



**confederation  
of tomorrow**

# 2019 Survey of Canadians

**CANADA: PULLING TOGETHER  
OR DRIFTING APART?**

**Executive Summary**

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# Introduction

## Background

For much of the late 20th century, Canadian politics was dominated by high-stakes attempts to remake or dismantle the country's federation. First ministers met regularly for mega-constitutional deal-making, while successive Quebec and federal governments wrestled with iterations of pre- and post-referendum strategies. The 1990s alone witnessed a national referendum on the Constitution, a second and closely-contested referendum on Quebec independence, and two new regionally-based political parties – Reform and the *Bloc Québécois* – taking turns as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

In recent years, it has appeared that such storms have now finally passed. A new generation of Canadians has come of age with no direct memories of national unity crises. Regional party fragments have once again coalesced around the traditional left-centre-right national options. And as other countries wrestle with the rise of inward-looking nativism, Canada appears to offer hope as a successful example of multiculturalism and multinational federalism capable of reconciling unity and diversity.

In fact, Canada's sesquicentennial in 2017 marked one of the only times the country has been able to celebrate a significant birthday in the absence of a serious national unity crisis. Canada's 50th birthday fell in the midst of the First World War and a crisis over conscription that split the country between British and French. The country's 75th birthday found it fighting another world war, with a second conscription crisis just over the horizon. The centennial, while full of optimism, coincided with the Quiet Revolution, and preceded the founding of the *Parti Québécois* by only one year. The country's 125th birthday, in 1992, was almost forgotten in the run-up to the referendum on the Charlottetown Accord – with the dramatic electoral gains of the *Bloc Québécois* and the Reform Party, and the re-election of a *Parti Québécois* government soon to follow.

Even though such events have receded into the past, the current political agenda remains full of unresolved issues that can easily divide Canadians along the fault lines of region and identity. Controversies over transnational pipelines are pitting erstwhile regional allies against one another, while the country's plan to meet international climate change obligations is at risk from several provinces challenging the wisdom of carbon pricing. As the resource-led boom in and around Alberta turned to bust, Albertans' support, not only for environmental policies, but also for broader wealth-sharing arrangements within the federation have come into question.

Meanwhile, the Quebec government's position paper on its "way of being Canadian" was launched in 2017 without sparking a serious reply from its partners in Confederation. This was followed by the province's only avowedly federalist political party not only losing power but receiving its lowest ever share of the popular vote. Atlantic Canada, for its part, continues to search for ways to offset its declining demographic and economic clout. In the North, the three territories are implementing different forms of devolution of power, both from Ottawa to territorial governments, and from territorial government to forms of Indigenous self-government. And the lack of concrete actions to match verbal commitments toward reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples threatens to undermine the country's harmony at home, as well as its reputation abroad.

In short, as Canada moves past its 150th birthday, once again new dimensions and challenges to the structure and governance of Canada are demanding greater attention. These issues are being considered by governments, think-tanks and universities, but it is also important to hear from the rest of Canadians, who have both a say and a stake in the outcomes. And it is important to hear what a new generation of citizens has to say, both about the unresolved challenges they have inherited and the emerging challenges they are called upon to confront.

## Confederation of Tomorrow 2019 survey

This is the goal of the 2019 Confederation of Tomorrow survey. The name “Confederation of Tomorrow” is taken from the landmark Confederation of Tomorrow conference, convened and hosted in November 1967 by Premier John Robarts of Ontario. The event allowed political leaders from all 10 provinces to share their perspectives on the country’s promising future, and to lay the foundations for a stronger federation amid the energy and excitement of the country’s centennial. It was a conference whose purpose was not to pretend that there were simple solutions to complex problems, but to ensure that there was an opportunity for each region’s distinctive perspectives on the country to be expressed and heard.

It is in that spirit that the 2019 Confederation of Tomorrow survey was conducted with representative samples of Canadians from every province and territory, to hear their perspective on the country’s federal system as it is today and what it might be. The research draws from previous national surveys conducted over the past several decades to understand not only what Canadians think today, but how public perspectives have evolved over time.

