them. Provincial differences, to the extent that they exist, are extremely modest and fail to fulfill stereotypes.

1. Introduction

At first blush, political identities may seem to be a strange thing to study: whether someone feels close to their country or their age cohort can seem less relevant than if the same person supports or opposes a particular policy option. However, political identities are of more than just academic interest. Identities are important because they help to shape and influence political attitudes and behaviours. We all like to think of ourselves as individuals, but our associations and attachments do impact our decisions. Identities also prove insight into the health of a polity: if citizens are not strongly attached to their nation, for example, the strength and legitimacy of the government are lessened. While their impact on Canadian democracy may be somewhat opaque and indirect, political identifications are useful to examine and understand.

The Canada West Foundation's Looking West Surveys are designed to provide valid and reliable data on western Canadian public opinion. The Looking West 2006 Survey is the fourth of the series; previous Looking West Surveys were conducted in 2001, 2003 and 2004. Unlike many other surveys, which often lump provinces together (thus obscuring important differences between the provinces) and/or have provincial sample sizes that do not allow for meaningful analysis of opinion in a single province, the Looking West Surveys use large provincial samples to allow for statistically significant analysis of each of the four western provinces (including urban-rural analyses). Indeed, the Looking West Survey is unique in its large sample size. In addition, the Looking West Surveys replicate a number of survey questions over the years, allowing for an analysis of attitudinal trends over time.

Political Identities in Western Canada presents an analysis of the Looking West 2006 political identities data. It should be noted that the survey also collected data on public policy attitudes and democratic attitudes and behaviours. The public policy data can be found in *Consistent Priorities*, released by the Canada West Foundation in May 2006. The democratic attitudes and behaviours data can be found in *Democracy in Western Canada*, released by the Canada West Foundation in July 2006.

2. Methodology

Looking West 2006 is a random sample telephone survey of western Canadians 18 years of age or older. On behalf of the Canada West Foundation, Probe Research Inc. coordinated and administered the survey from February 23, 2006 to March 29, 2006 through its Winnipeg, Manitoba call centre DataProbe. It should be noted that this fielding window for the survey was purposely chosen in order to have at least one month separating the federal election of January 23, 2006 from the interview period.

To allow for statistically significant analyses of each province, as well as the West as a whole (BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba), a large sample was used. A total of 4,000 residents were interviewed by telephone across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. With a sample of 4,000 across the region, one can say with 95% certainty that the results are within +/-1.55 percentage points of what they would have been if the entire adult population of the region had been interviewed. The margin of error is higher within the survey population's sub-groups. The provincial breakdowns, and the margins of error, are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:
Sample Size and Margin of Error**

	Total N	Margin of Error +/- 95 times out of 100
BC	1,000	3.1%
Alberta	1,000	3.1%
Saskatchewan	1,000	3.1%
Manitoba	1,000	3.1%
Western Canada	4,000	1.55%

In the presentation of aggregate western Canadian regional data, a weighting adjustment factor was applied to match each province's sample weight to its portion of the regional population of those aged 18 years of age and over. Half of the respondents from each province were under 35 years of age, while the other half were 35 years of age or older. A weighting adjustment factor was applied to correct for this over-sampling of the 18-34 age group. A full analysis of the similarities and differences between the two age samples will be presented in a forthcoming Looking West 2006 Survey report on generational transformations.

Because non-responses ("don't know/refused") are not reported in the tables or text, the data in the figures in this report do not always add up to 100%.

Urban size analyses are based on postal codes, and have the following categories: urban core (a large urban area around a Census Metropolitan Area [CMA] or Census Agglomeration [CA] with a population of at least 100,000 persons in the case of a CMA, or between 10,000 and 99,999 in the case of a CA); urban fringe (includes all small urban areas [with less than 10,000 population] within a CMA or CA that are not contiguous with the urban core of the CMA or CA); rural fringe (all territory within a CMA or CA not classified as an urban core or an urban fringe); small urban; and rural.

3. Measuring Political and Personal Identities

Looking West 2006 respondents were asked: "I am going to read a list of different groups of people and geographic locations. For each one, I would like you to tell me how close you feel to people in these groups, or to the geographic location identified. On a scale of 1 to 5, where a 1 means that you feel *not at all close to people in this group* and a 5 means that you feel *very close to people in this group*, how close would you say you are to [each identity]?"

