PUBLIC OPINION ON IMMIGRATION IN NORTH AMERICA DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC: HOW DID THE PANDEMIC AFFECT VIEWS AROUND IMMIGRATION LEVELS AND NEWCOMERS IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES?

Jack Jedwab is President and CEO of the Association for Canadian Studies and the Metropolis Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in Canadian History from Concordia University. Prior to 1998, he served as executive director of the Quebec branch of the Canadian Jewish Congress. He is an author and contributor to academic publications, government reports and newspapers across the country in the fields of immigration, multiculturalism, diversity, human rights and official languages. Following three decades of wide-ranging research on public opinion and demographics, he is regularly consulted by media and government bodies alike for his expertise and insights on issues of import in the public sphere. He has taught and lectured at McGill University, the Université du Québec à Montréal and Concordia University, offering courses ranging from public policy to the history of immigration and minority groups, to sports in Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Following several decades of declining birth rates, newcomers are the essential demographic remedy for a country that seeks to increase its national population. In Canada, immigration is the principal driver of population growth. Critics of immigration often dispute the observation about the demographic importance of newcomers. But the global pandemic provided evidence of the actual impact of international immigration on population change with the considerable reduction in the numbers of immigrants in 2020 compared with the previous year. In effect, results from the 2021 census confirmed that as a result of the pandemic population growth slowed from a record high in 2019 (up 583,000 or +1.6%) to its lowest growth rate in a century in 2020 (up 160,000 or +0.4%). Nonetheless, the rate of Canada's population growth remained the highest amongst G7 countries (Statistics Canada, 2022).

That which follows will consider the impact of the global pandemic on immigration levels in Canada over the first two years of the pandemic (2020–2022) and offer a comparison with the United States. Much of the focus will be on the evolution of opinion about immigration in the two countries and the extent to which the pandemic potentially influenced the views of Canadians and Americans about newcomers. It is contended that Canadian policy-makers mostly sought to orient public opinion on immigration rather than taking direction from it. In addition, some insights will be offered around the admission of Afghan refugees in Canada and the United States.

IMMIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHY IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

In 2020, deaths in Canada surpassed 300,000 (309,893) for the first time in Canadian history. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) reported that 15,651 or 5.1% of deaths in 2020 were caused by COVID-19, meaning that the pandemic is estimated to have been the cause of about 1 in 20 deaths in Canada. This proportion was lower than what was estimated in the United Kingdom (12.3%), the United States (11.2%) and France (9.7%) but higher than in Australia (0.7%) and New Zealand (0.1%).

In 2020 the number of deaths remained lower than the number of births but natural increase (births minus deaths) fell to its lowest annual level since at least 1922. By far however, the most significant demographic impact of the pandemic came from changes to international migration which since 2016 accounted for more than three-quarters of the total population growth since 2016, reaching 85.7% in 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2022).

As observed in the table below, Canada welcomed 184,624 immigrants in 2020, down by almost half from 2019 (a decline of 46%) and the lowest in any year since 1998. The pre-pandemic target for immigration set by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada was 341,000. But the numbers admitted to Canada in the following year, 2021, returned to new record levels exceeding 400 000 and for 2022 admitted 437 500 permanent residents.

For its part, the United States saw a reduction in the numbers of immigration admitted annually over the period 2020 and 2021 by some 30 percent relative to 2019. In 2022, the United States appears to be on track to return to the annual level admitted prior to the emergence of the pandemic. (See Table 1).

It is worth noting in the table above that Canada's immigration rate stands at around 1.1 per cent of its total population

TABLE 1. ANNUAL NUMBER OF PERMANENT RESIDENTS IN CANADA AND ANNUAL NUMBER OF LEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2010–2022.

Annual Immigration	United States	Canada
2010	1 042 625	280 686
2011	1 062 040	248 701
2012	1 031 631	257 763
2013	990 553	259 034
2014	1 016 518	260 283
2015	1 051 031	271 808
2016	1 183 505	296 385
2017	1 127 167	286 485
2018	1 096 611	321 045
2019	1031 765	341 175
2020	707 362	184 385
2021	738 199	405 330
2022	730 995 (January to September)	437 500

Source: IRCC, "Permanent Residents, Monthly Updates" and Homeland Security, Legal Immigration, Fiscal Years and Adjustment of Status, 2010–2022.

though it dipped to 0.5% in 2020. Canada generally welcomes three times more immigrants on a per capita basis than the United States and that gap rose substantially in 2021-the second year of the pandemic.

