

Focus Canada – Fall 2020

Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees

FINAL REPORT

As part of its Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), the Environics Institute updated its research on Canadian attitudes about immigration and refugees. This survey was conducted in partnership with the Faculty of Social Sciences' IMPACT Project at the University of Ottawa and Century Initiative. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with 2,000 Canadians between September 8 and 23, 2020. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Executive summary

The year 2020 has been unprecedented in Canada and worldwide, starting with a global pandemic the likes of which have not been seen in 100 years, causing the greatest economic slowdown since the Great Depression. Millions of Canadians found themselves suddenly out of work, at risk from a deadly virus, and restricted to their homes for months. In such times of national crisis, it is easy to assume that Canadians will draw inward and protective, and become more wary of outsiders such as new immigrants who might show up to take precious jobs from those already here and introduce new health risks. In recent years Canada has developed the reputation as a beacon of acceptance of migrants and multi-ethnic diversity, and Canadians have increasingly embraced this vision of their country. Has the pandemic and its impacts diminished the public's openness to newcomers?

In fact, surprisingly, Canadians have become more open, not less so. Over the past year, the Canadian public has become more accepting and supportive of immigrants and refugees, continuing a trend dating back several years but to levels not recorded in more than four decades of Focus Canada surveys. Strong and increasing majorities of Canadians express comfort with current immigration levels, see immigrants as good for the Canadian economy and not threats to other people's jobs, and believe that immigration is essential to building the country's population. And for the first time in the Focus research dating back four decades, a plurality of Canadians rejects the ideas that too many refugees are not legitimate, and that too many immigrants are not adopting Canadian values. By a five-to-one margin, the public believes immigration makes Canada a better country, not a worse one, and they are most likely to say this is because it makes for a more diverse multicultural place to live.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this latest trend is that it has taken place all across the country and among all demographic segments of the population; in some cases especially so where opinions about immigration have been the least positive, including Albertans and Canadians with lower levels of education and income, as well as supporters of the federal Conservative Party. While divisions remain along regional, generational and political lines, in some cases these have diminished over the past year. This suggests that whatever fault lines may continue to divide Canadians, immigration is now less likely than before to be among them.

What lies behind this growing public support for immigration and refugees is not immediately apparent from the survey data itself. It may be in part a response to the pandemic (e.g., a "we are all in this together" reaction). It could be a reaction to the alarming political instability south of the border in the USA ("we are not like them"). And it may reflect a solidifying public consensus that Canada's economy (and one's own livelihood) depends on making space for newcomers, especially this year when the economy needs all the help it can get.

Overall level of immigration

A record high two-thirds of Canadians now reject the idea that immigration levels are too high, with this view strengthening across the country. A majority also believes Canada needs more immigrants to increase its population.

Agree-Disagree: “Overall, there is too much immigration to Canada.” For almost two decades, Canadians have been more likely than not to reject the idea that their country is taking in too many immigrants, and this perspective continues to strengthen over time.

Two-thirds (66%) now disagree with this negative statement (up 3 percentage points since October 2019), and is now the largest proportion of the population ever to express this view on a Focus Canada survey (dating back to 1977). Just over one in four (27%) now agrees that there is too much immigration in Canada (down 7 points), the smallest percentage recorded in more than four decades. Fewer than one in ten (7%) has no clear opinion either way (up 3 points).

