

Canadian's Attitudes Toward Immigration in the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

Canada depends on immigration for economic and demographic growth. But fears of COVID-19 and attempts to control its spread have resulted in governments closing borders and/or restricting immigration. Concurrently, increased discrimination against people from Asia, and immigrants in general, has been observed. Based on a national survey, this paper examines whether Canadian's attitudes toward immigration have shifted with the pandemic. Results suggest that Canadians have concerns regarding immigration and would prefer to see immigration numbers reduced. Increased racism and discrimination directed toward immigrants and racialized individuals is also noted.

Keywords: Canada; COVID-19; immigration; attitudes

Introduction

Immigration can propel economic growth, population growth, and higher wages and productivity (Cooke and Kemeny, 2017; Kemeny and Cooke, 2018; Gómez-Flors and Alguacil 2018; Nathan, 2011; OECD, 2015; Orrenius and Gullo, 2018; Ottaviano and Peri, 2012). But international migration can also represent a sensitive or divisive topic. Such divisions are evidenced by the rise of anti-immigrant populist political parties in countries including Italy, Hungary, France, and Germany (amongst others). In many cases, immigration is seen as one of the most pressing issues facing Europe (Heath and Richards 2016), with refugee flows in 2015 leading to border closures and attempts to restrict refugee flows throughout the continent (Koca 2019). Although the 1990s saw more refugees across Germany and Austria, journalists framed events in 2015 as a crisis, with the right further politicizing it. In the United States, the 2016 presidential election and subsequent actions taken by the Trump administration, including barring entry from certain Muslim countries and gutting immigration policy have placed a spotlight on immigration in public and political debates that continued to reverberate during the 2020 presidential campaign. Although President Biden has rolled back some of former President Trump's immigration legislation (i.e., Martin 2020), an underlying fear of immigration remains among large portions of the American population and across party lines (Daniller 2019). Likewise, the UK's Brexit 2016

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referendum was partially aided by a hardening anti-immigrant stance, with the leave campaign offering an unnuanced and largely negative perspective on the issue.

So far, Canada has largely escaped such discussions around its immigration policy, although it is fool hardy to believe that what happens amongst some of Canada's closest allies will not also seep into domestic political and economic discussions, ultimately impacting the country's economic and demographic future. For example, events including an influx of asylum seekers into Canada in 2018 and 2019 lead to greater calls for immigration control (see, for example, Hyndman and Mountz, 2020; Kirkey, 2020). The emergence of a new federal political party that encouraged anti-immigrant sentiments and fielded candidates in the 2019 general election suggested that attitudes toward immigration could be changing. At least one poll in 2019 (EnviroNics 2019) indicated that while Canadians were more positive than negative about the benefits of immigration, anti-immigrant views were observed, and were more common in the province of Alberta, amongst older Canadians, and the less educated. Conversely, younger Canadians and individuals with a university education were more positive of immigration.

COVID-19 may also represent a threat to immigration, with calls to stop immigration because of the rapid rise in unemployment. At the same time, overt as well as systemic discrimination against Chinese and the broader immigrant population more generally was observed to increase (Hango 2020; Wu et al. 2020), with incidents reflecting fears that immigrants were, in part, responsible for its spread.

This paper is motivated by the need to understand potential shifts in attitudes toward immigrants and immigration and reports on the results of a survey of attitudes toward immigration amongst Canadians during the summer of 2020, with results suggesting that Canadian's attitudes toward immigration may have hardened.

Background: Understanding attitudes to immigration

International migration has long been associated with economic motivations and individual responses. In a globalized world, immigrants provide a quick response to labor demand and enable economic growth. The neoliberal globalization of trade, finance, production, and culture has encouraged the cross-border migration of labor, with globalization and immigration reinforcing each other (Fielding 2016). Like many countries, Canada is an aging society that needs immigrants to fuel its population and labour force growth, accepting over 300,000 immigrants each year. As an aging society, immigration is the leading agent of population change in Canada (Bélanger 2005; Downie 2010), with immigration alleviating and filling labour and skill gaps, spurring innovation (OECD 2015), and augmenting the workforce, productivity, and wages (Tu 2010; Yaassad and Fields 2018).

