

Wave 3: Surveys of the General Public in Canada and the United States

Executive Summary

PART OF THE
RETHINKING NORTH AMERICA
STUDY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As in previous years, this edition of Rethinking North America examines the similarities and differences between Canadians and Americans across a range of issues (e.g., views on immigration, views on the environment/global warming, North American relations, values). Findings from the study are summarized below (and in more detail in later sections of this report). Many of these findings have been tracked over time to provide a clearer picture of shifting public attitudes occurring in North America on these issues.

Views on Immigration

Survey results reveal that Canadian and American attitudes toward immigration continue to differ significantly. Perhaps as a result of the ongoing debate in the U.S. about illegal immigration (and continued security concerns post September 11), fully six in ten Americans (60 per cent) say there are too many immigrants coming to the country, compared to only 27 per cent of Canadians. Conversely, half of Canadians (49 per cent) feel that the number of immigrants entering their country is about right, whereas only 27 per cent of Americans feel the same way. Tracking this data reveals that the proportion of Canadians who are opposed to immigration has once again settled in the mid-twenties after experiencing a spike in opposition following the arrests of 17 alleged terrorist suspects in the Toronto area in the summer of 2006. American opposition to immigration remains largely unchanged over the past year or so.

Results also reveal that Americans are significantly more likely than Canadians to disagree with a significant increase in immigration to their country. Roughly half of Canadians (46 per cent) somewhat or strongly agree that the country needs to significantly increase its immigration intake over the next five years, and roughly the same proportion (48 per cent) expresses disagreement with this idea. In contrast, a clear majority of Americans (73 per cent) express disagreement with increasing the nation's immigration intake, while only one in four (25 per cent) voice support for such an effort.

The higher level of opposition to immigration in the United States may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that Americans are much more likely than Canadians to believe that immigration has a negative impact on the economy. The plurality of Americans feel immigration seriously weakens the economy (38 per cent), while only about one in ten Canadians (13 per cent) feel the same way. In Canada, the majority (61 per cent) indicate that immigration has a positive impact on the economy, compared to only one in three Americans (31 per cent) who feel this way. Tracking this data reveals that the proportion of Canadians who think that immigration strengthens the economy is up four points since 2001, while those who feel it has a negative impact is down a corresponding five points.

Similarly, Canadians are more likely to agree that immigration is beneficial for the economy. The majority of Canadians (76 per cent) believe that immigration is necessary if Canada is to sustain its economic growth, and only about one in five (21 per cent) express disagreement with this idea. Americans

are more divided on the benefits of immigration on the economy. While a majority (55 per cent) agrees that immigration is necessary to sustain economic growth, a significant minority (44 per cent) expresses disagreement with this view.

Results from *Rethinking North America* also reveal that Canadians are more likely than Americans to believe in the importance of recruiting immigrants to meet the country's labour needs. A solid majority of Canadians (70 per cent) agree that Canada's competitiveness depends on the country's ability to recruit immigrants who meet the country's labour needs, and only about one in four (26 per cent) expresses disagreement with this view. In contrast, American views are more polarized: one in two (50 per cent) agree that their country's competitiveness is dependent on recruiting qualified immigrants, while roughly the same proportion (47 per cent) disagree with this idea.

According to a report published by the Washington-based Cato Institute, studies conducted on the economic impacts of immigration "show that immigrants do not increase the rate of native unemployment in the aggregate".¹ Despite these findings, a majority of Americans (53 per cent) believe that immigration increases unemployment for the people already living there (and only 18 per cent feel immigration has a positive impact on job opportunities). In Canada, the results are more divided with three in ten (29 per cent) expressing the view that immigration has a positive impact on employment, and about the same proportion holding the opposite view (32 per cent). In both countries there is also a sizeable group that is more ambiguous about the impacts of immigration: 35 per cent of Canadians and 27 per cent of Americans say immigration has neither a positive nor negative effect on employment opportunities. Tracking this data reveals that Canadians are more positive about the impact of immigration than they were when we last asked this question in May 2000: the proportion who feel immigration increases unemployment has dropped 10 points, while the number who feel immigration has a positive impact on employment opportunities is up five points.