Ten potential identities were included. Six of these were geographic:

- the city, town or rural area in which you live;
- province;
- western Canada—that is, BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba as a region;
- Canada;
- a country other than Canada; and
- the global community.

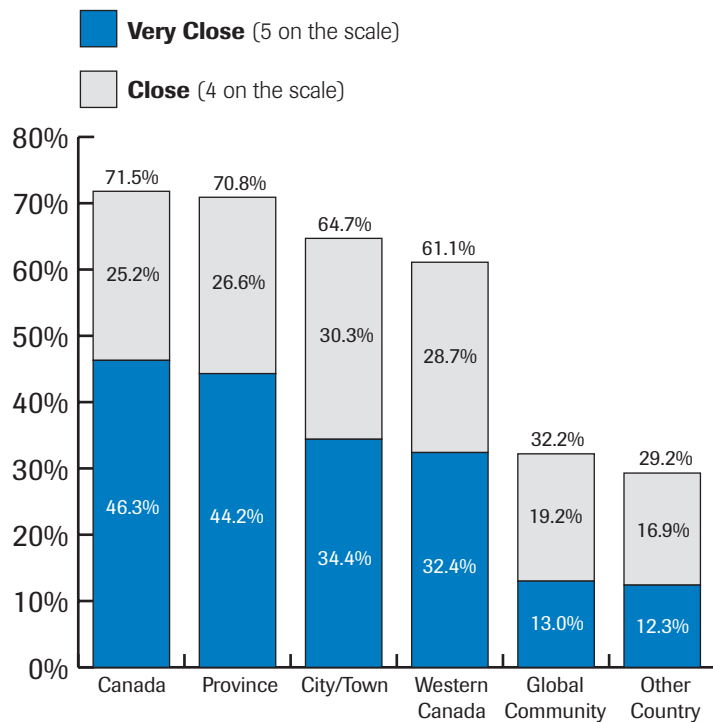
Four identity questions focused on more personal factors:

- people who are close to your age;
- people who share your ethnic background;
- people who share your political beliefs; and
- people who share your religion or faith.

In addition, after these 10 identity questions, respondents were asked an open-ended question: "Are there any other groups of people or locations that we have not yet mentioned that you closely identify with? What are they?"

The geographic identities will be discussed first, followed by a discussion of the personal identities. A comparison of the geographic and personal identity data will follow these analyses.

Figure 2:
Geographic Identity (All Respondents)



Survey Question: "I am going to read a list of different groups of people and geographic locations. For each one, I would like you to tell me how close you feel to people in these groups, or to the geographic location identified. On a scale of 1 to 5, where a 1 means that you feel *not at all close to people in this group* and a 5 means that you feel *very close to people in this group*, how close would you say you are to [each identity]?"

local identification. Conversely, as education increases, respondents are less likely to report a very close local identification. Also, in general, as income increases respondents are less likely to report a very close local identification.

Western Canada: Western Canadian identification is particularly high in Saskatchewan, and is lower in BC and Manitoba. Respondents with an annual household income below \$60,000, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in rural fringe or rural areas are more likely to report a very close regional identification. Non-immigrants are more likely than immigrants to report a very close regional identification, but the gap is small at 5 percentage points. In general, as education increases respondents are less likely to report a very close regional identification. Finally, as age increases, respondents are more likely to report a very close regional identification.

Global Community: Global identifications are lowest in Saskatchewan. The only gender gap with respect to geographic identities is found with global identities, with women more likely to report a close or very close global identification, and less likely than men to report no or low global identification. In general, as age increases, respondents are more likely to report a very close global identification. Immigrants are more likely than non-immigrants to report a very close global identification, while rural respondents are more likely than respondents in other community types to report no global identification. Visible minority respondents, Aboriginal respondents and respondents with less than a high school diploma are more likely to report either a very close identification or no identification with the global community.

Country Other Than Canada: BC respondents are more likely to report a close or very close identification with a country other than Canada. Respondents with less than a grade 12 diploma, respondents living in small urban areas or rural areas, and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to report no identification with a country other than Canada. Respondents with an annual household income below \$20,000 or of \$150,000 and over, respondents living in urban fringe areas, immigrants, visible minority respondents, and respondents aged 55 and over are more likely to report a very close identification with another country.