The research was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with five leading public policy organizations across the country: the Canada West Foundation, the Mowat Centre, the Centre D’Analyse Politique – Constitution et Fédéralisme, the Institute for Research on Public Policy, and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government at Saint Francis Xavier University.

The research consisted of a national public opinion survey conducted online (in the provinces) and by telephone (in the territories) with a representative sample of 5,732 Canadians (ages 18 and over) between December 14, 2018 and January 16, 2019. The survey sample was stratified to provide for meaningful representation in all 13 provinces and territories, as well as the country’s Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit). Many of the questions included on the survey were drawn from previous national surveys stretching back to the 1980s. This provides the basis for identifying how public opinion has changed (or not) over time. Further details on the survey methodology and previous research are provided in the Appendix.

## About this report

This report is one of three that presents the results of this research, focusing on Canadians' identity within the country, and how they view their province or territory's place in the federation. The two remaining reports will address related themes, and will be published later this year. Additional details are provided under separate cover that provides the results for each survey question by region and jurisdiction, demographic characteristics and other population segments. All results are presented as percentages unless otherwise noted.

## Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

## Identity

Most Canadians say that the nation is important to their personal sense of identity. At the same time, it is other identities, rather than the national identity, that have been growing more important over time. Canadians are more likely today than in 2003 to say that their region or province, their language, their ethnicity or race, and their gender are important parts of their identity. And when considering both their national and subnational identities, Canadians are less likely to say they consider themselves to be Canadians only or first, and more likely to say that they are either equally a Canadian and someone from their province, or someone from their province first or only.

The survey, however, highlights the extent to which different identities continue to overlap in Canada. Fewer than one in four Canadians expresses an identity that is either exclusively national or exclusively provincial. The same is true of those who identify as Indigenous: A strong majority say that their Indigenous nation or community is important to their personal sense of identity. But most Indigenous peoples express a mix of Indigenous and Canadian identities, rather than identifying as either exclusively Indigenous, on the one hand, or exclusively Canadian, on the other.

## Place in the federation

Canadians' views on whether their province or territory is treated fairly within the Canadian federal system vary widely across jurisdictions. More than that, one of this survey's main findings is that views and trends on these questions vary not only across regions, but among neighbouring provinces and territories within regions as well. This calls into question the extent to which the concepts of "region" and "regionalism" are germane to an understanding of present-day dynamics within the federation.

**Western Canada.** This survey takes place in the context of a profound economic downturn in the oil and gas sector that is the lynchpin of the economy of parts of Western Canada. This has been accompanied by rising political tensions across

provinces and between provincial and territorial governments about how best to balance the needs of the resource economy with those of the environment. It is therefore not surprising to find that provinces such as Alberta and Saskatchewan are among the jurisdictions least likely to say their province or territory is respected in Canada, has its fair share of influence on national decisions, and receives its fair share of federal spending. The trend in Alberta is particularly notable: there has been a dramatic negative shift in the province in views on these questions. Albertans are now the least likely among all Canadians to say their province receives the respect it deserves, or receives its fair share of federal government spending on different programs and transfers.

The extent of dissatisfaction among residents in Alberta and Saskatchewan is evident in their responses to other questions as well. Albertans and Saskatchewanians are, by a wide margin, the least likely to agree that Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province. And, for the first time (based on surveys going as far back as 1987), majorities in both provinces now agree with the proposition that *"Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of Canada that they might as well go it on their own."*

This, however, is only part of the story within Western Canada. Significantly more negative views about the federation in Alberta have been accompanied by an opposing, positive shift in British Columbia. This divergent trend has produced a striking reversal in the relative outlooks of these two neighbouring provinces: whereas in previous surveys, residents of B.C. were slightly less likely than those of Alberta to say their province is treated fairly within the federation, now they are much more likely to hold this view. The two provinces have effectively become "decoupled," in that they can no longer be described as sharing a common Western Canadian view of the federation.