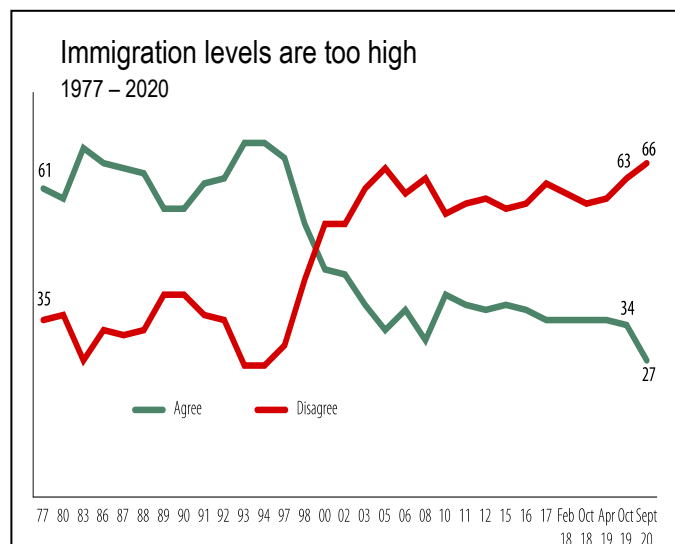
Not only is the overall sentiment trending in an immigrant-friendly direction, but the strength of opinion is also shifting. Four in ten (39%) Canadians *strongly disagree* with the statement, up from about one in three who expressed this sentiment in recent years. This is now more than three times as many Canadians as those who *strongly agree* that their country accepts too many immigrants (12%).

The trend toward increasing comfort with current immigration levels (and strong disagreement with the statement) is evident across the country and in almost every segment of the population. This shift is most noticeable among Albertans, individuals with lower household incomes and first generation Canadians.

As before, a positive view of immigration levels is most widespread in Atlantic Canada (77% disagree with the statement), as well as among Canadians with the highest levels of education (74%) and income (74%). In past surveys, opinions also varied by age but this gap has narrowed as the youngest generation of Canadians (18 to 24) have become less positive toward immigration (66%, down 7), while older generations have become more so (67% among those 45 years and older, up 8).

Previous surveys revealed how immigration has become increasingly polarized along political lines, and this gap remains but has narrowed over the past year. Support for current immigration levels continues to be most widespread among Canadians who support the federal NDP (81%) and Liberal Party (75%), both up marginally since October 2019. But the positive trend recorded over the past year has taken place most noticeably among federal Conservative Party supporters (52% disagree with the statement, up 7), reversing a previous trend. Moreover, this shift in Conservative perspective reflects a movement of eight to nine percentage points from those who *strongly agree* with the statement to those who *strongly disagree*.

Agree-Disagree: “Canada needs more immigration to increase its population.” Until recently, government policy and public debate have not focused on the role of immigration in increasing the country’s population per se. Despite the absence of public profile on this issue, a majority of Canadians accept if not endorse the premise that the country needs more immigrants to increase the population.

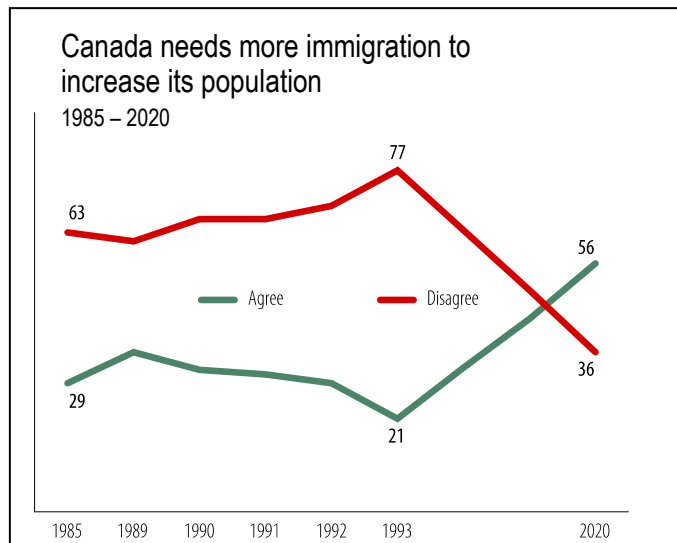


More than half (56%) agree with this statement, compared with 36 percent who disagree, and another seven percent who offer no clear opinion. This current sentiment reflects a sea change in perspective from the 1980s and 1990s, when most Canadians consistently took the opposite view.

