EVOLVING TRUST AND RISING DISCRIMINATION DURING THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

The Edelman Trust Barometer (ETB) revealed that in the midst of the global pandemic in 2021 there emerged a "widespread mistrust of societal institutions and leaders around the world" and further observed in 2022 that people around the world, especially in democracies, increasingly faced a failing trust ecosystem.[1] The 2022 ETB showed that the overall trust index declined 5 percentage points in the US, and 3 in Canada from 2021 to 2022. Wu and associates recently found that a substantial portion of the Canadian population experienced declines in social trust, especially in neighborhood trust amongst socioeconomically disadvantaged, during the pandemic.[2]

Trust has long been considered a key element in building social capital and strengthening democracy.[3]While generalized trust — trust towards people in general — helps to promote group solidarity in the face of adversity, a breakdown in such trust is widely viewed as a cause of fragmentation thus undermining social cohesion. Over the period 2020–2022, the response to the COVID-19 global pandemic highlighted the importance of trust in people and institutions so as to ensure adherence to health measures, such vaccination, mask wearing, and social distancing, aimed at combating the spread of the virus.

Researchers often measure levels of trust across societies by asking citizens about trust in people, neighbors, fellow

1 For detail of the 2021 and 2022 ETB reports, see www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer; www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer.

2 Wu, C., A. Bierman, and S. Schieman (2022) "Socioeconomic stratification and trajectories of social trust during COVID-19." *Social Science Research*. PMCID: PMC9186426.

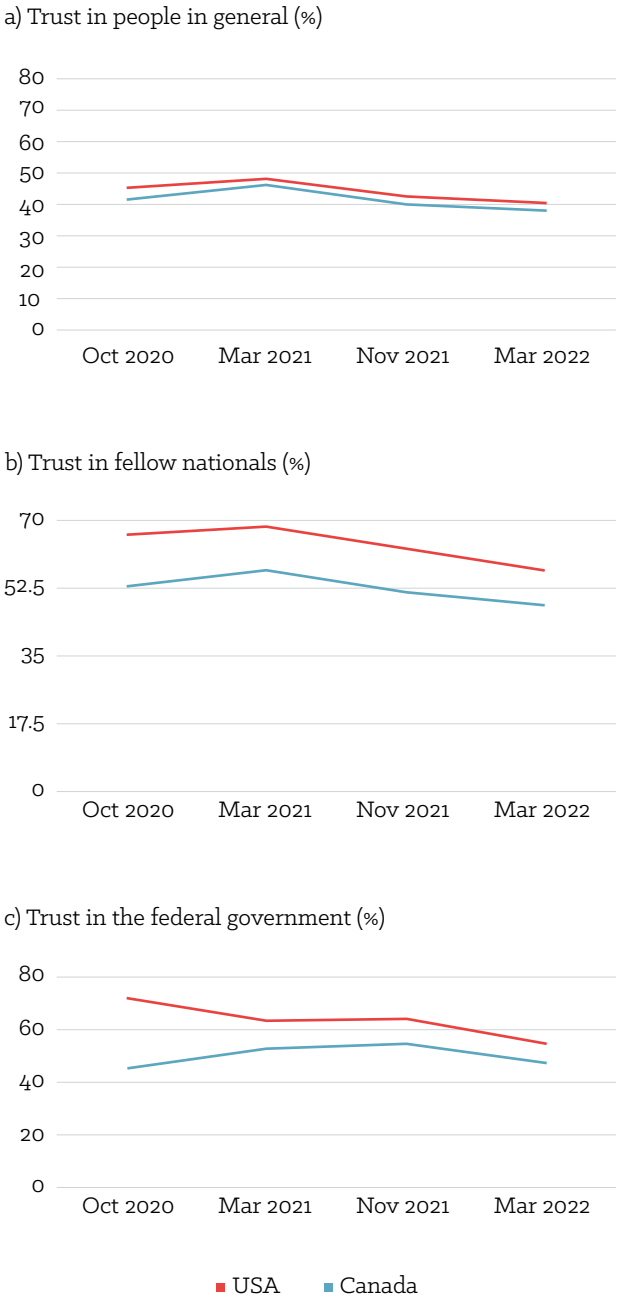
3 Putman, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