Travel and border restrictions in 2020 impacted the movement of Canadians leaving and returning to the country (and changing their usual place of residence minus net emigration). The decrease in the number of non-permanent residents caused by COVID-19 also played a major role in the slower growth in 2020 as more non-permanent residents left Canada than came to the country in 2020. This represented the (-86,535)—the largest net loss since comparable data was available. By comparison, Canada had a net gain of 190,952 non-permanent residents in 2019.

In the case of the United States the year 2021 will go down as the year with the slowest population growth to date in that country's history which fell to an unprecedented 0.1 percent. According to the United States census bureau, gains from immigration and natural increase fell sharply in recent years. Yet despite what was described as rather sluggish results a new pattern is emerging wherein Immigrants, (even at the reduced levels seen in Table 1) for the first time, constitute the source of the majority of the country's population growth (in part attributable to declining rates of natural increase in the US). Not only is the overall percentage of Americans born in other countries on the rise, but the share is approaching levels not seen since the late 19th century (Jordan and Gebeloff, February 2022).

Much like in Canada, in the United States in 2020 measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the slowdown in immigration with tougher immigration policies. This was highlighted by United States border closures with Mexico and Canada and limited international entries to the country air. While pandemic related reductions in immigration numbers continued in the United States through much of 2021, in Canada there was a significant resurgence in immigrant admissions in that same year. Thus, notwithstanding the persistence of the pandemic, in 2021 Canada welcomed the highest annual number of immigrants in its history. As viewed in Table 1, the number of newcomers admitted to Canada was more than double what it was in 2020 as overall population growth returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Indeed, the immigration department (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) surpassed its projected newcomer admission level for 2021 which forecasted 401 000 new permanent residents. And, the federal immigration plan called for continued increases for subsequent years and aimed at making up for the 'shortfall' in 2020 which the Immigration Minister deemed essential to keep Canada's economy buoyant (El-Assal and Thevenot, 2022).

Still, the 2021 census of Canada revealed that "more than 8.3 million people, or almost one-quarter (23.0%) of the population, were, or had ever been, a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada. This was the largest proportion since Confederation, topping the previous 1921 record of 22.3%, and the highest among the G7"[1].

1 www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm

CANADA, THE UNITED STATES: COVID-19 AND IMMIGRATION LEVELS

Saunders (2021) observes that while immigration to Canada was affected by the decrease in flights and the closure of the U.S. border to most traffic, there was flexibility for applicants that had already been approved for those entry to Canada as well as for those in the country whose documents expire before they are able to travel. For its part, the United States took a more categorical approach to immigration by suspending the entry of economic-based immigrants for sixty days (with some exceptions) because of the "impact of foreign workers on the United States labor market, particularly in an environment of high domestic unemployment and depressed demand for labor" (Saunders, 2021).

In January 2020, the Trump administration issued a series of immigration-related measures that it deemed necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19 including travel bans, a suspension of routine visa services, and a suspension of refugee resettlement. While the Trump administration introduced measures that cast immigrants as a burden, surveys of American opinion also revealed that many viewed immigrants as essential workers on the front lines in the fight against the pandemic at hospitals, grocery stores, pharmacies, retail stores, and delivery services.

Surveys conducted on immigration levels by the firm Gallup reveal that in the latter part of the 20th century most Americans preferred decreases in levels of immigration. Such sentiment declined sharply since 2010 and during the pandemic a July 2020 Gallup poll revealed that for the first time since the firm began asking the question in 1965, the percentage of Americans who said they wanted to see an increase in immigration (34%) was greater than the percentage who wanted immigration to the U.S. cut (28%). Some 36% wanted the level of immigration unchanged (Younis, 2020).

