Looking Back to Look Forward: Canada's Demographic Revolution, 1951-2026

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Between 1951 and 2026, Canada shifted from a population sustained mainly by natural increase and anchored in British-French, Christian identities to one renewed almost entirely through immigration and marked by growing ethnic, religious, and Indigenous diversity. Secularization has advanced alongside the rapid growth of non-Christian faiths, while rising public concern about immigration signals tensions between diversity and cohesion. Equally consequential has been a parallel "measurement revolution": the introduction of visible minority categories and the normalization of multiple ethnic origins have recast identity as layered, self-defined, and evolving. Canada's demographic future will remain an ongoing negotiation of belonging rather than a fixed endpoint.

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This edition of Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens is devoted to Canada's demographic future at a moment when the country's population trajectory is being reconsidered. After several years of exceptionally rapid growth driven largely by immigration, recent policy adjustments have begun to slow that pace and have renewed debate about the social, economic, linguistic, and regional consequences of demographic change. Much of that discussion understandably asks where Canada is headed. Yet any serious assessment of the future must also begin by asking where the country has come from and how profoundly the forces shaping its population have already changed.

I propose to do this by comparing Canada in 1951 with Canada in 2026. Doing so offers a particularly interesting vantage point as over that time the country moved from a population sustained mainly by natural increase as one whose growth is almost entirely dependent on immigration. In 1951 the population was mainly organized around British-French duality and Christian identities and has since become a considerably more ethnically and religiously diverse with a demographic landscape in ongoing flux. This historical perspective does not provide a simple forecast: demographic change is never linear, and policy choices can accelerate, slow, or redirect it. It does, however, show that Canada's demographic future will emerge from transformations already well underway-in the sources of population growth, the composition of immigration, the regional distribution of newcomers, and even the categories through which Canadians understand and report who they are.

In 1951, Canada was a country that perhaps saw itself as demographically predictable and rooted in a relatively simple conception of identity. With a population of just over 14 million, growth was driven overwhelmingly by natural increase rather than immigration, accounting for over 90 percent of population change in the preceding decade. The country's ethnic composition reflected this pattern: it was largely shaped by people of British and French origin, with English, French, Scottish, and Irish identities dominating the social landscape. Religion, too, was deeply embedded in this structure. Christianity was nearly universal, and fewer than one percent of Canadians reported no religion.Representing just over one percent of the reported population, indigenous peoples were marginalized in demographic and political terms and were often targeted for assimilation (which quite regrettably were sometimes described as being in their best interest). Immigration was selective and largely European reinforcing rather than transforming the dominant cultural framework.

Seventy-five years later, by 2026, the demographic landscape has profoundly shifted. The country's population currently exceeds 41 million and as noted above the population is increasingly renewed through external flows of people, cultures, and beliefs. The ethnic composition of the country illustrates this transformation vividly. While "Canadian" remains the most frequently reported ethnic origin, it now coexists with a wide array of identities reflecting global migration patterns. South Asians have emerged as the largest non-European single-origin group, while Chinese, Black, Filipino, and other communities have grown significantly . At the same time, the rise of multiple ethnic origin reporting—now accounting for roughly one-third of responses—suggests that identity is no longer experienced as singular or inherited, but increasingly as layered and hybrid .

The Indigenous population has also grown substantially, both numerically and in its visibility within national discourse, now representing an estimated six percent of the population. This growth, alongside broader recognition of Indigenous rights and histories, has redefined Canadian identity to include not only diversity but also reconciliation.

Religious change has been equally striking. Where Christianity once defined the overwhelming majority, in the 2021 census it accounts for just over half of the population and continues to decline . The most significant shift has been the rise of those reporting no religious affiliation, now the largest single category at over one-third of Canadians. At the same time, non-Christian religions—particularly Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism—have grown rapidly, reflecting immigration from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The result is a religious landscape that is not only more diverse but also more secular, with institutional religion playing a less central role in shaping identity.