Respondents were also asked if they thought immigration increases or decreases intolerance of other cultures. Findings suggest that both Canadians and Americans are somewhat divided on this issue. A plurality of Canadians (40 per cent) believes immigration decreases intolerance of other cultures, however, a sizeable proportion (30 per cent) believes immigration to have the opposite effect. American views are even more polarized, with 34 per cent indicating a belief that immigration decreases intolerance, and an identical proportion (34 per cent) feeling immigration increases intolerance of other cultures. Interestingly, tracking suggests that Canadians are now *less* likely to feel immigration has a positive impact on intolerance than earlier this decade: the proportion of Canadians who believe immigration decreases intolerance has dropped four points since May 2000, while the number that believe immigration increases intolerance has risen two points over this same timeframe.

In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, it was revealed that all 19 hijackers had entered the United States legally on a temporary visa. Since then, greater effort has been made to improve

¹ Source: http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy_report/pr-immnative.html

immigration screening measures in both the U.S. and Canada. Despite these efforts, results reveal that both Canadians and Americans express doubts about their country's ability to protect them from potential security threats. Fewer than one in four Canadians (23 per cent) say they are confident in the ability of their country's immigration system to screen out potential security threats, while the plurality (42 per cent) indicate they have little confidence in the country's ability to screen out threats. Americans express even more negative views about this issue: the majority (52 per cent) are not confident in the ability of their country's immigration system to screen out those who are potential security threats, while only one in seven (14 per cent) express a high degree of confidence in the security of their immigration system. Tracking this data reveals that confidence in both countries' immigration system has declined since 2005 (down five points in Canada, and down ten points in the U.S.). This is particularly noteworthy since the previous trend had been towards rising confidence (up eight per cent in Canada between 2003 and 2005, and up nine per cent in the U.S. over this same timeframe).

Given their rather modest levels of confidence in screening out immigrants who may pose a potential threat to the country, it is not surprising to find that a majority of Canadians (72 per cent) and Americans (82 per cent) favour increased screening of newcomers. However, Canadians are more likely to worry that stringent screening criteria may keep out immigrants needed to help the country prosper (24 per cent, versus 16 per cent of Americans). These results have remained largely stable in both countries over the past year or so.

Perceptions of North American Trade and Collaboration

This edition of Rethinking North America also continued to examine Canadian and American views on free trade. Results indicate strong support for NAFTA, with seven in ten Americans (70 per cent) and Canadians (71 per cent) expressing agreement that there should be free trade between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico. Interestingly (and consistent with previous years' results), support for free trade increases when the focus of the question is narrowed to free trade between Canada and the U.S. only (five percentage points higher in Canada, and 10 points higher in the United States).

Leaders from all three North American countries recently met in Montebello, Quebec, as part of the "Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America". Established in March 2005, the agreement aims "to increase security and enhance prosperity among the United States, Canada and Mexico through greater cooperation and information sharing."² Canadians were asked if they recalled hearing anything about this agreement, and what, if anything, they recall about the outcomes of this meeting. Results reveal that just over half of Canadians (52 per cent) indicate having heard about the agreement (24 per cent "clearly" and 28 per cent "vaguely"), while a similar proportion (47 per cent) indicated they did not recall hearing anything about the agreement. Turning to the announced outcomes of the meeting, findings reveal that the majority of Canadians (76 per cent) are not able to recall anything specific about the meeting. Of those who were

² Source: <http://www.spp.gov/>

able to provide a response, five per cent mentioned free trade, and three per cent mentioned security issues. A further five per cent had a generally negative impression of the meeting.

One of the outcomes of the Montebello meeting was the North American Plan for Avian and Pandemic Influenza, which outlines how Canada, Mexico and the U.S. would work together to combat such an outbreak should one occur. When asked how confident they are that the governments from the three countries would be able to work together in the event of an avian or pandemic influenza outbreak, just over half of Canadians (56 per cent) say they are very or somewhat confident, while a sizeable minority (41 per cent) expresses little confidence in the ability of the three governments to work together if such an outbreak were to occur.

The Environment

The Rethinking North America study also asked a number of questions examining Canadian and American views on the environment. Although increasing majorities from both sides of the border agree that greater protection of the environment is important, Canadians continue to express a higher level of commitment to this idea.

As governments continue to tackle the challenge of balancing energy needs with environmental protection, survey results reveal that three-quarters of Canadians (75 per cent, up eight points since 2006) and six in ten Americans (57 per cent, up two points since 2006) favour protecting the environment over ensuring an adequate supply of oil and gas to meet energy needs. In the U.S., however, views remain more divided, with nearly four in ten (38 per cent) choosing to prioritize energy needs (although this is down three points over the past year). In contrast, only one in five Canadians believe energy needs should trump protecting the environment (20 per cent, down seven percentage points since 2006).