Demographic and regional variations:

Canada: Respondents with an annual household income of less than \$80,000, respondents living in rural fringe areas, respondents with less than a grade 12 diploma, and visible minority respondents are more likely to report a very close identification with Canada. Respondents with a bachelor degree or a graduate/professional degree, respondents living in urban fringe or small urban centres, and immigrants are slightly less likely to report a very close identification with Canada. Aboriginal respondents are more likely than non-Aboriginal respondents to report either no identification ("not at all close") or a low identification with Canada. As age increases, respondents are more likely to report a very close national identification.

Province: Provincial identifications are particularly close in Saskatchewan. At the other end of the identification spectrum, both Alberta and Manitoba have higher percentages of respondents reporting either no identification ("not at all close") or a low identification with their province of residence. Respondents living in rural fringe and rural areas, visible minority respondents and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to report a very close identification with their province. Respondents with an annual household income of \$100,000 or more are less likely to report a very close identification with their province. As age increases, respondents are more likely to report a very close provincial identification. As education increases, respondents are less likely to report a very close level of identification with their province.

Local Community: Local identities are particularly high in Saskatchewan, and are lower in Alberta. Respondents living in rural fringe or rural areas, visible minority respondents and Aboriginal respondents are more likely to report a very close (five) identification with their local community. As age increases, respondents are more likely to report a very close

4. Geographic Identities

Analyses of geographic identities often ask respondents to choose among various identities; for example, respondents might be asked to specify the geographic unit, Canada or their province, with which they identify more strongly. The Looking West 2006 Survey approached geographic identities in a different way, asking respondents to rate their level of identification with a variety of geographic locations. Although this is a more time-consuming process, there are two advantages to this approach. First, it acknowledges that individuals have multiple identifications: one can see oneself as a Canadian, a British Columbian and as a Vancouverite, and one can identify strongly with Canada and with another country. Personal identity is multi-faceted, and individuals rarely need to make stark choices about identity in real life. Second, a more exhaustive list of geographic identities acknowledges the fact that individuals may identify with more than simply Canada or their province.

A summary of the geographic identities data is presented in Figure 2 on the previous page. Western Canadians report very similar levels of national and provincial identities. There is no geographic identity with which a majority of respondents report a very close identification.

The high number of respondents who identify with western Canada as a region is striking, particularly given that the region does not have an institutional form or political role. Over 6 in 10 western Canadians identify closely or very closely with western Canada as a region, placing regional identities only three and a half percentage points behind local identities.

The number of western Canadians who identify with the global community is also higher than expected, with over 3 in 10 respondents reporting a close or very close global identification. However, close to 3 in 10 report no identification ("not at all close") or a low identification with the global community, and the plurality (just over one-third) report a moderate global identification.

The geographic identity that received the lowest number of close or very close identifications, and the highest number of no or low identifications, is a country other than Canada. For the West as a whole, almost 3 in 10 respondents report a close or very close identification, but this regional picture masks large differences between the provinces. For BC respondents, over 3 in 10 report a close or very close identification with a country other than Canada. The number falls to under 3 in 10 for Alberta, and to under one-quarter for Manitoba and Saskatchewan. One-quarter of prairie respondents and 2 in 10 BC respondents report no identification with a country other than Canada.

Clearly, there is considerable variation with respect to geographic identities, with national and provincial identities being the strongest, and local and regional identities not far behind. The geographic identity data demonstrate that identities are multi-faceted, and that western Canadians see themselves as part of myriad geographic groups.

