

American Wave

Overview

May 2008

PART OF THE
SECURITY MONITOR
STUDY



2007 | 2008

Overview

Our recent survey of the American public was conducted exactly one year after our last examination of this population. While some of this year's results reaffirm our previous conclusions, others suggest that there have been some significant changes in American outlook over the past 12 months. In this overview, we will outline these results and briefly explore how they compare to what we have seen in Canada over the same timeframe.

National outlook

As has been the case for the past several years, American public outlook can be summarized in one word: gloomy. Large and growing majorities of the public are unhappy with the federal government (particularly its approach to foreign policy) and with overall national direction. There are also looming fears about the state of the economy (i.e., most believe the country is in a recession). While ideology tends to play an important role in American outlook on these areas, it is safe to say that, in the current context, almost no one is satisfied with the present state of affairs. Canadian outlook stands in stark contrast, with majorities approving of both the direction of their government and their country. Moreover, Canadians do not share the same economic fears as their counterparts to the south.

Outlook on security

Where we are beginning to see some changes in the United States is in perceptions of threat and security. For the first time since we have been examining these issues, Americans fears of the outside world and for their own safety (e.g., from the threat of terrorism) are starting to relax somewhat. This diminution in risk perception appears to be having an affect on attitudes towards security. For example, Americans no longer express a clear preference for a security focus *over* a civil liberties focus; instead, these objectives are now regarded as equally important. The story is a bit different in Canada, where the public remains, relatively speaking, just as committed to security despite a similar decline in risk perception.

The decreased emphasis on security is also evident in outlook on border security. In both countries, the priority placed on securing this border has declined significantly, whereas issues such as the economy and freedom of movement have become increasingly important. At the same time, support for a continental security perimeter has also declined (although support still outweighs opposition in both countries). Interestingly, the relaxed emphasis on security at the border has occurred concurrently with the implementation of the WHTI – a policy that most Americans are still not aware of, but which has resonated with a vast majority of Canadians.

Attitudes to immigration

Ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. and Canada have been on divergent trajectories on this issue: Americans have increasingly opposed the rate of immigration to their country, whereas Canadians have progressively become more comfortable with the influx of immigrants to theirs. While American opposition to immigration continues to outstrip Canadian opposition by a margin of more than 2 to 1, the proportion of the U.S. public that says there are “too many” immigrants coming to their country has – for the first time since 2001 – declined over the past year. It should be noted that opposition to immigration in the United States is not, as some have suggested, rooted in concerns about security or the threat of terrorism, but rather in concerns about illegal entry (i.e., undocumented workers). With new rules targeting undocumented immigration coming into effect last summer, it is possible that some Americans feel as though these concerns have been addressed (i.e., that there no longer *are* “too many” immigrants). In any case, this is an area that will require careful monitoring in the future to determine whether or not we are witnessing a trajectory change in terms of American outlook on immigration.

Canada-U.S. relations

On the American side of things, outlook on the Canada-U.S. relationship is relatively unchanged from previous years (i.e., most have a favourable impression of Canada, even though they see Britain as their best friend and allies). Canadian outlook, on the other hand, has changed significantly: while a plurality currently has a favourable impression of the United States, just last year, the reverse was true (i.e., a plurality had an unfavourable impression). Mutual impressions aside, most Canadians and Americans think it is important to improve this relationship.