As might be expected, opinions about the need for immigration to boost population are related to those about current immigration levels.

Agreement with the statement about needing more immigration is most widespread in Atlantic Canada (70%, versus 26% disagree), as well as among Canadians with the most education and income (66% vs. 26%), first generation Canadians (71% vs. 22%), those who are racialized (66% vs. 27%), and supporters of the Federal Liberal Party (67% vs. 23%) and NDP (64% vs. 31%).

By comparison, opinions are divided among residents of Manitoba/Saskatchewan (47% agree vs. 43% disagree) and Alberta (44% vs. 47%), as well as among Canadians without a high school diploma (45% vs. 46%), second generation Canadians (47% vs. 43%), and federal Conservative Party supporters (46% vs. 50%).



Economic impact of immigration

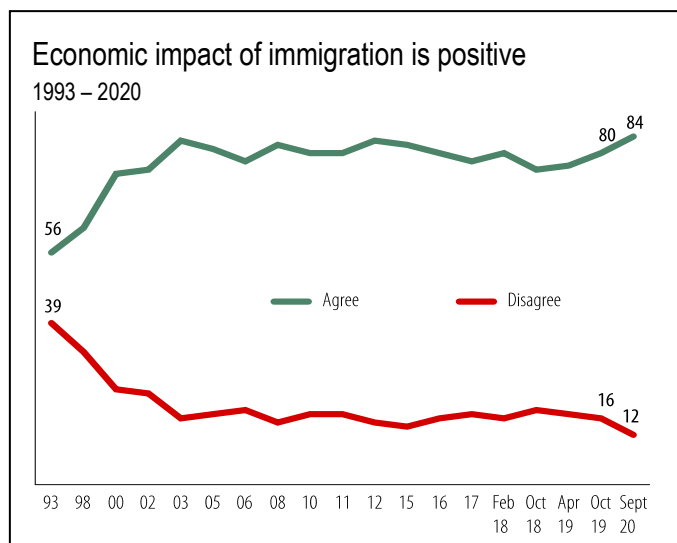
A large and increasing majority of Canadians see immigrants as important to the Canadian economy, and reject the view that they take jobs away from other Canadians.

Agree-Disagree: “Overall, immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada.”

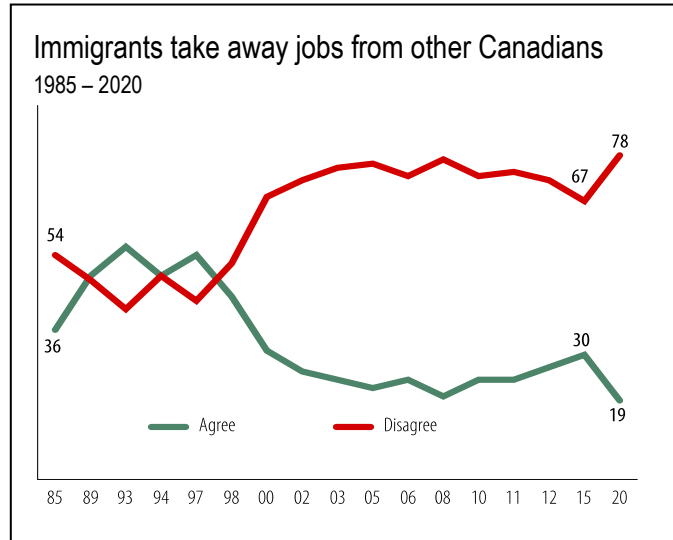
Canadians’ support for immigration is grounded in the belief that it supports the country’s economy. Large majorities have expressed this view over past 20 years, and this belief has strengthened over the past year.

More than eight in ten (84%) now agree that immigration has a positive impact on the Canadian economy, up four points since October 2019, and the highest level recorded on Focus Canada (dating back to 1993). Moreover, this shift reflects a five point increase in the percentage who *strongly agree* with the statement (now at 50%). Just over one in ten (12%, down 4 points) disagrees with this statement, with four percent having no opinion.