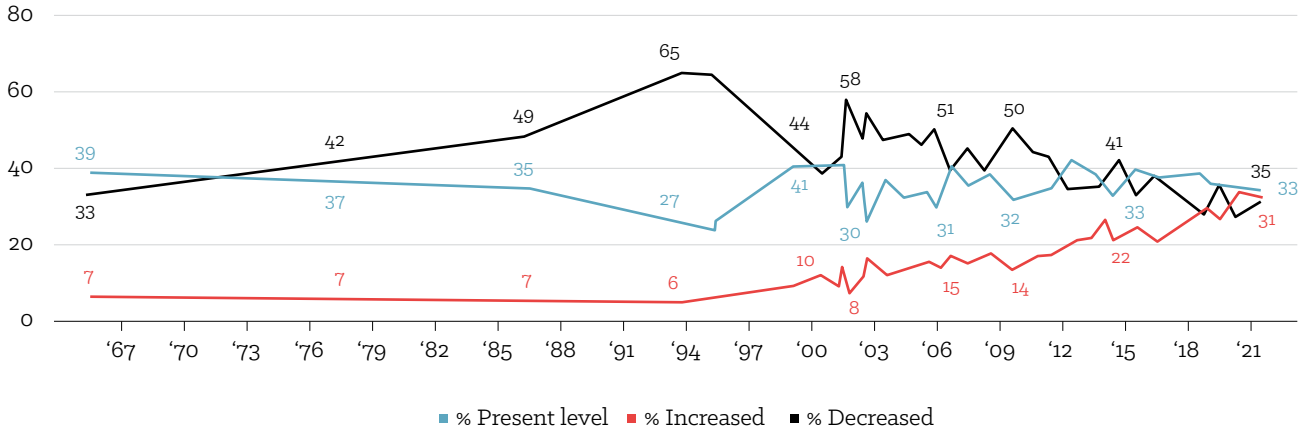
Other surveys come to similar conclusions. A September 2020 Pew Research poll found that, since 2016, the public has moved in a positive direction when considering the impact of the growing numbers of newcomers from other countries in the U.S. Sixty percent said that newcomers strengthen American society. At the time of the election of the Trump administration, in 2016, only 46% shared that opinion. During the Trump years there were year to year declines in the number of immigrants admitted to the United States. Perhaps paradoxically however, despite the anti-immigration discourse that characterized much of the Trump administration, the Gallup survey below reveals that negative public sentiment towards immigrants actually declined over the period 2016–2020. (See Survey 1).

Pew Research surveys point to important differences in opinion around immigration in the United States on the basis of partisan preferences. Hence, they observe that in September 2020 the desire for more immigration was driven by Democrats (50% of whom want increases compared with 22% in 2010) There was also stark difference between Biden and Trump voters when asked in 2020 whether newcomers strengthen America with 84% of Biden voters in agreement compared with 32% of Trump voters. However, both groups of voters moved 13% in a positive direction since 2016, from 71 to 84% for Biden voters, and from 19 to 32% for Trump voters (Pew Research, 2020).

CANADA, COVID-19 AND IMMIGRATION LEVELS

Over much of the period prior to the onset of the pandemic a majority of Canadians felt that the annual numbers of immigrants coming to Canada was about right. As seen in the Chart below, with only a few exceptions did the percentage saying there were too many not noticeably exceed those saying that there were too few immigrants. Coinciding with the increases in the numbers of Syrian refugees coming to Canada, in

SURVEY 1. IN YOUR VIEW, SHOULD IMMIGRATION BE KEPT AT ITS PRESENT LEVEL, INCREASED OR DECREASED.



the year 2016, the percentage contending that the number admitted was just about right reached a height for the period covered in the survey (1996–2019). (See Survey 2).

Examining the 26 polls commissioned by IRCC over the period 1996–2019 (as illustrated above), reveals that on average some 55% of survey respondents felt that the number of immigrants admitted to Canada was just right/about right, that some 31% felt that there were too many immigrants, that 12% felt that there were too few and 7% said that they didn't know or preferred not to answer. But the graph above shows that there was a marked shift in favorable views around levels of immigration commencing about the year 2004 and continuing over the subsequent 17 surveys. Based on surveys conducted over the period 2004–2019, those Canadians contending that there were too many immigrants averaged 26.5%. Not only did the pre-pandemic period in Canada feature relatively good support for immigration levels but compared with other immigrant receiving countries, Canadians were most likely to regard immigrants as strengthening the country rather than being a burden. Indeed, when compared with the United States a 2018 Pew Research Center Survey found that 68% agreed that immigrants strengthen the country whereas that view was held by 59% of Americans (Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor 2019). (See Pew Research table).