citizens, nonprofits, and private and public institutions. This essay reports findings from four waves of Leger survey data from October 2020 to March 2022[4] that analyze the evolving levels of trust and patterns of rising discrimination in the US and Canada during the first two years of the pandemic. We first examine the trends of the trust towards people in general, trust towards fellow nationals, and trust towards the federal government. We also contrast the levels of trust towards people in general, fellow nationals, and the federal government amongst different social groups by ethnoracial identity, those self-identified as White, Black, Hispanic/Latin American, or Asian American/Chinese Canadian.[5] Third, we further examine whether people are generically trusting or whether they experience certain types of trust that may be in opposition to each other. For example, are those more trusting toward fellow nationals less trusting towards their government? Finally, responding to growing anti-Asian racism in the US and Canada during the pandemic, we zoom in on Asian Americans and Chinese Canadians to examine the relationship between trust and discrimination. In particular, we look at the extent to which Asian Americans/Chinese Canadians who had experienced discrimination reported a decline in trust. By examining this relationship, we seek to provide insight into observations made by Robert Putnam and others that generalized trust is threatened by a society's cultural diversity.[6]

ESTABLISHING TRUST: TRUST TOWARDS PEOPLE IN GENERAL, FELLOW NATIONALS, AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Figure 1 demonstrates the evolving trends of trust. Between October 2020 and March 2022 (coinciding with a second peak of the contagion), trust towards people in general, in fellow nationals, and in the federal government ended up declining. However, the decline in trust was not linear in both the US and Canada. The trends did not show a straight line of descent across the period under study. In both countries, between October 2020 and March 2021, there was a marked increase in trust towards people and fellow nationals; but over that same period, trust towards the federal government diverged between the two countries—increasing in the US while falling in Canada. From March 2021 to November 2021 the degree of trust towards people in general and fellow nationals fell in

FIGURE 1. EVOLVING TRUST TOWARDS PEOPLE IN GENERAL, FELLOW NATIONALS, AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN REGARD TO COVID-19/CORONAVIRUS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA.



Source: Leger survey data (Appendix 1).

4 Four waves of survey data were collected in the United States and Canada by the firm Leger during the months of October 2020, March 2021, November 2021 and March 2022. For methodology and other detail, see Appendix 1.

5 We choose to use the term "ethnoracial" identity for brevity to reflect on the possible overlap of race and ethnicity and acknowledge that the Canadian census uses the term visible minority while the US census uses the term race. In the Leger surveys, the selected groups are self-identified as White, African American/Black, Asian American, and Hispanic/Latin American in the US; the groups are White, Black, Chinese Canadian, and Latin American in Canada.

6 Putnam, R. D. (2007). "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and community in the twenty-first century the 2006 Johan Skytte prize lecture." *Scandinavian Political Studies, 30*(2), 137–174; Achbari, W., M. Gesthuizen, and J. Holm (2018) "Ethnic Diversity and Generalized Trust: Testing the Contact Hypothesis in Dutch Voluntary Organizations." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 47*(4), 813–835.

both countries but there was a slight increase in the degree of trust in the federal government. The period between November 2021 and March 2022 witnessed the decline across all categories and in both countries, with a steeper fall regarding the trust towards the federal government.

Despite the overall declining trends in both countries, Figure 1 points to a slightly greater degree of trust towards people in general in the US when compared with Canada. However, the degree of trust amongst Canadians is markedly greater than that amongst Americans when it comes to trust towards both fellow nationals and towards the federal government. Nonetheless, there is a much greater gap between trust towards people in general and trust towards fellow nationals in the US (less than 10 percentage points) than there is in Canada (19–25 percentage points). These evolving trends remind us just how fluid trust can be.

DIFFERENCES IN TRUST ACROSS SELECTED ETHNORACIAL GROUPS

We now shift our focus to the degree to which major ethnoracial groups in the US and Canada, respectively, trust people in general and fellow nationals based on results from the fourth wave of the Leger survey (March 2022). As Table 1 shows, the patterns of trust towards people in general and fellow nationals, as well as the gap between these two types of trust, closely reflect those seen on a national scale. Regardless of race, trust towards fellow nationals is higher than trust towards people in general. In the US, Hispanics are most trusting towards both people and fellow nationals while whites are least trusting towards people in general. For each of the ethnoracial groups in the US, the differences in their levels of trust towards people and fellow nationals are relatively small, ranging from a low of 2 percentage points amongst Asian Americans to a high of 9 percentage points amongst Whites. In Canada, in contrast, Blacks are the most trusting towards fellow nationals but the least trusting towards people in general; and the gaps are much wider across groups, especially for Blacks (26 percentage points).