5. Personal Identities

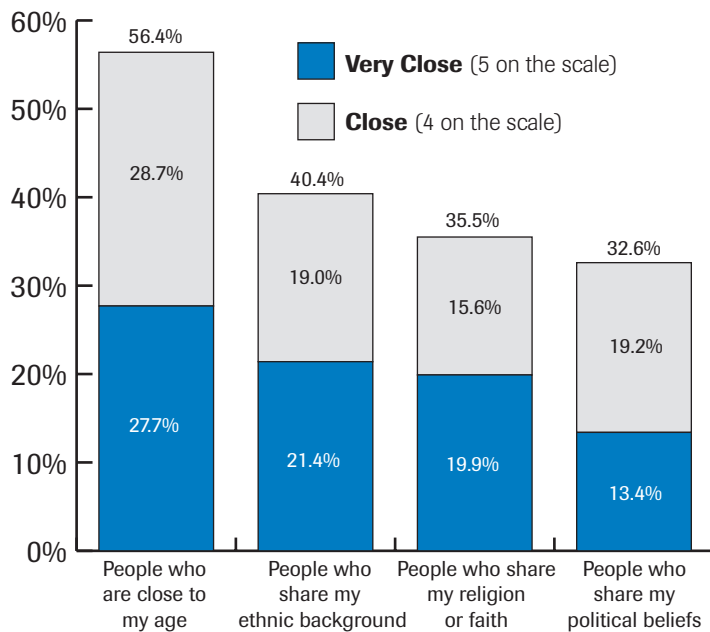
Identities are not just geographic: one can also identify with a number of social groups or cohorts. To tap into these personal identifications, Looking West respondents were asked to rate their identification with four groups: people who are close to their age; people who share their ethnic background; people who share their political beliefs; and people who share their religion or faith.

Figure 3 summarizes the personal identities data. The strongest form of personal identity is age, with over 5 in 10 western Canadians reporting closely or very closely identifying with people who are close to them in age. Ethnic background is another important form of personal identity, with 4 in 10 western Canadians stating that they closely or very closely identify with people who share their ethnic background. At the same time, 3 in 10 report no identification or low identification with people of a similar ethnic background.

Over one-third of western Canadians report that they closely or very closely identify with people who share their religion or faith. At the same time, almost one-quarter expressed no identification based on religion or faith—a higher number of “not at all close” responses than any of other personal identity, and similar to the number of respondents reporting no identification with a country other than Canada.

One-third of western Canadians report that they closely or very closely identify with people who share their political beliefs, while another third reports no or low identification based on political beliefs, and the remaining third reports moderate political identification. This one-third/one-third/one-third split is relatively consistent across the West, with the exception of Saskatchewan, in which less than 3 in 10 report a close or very close identification based on political beliefs.

Figure 3:
Personal Identity (All Respondents)



Survey Question: “I am going to read a list of different groups of people and geographic locations. For each one, I would like you to tell me how close you feel to people in these groups, or to the geographic location identified. On a scale of 1 to 5, where a 1 means that you feel *not at all close to people in this group* and a 5 means that you feel *very close to people in this group*, how close would you say you are to [each identity]?”

a very close identification with people who share their religion or faith. Men, respondents aged 18-24 and 35-44, respondents living in urban fringe areas, and respondents with an annual household income of \$100,000 and over are more likely to report no identification (“not at all close”) based on religion or faith. In general, as education increases, respondents are more likely to report no religious identification and less likely to report a close religion/faith identification.

Political Beliefs: Women, respondents living in urban fringe and rural areas, respondents with less than a grade 12 diploma, Aboriginal respondents and visible minority respondents are more likely to report no identification based on political beliefs.

Demographic and regional variations:

Age: Respondents from Saskatchewan and Manitoba are more likely to report a close or very close age identification. Respondents aged 18-24 and 65 and over, women, respondents with an annual household income below \$40,000, visible minority respondents, and respondents living in rural and rural fringe areas are more likely to report a very close age identification. Aboriginal respondents and respondents living in urban fringe areas are more likely to report no identification (“not at all close”) with their age cohort.

Ethnic Background: Respondents from the three prairie provinces are more likely to report a close or very close ethnic identity than are respondents from BC, while respondents from BC are more likely than prairie respondents to report no or low ethnic identity. Visible minority respondents, respondents aged 65 and over, and rural respondents are more likely to report a very close ethnic identity. As education increases, respondents are less likely to report a very close ethnic identity. Immigrants and Aboriginal respondents are no more likely than non-immigrant and non-Aboriginal respondents to report a close or very close identification with people who share their ethnic background.