Belief in immigration as an economic driver is the majority view across the country, expressed by over 70 percent in every province and identified demographic group. *Strong* agreement with the statement is most widespread in B.C. (60%), as well as among first generation Canadians (68%), racialized people (63% vs. 46% who identify as white), and those who support the federal NDP (69%) and Liberal Party (63%). This strong opinion is less widely held in Quebec (43%, but up 6 points), Manitoba/Saskatchewan (43%, unchanged) and Alberta (37%, up 2), as well as among third plus generation Canadians (43%, up 3) and federal Conservative Party supporters (34%, up 6); in none of these groups do more than one in five express disagreement.



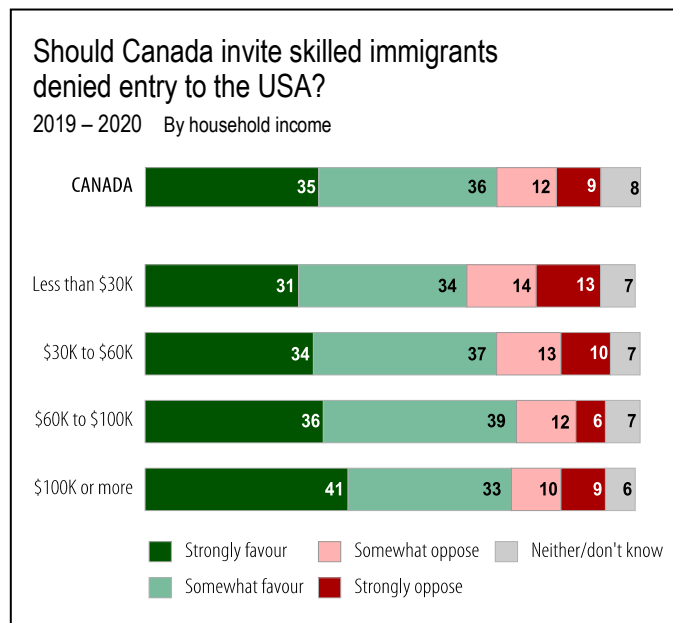
Agree-Disagree: “Immigrants take jobs away from other Canadians.” Consistent with the previous statement, close to eight in ten (78%) Canadians reject the idea that immigrants take jobs away from other Canadians. This reflects a noticeable increase since 2015 (up 11 points) and reverses a downward trend stretching back to 2008 that likely relates in part to the international financial crisis that struck in that year.



This upward shift in rejection of the statement has taken place across the population and now reflects a clear majority view in every region and demographic group. The belief that immigrants take jobs from other Canadians is most apt to be expressed in Alberta (31%, down 12 from 2015), among Canadians without a high school diploma (32%, down 17), and those who support the federal Conservative Party (28%, down 10).

Welcoming skilled immigrants denied entry to the USA. In sharp contrast with Canadian policy, the Trump administration has sharply curtailed immigration, including professional and skilled workers who were once fast-tracked with H-1B visas to fill needed positions in American businesses. Some in Canada have suggested their own country should take advantage of this by encouraging skilled immigrants denied entry into the US to come to Canada instead, and this idea receives strong public support.

Seven in ten Canadians say they strongly (35%) or somewhat (36%) favour Canada trying to encourage skilled immigrants who are denied entry into the United States to choose to come to Canada instead, compared with one in five who somewhat (12%) or strongly (9%) oppose such a policy. Just under one in ten (8%) have no clear opinion either way.



Active recruitment of skilled workers barred from the USA receives majority support across the country, but most noticeably in Atlantic Canada (74%) and British Columbia (74%), among first generation Canadians (74%), and most enthusiastically among those 18 to 24 years of age (79%), and supporters of the federal NDP (86%) and Liberal Party (79%).