Turning to the issue of global warming, we find that an overwhelming majority of respondents in both Canada (94 per cent) and the U.S. (81 per cent) feel it is very or somewhat important for their governments to take increased action to reduce global warming. Consistent with previous findings, Canadians are more likely than Americans to see environmental improvement as an urgent priority: 76 per cent of Canadians believe taking increased action to reduce global warming is “very” important, compared to 59 per cent of Americans.

North American Relations and Values

Looking at overall impressions of the other country, results reveal that Americans are significantly more likely than Canadians to offer a positive assessment. Two-thirds of Americans (66 per cent) view Canada in a positive light, and only one in ten (12 per cent) hold an unfavourable view. Canadians are decidedly less positive in their appraisal of the United States: a slight plurality (38 per cent) holds a favourable view, while a significant minority (26 per cent) describe their opinion of our southern neighbour as unfavourable. Tracking indicates that the proportion of Canadians who hold a favourable impression of

the U.S. has declined three points since 2006, while the proportion of Americans who view Canada in a positive light is unchanged over this timeframe.

Canada-U.S. comparisons often centre on the similarities or differences between the two countries with respect to values. Consequently, this edition of *Rethinking North America* examined Canadian and American attitudes on a number of value propositions, ranging from broad concepts such as political ideology to more specific issues such as capital punishment and same-sex marriage.

Looking at self-rated political ideology, findings reveal that while significant proportions of Canadians continue to associate themselves with both sides of the political spectrum – 29 per cent small “l” liberal and 25 per cent small “c” conservative – the plurality (41 per cent) consider themselves to be neither conservative nor liberal. Tracking this data reveals that the proportion of Canadians identifying themselves as “conservative” has declined two percentage points since 2006, while those seeing themselves as “liberal” is down one point over this timeframe. Despite historically low presidential approval levels and discontent with the war in Iraq, Americans are still more likely to identify themselves as conservative rather than liberal. The plurality of Americans (42 per cent – down one point since 2006) continues to identify with a conservative ideology, compared to only one in four Americans who identify themselves as “liberal” (23 per cent, although this is up three points over the past year). Similar to Canada, a sizable proportion of Americans (33 per cent) identify with neither conservative nor liberal ideology.

In 2005 Canada passed the Civil Marriage Act, becoming the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage – thus conferring upon same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples. In the United States, same-sex marriage is recognized only in the state of Massachusetts. Given each country’s differing approach to same-sex equality, it is perhaps not surprising to see a significant difference in attitudes toward this issue. Six in ten Canadians (61 per cent) agree that same-sex couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples, while only one in four disagree with this idea (26 per cent). In the United States, views are much more polarized: 43 per cent of Americans support same-sex equality, and a similar proportion (41 per cent) are opposed. These findings have remained largely stable in both countries over the past year.

Both Canadians and Americans were also asked for their views on the controversial issue of capital punishment, which was abolished in Canada in 1976 but is still considered an acceptable form of punishment for capital offences in twelve U.S. states. Results reveal that support for the death penalty is considerably higher among Americans than Canadians (who are more divided in their views). In Canada, fewer than half (48 per cent) say they disagree with the reintroduction of capital punishment, while just over four in ten (41 per cent) agree with reinstating the death penalty. In contrast, six in ten Americans (61 per cent) say they support capital punishment, compared to only one in four (23 per cent) who oppose it. Tracking this data reveals that views on this issue in both countries have remained largely stable since 2005.

Rethinking North America also asked respondents for their views on the decriminalization of marijuana. Consistent with previous years' findings, Canadians are more likely than Americans to express support for the decriminalization of small amounts of marijuana for personal use. Currently, just over half of Canadians (54 per cent) agree that possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use should not be a crime, while one in three (34 per cent) disagree with this idea. In contrast, Americans are more apt to oppose the decriminalization of marijuana: only one in three (38 per cent) agree that possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use should not be a crime, while the plurality (47 per cent) disagree with this idea. Canadians' attitudes on this issue have remained relatively unchanged since 2005, whereas American support for decriminalizing marijuana for personal use has declined six points over the same timeframe.