Religion/Faith: Saskatchewan and Manitoba respondents are more likely to report a close or very close religious identity than are respondents from BC. Women, respondents aged 65 and over, respondents living in rural fringe areas, immigrants, visible minority respondents and respondents with an annual household income less than \$20,000 are more likely to report

Identity and Immigration

How does immigration history play into personal and political identity? To answer this question, we can compare the identifications of three groups: respondents who were born in Canada and whose parents were both born in Canada (“second generation and over Canadians”); respondents who were born in Canada and who have at least one immigrant parent (“first generation Canadians”); and immigrant respondents.

With respect to the immigrant cohort, respondents are slightly less likely than the other two groups to closely identify with Canada, with their province, with western Canada, and with their local area. Immigrants are also more likely than the other two groups to closely identify with another country and with the global community. Yet even among the immigrant group, Canadian geographic identities trump personal and non-Canadian geographic identities: a higher percentage of immigrant respondents closely identify with western Canada as a region than identify with another country, or with their ethnic or religious groups.

The first generation Canadians are more likely than the other two groups to identify with Canada, with their province, with western Canada, and with their local area. The percentage of first generation respondents identifying with a country other than Canada is significantly lower than among the immigrant cohort, but still above that of the second generation and over Canadians.

Both the immigrant and the first generation Canadian cohorts are more likely than the second generation and over Canadians to closely identify with people who share their religious beliefs.

6. Other Identities

Given the time constraints of a large public opinion survey, it is difficult to include and assess all possible forms of personal identity. For this reason, after the list of identity questions, Looking West 2006 Survey respondents were asked, “Are there any other groups of people or locations that we have not yet mentioned that you closely identify with? What are they?” This was an open-ended question, with respondents provided no prompting or suggestions for other forms of identity. Up to three additional forms of identity were accepted.

Almost 8 in 10 respondents reported that they did not have any additional forms of identity to add. From those who did have identities to add, a total of 22 different identities were mentioned, with none receiving mention by more than 4% of respondents. In total, 13% of respondents identified additional personal identities, such as individuals who share similar hobbies or activities, industry or vocational groups, family, linguistic groups, gender groups, and humanity in general. One in ten identified additional geographic identities, such as another province in Canada, another region in Canada, continents, or other local areas.

7. Comparing Geographic and Personal Identities

The Looking West 2006 Survey examined ten forms of identity: six geographic and four personal. The data collected suggest that geographic identities matter more than personal identities: respondents are more likely to identify with their country, province, local community or region than they are to identify with their age peers, or people who share their ethnic background, religion or faith, or political beliefs.

Respondents were asked to rank their identification of each identity on a five-point scale, with one being no identification and five being a very close identification. Figure 4 presents the mean score and standard deviation for each of the ten identities. The larger standard deviations of religion/faith, ethnicity, a country other than Canada and (to a lesser degree) political beliefs and the global community demonstrate that there was considerable disparity in responses to those questions.

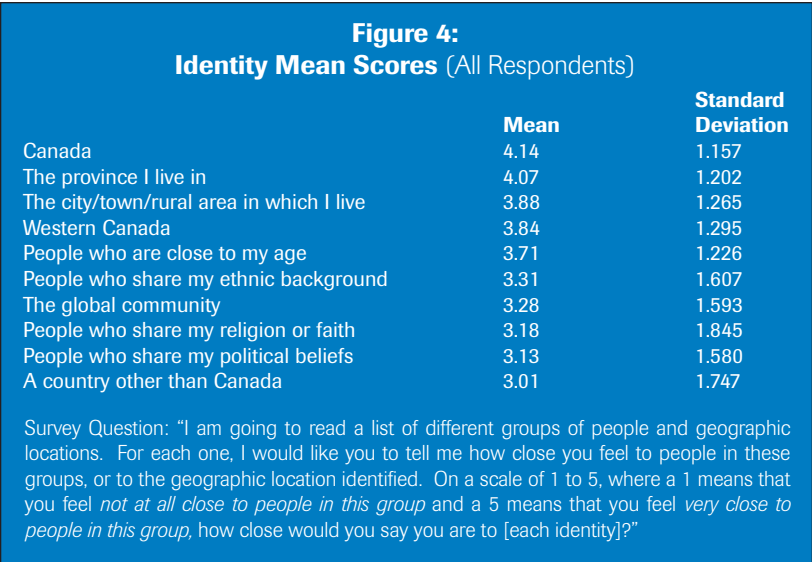
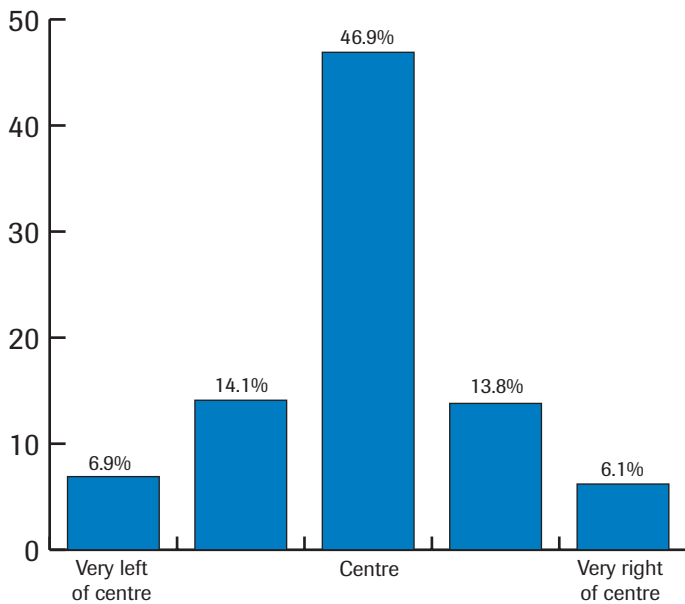


