WHAT'S IN A NUMBER? THE MEASURE OF PUBLIC OPINION ON LEVELS OF IMMIGRATION

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What do Canadians think about the numbers of immigrants entering the country annually? Survey firms in Canada have repeatedly asked questions that seek to explain how the population feels about the numbers. As a country that receives a relatively important number of newcomers, public opinion around immigration is monitored on a regular basis by Canadian policy-makers, researchers and media. In addition to being used to assess public support for levels of immigration. The surveys can provide valuable insights into issues of public perceptions about immigrant settlement and integration.

When survey results are released to the public, they can have an important bearing on debates about immigration. When evaluating the results of public opinion surveys on immigration and integration, it is critical to look at the manner in which the questions are formulated. Sometimes there can be assumptions/statements built into questions on how people feel about immigration levels and when this occurs misleading conclusions may arise.

Underlying questions about immigrant numbers is the extent to which respondents possess knowledge about how many people are actually coming to Canada annually. Until recently, survey questions about immigration levels have tended not to focus on knowledge about the numbers as the purpose of the question is getting at how people feel about the presence of immigrants. One might even wonder whether presenting the number of immigrants within a survey question will mean anything to the respondent, as many will have little ability to determine what the number represents. Another consideration is the geography to which the survey question on levels refers when asking about feelings towards immigrants. Although it tends to go untested, that too may be a factor in the response. To date most national surveys that are commissioned and/or employed by policy-makers inquire into whether people feel that there are too many immigrants arriving annually in Canada-as opposed to say a specific province or a city.

That which follows will look at the results issued by five of Canada's leading public opinion survey firms on concerns around immigration levels. The surveys were conducted between 2018 and 2019. Although each of the surveys asks a range of other questions around immigration, our focus will be on the questions that pertain to the levels of immigration. We will attempt to explain what accounts for the differences in the results of the surveys and also look at varying interpretations of the results by survey analysts.

An IPSOS survey conducted for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) in February 2018, revealed that some 43% felt that there were too many, 40% said the number was about right, 8% said that there were too few, and 9% said they didn't know or preferred not to give an opinion. IPSOS followed up with this question: *currently, Canada aims to admit over 300,000 immigrants each year. Knowing this, do you feel there are too many, too few, or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?* When respondents were made aware of the number, the percentage that felt there were too many jumped by 10 points to 54% and the percentage saying the numbers of new arrivals were about right dropped

to 34% (the percentage saying that there were too few dropped to 6% and those saying they did not know or refusing to give an opinion).[1]

It remains unclear as to why the jump occurred when the number was made known, especially since we have no conception of what the respondents thought the number was prior to being informed. Hence, to some degree it is still uncertain as to what the value is of including the numbers of immigrants in the question when gauging opinion. In contrast to the two-part question asked by IPSOS, an Angus Reid Institute (ARI) survey, conducted in August 2018, found that half of Canadians surveyed would prefer a decrease in the federal government's current immigration targets of 310,000 new permanent residents for 2018. The question was put as follows: *"First, some questions about immigration. In 2018, Canada is expected to accept 310,000 new permanent residents. These are people who were born in other countries who have immigrated to Canada on a permanent basis. What is your opinion on this? Would you say 310,000 new permanent residents in 2018 is too many — the number should be lower; is about right; is too few, the number should be higher; or not sure/can't say".*[2]

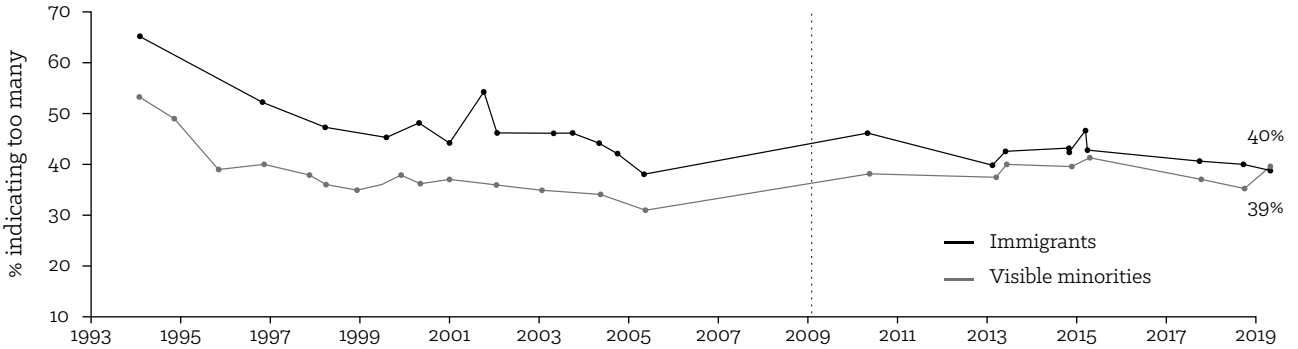
ARI points out that as immigration targets rose from 260,000 to 310,000 between 2014 and 2018, so too, has the number of people saying there should be fewer immigrants to Canada with half (49%) being of that opinion now, compared with just over one third (36%) in 2014. According to ARI, the findings had to be understood in the context of 'increasingly fraught conversations about policy regarding immigration and migration to Canada.' ARI further points out that over the course of four decades, the number of Canadians saying immigration is either at the right level or should be increased has remained above fifty percent, even as immigration levels have consistently risen, beginning under the Mulroney government in the 1980s. Over the same period of time, the number saying immigration levels should be decreased has fluctuated within the 40 to 50 per cent range, suggesting the issue has been a source of division for more than 40 years.[3]