Despite its economic and demographic benefits, immigration is often associated with strong reactions closely linked to economic self-interest, social and cultural identities, and political viewpoints (Card et al. 2005). Increasingly, the movement of individuals at the global scale has been challenged by the rise of populism which has parlayed a rejection of immigration and social and cultural change into political agendas and support (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Viewing immigration as a material and cultural threat to society (Englund, 2018; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014), populism draws its strength from opposition to mass immigration, the surrender of national sovereignty (i.e., of border and immigration control, and economic policy), and cultural liberalization (Galston 2018), leading populists to call for cutting or



limiting immigration. In the UK, for example, while the Brexit vote reflected a complex mix of differential voting behaviour by age and urban/rural differences and buttressing the National Health Service, resentment towards immigrants and fear of diluting or losing English identity (see, for example, Anderson 2013) also partially drove the Brexit vote (Peters 2018). Europe's immigration crisis in 2015 furthered anti-immigrant agendas, with parties such as the Alternatives for Germany (AfD), the ANO party in the Czech Republic, France's National Front, the Freedom Party in Austria, and Italy's Northern League, amongst others, capturing these fears.

Anti-immigrant sentiments and the rise of populism has also been driven by a sense among many in the developed world that they see less opportunity for themselves (and their children) than in the past, despite increased wealth, technological advances and longer, healthier lives. Deindustrialization and the loss of manufacturing in traditional sectors, globalization, the weakening of labor unions, the off-shoring of jobs, the rise of the 'gig' economy and temporary work, stagnating wages, public fiscal restraint and the erosion of public welfare programs have reinforced this fear (Inglehart and Norris 2016). Beyond the political response and economic impacts, immigrants have been stigmatized or blamed for the spread of disease and infection (Piché 2020), evidenced by the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) with Chinese Canadians bearing the brunt of the blame and subjected to instances of violence and threats (Wilkinson 2020), along with being portrayed as 'SARS suspects' (Dong 2008).

The current pandemic echoes SARS. At the peak of the first COVID-19 wave and with lockdown restrictions in effect, unemployment rates in Canada soared as individuals were forced out of work (Hou et al. 2020). Concerns with the spread of the virus prompted Canada to close its borders and temporarily shutter its immigration offices in the spring of 2020. At the same time, travel restrictions and political rhetoric, especially from the Trump administration that continuously referred to COVID-19 as the 'China virus', was reflected in an increasing number of anti-immigrant or racist comments at the local level, both in Canada and globally. Conspiracy theories that China had manufactured COVID-19 further fueled anti-Chinese sentiments (Wilkinson 2020).

Calls for dramatically reducing the number of immigrants were heard, including a call by Quebec's premier to reduce the number of immigrants coming into the province. Echoing SARS experiences, incidents of racism and discrimination also increased, with the media reporting widely that Chinese and other Asian groups were stigmatized (see, for example, Aguilera 2020; Hango 2020; Wu et al. 2020). Research reinforced media reports, with immigrants almost twice as likely as the Canadian born to report that they were afraid of discrimination against them (Hango 2020; Leger 2020). Visible minorities also reported a perceived increase in the frequency of discrimination since the start of the pandemic (Heidinger and Cotter, 2020; ICC-Leger 2020). Concerns and experiences of discrimination were more significant among newcomers with intersecting racial and immigrant identities, as well as amongst Chinese and South Asian immigrants (ICC-Leger 2020).

Although there is strong evidence that Canadians have continued to support immigration and recognize its benefits (Environics 2019), COVID-19 could further change attitudes toward immigration. Anti-immigrant rhetoric in the spring of 2020 demonstrated that Canada is not immune from such anti-immigrant forces. Given evidence of increased discrimination against

immigrants and Asians in particular, could the COVID-19 pandemic shift attitudes toward immigration among Canadians? The following explores this idea.