Figure 5:
Self-Placement on Left-Right Political Spectrum
(All Respondents)



Survey Question: "In politics we often hear people talk about being "right of centre," "left of centre" or "centrist". On a five point scale, with one being very left of centre, three being centre, and five being very right of centre, where would you place yourself?"

Demographic and regional variations:

In general, as income increases respondents are more likely to describe themselves as somewhat right of centre. Men are more likely than women to describe themselves as somewhat or very right of centre. Respondents with graduate/professional degrees are more likely than other educational cohorts to describe themselves as somewhat or very left of centre. And finally, in general, as age increases, respondents are less likely to describe themselves as somewhat or very left of centre, and are more likely to describe themselves as centrists.

8. The Left-Right Spectrum

A final point of identity to consider is political identity. Looking West 2006 Survey respondents were asked: "In politics we often hear people talk about being "right of centre," "left of centre" or "centrist." On a five-point scale, with 1 being very left of centre, 3 being centre, and 5 being very right of centre, where would you place yourself?"

The results to this question are very interesting, with survey responses forming a near-perfect bell curve (see Figure 5). Just under 5 in 10 respondents categorize themselves as a 3 (centre), while just under 15% categorize themselves as either a 2 (somewhat left of centre) or a 4 (somewhat right of centre). About 7% of respondents categorize themselves as either a 1 (very left of centre) or a 5 (very right of centre). Less than 5% of respondents report that these political categories do not apply to them.

Given provincial stereotypes (for example, Alberta is often characterized as a more right of centre province, and BC as a more left of centre province), one might expect significant provincial variations on this question. However, these variations are not seen. Across all four provinces, the same pattern is

observed, with the plurality describing themselves as centrists. Alberta respondents are slightly more likely to place themselves at the very right of centre position, but the gap between Alberta and BC (which has the lowest percentage of respondents putting themselves in this position) is less than three percentage points. British Columbia respondents are slightly more likely to describe themselves as somewhat left of centre, but the gap between BC and Saskatchewan (which has the lowest percentage of somewhat left of centre respondents) is only four percentage points. Provincial differences, to the extent that they exist, are extremely modest and fail to fulfill stereotypes.

9. Conclusion

Political and personal identities matter in subtle but significant ways. Research suggests that identities shape not only how we see ourselves and present ourselves to the outside world, but also how we interpret political actions and respond to political choices. The fact that western Canadians identify more closely with geography than with social groups such as age and religious cohorts is striking, and speaks to the shared experience, history, and political culture of a common country, province, region and locality. [CWF](#)

About the Canada West Foundation

Our Vision

A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

Our Mission

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces, the territories, and all Canadians.

Canada West Foundation is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under federal charter (#11882 8698 RR 0001).

In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

More information can be found at www.cwf.ca.



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