Ekos arrives at a different conclusion around the evolution of opinion on immigration numbers. Similar to the ARI survey, Ekos employs a three-point scale (too many, about the right number and too few) but it doesn't include the number of immigrants in the question. Conducted in the spring of 2019, the EKOS survey finds that 'General opposition to immigration is not that different over the past several years.' Over 25 years of monitoring attitudes towards immigrant numbers, Ekos points to an important decline in opposition to immigration when compared with the early 1990s. The result for the spring 2019 Ekos survey points to results that are considerably better than what the ARI survey revealed some six months prior. It does, however, point out that opposition to immigration identified as visible minorities is on the rise and no longer trails opposition to general immigration (as it has historically). Racial discrimination is now as important a factor in views about immigration as the broader issue of immigration.[4]

FIGURE 1: ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION/MINORITIES (ADJUSTED)

Q: In your opinion, do you feel that there are too few, too many or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?

Q: Forgetting about the overall number of immigrants coming to Canada, **of those who come**, would you say there are too few, too many or the right amount who are **members of visible minorities**?



1 Ipsos Report, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, March 2018 Qualitative and Quantitative Research about Newcomers and Immigrants, http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/por-ef/immigration_refugees/2018/091-17-e/report.pdf

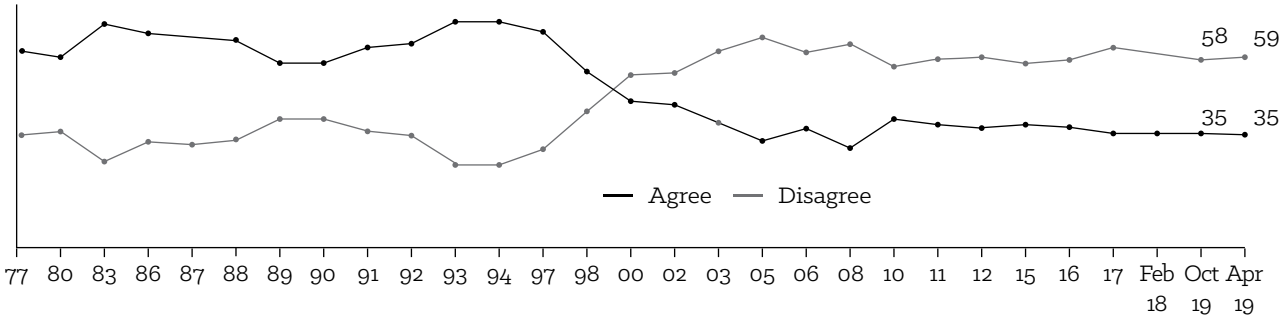
2 http://angusreid.org/canadian-immigration-trend-data/

3 http://angusreid.org/canadian-immigration-trend-data

4 http://www.ekospolitics.com/index.php/2019/04/increased-polarization-on-attitudes-to-immigration-reshaping-the-political-landscape-in-canada/

Environics Institute surveys do not put the question about immigration levels on the three-point scale (too many, about right, too few), and rather asked Canadians whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *'overall, there is too much immigration in Canada'*. Some 59 per cent of Canadians disagreed with the statement, up from 58 per cent in October 2018. Just over a third of Canadians agreed that there was too much immigration. As observed below, by contrast with the ARI findings, Environics Institute historic trend suggests that for "most of the past two decades, positive sentiments outweigh negative ones on such questions as the overall level of immigration."

FIGURE 2: QUESTION – IMMIGRATION LEVELS ARE TOO HIGH? (1977-2019)



Source: https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/focus-canada-spring-2019/environics-institute---focus-canada-spring-2019-survey-on-immigration-and-refugees---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=8dd2597f_2

Conducted in March 2019, a Leger Marketing survey for the Association for Canadian Studies has 36% of Canadians contending that there are too many immigrants, numbers which are not as high as the percentages reported on the same question in the surveys above. Unlike the other surveys, the question on the numbers of immigrants also offers varying options to respondents around the geographies where concerns are highest. As observed in the table below, it is at the level of the country and of the province that Canadians are more likely to believe there are too many immigrants. They are less likely to do so at the level of their city, town or neighbourhood. Hence, proximity to immigrants is not the determining factor in opinion formation when one specifies geographical location.

TABLE 1: QUESTION – IN YOUR OPINION, ARE THERE TOO MANY, JUST ABOUT THE RIGHT NUMBER OR TOO FEW IMMIGRANTS IN THE FOLLOWING?