Views in Saskatchewan about its place in the federation have also become slightly less negative since the early 2000s, in contrast to the trend in Alberta – but as negative views

in Saskatchewan were traditionally very high, this modest improvement still leaves it as one of the least satisfied provinces. Manitoba, for its part, has a somewhat distinctive outlook on these questions. While a plurality in the province say that it is not respected, has less than its fair share of influence on national decisions, and receives less than its fair share of federal spending, this sentiment is not nearly as pronounced as with its Prairie neighbours, and has not become noticeably more negative over time.

**Atlantic Canada.** While the term “western alienation” has been attracting attention recently, it remains the case that certain provinces in Atlantic Canada are often equally, if not more dissatisfied, with their place in the federation. Newfoundland and Labrador, in particular, stands alongside Alberta in terms of being among the least likely jurisdictions to believe their province or territory is respected in Canada, has its fair share of influence on national decisions, and receives its fair share of federal spending. In terms of discontent with its place in the federation, Nova Scotia is not that much further behind.

Across the Atlantic region as a whole, however, there are important differences both in the degree of dissatisfaction, and the trend. New Brunswickers typically are not as negative in their assessment as their neighbours to the east. That said, some views in New Brunswick are more negative than in previous surveys, while those in Nova Scotia are slightly more positive (though still predominantly on the negative side). As a result, in contrast to the divergence between neighbouring B.C. and Alberta, there has been somewhat of a convergence between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia: whereas previously New Brunswick was much more satisfied than its neighbour to the east, this is no longer the case. Finally, Prince Edward Islanders continue to stand apart from other Atlantic Canadians: they are among the most likely to believe their province or territory is respected, has its fair share of influence on national decisions, and receives its fair share of federal spending.

The Atlantic provinces – even the least satisfied – differ from Alberta and Saskatchewan, however, in one important regard, which is that their concern about the degree of respect that they receive or influence they have does not translate to the same degree into dissatisfaction with federalism itself. Residents of all four Atlantic provinces are much more likely than those in Alberta and Saskatchewan to agree that Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their province. In Newfoundland and

Labrador, two-thirds say that Confederation has been a good thing for them.

**Quebec.** Traditionally, one of the main objectives of studies of public opinion on federalism in Canada was to track the rise and fall of support for independence in Quebec. This study, however, comes in the wake of the lowest ever levels of popular support for the sovereigntist *Parti Québécois* and *Bloc Québécois* in the most recent provincial and federal elections. But the survey finds the situation in Quebec to be more one of continuity than of change. Quebecers are no more likely today than they were in the wake of the 1995 referendum to say that their province is treated with the respect it deserves in Canada, or to believe Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for Quebec. And Quebecers are much less likely today to maintain their province has its fair share of influence on important national decisions in Canada.

On the specific issue of sovereignty, a majority of Quebecers say that it is an idea whose time has passed; however, the proportion holding this view is not noticeably higher today than it was 15 years ago. And while only a minority of Quebecers identify as sovereigntist, the proportion identifying as federalist is no higher, and has not increased over time. Finally, the sense that the French language in Quebec is under threat – which is a key factor correlating with support for Quebec nationalism – is even stronger today than previously. Quebecers may no longer be looking for an immediate exit from Confederation, but they remain at best ambivalent or conditional federalists.

**Ontario.** Canada’s largest province (by population) stands out as its most satisfied. Together with PEI, Ontarians are the most likely to say that they are respected, have their fair share of influence on national decisions, and receive their fair share of federal spending. In fact, Ontario is the only province in which a majority says their province gets the respect it deserves, and in which a majority does not say they have less than their fair share of influence on national decisions. And Ontario, along with Quebec, is among the least likely to believe that the federal government favours one region over the others. At the same time, while views in Ontario about its place in the federation remain more positive than those in the West or the East, they are less positive than they were in the early 2000s. It is also notable that, over time, other Canadians have become more likely to single out Ontario as the one province or region that receives favoured treatment from Ottawa.