This view is less evident but still embraced by the majority of Canadians who support the federal Conservative Party (61%) and Bloc Québécois (65%), as well as among those who agree with the statement that immigration levels in Canada are too high (53%). Support for this economic development strategy increases moderately by household income, but clearly evident even among those earning less than \$30K per year.

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Legitimacy of refugees

Canadians increasingly reject the notion that most refugee claimants are not legitimate, and this positive trend is most evident among those parts of the population that have typically been the most suspicious.

Agree-Disagree: “Most people claiming to be refugees are not real refugees.” Refugees make up a very small percentage of newcomers arriving each year, but their profile periodically becomes significant when there is an influx arriving through authorized channels or unexpectedly at the border. For much of the past 35 years, Canadians have tended to adopt the view that many claiming to be refugees are not in fact legitimate. This perspective has been declining steadily, and while still shared by a significant proportion of the population is now at the lowest level recorded in more than three decades on Focus Canada.

One in three (34%) Canadians now agrees with this statement that most refugee claimants are not real refugees (down 5 points since October 2019 and at the lowest level yet recorded since 1987). By comparison, a plurality (41%, down 2) disagrees with this sentiment, while an increasing number (24%, up 6) are unsure or do not offer an opinion. Notably, this latest trend reflects a decline of five percentage points among those who *strongly agree* (14%, down 5) with the statement.

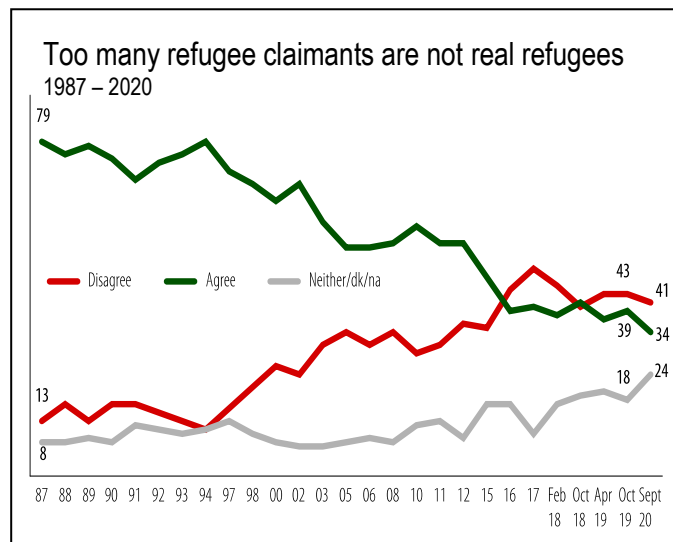
Views about the legitimacy of refugees have diverged noticeably across regions, but these differences have narrowed over the past year.

As before, positive opinions about refugee claimants are most pronounced in Atlantic Canada (26% agree with the statement, down 2) and B.C. (26%, down 18 and reversing a previous trend); negative views about refugees remain more prevalent in Alberta (39%, down 8), but less so than before. Opinions have improved in Quebec (31% agree with the statement, down 5), while stable in Ontario (39%, unchanged) and Manitoba/Saskatchewan (39%, up 2).

Notably, first generation (39%) and racialized (40%) Canadians are somewhat more likely to agree with this statement about most refugees not being real refugees, in comparison with those who are third plus generation (32%) or white (33%). Young Canadians continue to be more accepting of refugee claimants than older generations, but the gap has narrowed significantly over the past year between those 18 to 24 (29% agree with the statement, up 11) and those 45 and older (39%, down 6).

As elsewhere, the issue of refugee claimants divides Canadians along political partisan lines, but less so than a year ago. federal Conservative Party supporters continue to be most likely to agree with the statement, but noticeably less so than in 2019 (53%, down 11 points). This view is shared by no more than half as many supporters of the federal Liberal Party (26%, down 3) and NDP (21%, up 4), as well as similar proportions for the federal Green Party (28%, down 4) and Bloc Québécois (33%, down 8), and those not supporting any party (30%, down 3).

