CANADIAN IDENTITY – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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No need to travel through time to identify turning points in Canadian thinking and understanding of ourselves. Still fresh in our minds is the COVID-19 pandemic. The unification of Canadians in the early days was followed by some degree of polarization in the thoughts and values toward public health measures, the media, and democratic institutions in general – though perhaps not to the same extent as our neighbours to the south.

The pandemic also put into question some historical sources of Canadian pride, notably Canada's universal health-care system, which has become strained with staff shortages and postponed surgeries and routine preventative care. The labour market and economy also took a hit, and for the Canadian identity, it magnified the divide between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Challenges to job and income stability was most often experienced by the lower-paying and essential sectors (e.g., grocery store clerks), while knowledge-based jobs were less impacted, as workers were able to shift online. This was coupled with the possible lasting impacts on upward economic mobility for the younger generation and immigrants, brought on by the rising cost of living and financial barriers to homeownership.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, pride in Canadian history was put to the test, as the country witnessed the discovery of unmarked burial sites at previous residential school locations. These injustices and other examples of systemic racism was punctuated by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that sparked protests in Canada and around the world over discrimination faced by Indigenous and racialized people. These events ultimately provoked Canadians to think about themselves and our traditional sources of pride.

Have these transformative events signaled a change in being Canadian, or was there ever a single Canadian identity to begin with? Questions on national identity can be a source of much esoteric debate, though data can help simplify and make sense of who we were, who we are, and where we are headed.

Over the years, Canada's identity as a country has continuously changed, being shaped by shifts in the socio-demographic landscape of Canada and the intertwined dimensions of social change, geopolitical events (e.g., wars, the Great Depression) and policy shifts. And while identity, in itself, can be an interesting declaration of who Canadians are and what they stand for, the notion of how Canadians view themselves and others can have implications on our social cohesion, civic engagement and participation, and connections with others. It also manifests into the degree Canadians believe that everyone should have a chance to succeed, regardless of differences in gender, age, ethnicity, language, disability status, or sexual orientation.

Looking at the history of this country, the sheer pace of social and demographic change in the past 50 years is unprecedented, and yet for the most part, we live alongside one another peacefully. The crime rate has been generally decreasing since the 1990s, and our social services, open-access political systems, and overall quality of life are often the envy of the world, consistently ranking among the top internationally. In many ways, Canada is a country that has successfully channeled the resources and talents of individuals from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds.

Our diversity is in large part thanks to immigration,

combined with the cultural richness flowing from Canada's Indigenous groups who have lived on this land for thousands of years. European settlers represented the bulk of new immigrants during the first 100 years after Confederation. And, while not a homogenous group, the shift in immigration policy in the 1960s meant the growth in the plurality of ethnic backgrounds alongside languages other than English and French, as well as non-Christian religions, notably Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism.

In 2021, the majority of immigrants were from Asia, including the Middle East, and an increasing share were born in Africa. Meanwhile, the share of immigrants born in Europe continued to drop, going from 62% of immigrants in 1971 to 10% in 2021.[1]

Reflecting the change in immigrant source countries and their descendants, 1 in 4 people now belong to a racialized group, compared to fewer than 1 in 20 people in the early 1980s. This proportion is projected to grow between 38% and 43% by 2041.[2] Indeed, with the recent federal *Immigration plan to grow the economy*,[3] it is expected that both population growth and diversity will accelerate at an impressive pace.

Currently, in the two large urban centres, racialized Canadians already represent the majority of the population, standing at 59% in Toronto and 58% in Vancouver. And, while Toronto and Vancouver are currently the two most racialized major cities, other areas of Canada will likely see changes in the demographic composition in the future, with an increasing share of immigrants residing in other cities in Ontario, notably Ottawa and Kingston, as well as Atlantic Canada.

In addition to the racialized populations, Indigenous population are increasing and representing a larger share of the population. In 2021, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis accounted for 5% of the Canadian population, up from less than 3% in the mid-1990s.

This growing cultural mosaic, where different groups coexist and flourish together, has often defined Canada's identity, both within our country and on the world stage. Indeed, the official multiculturalism policy of Canada is often a source of national pride and a stark contrast to the melting pot system, emphasized in other immigrant-receiving countries. Does this tenet still define our national identity? Does the idea of multiculturalism envelop the intersecting identities, based not only on culture but age, gender, region, disability status, sexual orientation, and various other markers of individual identity? Are we moving towards a more individualistic sense of identity, and possibly a more divisive society?

Data tell us that while we may be increasingly

1 Statistics Canada. 2022 (October). "Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians", *The Daily*. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm

2 Statistics Canada. 2022 (September). "Canada in 2041: A larger, more diverse population with greater differences between regions", *The Daily*. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220908/dq220908a-eng.htm

3 See An Immigration Plan to Grow the Economy - Canada.ca (November 2022). www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/11/an-immigration-plan-to-grow-the-economy.html

diverse in a growing number of ways with potential challenges to social cohesion, Canadians continue to stand united in the fundamental values of equality and protection of human rights. With it, there is a mutual respect and responsibility to uphold these values. It is perhaps these shared values, combined with our diversity, that makes Canada stand out internationally, and what defines us as Canadians.

One of the clearest examples of this collective value system is the pride in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Adopted in 1982, the vast majority of Canadians (93%) still consider the Charter an important symbol of Canadian identity, guaranteeing the rights to equality, democracy, and mobility.[4] While this symbol and other national symbols are largely conceptual representations of a country's identity, they can have a positive effect on bonding and emotional attachment to our country.

