THE HUMANITARIAN AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS FOR CANADIAN SUPPORT OF IMMIGRATION

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Over 100 million people worldwide are currently displaced due to conflict or persecution, according to the United Nations' Refugee Agency – a number which has grown significantly in recent years.[1] With ongoing wars and escalating climate change, more and more people can be expected to seek refuge. In this context, it is important for countries such as Canada to remain open to welcoming refugees. Fortunately, there is evidence that, among Canadians themselves at least, that openness is on the rise.

Canadians have been recognized as generally having a positive attitude towards immigration. International studies find attitudes more welcoming in Canada than in most other countries. In 2020, for instance, Gallup reported that Canada scored the highest out of 145 countries on its Migrant Acceptance Index.[2] Canadians have also become more open to immigration over the past few years, despite the pressures and uncertainties unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same week that Statistics Canada reported that immigrants now form a greater share of the country's population than ever before (23 percent), the Environics Institute reported that more Canadians than ever before disagree with the proposition that the country is accepting too many immigrants.[3]

This openness towards immigration is explained in part by Canada's ability to select highly skilled immigrants with the potential to contribute to the country's economic growth and prosperity. Since the early 2000s, large majorities of

1 Homepage, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accessed August 23, 2023, www.unhcr.org;"Refugee Data Finder," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accessed August 23, 2023, www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics

2 Neli Espipova et al., "Canada is No. 1 for Migrants, US in Sixth Place," Gallup, September 23, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/320669/canada-migrants-sixth-place.aspx

3 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants Make Up the Largest Share of the Population in Over 150 years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm; "Homepage," Environics Institute, accessed August 23, 2023, www.environicsinstitute.org/home; Keith Neuman, Canadian Public Opinion about Immigration and Refugees – Fall 2022 (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2022), www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees---fall-2022

Canadians have agreed that immigration has an overall positive impact on the economy of Canada (in 2022, the proportion agreeing reached 85 percent).[4] In 2020, in the wake of new restrictions on immigration adopted in the United States, seven in ten Canadians said the country should try to encourage skilled immigrants who are denied entry into the United States to choose to come to Canada instead.[5]

Support for immigration in Canada, however, is not solely driven by considerations of economic gain. Many Canadians who are supportive of immigration have other motivations. In the case of those who think immigration makes Canada a better place, for instance, the most common justification is that immigrants contribute to the country's diversity or multicultural character. About one in two pro-immigration Canadians explain their support in these terms, compared to one in three who give a reason related to immigrants' contribution to the country's economy.[6] No less importantly, a growing proportion of Canadians are supportive of immigration for humanitarian reasons in addition to economic ones. In 2022, three in four agreed that Canada should accept more immigrants from parts of the world that are experiencing major conflicts.[7] This proportion in agreement was the highest since the question was first asked in 1993, and roughly double the proportion that agreed twenty years ago (in 2001). At the same time, public skepticism about refugee claimants has fallen steadily over the past 35 years. In 1987, 79 percent of Canadians agreed that most people claiming to be refugees were not real refugees. By 2022, the proportion agreeing had fallen to 36 percent; a greater proportion of Canadians (46 percent) now disagree with this claim.[8]

Some question whether this commitment to accepting refugees is somewhat thin, because it is more likely to be expressed in the case of European refugees – such as those displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine – than of refugees fleeing Asia or Africa.[9] This may be true in terms of the policies and processes in place that determine how many refugees Canada accepts, and from where. But in terms of the Canadian public, there is, in fact, solid support for refugees no matter where they come from.

In its 2022 *Focus Canada* study, the Environics Institute tested whether there is more support for refugees fleeing conflict from a European country compared to those escaping from a predominantly Muslim one. We did this by randomly varying the wording of one survey question. The experiment found that the origin of refugees does matter for some Canadians, but not many: eight in ten Canadians agree with accepting more immigrants escaping conflicts in countries "such as Ukraine," compared to just over seven in ten who hold the same view when the question mentions countries "such as Afghanistan." The actual difference in the level of support was only eight percentage points. Fewer than one in four disagree with accepting more of either group of refugees.

Perhaps a better indication of how welcoming Canadians are to refugees – regardless of where they come from – is the views of refugees themselves. This is now possible, thanks to a new report on the experiences of Syrian refugees who came to Canada in 2015 and 2016.[10] The study is based on interviews with 305 Syrian refugees who arrived in Canada between 2015 and 2016, focusing on their lived experiences and their situation today, seven years later. It documents the difficulties faced by those arriving under such circumstances, especially in terms of language barriers, difficulties finding both employment commensurate with their skills, and suitable housing. But at the same time, it finds that 96 percent of the Syrian refugees surveyed say they felt generally welcomed by their local community in Canada, 75 percent feel they are seen positively by other Canadians, and only three percent have plans to eventually leave this country.

Moreover, when asked what they like least about living in Canada, the most common response among Syrian refugees was – not surprisingly – the weather (mentioned by 32 percent), followed by financial and economic difficulties, and the distance from home. Racism in Canada was mentioned, but only by four percent of the refugees interviewed (that said, 48 percent said they had felt discriminated against at some point since their arrival in Canada).

These positive findings should be celebrated, but not used to cover up the problems that remain. For instance, the Survey on Employment and Skills, conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with the Diversity Institute and the Future Skills Centre, confirms that immigrants are more likely than average to experience discrimination in the workplace based on their ethnicity or race; the proportion experiencing such discrimination is even higher among racialized

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Kandice Pardy, "Why are Some Refugees More Welcome in Canada than Others?," *Policy Options*, February 27, 2023, https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/february-2023/ukrainian-afghan-refugees

10 Keith Neuman, Canadian Public Opinion about Immigration and Refugees - Fall 2022 (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2022), www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees---fall-2022

immigrants.[11] Another recent Environics Institute study finds that experiences of discrimination in Canada are particularly high among second generation immigrants who are racialized, suggesting that the country is falling short in its efforts to fulfill its promise of extrending a better to immigrant families.

Work remains to be done to ensure fair treatment and secure equitable opportunities for newcomer Canadians. In Canada, however, this work can unfold in an environment that continues to be considered one of the most welcoming in the world for migrants from all backgrounds.

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