Methods

During the first week of August 2020, Dynata Research (dynata.com) conducted an online survey that recruited 1,002 participants aged 25 and over from across Canada's 10 provinces (excluding responses from the three northern territories). Like other surveys conducted during COVID-19 (e.g., Astroza et al., 2020; Paez and Jamal, 2020), the sample has the advantage of being quick and cost-efficient. Moreover, despite their lower generalizability, such samples are useful to address rapidly emerging questions (Fricker and Schonlau, 2002; Jager et al., 2017).

Respondents were asked to participate in a survey that explored Canadian's attitudes toward immigration in the age of COVID-19. The survey consisted of two sections. The first section explored the economic impacts of COVID-19, including job loss, financial stress, and their attitudes toward immigration. The second section included sociodemographic and socioeconomic questions to establish the profile of respondents. Survey content was based on similar surveys, including survey questions from Statistics Canada. The online survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete and received approval from the author's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Analysis was completed using SAS and relies upon descriptive statistics to explore the data.

In fielding the survey, the aim was to recruit participants reflecting regional population shares across Canada's five regions (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Prairies, and British Columbia), along with national gender and age distributions. Table 1 compares sample characteristics with Canadian statistics based on the 2016 census. Regionally, the sample closely resembles the distribution of the Canadian population. The national sample also closely resembles the Canadian population in terms of age, except for the 75+ category which is under-represented in the survey relative to the census (5.8% vs. 10.2% for the sample and census, respectively), potentially reflecting lower internet access within this cohort. Although the average age of the sample (50.5 years) is greater than the average age in the Canadian population, the sample was restricted to individuals aged 25 and over. Males are slightly under-represented in the survey (47.1% vs. 49.1%), although the sample proportion is statistically equivalent to the Canadian proportion ($t = 0.05$).

Table 1. 2016 Census and survey characteristics (%)

	Survey	Census	
Gender			
Males	47.1	49.1	*
Immigrant status²			
Immigrant	25.6	21.9	
Age			
25-34	18.3	18.4	*
35-44	19.9	18.1	
45-54	21.6	20.1	
55-64	19.2	19.6	*
65-74	15.4	13.5	



75+	5.8	10.2	
Average Age ²	50.5	41.0	
Marital Status ³			
Married	60.5	57.6	*
Single	26.9	28.2	*
DSW	11.9	14.2	
Language ³			
English	86.9	63.7	
French	7.8	20.0	
Other	5.3	16.3	
Education ³			
Less than HS	1.9	18.3	
HS	14.8	26.5	
Trade, Cert, Dip	6.5	9.8	
College, CEGEP	20.3	19.4	
< BA	7.1	2.8	
BA+	48.9	23.3	
Region			
Atlantic	6.0	6.6	
Quebec	22.2	23.3	*
Ontario	38.9	38.4	*
Prairies	19.0	18.4	*
BC	14.0	13.2	*
Labour Force Participation ³			
Worked - full time	49.1	33.6	
Worked - part time	12.3	34.0	
Did not work	38.6	32.4	
Racial Minority Status ⁴			
Racial Minority	21.1	22.2	*
COVID-19 test [?]			
Yes	9.8		
Positive test	0.8		
Likely positive	2.7		
Sample size	1,002		

Notes:

1. indicates census and sample statistically equivalent ($t = 0.05$)

2. Census % captures entire population

3. Census % based on those aged 15 and over.

4. Statistics Canada asks about 'visible minority status', whereas the survey asked individuals about their racial minority status.

Table 1 also provides other comparisons with respect to common sociodemographic characteristics. Immigrants are slightly over-represented in the sample relative to the census

(25.6% vs. 21.9%), although the proportion of individuals identifying as a racial minority (21.1%) is only slightly less than the national proportion of 22.2%. Other attributes (i.e., marital status, highest level of education attained, employment status, labour force status) show greater divergence relative to the census, although the minimum age of the sample (25+) relative to the census (15+) for these measures will account for some of the differential. Finally, approximately 10% of the sample reported being tested for COVID-19 at the time of survey. Of those who had been tested, less than 1% reported a positive test. Another 2.7% reported that they had been told by a health care provider that they had COVID-19 but had not been able to have a test to confirm this.