Yet this transformation has not been without challenges. Public opinion data suggests growing concern about immigration levels, with a majority of Canadians in 2025 expressing the view that there are too many immigrants . Trust in immigrants and refugees remains relatively low compared to trust in neighbours or those sharing similar backgrounds . Intergroup relations—particularly between religious communities such as Jews and Muslims, or between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations—are often perceived as strained . These tensions highlight the ongoing negotiation between diversity and cohesion in a rapidly changing society.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Canada's demographic evolution will depend heavily on immigration levels and the countries from which newcomers arrive. Projections suggest that by 2026 immigrants and their children could soon make up half of the population , and that visible minority or racialized groups could approach half of all

Canadians within a few decades. South Asian, Chinese, Black, and Filipino communities are expected to grow substantially, reshaping the ethnic composition of the country further.

A crucial dimension of Canada's demographic and identity transformation—often overlooked but deeply consequential—is the evolution in how identity itself is measured. The contrast between 1951 and 2026 is not only about who Canadians are, but also about how they are counted, categorized, and how they understand and report themselves within those categories.

In 1951 and throughout the immediate postwar period, identity was measured in ways that assumed singularity. Census categories reflected a worldview in which individuals were expected to belong to one ethnic origin, one religion, and, implicitly, one cultural identifier. Ethnic origin questions largely captured lineage tied to European ancestry, reinforcing the dominance of British and French identities. There was little conceptual or methodological space for hybridity or multiple affiliations. Identity, in statistical terms, was something inherited and fixed.

Over time, however, both the composition of the population and the conceptualization of identity began to shift. One of the most important changes was the introduction of the "visible minority" concept into Canadian census measurement in the late 20th century, following the Employment Equity Act of 1986. This marked a significant departure from earlier approaches. For the first time, the census explicitly attempted to capture racial identification as a social category, recognizing that differences in lived experience were not only about ancestry or nationality but also about how individuals were perceived within Canadian society. The absence of such a category in 1951 reflects not only a different demographic reality but also a different understanding of (in)equality and diversity.

At the same time, the measurement of ethnic origin (s) underwent a profound transformation. Where earlier censuses implicitly encouraged singular responses, later iterations increasingly allowed—and eventually normalized—multiple responses. By 2021, a substantial share of Canadians reported more than one ethnic origin, signaling a shift from identity as a single lineage to identity as a composite of histories, affiliations, and personal choices. This change is not merely technical. It reflects the lived reality of a population shaped by intermarriage, migration, and the blending of cultures over generations. The rise of "Canadian" as an ethnic response, alongside multiple-origin reporting, further illustrates how identity has become both more symbolic and more self-defined.

This evolution in measurement has interacted directly with demographic change. Post-1960s immigration introduced unprecedented diversity into Canada, but it is the census's ability to capture multiple identities that has allowed this diversity to be fully expressed. In other words, Canada's "demographic revolution" is inseparable from a parallel "measurement revolution." The categories themselves have expanded to reflect new social realities, and in doing so, they have also shaped how Canadians think about who they are.

Religion presents a somewhat different case. Census questions on religion have remained comparatively stable, continuing to emphasize singular affiliation. Yet here too, the transformation has been profound—not in how identity is measured, but in how it is expressed. The dramatic rise of those reporting "no religion," from less than one percent in 1951 to more than one-third of the population in recent decades, represents a fundamental reconfiguration of the religious landscape. This shift signals not just greater secularization, but a broader change in the role of religion as an identity marker. For many Canadians, identity is no longer anchored in formal religious belonging, even as religious diversity increases through immigration.

Taken together, these changes point to a broader redefinition of identities in Canada. Where once identity was measured as singular, inherited, and largely unchanging, it is now understood as multiple, constructed, and evolving. The introduction of new categories such as visible minority status, the normalization of multiple ethnic responses, and the growing prominence of non-affiliation in religion all reflect a society in which identity is less about fitting into predefined boxes and more about navigating overlapping and sometimes fluid affiliations.