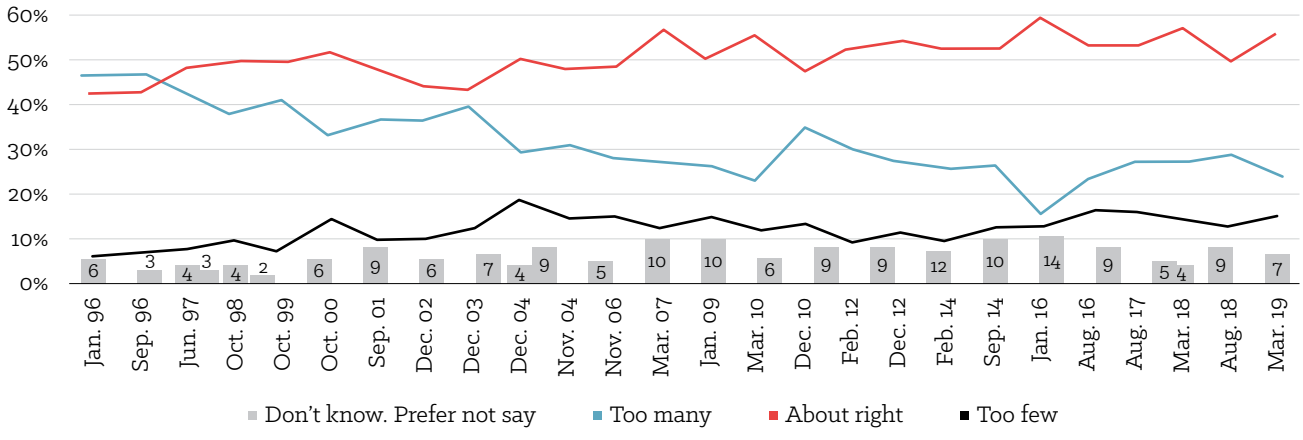
With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 there were significant declines in the numbers of immigrants in Canada (as seen in Table 1). The reductions appeared in line with the sentiment of most Canadians that felt there was a need to reduce the numbers of immigrant numbers in light of the global spread of the pandemic. In this regard, a survey conducted by Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies in July 2020 (Jedwab, 2020) reveals that Canadians were divided when asked whether they supported yet further increases to levels of immigration (a preamble to the question indicated that there had been reductions in the number of immigrants admitted to Canada over the months prior to the survey). Nonetheless, when asked about immigrants' role in Canada's longer-term economic recovery, some 61% said that they would help the recovery compared with 22% that believed they would hurt the recovery (and 18% saying that they didn't know).

Qualitative research aimed at further probing Canadian views around immigration during the pandemic conducted by IPSOS for IRCC confirms that most Canadians view immigrants as making a positive contribution to the economy. IPSOS focus group participants frequently cited the benefits of newcomers in general and in reflecting on the pandemic response mentioned newcomer contributions in support of essential services and long-term care homes. On the role of immigration in the COVID-19 recovery the focus group discussions tended to largely reinforce participants' pre-existing views towards immigration especially in reference to immigrants' contribution to the healthcare system. But this did not always translate into emphatic support for resuming levels of immigration (IRCC, 2020),

The quantitative segment of the IPSOS survey for IRCC confirmed some slippage in the percentage of Canadians reporting that the numbers of immigrants both current and projected were about right and a conversely a rise in the share that said that there were too many when compared with the 2004–2019 pre-pandemic average across the trend line calculated above.