When we consider the level of trust towards the federal government by ethnoracial groups in the two countries, there is some variation across the groups. Hispanics displayed the highest level of trust across all groups in the US in contrast with their Canadian counterparts who showed the lowest level of trust. Chinese Canadians exhibited the highest level of trust towards the federal government across all groups in both countries and with Asian Americans who also displayed a relatively high level of trust.

TABLE 2: TRUST TOWARDS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN REGARD TO COVID-19 BY SELECTED ETHNORACIAL GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Trust toward the federal Government "a lot" or "somewhat," March 2022	United States	Canada
Total	47.7	55.1
White	46.6	51.9
African American / Black	54.5	51.9
Asian American / Chinese Canadian	57.7	**68.6**
Hispanic / Latin American	**60.2**	48.2

Source: Leger survey data, fourth wave, March 2022.

TRUST TOWARDS FELLOW NATIONALS V. TRUST TOWARDS THE GOVERNMENT

A study by Pew Research concludes that "people's views on personal trust are strongly associated with their views

TABLE 1: TRUST TOWARDS PEOPLE IN GENERAL AND FELLOW NATIONALS IN REGARD TO COVID-19 BY SELECTED ETHNORACIAL GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA RESPECTIVELY

Trust "a lot" or "somewhat," March 2022	United States			Canada		
	People in General	Fellow Nationals	Gap	People in General	Fellow Nationals	Gap
White	39.9	48.9	9	38.9	57.6	18.7
African American / Black	44.3	51.0	6.7	36.2	62.0	25.8
Asian American / Chinese Canadian	41.3	43.6	2.3	36.3	54.1	17.8
Hispanic / Latin American	53.7	59.1	5.4	44.1	57.5	13.4

Source: Leger survey data, Fourth wave, March 2022.

on issues related to institutional trust."[7] In effect those who report high trust in people tend to have significantly more confidence in institutions than do persons with low trust in people, whether it is the military or police officers, business executives, or religious leaders, as table 3 shows.

In the previous sections, we found that our survey respondents, regardless of ethnoracial backgrounds, generally displayed higher trust towards their fellow nationals than towards people in general. Table 4 reveals that those who are more trusting of their fellow nationals are much more likely to trust the federal government when it comes to the COVID-19.

ANTI-ASIAN RACISM DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Government statistics have consistently revealed a significant rise of anti-Asian hate crime since the pandemic outbreak. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's 2020 FBI Hate Crime Statistics showed a 76% rise in the number of reported hate crimes against Asian Americans, the highest level in recent decades.[8] In Canada, Statistics Canada released a study in August 2022 pointing to a marked increase in reported hate crimes between 2019 to 2021 (a rise of 72 percent over that period).[9] During these two years, there were unprecedented increases in the number of hate crimes reported by persons identifying as East or Southeast Asian, from 67 in 2019 to 305 in 2021.[10] Generally such figures in both countries are small compared to the overall number as reflected in public opinion surveys because the vast majority of persons do not report potential hate crimes to the police.

TABLE 4. THE EXTENT TO WHICH RESPONDENTS TRUST FELLOW NATIONALS BY THEIR TRUST TOWARD THE GOVERNMENT "A LOT" IN REGARD TO COVID-19/CORONAVIRUS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES.

March 2022	Trust towards the federal government "a lot"	
The extent to which respondents trust fellow nationals	Canada	United States
A lot	71.4%	**75.8%**
Somewhat	63.9%	58.6%
Not a lot	44.3%	40.2%
Not at all	32.9%	**22.5%**

Source: Leger survey data, fourth wave, March 2022.