Results

Participants were first asked to rank the top three most important problems facing Canadian society (results not shown). Approximately 50% of respondents identified COVID-19 as the top-ranked problem at the time of the survey. The 'economy' (23.3%) and 'health care' (15.0%) were the second and third most ranked problems, respectively, and unemployment was a close fourth (14.8%). Among respondents, just 6.1% of respondents ranked immigration as a top problem faced by Canada. In fact, most respondents (approximately 48%) noted that immigration makes Canada a better place. Slightly less than 20% indicated that immigration made Canada a worse place.

Impacts and attitudes associated with COVID-19

Turning first to the overall impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians, Table 2 captures some of the main economic impacts associated with the pandemic. Results indicate that COVID-19 did have an immediate impact on respondents, with 27.0%, or slightly more than one in four, indicating that they had experienced a temporary or permanent loss of job since the start of the pandemic. In addition, approximately 23% felt that they might yet lose their job because of COVID-19, and 37.0% of respondents indicated that the pandemic had a moderate or major impact on their household finances.

Table 2. Economic impacts of COVID-19 (%)

	All	Non-Immigrant	Immigrant		Non-Racialized	Racialized	
Job loss since COVID 19?	27.0	25.2	32.3	*	24.0	36.0	*
I might lose my job or main source of income							
Agree	23.2	19.7	33.1	*	19.6	35.1	*
Neither	13.3	12.5	15.6	*	10.9	17.5	*
Disagree	31.3	33.3	25.7	*	33.4	28.0	*
Not sure/ too early to tell	4.7	4.7	4.7		4.1	5.7	*
Overall impact on household finances?							
No Impact	27.6	29.4	22.6	*	30.6	23.7	*
Minor impact	30.8	31.4	29.2		30.8	30.3	
Moderate impact	26.9	24.6	33.9	*	26.6	28.0	
Major impact	10.0	9.3	12.1	*	8.0	15.2	*
Not sure / too early to tell	3.1	3.6	1.6	*	3.3	1.4	*
NR	1.5	1.7	0.8		0.7	1.4	



Impact of COVID-19 on your ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs?							
No impact	44.5	46.9	37.7	*	49.8	35.1	*
Minor impact	22.8	23.4	21.0		22.9	20.9	
Moderate impact	20.2	17.2	28.8	*	17.6	28.4	*
Major impact	8.7	8.2	10.1	*	7.2	12.3	*
Not sure / too early to tell	2.4	2.6	2.0	*	1.8	2.8	*
NR	1.5	1.9	0.4		0.7	0.5	
Sample size	1,002	745	257		733	211	

Notes: *indicates immigrants and non-immigrants / racialized and non-racialized statistically different at $t=0.05$. NR = Non-response. The number of racialized and non-racialized respondents does not equal the sample size due to non-response to these questions (n = 58).

Table 2 also delves a bit more deeply into understanding whose attitudes have changed by exploring the economic impacts of the pandemic by immigrant and racialized status. Overall, immigrants and racialized groups were more impacted by the pandemic than their counterparts. For example, a larger proportion of immigrants had experienced job loss since the start of the pandemic (32.3% versus 25.2% for immigrants and non-immigrants, respectively). Similarly, racialized individuals were also more likely to have experienced temporary or permanent job loss. Amongst those that were still in the labour force (not retired), immigrants and racialized individuals were also more concerned with potentially losing their jobs or main self-employment because of the pandemic as compared to their non-immigrant or non-racialized counterparts, reflecting their greater vulnerability to changes in the labour market and their higher participation in precarious labour (Ali and Newbold 2020).