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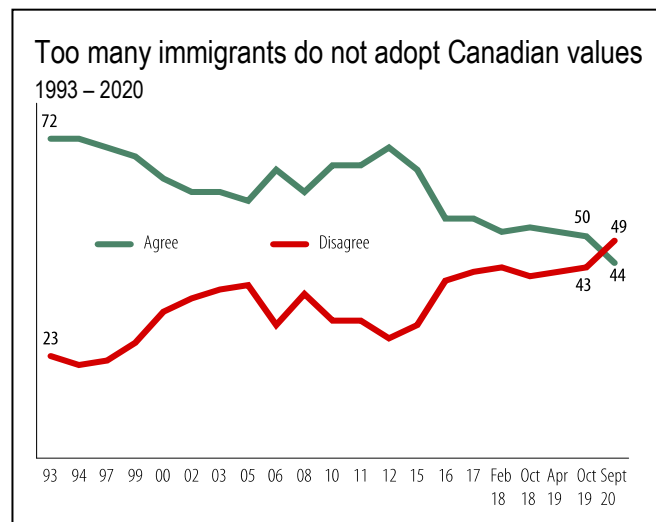


Integration of immigrants into society

For the first time ever, Canadians are more likely than not to reject the idea that too many immigrants are not adopting Canadian values. Immigrants are seen as making Canada a better rather than a worse country by a five-to-one margin, mostly because they contribute to greater diversity and multiculturalism.

Agree-Disagree: “There are too many immigrants coming into this country who are not adopting Canadian values.” The aspect about immigration most apt to divide Canadians is how newcomers are perceived to be or not to be integrating into Canadian society, especially in such areas as religious practices and gender equity. For much of the past three decades a majority of Canadians expressed concern about immigrants (or at least some of them) not doing enough to fit in. This sentiment has been waning since 2015, and has weakened further over the past year.

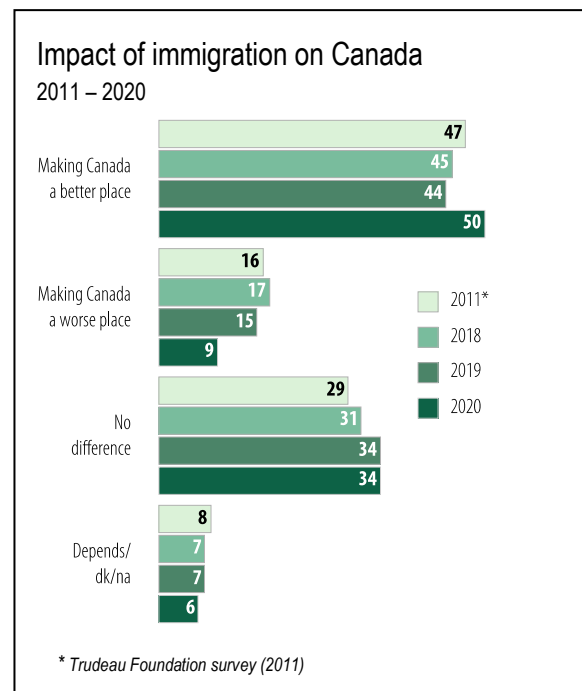
For the first time since Focus Canada has measured this opinion, fewer than half (44%) of Canadians agree with this statement about too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values, down six points since October 2019 and now the smallest proportion expressing this view yet recorded. Almost half (49%) now disagree with this sentiment (also up 6 points), with another eight percent offering no clear opinion (up 1). Notably, the decline in negative views of immigrant integration is most significant among those who *strongly agree* with the statement (to 22%, down 5 points).



Over the past year, concerns about immigrant integration have declined across the population, and most noticeably in Alberta (47% agree, down 11 points) and B.C. (39%, down 12). This view remains most evident among Canadians 60 years and older (52%, down 6), as well as among supporters of the federal Conservative Party (62%, down 11) and Bloc Québécois (65%, up 6), while least so among Canadians 18 to 24 years of age (32%, down 7) and those who support the federal NDP (28%), Liberal Party (32%), or Green Party (32%).