Table 5 reveals consistent evidence of rising anti-Asian racism based on the third wave of the Leger survey (November 2021). As shown, Asian Americans and Chinese Canadians reported higher levels of unfair treatment on the basis of racial/visible minority status compared with other ethnoracial groups examined here since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Other recent studies in the US and Canada confirm the rise in the experience and expression of hate towards Asian

TABLE 3. THE RESPONDENTS' TRUST TOWARDS FELLOW NATIONALS AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT 'A LOT' BY THE EXTENT TO WHICH RESPONDENTS TRUST PEOPLE IN GENERAL IN REGARD TO THE HANDLING OF THE COVID-19/CORONAVIRUS.

March 2022	The extent to which respondents trust people in general			
Trust toward fellow nationals "a lot"	A lot	Somewhat	Not a lot	Not at all
Canada	67.7%	13.2%	3.4%	6.9%
United States	**73.6%**	13.2%	3.6%	**2.7%**
Trust towards the federal government "a lot"	A lot	Somewhat	Not a lot	Not at all
Canada	42.3	17.3	14.0	14.1
United States	**55.4**	13.4	9.0	**5.9**

Source: Leger survey data, fourth wave, March 2022.

7 Pew Research Center (July 2019) "Trust and Distrust in America", p. 38 www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/the-state-of-personal-trust/

8 ABC news (Oct 25, 2020) "Hate crimes against Asians rose 76% in 2020 amid pandemic, FBI says" Hate Crime Against https://abcnews.go.com/US/hate-crimes-asians-rose-76-2020-amid-pandemic/story?id=80746198. Also see https://crime-data-explorer.fr.cloud.gov/pages/explorer/crime/hate-crime

9 Greg Moreau, "Police-reported crime statistics in Canada, 2021," Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, August 2, 2022 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00013-eng.htm

10 Ibid.

TABLE 5. REPORTED LEVELS OF UNFAIR TREATMENT BY ETHNORACIAL BACKGROUNDS.

Percent reporting "YES" to the question: Since the outbreak of COVID-19/Coronavirus, have you been treated unfairly on the basis of visible minority/race?		
November 2021	United States	Canada
Total	8.0%	4.5%
White	5.6%	1.1%
African American / Black	14.5%	16.2%
Asian American / Chinese Canadian	**21.5%**	**24.5%**
Hispanic / Latin American	12.6%	2.7%

Source: Leger survey data, fourth wave, March 2022.

Americans/Chinese Canadians. A 2021 Pew Research survey found that Asian adults expressed fear that someone might threaten or physically attack them much more than other racial minority groups. The Pew survey further revealed that a vast majority of Asian adults (81%) said that violence against them was increasing, far surpassing the share of all U.S. adults (56%) who said the same.[11] The Stop AAPI Hate website, a multi-racial coalition against anti-Asian hate launched in March 2020, has recorded a sharp and continuous surge of incidents of anti-Asian racism, ranging from boycotting Asian restaurants, bullying Asian American school children, to verbal or physical assaults of Asian Americans in public places, since the coronavirus outbreak from in 2,100 March 2020 to 11,500 in March 2022.[12] In Canada, similar findings were uncovered by the Toronto Chapter of the Chinese Canadian National Council. The Council's survey found some 943 self-reported racist incidents across the country by Canadians of Chinese origin, a 47-percent increase between January 1 and December 31, 2020.[13]

DO VICTIMS OF DISCRIMINATION REPORT DECLINING TRUST?

One of the key factors that Putman identifies as a possible threat to generalized trust is a society's degree of cultural diversity. In his 2007 essay, he asserted that people living in more demographically diverse areas reported lower levels of trust in their neighbors. He went on to conclude that greater diversity was associated with feelings and behaviors that threatened the sense of community.[14] His thesis raises issues about the factors contributing to the greater distrust in demographically diverse societies. Some may be left with the impression that it is the relationship between ethnoracial groups, or between white and non-white persons, that is the source of distrust. To provide insight into this relationship, we address the question "do victims of discrimination report declining trust" based on the third wave survey findings (November 2021). We focus on Asian Americans and Chinese Canadians to determine whether trust toward people in general, fellow nationals, and the government diminished amongst those reporting being victims of discrimination during the pandemic compared with those that did not experience such discrimination.

TABLE 6. HOW ASIAN AMERICANS AND CHINESE CANADIANS RESPOND TO BEING TREATED DURING COVID-19/CORONAVIRUS.