Given their often more precarious labour market situation, immigrants and racialized individuals are less able to withstand income loss or an extended period of unemployment (Badets 2020; Francis and Henriksson 2020). Among both racialized and immigrant groups, over 30% agreed that they might lose their job or main source of income because of the pandemic, while less than 20% of non-immigrants or non-racialized groups were concerned with potential job loss, echoing findings by Hou et al. (2020). Both groups were also more likely to report that the pandemic had a moderate or major impact on household finances in the months following the March 2020 outbreak, reinforcing findings by Laroche-Côté and Uppal (2020).

Interestingly, none of the groups were more/less likely to report an overall negative impact due to the pandemic. Finally, while the largest proportion of respondents reported that COVID-19 did not have an impact on their ability to meet household financial obligations or essential needs, non-immigrants and non-racialized individuals were again more likely to report no impacts and less likely to moderate or major impacts.

Table 3 takes a closer look at respondent attitudes toward immigration. Overall, most respondents agreed that immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada (55.3%). Additionally, the majority of respondents felt that immigration had a positive impact on the cultural and social life of the country (52.8%).

Despite these generally positive endorsements of immigration, could immigrants and racialized individuals become scapegoats given the immediate impact of the pandemic on Canadian jobs and household income? Table 3 suggests mixed attitudes toward immigration, with respondents expressing clear signs of strain and discomfort with current immigration levels. For instance, slightly more than 51% felt that immigrants were not adopting Canadian

values, and approximately 46% of respondents felt that immigrants posed a strain to Canada's social-welfare system. Furthermore, approximately one-third of respondents (33.9%) felt that Canada accepts too many immigrants from racial minority groups.

Concerns with the number of immigrants admitted to Canada on an annual basis also emerged. Just over 41% of respondents indicated that Canada admits too many immigrants. Separately (not shown), 40.6% felt that the number of immigrants admitted annually should be reduced, while only 18.8% felt that immigration numbers should be increased. Finally, the pandemic may **Table 3. Attitudes toward immigration (%)**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Canada	20.5	34.8	25.2	9.0	9.7
Immigration has a positive impact on cultural and social life	19.1	33.7	25.8	9.8	10.7
Overall, too much immigration	18.7	22.5	26.3	17.5	14.0
Too many immigrants not adopting Canadian values	25.3	26.0	25.0	12.7	9.6
Canada accepts too many immigrants from racial minority groups	17.7	16.2	32.3	13.9	18.0
New immigrants pose a strain on welfare system	22.1	24.3	23.5	16.9	12.1
Number of immigrants should be reduced because of COVID-19	39.1	24.9	21.7	6.8	5.7
Will Immigration be an important part of post-COVID recovery?	14.2	29.1	32.5	13.1	9.1

exacerbate calls to reduce immigration flows, with approximately 64% agreeing that the number of immigrants should be reduced because of COVID-19. Looking further ahead, less than half of respondents (43.3%) felt that immigration would be an important part of Canada's post-pandemic economic recovery.

Racism, Discrimination and COVID-19

Racism and discrimination were also a concern, and the pandemic has potentially exacerbated these issues (Table 4). Amongst respondents, 1 in 10 had reported an experience of racism or discrimination since the pandemic started, and a large proportion (47.3%) felt that racism and discrimination had increased since March 2020. Nearly one in three (29.3%) reported that they had seen or heard racism or discriminatory acts or words expressed to someone since the pandemic started.

Table 4. Prevalence of racism and discrimination (%)

	All	Non-Immigrant	Immigrant	Non-Racialized	Racialized	
Has racism and discrimination increased since the pandemic started?						
Yes	47.3	47.7	46.3	45.3	56.4	*
About the same	27.5	27.1	28.8	27.8	26.1	
No	8.2	8.1	8.6	9.4	4.3	*
Don't know / NR	17.0	17.2	16.3	17.5	13.3	*



Have you personally experienced racism or discrimination since the pandemic started?							
Yes	11.1	9.1	16.7	*	5.9	27.0	*
No	82.5	85.0	75.5		89.9	65.4	*
Don't know / NR	6.4	5.9	7.8		4.2	7.6	*
Have you seen or heard racism or discriminatory acts or words expressed to someone else since the pandemic started?							
Yes	29.3	27.8	33.9	*	25.1	50.0	*
No	64.4	65.8	60.3		73.3	50.0	*
Don't know / NR	6.3	6.4	5.8		1.6	0.0	
Sample size	1,002	745	257		733	211	

Notes: * indicates immigrants and non-immigrants / racialized and non-racialized statistically different at $t = 0.05$. NR = Non-response. The number of racialized and non-racialized respondents does not equal the sample size due to non-response to these questions ($n = 58$).