The table below points to a ten-point increase over the 26.5% benchmark for the period in regards to the percentage reporting that the number of immigrants Canada intended to admit for 2021 were too many and a 6-point rise above that benchmark when asked whether the lifting of travel restrictions would yield for a return to pre-pandemic immigration levels (although the question did not specify the pre-pandemic number). It is worth noting that the questions posed by IPSOS

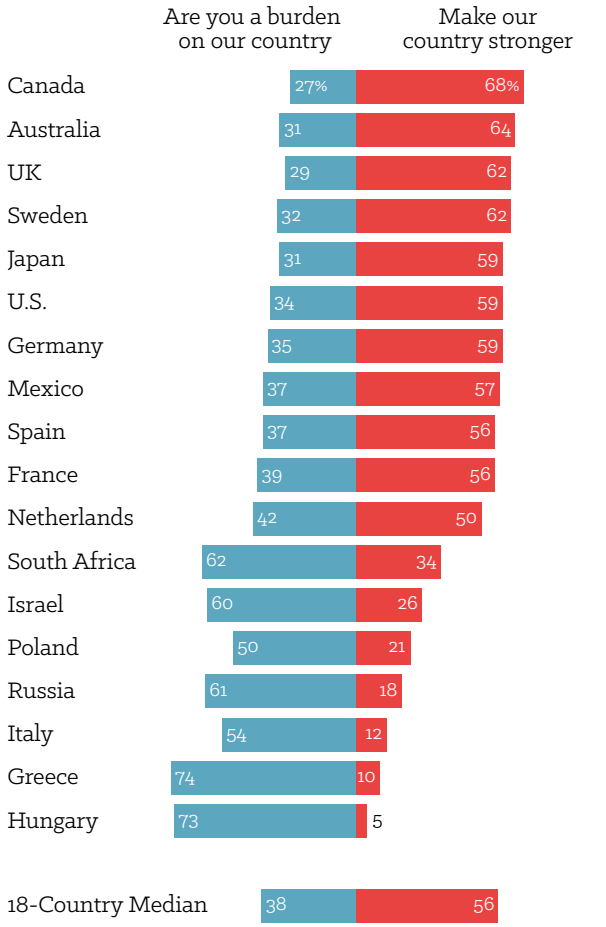
SURVEY 2. IN YOUR OPINION DO YOU FEEL THAT THERE ARE TOO MANY, TOO FEW OR ABOUT THE RIGHT NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS COMING TO CANADA?



Source: Introduction to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada: Public Opinion Research on Canadians' Attitudes towards Immigration.

PEW RESEARCH): HALF OR MORE IN MANY DESTINATION COUNTRIES VIEW IMMIGRANTS AS A STRENGH

Immigrants today make our country stronger because of their work and talents OR immigrants today are burden on our country because they take our jobs and social benefits.



Source: Soring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q54a. "Around the World. More Say Immigrants Are a Strengh Than a Burden." PEW Research Center

for IRCC differ from the standard question about immigration levels. They nonetheless suggest that there were concerns about current and future levels of immigration expressed at that time. (See Table 2).

By the fall of 2021 public opinion surveys confirmed that, despite the pandemic, positive views about immigration were dominant amongst Canadians. A September 2021 poll conducted by the Environics Institute found that "a clear majority supported robust levels of immigration (which at that time exceeded pre-pandemic levels), viewed immigrants as good for the Canadian economy (80 percent agreed that the economic impact of immigration is positive) and believed that newcomers were important for growing the country's population (57 per cent agreed that Canada needed more immigration to increase its population)," The Environics Institute survey revealed that the majority of survey respondents (65%) disagreed with the statement that there is too much immigration to Canada (Environics, 2021).

IDENTITY ISSUES AND PUBLIC OPINION ON IMMIGRATION

Between 2020 and 2021, much attention was directed at the health and economic concerns as to their potential impact on approval or disapproval of immigration levels. But identity issues remained an important facet in public concerns around immigration even if they appeared less present in conversations around immigration in the first two years of the pandemic. Pandemic aside, in Quebec debates over the effects of immigration on the vitality of the French language were not much deterred by the focus on the contagion.

Underlying support or opposition to robust levels of immigration are anxieties about immigrant integration, fears over diversity and concerns about personal identities. Assumptions are often made that openness to immigration implies generally positive attitudes across the spectrum of diversity issues.

TABLE 2. DO YOU FEEL THAT WOULD BE TOO MANY, TOO FEW OR ABOUT THE RIGHT NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS COMING TO CANADA?