Overall impact of immigrants on Canada. What about the overall effect of immigration on the country – is the net impact positive or negative? While there is no public consensus, the balance of opinion is heavily weighted toward the positive view, with this sentiment having strengthened over the past year. Canadians are now more than five times as likely to say that immigration is making the country a better place (50%, up 6 since October 2019) than a worse one (9%, down 6). Another third (34%, unchanged) maintain that immigration has made no real difference either way, while few (6%, down 1) do not offer an opinion on this question.

This positive trend since 2019 has taken place across the population, and most noticeably in Atlantic Canada (58% say a better place, up 12 points), B.C. (54%, up 11), as well as among Canadians who are not in the top education and income brackets (narrowing the gap across socioeconomic groups). Albertans are among the least positive in their



assessment of how immigration affects the country, but even in this province opinions have improved somewhat over the past year (39% say it has made it better, up 4 points), compared with 18 percent who maintain it has made Canada worse (down 8).

There continues to be a sharp political divide on this question, but less so than in 2019. The most positive view continues to be expressed by supporters of the Federal NDP (67%, up 18 points) and Liberal Party (62%, down 2), but Federal Conservative Party supporters are also now more likely than before to endorse this view (35%, up 5 points since October 2019), reversing a previous trend.

How immigration has made the country better. Canadians who say that immigrants make their country either better or worse were asked why they think so (unprompted, without offering response options). Those who believe immigrants make their country better (50% of the population) are most likely to say this is because it adds to Canada’s diversity and multiculturalism (53% among those who hold a positive view of immigrants, or 27% of all Canadians). One third (32%) of this group emphasize the economic benefits of immigration, in terms of helping the economy grow, bringing their needed skills, and starting new businesses. Small proportions mention such benefits as building the overall population (5%), showing that Canadians are open-minded and caring (3%), and enhancing the country’s global reputation (3%).

The benefits of immigration to the country’s diversity and multiculturalism is the most common reason given across the country, but most noticeably among supporters of the federal NDP and Green Party. Focus on the economic benefits is emphasized among Canadians with a university education, first generation Canadians, those who are racialized, and supporters of the federal Conservative Party.

<i>Why do you say that immigrants make Canada a [better/worse] place?</i>			
<i>Makes Canada a <u>better</u> place = 50% of population</i>		<i>Makes Canada a <u>worse</u> place = 9% of population</i>	
TOP MENTIONS	%	TOP MENTIONS	%
Adds to Canada’s diversity / multiculturalism	53	Immigrants weaken Canadian (Quebec) identity / culture / too many people coming here are not like “us”	44
Helps Canada’s economy grow / immigrants bring skills we need / immigrants start businesses	32	Immigrants a drain on public finances / cost governments too much / drain on welfare	16
Helps Canada’s population grow / we need more people	5	Immigrants hurt the economy / take jobs from other Canadians	14
Shows Canadians are caring / open	3	Immigrants are a security risk / risk of extremism or terrorism	10
Enhances Canada’s reputation around the world	3	Over-population – there are too many people in Canada already	4
Other reasons	2	Immigrants are a public health risk – may bring COVID-19 virus or other diseases to Canada	1

How immigration has made the country worse. Among the one in ten (9%) Canadians who say that immigrants make the country worse, the predominant reason is that they weaken the Canadian (or Quebec) identity or leads to too much multiculturalism (44% of this group, or 4% of all Canadians). Other reasons include immigrants creating a drain on public finances (16%, or 1% of all Canadians), hurting the economy/taking jobs from other Canadians (14%), creating a security risk (10%) or contributing to over-population (4%). While some commentators have wondered if the Covid-19 pandemic might lead to heightened concern about added risk due to immigration, only one percent of this group (or .09 percent of all Canadians) identifies this as a reason why immigration is bad for the country.

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