November 2021	Since the outbreak of COVID-19/Coronavirus, have you been treated unfairly on the basis of race/visible minority status of the following?			
	Asian Americans		Chinese Canadians	
In regard to COVID-19/Coronavirus, I don't trust each of the following:	Not on the Basis of Race (%)	On the Basis of Race (%)	Not on the Basis of Visible Minority Status (%)	On the Basis of Visible Minority Status (%)
Towards People in General	46.9	**56.5**	50.0	**62.2**
Towards Fellow Nationals	42.7	**52.1**	26.7	35.1
Federal Government	29.6	42.5	17.2	23.7

Source: Leger survey data, third wave, November 2021.

11 Ruiz N. G., K. Edwards, and M.H. Lopez (April 21, 2021) www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/21/one-third-of-asian-americans-fear-threats-physical-attacks-and-most-say-violence-against-them-is-rising/

12 https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Year-2-Report.pdf

13 Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Council (2021) Another Year: Anti-Asian Racism across Canada Two Years into the COVID-19 Pandemic, www.ccnctoronto.ca

14 Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum."

As revealed in Table 6, amongst both Asian Americans and Chinese Canadians, those saying they were "not at all" trusting of people in general were more likely to report being treated unfairly on the basis of their racial/visible minority status than those saying they were not treated unfairly on that basis during the pandemic. Regarding trust toward fellow nationals, however, we see some marked difference: it was Asian Americans who were not trusting of fellow nationals that were more likely to report unfair treatment on the basis of their racial minority status than those saying they were not treated unfairly on that basis during the pandemic. Finally, the data point to important differences in the degree of trust towards the federal government. In effect, those Asian Americans and Chinese Canadians reporting unfair treatment on the basis of their racial/visible minority status were less likely to trust the federal government than those who did not report encountering such treatment.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis so far suggests that discrimination, rather than cultural diversity, undercuts trust in society. Regarding the negative effects of cultural diversity on trust in society, Putnam and others seem surprised to discover that persons living in diverse settings are not only less trusting of people in general but are also less trusting of members of their own community.[15] That observation assumes that trust towards in-group members (in people that share one's own cultural background) inevitably implies lower trust towards out-group members. But that view is not supported by findings from our survey data which show that Americans and Canadians who are trusting of people in general also exhibit more trust towards their fellow nationals as well as their respective federal governments.

In the analysis of levels of trust, societal context matters. To that end we focus on how trust can shift in response to a crisis, in this case the global COVID-19 pandemic, in different countries. We find that the crisis does affect the levels of personal and institutional trust in both countries as well as on cultural communities. We also observe important shifts in levels of trust in the two countries over the course of the crisis between March 2020 and March 2022. It is difficult to ascertain whether the degree of diversity in society had any significant impact on evolving levels of trust. However, it is quite clear from our analysis that trust has declined amongst Asian Americans and Chinese Canadians who experience unfair treatment on the basis of racial/visible minority status. If enhancing trust is a key objective in promoting social cohesion, it follows that combating racism and discrimination against minority groups in the US and Canada can serve to strengthen a society's cohesion and, by consequence, efforts to combat discrimination can help promote trust towards people and their institutions.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

Four large-scale surveys were conducted by the firm Leger using their internet panels in Canada and the United States. The surveys were conducted for the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) and the University of Manitoba with the support of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). The four waves of the survey were fielded between October 2020 and March 2022 with over 26,000 respondents in Canada and the United States with oversamples of persons identifying as Black, Asian/Chinese and Hispanic.

A margin of error cannot be associated with a non-probability sample in a panel survey. For comparison, a national probability sample of 3,000 respondents would have a margin of error of ± 1.9%, 19 times out of 20.

SAMPLE SIZE AND TIMELINE OF EACH SURVEY WAVE

Waves	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
Timeline	Oct 21–Nov 16, 2020	Mar 3–27, 2021	Sept 2–28, 2021	Feb 10–Mar 10, 2022
Sample size by country				
Canada	2.759	3.070	2.980	2.939
United States	3.551	3.773	3.714	3.734
TOTAL	**6.310**	**6.843**	**6.694**	**6.673**

15 Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum;" Achbari et al., "Ethnic Diversity and Generalized Trust."