Do you feel that would be too many, too few or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada currently?	Canada aims to admit 401,000 immigrants as permanent residents this year, many of whom are already in Canada as temporary residents.	Once travel restrictions are lifted, if the same number of immigrants were to come to Canada as before the COVID-19....
Too Many	36%	32%
Too Few	7%	9%
About the Right Number	46%	43%
Don't Know	10%	16%

Source: Prepared for: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada by IPSOS, 2020–21 Annual Tracking Study/Final report
https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/por-ef/immigration_refugees/2021/019-20-e/Instrument_appendix.htm

This is revealed in the table below which makes it clear that those Canadians who believe that there are too many immigrants coming to the country are far more likely than others to want immigrants to give up their customs and traditions and considerably more worried about losing their culture than those Canadians who feel that Canada is admitting either the right number or too few immigrants. (See Table 3).

PUBLIC OPINION ON AFGHAN REFUGEES AND UKRAINIAN DISPLACED PERSONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

In response to the refugee crisis in Afghanistan, Canada evacuated roughly 3,700 people from the country and expanded its humanitarian program to welcome 20,000 refugees. Like many other refugee receiving countries, many Canadians watched the troubling events unfold in the evacuation process with a great deal of concern. The pandemic did not appear to have an appreciable impact on the extent to which Canadians and Americans were prepared to admit Afghan refugees in their respective counties. The IPSOS survey for IRCC (2021) saw most Canadians view the initial 20 000 Afghan refugees to be admitted as either too few (23%) or about the right number (51%), Some 14% of Canadians surveyed felt the number of Afghan refugees would be too many (well below the overall average share of Canadians that felt there were too many immigrants). Some 14% felt that they didn't know or preferred not to answer.

The support for admitting Afghan refugees was further confirmed in the Fall of 2021 with the results of a national survey conducted by Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies. It revealed that some 55% of Canadians expressed approval for allowing the then projected 20 000 Afghan Refugees to come to Canada and 53% agreed that Canada has a responsibility to accept refugees into the country (Leger-Association for Canadian Studies, August, 2021) Similar sentiments about Afghan refugees were echoed by Americans as revealed in a CBS/YouGov poll where some 81% of Americans surveyed said the U.S. should help Afghans come to the U.S (Solender, 2021).

CONCLUSION: A TALE OF TWO DIVERGING MIGRATION NARRATIVES

The first year of the pandemic offered a clear demonstration of the importance of immigration for population growth in Canada as it did in the United States. Hence the reductions in immigration at the start of the pandemic saw record lows in Canada's population growth. Yet in both countries there remained a strong sense across the period 2020 and 2021 that immigrants made a positive contribution to the economy and that view was reinforced as Canadians and Americans observed the presence of immigrants on the front lines. Health concerns arising from the global spread of the pandemic were accompanied by border closures and international travel limits that served as the rationale for immigration reductions in 2020.

Afrouzi et al. (2022) contend that political leaders can change constituents' beliefs. Based on a large-scale survey on attitudes towards immigrants they confirm that leader messages matter. They maintain that leaders persuade when participants hear messages from sources perceived as reliable. Across the pandemic, Canadian policy makers maintained the position that immigrants were essential to post pandemic economic recovery and insisted as much in their public messaging. The consistent messaging assisted the federal government in restoring immigration levels well above the pre-pandemic numbers. By contrast the United States saw the reduced immigration numbers of 2020 continue into the next year and the message(s) around immigration were more ambiguous owing to the ongoing challenges associated with irregular migration on that country's southern border.

While both countries often describe themselves as nations of immigrants, the domestic discourse and respective geopolitics

TABLE 3. IN YOUR OPINION, DO YOU FEEL THERE ARE TOO MANY, TOO FEW, OR ABOUT THE RIGHT NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS COMING TO CANADA CROSS REFERENCES WITH SELECTED CONCERNS ABOUT IMMIGRATION.

Agree that/ Worry about	In your opinion, do you feel there are too many, too few, or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?			
	Too many	About the right number	Too few	**Diff too many vs too few**
Immigrants should be encouraged to give up their customs and traditions and become more like the rest of the Canadian population	58	24	12	**46**
…losing my culture	58	41	32	**26**

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, March 10–18, 2021.

around immigration diverge in important ways that need to be considered when undertaking comparisons of public opinion around migration in Canada and the United States. Examining the relationship between public policies around immigration and shifts in public opinion merits deeper analyses of the evolving identities and ideologies in both countries so as to better explain that which accounts for the differences between them.

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