

Wave 4

Overview

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STUDY



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Overview

The Security Landscape

The latest iteration of the Security Monitor shows a range of interesting new twists and turns in Canadian public outlook on security. Beginning with the most general, we consider potential shifts in the overall societal balancing of security and civil liberties – an area that may be undergoing a profound transformation. While not yet conclusive evidence of a trajectory reversal, the shifts we are witnessing may indeed be the incipient signals of precisely that.

These shifts become even more interesting when set in the context of our recent analysis of the underlying dimensionality and segmentation of public attitudes to these issues. Most importantly, we are beginning to see new patterns which suggest that the simple discrimination across age and generation (i.e., older pro-security, younger pro-civil liberties) belies the internal contradictions within the post-boomer cohorts in Canada. More concretely, we are seeing evidence that there are very sharp differences between the optimistic and cosmopolitan Generation X cohort (who are pro-diversity, antipathetic to the United States, and sympathetic to civil liberty concerns) and the trailing, but larger Generation Y or Generation Next group (who are more open to upper North America than the world, highly confident, relatively unconcerned with civil liberties, and the strongest supporters of a muscular security strategy). There is also an important and atypical group within the Boomer cohort (particularly in Quebec) that is sharply critical of government and institutions and unremittingly focussed on the priority of human rights. The interplay between these competing segments will be extremely interesting to watch in the coming year.

Beyond these internal dynamics, however, we are witnessing a clear shift in the balancing of security and civil liberties. Simply put, the recent historical lean to security has been challenged by an unprecedented rise in preference for civil liberties resulting in a rebalancing of these two principles that is approaching parity. Two questions emerge: why and what are the implications? In both cases, we can only offer preliminary conjectures. Two potential explanations are laid out below.

1. *Perceived Risk Diminution and the New Normal* – Risks, once pyrotechnic and unusual, have become routinized or, to adapt Hannah Arendt’s phrase, we now see the “banality of threat”. Citizens may be becoming somewhat inured to the notion of ubiquitous hidden threats. This is not to say they discount the threats, but their psychological impact is lessened by virtue of habituation. The “new normal” may be reducing the visceral fear that accompanied these issues in the past. Recently we have seen “perceived danger” indicators in Canada dropping successively. Another variation on this theme is that, like business cycles, there is a cycle of fear and hope and we are beginning to explore the limits of the fear paradigm which had captured upper North America for the first part of this decade. This may also presage a broader North American mood shift, helping to explain the resonance of the Barack Obama campaign within the fear-weary American public.
2. *Demographic Transition* – Another theory is that the shift may just represent the natural churn of demographic transition. As Boomers age, their stranglehold on the political agendas of North America may be relaxing. What is interesting here is the bifurcation of the post-Boomers into a cosmopolitan and continentalist split.

The implications of this shift, like the shift itself, are uncertain. It may, however, be nothing less than tectonic if we do see these trends continuing to the extent that they displace the current security ethic with a very different model of public priorities and action. Irrespective of whatever tensions exist on the security / civil liberties front, however, the good news for the Government of Canada is that Canadians continue to generally approve of its handling of these issues. While there are individual cases where the public says they would favour a different approach (e.g., Omar Khadr, the Chalk River debate¹), on the whole, Canadians appear largely satisfied with this area of governance.

¹ The principle of Minimax (derived from Luce & Raiffa’s game theory) may help to explain Canadians’ views on the Chalk River debate. The principle states that, when confronted with a challenge or situation of uncertainty, people will come up with a solution that minimizes their maximum loss. In the case of the Chalk River debate, Canadians opt for a solution that they believe produces the least amount of loss (i.e., fewer medical isotopes over the potential for a devastating nuclear meltdown).

The remainder of this chapter provides brief summaries of the trends we are seeing in the key areas of interest explored in Wave 4.

Special topics explored in Wave 4

Immigration and Cultural sensitivities – Health of Newcomers in Canada

Concerns about the health of newcomers to Canada are modest overall. While there is some concern that immigrants could expose Canadians to health risks, most believe that the immigration system does a fairly good job of screening immigrants before they arrive in Canada. Moreover, although our other research suggests that Canadians are concerned about the capacity of the health care system in general, results from this survey reveals that they are not convinced that immigrants are placing undue pressure on the system.

Health concerns – Pandemics & Travel Advisories

In the event of an influenza pandemic, most Canadians expect that sweeping measures – such as the closing of countries’ borders and the cancellation of international air travel – would be taken to stop the outbreak. If Canadians are in need of warning about health risks associated with travel to other countries, most would expect these to be issued by Health Canada.

Borders – The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) and NEXUS

As we have been tracking for more than a year now, most Canadians say they are aware of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) and the restrictions it places on travel to the United States. Indeed, despite being a foreign policy, awareness of the current and pending WHTI requirements is near universal at this point. Interestingly, the belief that air travel to the United States has become more inconvenient has risen sharply over the period in which the air travel component of this policy has come into place. Perhaps this is why also we find strong support for NEXUS, an initiative that is intended to make it more convenient to cross the border.

Despite any perceived inconveniences, The Security Monitor has consistently found that border security is a top priority for the public. Results of the most recent sounding suggest that this trend is continuing, with more than 8 in 10 indicating that they are at least “somewhat” concerned that some of the people and goods entering Canada could threaten their safety and security. That said, Canadians are also increasingly confident in the organization responsible for securing Canada’s borders (i.e., the Canada Border Services Agency).

Justice – Crime Prevention

In our last iteration, we found that, while many Canadians continue to be concerned about the crime rate in this country, they are also fairly supportive of the direction the Government of Canada is taking in its approach to dealing with crime, part of which includes funding for a variety of crime prevention initiatives.

Results of the current sounding show that most Canadians support crime prevention programs (particularly those aimed at youth). Moreover, at least 2 in 3 would like to see more of these programs in their communities and support the government investing in programs available to youth (e.g., mentoring, job-readiness). While all of the crime prevention programs examined in this month’s survey are seen as having their merits, community policing is considered the most effective, followed closely by programs for youth.

Canada’s role on the world stage – The Afghanistan Mission and Views of the CF

With almost 9 in 10 registering awareness, attention to the Canadian Forces mission in Afghanistan has never been higher. Support for the mission is also robust (63 per cent vs. 36 per cent who oppose) and strengthening. Just prior to the current survey, the Government of Canada had announced that it would be seeking to extend the Canadian Forces mission in Afghanistan to 2011, a move that is supported by slightly fewer, but still a majority (53 per cent vs. 47 per cent who oppose).

In addition to extending the mission, the Government also responded to recommendations made by the Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan by setting out a number of new objectives (e.g., better balance between military and development efforts, increased public reporting, and partnering with

another country to complete the mission). While all of the objectives laid out for Canada's future role in Afghanistan are considered important, the public expresses some concerns as to whether or not these objectives can be achieved.

Views on the Afghanistan mission aside, Canadian attitudes towards the Canadian Forces – particularly its personnel – continue to be extremely positive. Canadians are slightly less enthusiastic in their assessment of the equipment used by the Canadian Forces, but these impressions are improving.