Perhaps not surprisingly, experiences of racism and discrimination were more common among immigrants and racialized groups. Racialized respondents were particularly likely to report incidents or feel that racism and discrimination had increased since the pandemic started. For instance, while immigrants and non-immigrants were equally likely to respond that racism and discrimination had increased since the pandemic started (approximately 47%), 56.4% of racialized respondents indicated that racism and discrimination had increased, compared to 45.3% of non-racialized respondents. Both immigrants and racialized individuals were much more likely to have personally experienced racism or discrimination (16.7% of immigrants and 27.0% of racialized respondents) as compared to non-immigrants or non-racialized. Finally, both groups were also more likely to have heard or seen acts of racism and discrimination as compared to their non-racialized or non-immigrant counterparts.

Conclusions

This paper has explored attitudes toward immigration in the age of COVID-19 among Canadians. Results suggest that while Canadians are generally supportive of immigration and recognize its social and economic benefits, they are also concerned with the level of immigration. Further, a large proportion felt that immigrants are a burden or are not adopting Canadian values. Even when borders do re-open, immigrants may no longer be as welcome as they have been in the past. Indeed, most respondents indicated that the number of immigrants should be reduced because of the pandemic. In addition to calls to directly reduce immigration levels, concerns amongst respondents with respect to immigration levels can also be seen through increased incidents of racism and discrimination. Clearly, Canadians are not immune to racism and discrimination, with both immigrants and racialized groups reporting increased incidents of racism and discrimination since the pandemic started.

But restricting the number of immigrants would be disastrous in both the short- and long-term. Canada's health care sector, for example, depends heavily on immigrant labour. The country's economy and its reputation for welcoming newcomers would be at risk if these attitudes continue and the government were to act on these concerns by reducing, even temporarily, immigrant numbers. Canada still needs immigrants to help rebuild the economy, fill job vacancies, and broaden the tax base. Despite the strain COVID-19 has placed on Canadian society, it is imperative that Canada continues to be open to immigration. Doing so

means that its economy, population, and labour force are ready for the post-pandemic world (Omidvar, 2020).

The findings of this work extend beyond the immediate attitudes toward immigration. For example, recent immigrants tend to have shorter job tenure and are therefore more likely to experience job loss due to the pandemic (Chan et al., 2020). Immigrants are also more likely to be engaged in precarious employment (Ali and Newbold 2020) and work in lower payer jobs than the Canadian-born (Lemieux et al. 2020). COVID-19, an issue that has tended to exacerbate economic vulnerabilities by race and immigrant status, with both groups at greater risk to being negatively impacted by the pandemic. Survey results reinforce this, with results showing that immigrants and racialized individuals were more likely to have experienced job loss than non-immigrants. Immigrants were also more likely to express concerns with the potential for job loss or have been negatively impacted financially due to the pandemic. Ultimately, COVID-19 has exacerbated the fragile economic situation of many immigrants and racialized individuals (Francis and Henriksson, 2020; Hou et al., 2020) and may negatively impact the path to integration among newcomers in Canada. Poor mental health outcomes among those most directly impacted by racism and discrimination may also surface given that discrimination – both experienced and perceived – can have significant impacts on mental health (Wu et al. 2020).

Finally, it is worthwhile to note the limitations of this paper. Although the survey is broadly representative of the Canadian population in terms of regional representation, age, gender, and racial minority status, the survey is from an internet panel and therefore not random. It is also likely that attitudes will continue to change as the pandemic progresses, and understanding these changing attitudes is critical from a policy perspective.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported through the McMaster University COVID-19 Research Fund and the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council.

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