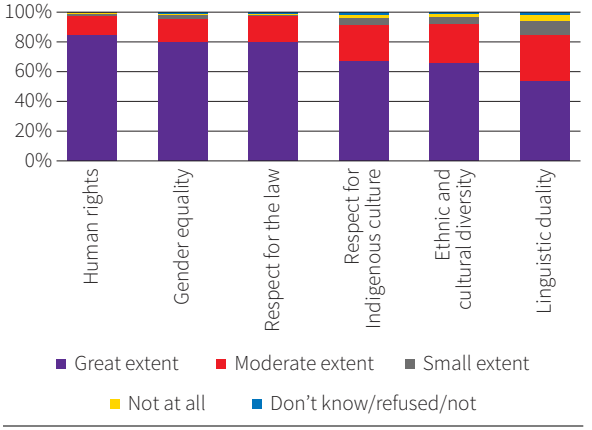
The appreciation of the Charter is perhaps a tangible representation of the values that Canadians hold dear to their figurative hearts, including human rights, gender equality, ethnical and cultural diversity, linguistic duality and respect for Indigenous culture.

Nearly all Canadians (98%) personally agree with the value of human rights, with 85% agreeing to a great extent (Chart 1). Similarly, 97% believe in the respect for the law and 95% for gender equality. Other values are also highly regarded among Canadians. Take for example ethnic and cultural diversity. Overall, 92% personally agree with this value – identical to the proportion who agree with the value of respecting Indigenous culture.

And, just as Canada is diverse, so are our personal adherence to these values. Women, immigrants and particularly recent immigrants, and Francophones are generally more likely to personally hold these values. Also, Indigenous peoples, whether First Nations, Inuit, or Métis, are more likely than non-Indigenous people to believe to a great extent in the need to respect Indigenous culture (84% versus 67%).

This possible rosy picture of Canada, however, may need to be tempered when we draw the distinction between personal belief systems and perceptions of collective Canadian values. Across a range of values, people are less inclined to identify them as shared Canadians values. In 2020, 92%

FIGURE 1. NEARLY ALL CANADIANS PERSONALLY AGREE WITH THE VALUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS.



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey on Social Identity, 2020

4 Based on results from the General Social Survey on Social Identity (2020). www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5024

of Canadians believed human rights as a shared Canadian value, with 57% feeling to a great extent that Canadians valued human rights. This was the only value where more than half of the population strongly believed it was a Canadian ideal. And even for this shared value, there has been a decline over time in people's beliefs as a shared value.

The share of Canadians believing to a great extent in the shared collective values of human rights, gender equality, ethnic and cultural diversity, linguistic duality and Indigenous culture has dropped since 2013. The largest drop was seen for gender equality, where 36% of Canadians agreed to a great degree that it was a shared value in 2020, compared to nearly half (47%) a decade earlier. A similar drop was evident for the shared value of ethnic and cultural diversity (30% versus 41% in 2013).

Perhaps these decreases reflect the ongoing challenges in Canadian society. There are indications of differential treatment and opportunity. Discrimination against racialized groups in Canadian society has been increasing. For instance, a higher percentage of Black Canadians experienced discrimination in 2019 compared to 2014 (46% versus 28%).[5] Similarly, experiences of discrimination were more prevalent among Indigenous people in 2019 (33%) than they were in 2014 (23%).

And the pandemic appears to have further exacerbated these issues. Discrimination based on race and ethnicity increased since the start of the pandemic, particularly against Asian groups.[6] Also coinciding with the start of the pandemic, police-reported hate crimes have been increasing over the past few years, with the largest increase between 2019 and 2020 (37% increase), including hate crimes based on race or ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.[7]

Having a balanced view of our country and our national identity – both the good and the bad – is critical moving forward as a country. No doubt there are challenges to social cohesion that we must tackle in order to survive and thrive as a country. Indeed, this need will be ever-growing, as we will increasingly rely on immigrants and their full integration into our knowledge-based labour market, in the face of an aging population and the corresponding demands on our social systems. Correspondingly, we will need to reverse the downward trend in immigrants' propensity to become Canadian citizens.[8] Doing so, will ensure that new Canadians and their progeny stay and succeed in Canada for generations to come.

So, what is the answer to the big question of Canadian identity? It is conceivably a combination of intersecting identities living alongside one

5 Cotter, A. 2022 (February). "Experiences of discrimination among the Black and Indigenous populations in Canada, 2019" *Juristat*. Catalogue no. 85–002–X. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00002-eng.htm

6 Statistics Canada. 2022 (March). "Discrimination before and since the start of the pandemic", *Infographics*. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2022021-eng.htm

7 Wang, J. H. and G. Moreau. "Police-reported hate crime in Canada, 2020", *Juristat*. Catalogue no. 85-002-X. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2022001/article/00005-eng.htm

8 Hou, F. and G. Picot. 2019. "Trends in Citizenship Rate Among New Immigrants to Canada", *Economic Insights*. Catalogue no. 11-626-X. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2019015-eng.htm

another in relative harmony, guided by a common set of values. At the same time, Canadians do not have their heads in the sand. They know there are areas of improvement, but on a personal level, they appear ready and willing to ensure that what makes us Canadian remains intact, now and into the future.