Looking forward, the way identity is measured will continue to evolve alongside the population itself. As immigration sources diversify further and as younger generations increasingly embrace hybrid and transnational identities, pressure will grow to refine existing categories or create new ones. Questions around race, ethnicity, language, and belonging may become even more complex, particularly as distinctions between first, second, and third generations blur.

As seen below, **Table 1** offers a vivid illustration of the extent to which Canada's ethnic composition has been transformed. In 1951, French, English, Scottish and Irish origins together accounted for approximately 78 percent of the population, reflecting a country still overwhelmingly defined through a British-French and broader northwestern European framework. By 2021, the combined number reporting Canadian, Québécois, French, English, Scottish or Irish as a single ethnic origin represented only about 37 percent of all single-origin responses—well below half—although these identities remained considerably more prevalent when multiple origins were included. The Indigenous population also rose markedly, from approximately 166,000 people, or 1.1 percent, in 1951 to more than 2.2 million, or 6 percent, in 2021. This increase is especially significant given the long history of assimilationist policies that suppressed Indigenous identity and likely contributed to substantial undercounting in earlier censuses. At the same time, populations of non-European origin that were absent or scarcely visible in the 1951 categories had become central to Canada's demographic profile by 2021: more than 1.7 million people reported Chinese origins and more than 2.3 million reported South Asian origins, with the single-origin population of each group alone exceeding one million. These changes reflect not only immigration and population growth, but also an expanding willingness and capacity to recognize identities that earlier census frameworks either marginalized or failed to measure.

Ultimately, the Canadian experience suggests that identity is not only shaped by demographic change but also by the method (s) used to measure it. The shift from singular to multiple identities is both a reflection of societal transformation and a driver of it—reshaping how Canadians see themselves and how they are seen in return.

In this context, Canadian identity is likely to become even more fluid and contested. The decline of traditional markers such as religion and single ethnic origin, combined with the rise of hybrid identities and transnational ties, suggests that future Canadians will define themselves in increasingly individualized ways. At the same time, questions of belonging and identities will remain central, particularly as demographic diversity deepens.

From the much less diverse Canada of 1951 to the complex, pluralistic society of 2026, the evolution of Canadian identities has been inseparable from demographic change. If the past seventy-five years are any indication, the future will not bring a fixed endpoint but rather an ongoing process—one in which identity continues to adapt to the realities of migration, diversity, and the shifting balance between unity and difference.

Table 1

Canada's ethnic origin declarations, 1951 and 2021

Ethnic Origin(s)	1951	% Total	2021	% Total	Single ethnic origin	Multiple ethnic origin
Total	14 009 429		36 328 475		23 426 010	12 902 470
Canadian	--	--	5 677 205	15.6%	4 186 840	1 490 370
French	4,319,167	31%	4 011 670	11%	1 525 770	2 485 900
Quebecois	--	--	981 640	2. 7%	721785	259855
English	3,630,344	26%	5 322 830	14.6%	1 134 055	4 188 780
Scottish	1,547,470	11%	4 392 200	12%	559 570	3 832 625
Irish	1,439,635	10%	4 413 120	12.1%	593 865	3 819 260
German	619,995	4.5%	2 955 700	8.1%	508 180	2 447 515
Ukrainian	395,043	3%	1 258 635	3.5%	273 210	985 425
Dutch	264,267	2%	988 585	2.7%	278 830	709 760
Polish	219,846	1.5%	982 815	2.7%	238 710	744 110
Indigenous	165,607	1.1%	2 204 475	6%	927 405	1 277 075
Italian	152,245	1.1%	1 546 390	4.2%	671 515	874 880
Chinese	--	--	1 713 870	4.7%	1 372 210	341 665
South Asian	--	--	2 322 895	6.4%	1 763 830	559 065

Sources: Census of Canada, 1951 and Census of Canada, 2026