**The North.** As is the case with provinces in the West and Atlantic regions, the survey shows that the country's three northern territories have distinctive takes on their place in the federation, pointing to the limits of the regional lens on issues of federalism in Canada. Yukon and Nunavut residents appear relatively satisfied, but those living in the Northwest Territories much less so. While Yukoners are the most likely to report that they receive the respect they deserve in Canada, residents of the Northwest Territories stand with those in Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador as among the least likely. Moreover, as within the West, the pattern in the North is one of divergent trends, with Yukon (like B.C., to the south) becoming much more satisfied on some measures over time, and the Northwest Territories and Nunavut much less so. Taken together, however, residents of the North are among those most likely to agree that Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for their jurisdiction.

### **Pulling together or drifting apart?**

Despite these divergent views on federalism, there is also a sense of shared values in Canada: close to six in ten agree that we have the same values regardless of which region of the country we live in, and about seven in ten disagree that we have more in common with American neighbours than other Canadians. Moreover, while the results of this

survey clearly show deep divisions across the country on how federalism is working, there is also widespread agreement that a federal-type system is best given Canada's diversity. Seven in ten Canadians agree that *"A federal system of government is the best one for Canada because we are a country made up of many different peoples and nations"*, compared with about one in five who disagrees. And unlike most of the other questions on this survey, agreement about the appropriateness of a federal system of government for Canada is the majority view in all 13 provinces and territories. Finally, two-thirds of Canadians also say they have confidence in the capacity or ability of Canadians to resolve their internal differences, compared with only one in four who has little confidence.

While this last figure seems encouraging, Canadians' confidence in the country's capacity to resolve differences is much lower than in 1977. While in some ways the integrity of the Canadian federation in the early 21st century appears to be less in question than it was in the last decades of the 20th, the results of the 2019 Confederation of Tomorrow survey do not paint a picture of a country that has become more unified. The gradual declines in the proportions of Canadians that see the advantages of federalism and the relevance of the federal government tell us that bridge-building is likely to be a growing challenge in the years ahead.

This study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the following organizations:

#### **THE MOWAT CENTRE**

The Mowat Centre is an independent public policy think-tank located at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto, and Ontario's non-partisan, evidence-based voice on public policy. We undertake collaborative applied policy research, propose innovative research-driven recommendations, and engage in public dialogue on Canada's most important national issues. <https://mowatcentre.ca/>

#### **THE CANADA WEST FOUNDATION**

The Canada West Foundation focuses on the policies that shape the West, and by extension, Canada. Through independent, evidence-based research and commentary, the Canada West Foundation provides practical solutions to tough public policy challenges facing the West at home and on the global stage. <http://cwf.ca>

#### **LE CENTRE D'ANALYSE POLITIQUE – CONSTITUTION ET FÉDÉRALISME (CAP-CF) À L'UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL (UQAM)**

CAP-CF's mission is to stimulate research on constitutional politics and federalism, and to advance in innovative ways the analysis and understanding of contemporary constitutional issues in Canada and other federations.

<https://capcf1.wixsite.com/accueil>

#### **INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH ON PUBLIC POLICY**

Founded in 1972, the Institute for Research on Public Policy is an independent, national, bilingual, not-for-profit organization. The IRPP seeks to improve public policy in Canada by generating research, providing insight and informing debate on current and emerging policy issues facing Canadians and their governments. <http://irpp.org>

#### **THE BRIAN MULRONEY INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT**

Established in 2018, the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government at St. Francis Xavier University aims to find creative solutions to complex national and global public policy and governance questions. Its public outreach activities, combined with its four-year undergraduate program in Public Policy and Governance, are intended to inform and shape national and international discourse on political, economic, security, and social issues.

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Environics Institute for Survey Research conducts relevant and original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