	Canada	My Province	My City or Town	My Neighbourhood
Too many	36%	34%	25%	19%
Just about the right number	48%	50%	57%	59%
Too few	12%	12%	14%	18%
I prefer not to answer	4%	4%	4%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 25, 2019

Seldom have Canadians been asked in surveys to estimate how many immigrants there are in Canada, either on the whole or entering the country each year. Ideally, securing such estimates would help to provide context in establishing whether those saying there are too many, about the right number or too few immigrants have some sense of the number. Survey questions that present respondents with the number of immigrants that arrive in a given year don't necessarily offer any insight into the rationale behind respondents' beliefs that there are too many or too few. The Leger-ACS 2019 survey asks Canadians to estimate the number of immigrants that there are in the country. In 2016 the census of Canada reported that there were 7.7 million immigrants in the country. The table below reveals that over one third believe that there were fewer

than 3 million immigrants and another third believe there were between 3 and 7 million. Some one in five Canadians estimated that there were more than 7 million immigrants in Canada. It is worth noting that the estimates in the number of immigrants are roughly similar amongst those saying there were either too many, too few or about the right number.

TABLE 2: QUESTION – ACCORDING TO YOU, APPROXIMATELY HOW MANY IMMIGRANTS ARE CURRENTLY LIVING IN CANADA?

	Too many	Just about the right number	Too few
Less than 1 million	9.4%	9.4%	10.3%
Between 1 million and 2.9 million	27.3%	23.8%	28.1%
Between 3 million and 4.9 million	20.8%	22.9%	20.9%
Between 5 million and 6.9 million	16.8%	16.2%	16.8%
Between 7 million and 9.9 million	5.7%	9.4%	9.6%
10 million or more	11.8%	11.5%	8.6%
I prefer not to answer	8.1%	7.0%	5.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 25, 2019

Not surprisingly those Canadians that feel there are too many immigrants in Canada are also far more likely to agree that there are too many immigrants in their neighbourhood. This further suggests that knowledge about the actual numbers of immigrants and the extent to which such knowledge influences opinion is highly uncertain. It may indeed be that a person who believes there are too many immigrants will believe it regardless of being informed of the actual number or the consideration of the geography to which a survey question refers.

TABLE 3: QUESTION – ARE THERE TOO MANY, JUST ABOUT THE RIGHT NUMBER OR TOO FEW IMMIGRANTS IN THE FOLLOWING?

	Canada		
Neighbourhood	Too many	Just about the right number	Too few
Too many	41.7%	6.7%	3.8%
Just about the right number	50.4%	74.7%	36.1%
Too few	6.1%	17.5%	59.1%
I prefer not to answer	1.8%	1.1%	1.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 25, 2019

THE CASE OF QUEBEC

Surveys over perceptions about levels of immigration rarely examine the degree to which the actual numbers of immigrants in a given area affect opinion about the desired level. Admittedly, it's not simple to establish causality in that regard. But it is clear that there can be high opposition to immigration in places where there are very few persons that are foreign-born. This is well illustrated in the case of Quebec where the provincial party that formed government in 2018 campaigned on a 20% reduction in the annual admission of newcomers (from approximately 52,000 in 2018 to 40,000 in 2019.) Surveys suggest that the reduction was especially attractive to the people in the province's smaller centres where as observed below the share of immigrants is particularly low. It is entirely possible that persons in such cities believe there is too much immigration elsewhere in the province and not in their cities or towns. Or they may believe that, whatever the number, there are too many. Either scenario needs to be examined if we are to properly comprehend how the question around numbers of immigrants is interpreted.

TABLEAU 4: TEN CANADIAN CITIES WITH THE LOWEST PERCENTAGE OF IMMIGRANTS IN 2016

	Total Population	Number of Immigrants	Percentage of Immigrants
Dolbeau-Mistassini	14880	100	0.007%
Alma	31800	300	0.009%
Bay Roberts, NFLD	11030	115	0.01%
Baie-Comeau	27000	305	0.01%
Mines Thetford	27065	340	0.01%
Saguenay	157165	2035	0.01%
Rivière-du-Loup	27720	405	0.015%
Saint-Georges	31450	480	0.015%
Matane	17245	270	0.015%
Shawinigan	52180	830	0.015%

Source: Statistics Canada, special compilation, Census of Canada 2016

CONCLUSION

Esteemed demographer and colleague Victor Piché has contended that there is nothing scientific in establishing the numbers of immigrants that a state is able to accommodate/receive in a given year.[1] Piché points out that at the end of the 1980s, the Quebec Immigration Department attempted to justify the desired level of immigration on the basis of the concept of receiving capacity which was supposed to be determined "scientifically" by demographic and economic models measuring the impact of immigration. This effort was abandoned as the models in question were unable to define thresholds based on the impact of immigration. Examining the contribution of public opinion on immigration levels supports the argument that Victor Piché has made over the past few decades and his emphasis on the need to carefully consider the evidence base when employing surveys to gauge opinion over purported capacity to receive a "certain number" of immigrants.

1 https://cjf.qc.ca/vivre-ensemble/webzine/article/immigration-et-integration-existe-t-il-un-seuil-optimal