



**Award date:** 2016-10-31

**Contract #** 35035-165058/001/CY

**POR** 061-16

POR@PCO-BCP.gc.ca



# Privy Council Office Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – Wave 6 of Focus Groups

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**August, 2017**

**Ipsos Public Affairs**  
1 Nicholas Street, Suite 1400  
Ottawa ON K1N 7B7  
Tel: 613.241.5802  
Fax: 613.248.7981  
[www.ipsos.ca](http://www.ipsos.ca)

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Mike Colledge  
President  
Ipsos Public Affairs

# 1. Executive Summary

## Background and Objectives

The Privy Council Office (PCO) is the hub of non-partisan, public service support to the Prime Minister and Cabinet and its decision-making structures. Led by the Clerk of the Privy Council, PCO helps the Government implement its vision and respond effectively and quickly to issues facing the government and the country.

As an advisor to the Prime Minister, PCO brings together quality, objective policy advice and information to support the Prime Minister and Cabinet, including information on the priorities of Canadians. To this end, the Communications and Consultation Secretariat within PCO supports the Prime Minister’s Office in coordinating government communications and setting broad government communications themes and messages, in accordance with government priorities, as determined by the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Cabinet committees and the Clerk of the Privy Council. The Secretariat also works with PCO policy secretariats to advise and support Cabinet and its committees.

In fulfilling its mandate, PCO required an ongoing cycle of qualitative data collection to ensure that it has up-to-date representations of Canadians’ opinions on macro-level issues that are of interest to the government, such as their views on what should be the priorities of the government. Additionally, such research increases the Government of Canada’s understanding of emerging trends, and measures Canadians’ views on key national issues and policy initiatives.

Through the use of an ongoing cycle of focus groups, PCO is gaining a solid understanding of Canadians’ views as they relate to the most important issues facing the country; their perceptions of how the federal government can best address these issues; expectations of actions related to government priorities; and perspectives on how the government can most effectively convey its efforts in dealing with emerging issues. This research helps inform the development of communications messages, products and dissemination tactics to respond to priority issues. Additionally, the research allows the Government of Canada to develop and refine communications activities to meet the specific needs of Canadians with timely, up-to-date, easily understood information based on the current perceptions of Canadians in the requisite areas.

This sixth wave of ongoing qualitative research was meant to gather feedback from Canadians on select issues and policy areas that are important to the Government of Canada. The issues discussed during focus groups differed from one location to the next. Topics covered included:

- Government of Canada actions
- Canada’s defense policy
- Poverty
- Local Challenges
- Taxes
- Impaired Driving
- Carbon Pricing

## Overview of Methodology

This sixth wave of qualitative research was comprised of a series of eight focus groups with Canadians aged 20 years old and above, held between June 12<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017. All group discussions lasted approximately two hours and were conducted in the evening, with the first session in each city starting at 5:30pm and the second starting at 7:30pm. These sessions were held in the following locations:

- June 12<sup>th</sup> – Trois-Rivières, QC
- June 14<sup>th</sup> – Whitehorse, YK
- June 19<sup>th</sup> – Toronto, ON
- June 21<sup>st</sup> – Coquitlam, BC

A total of 12 participants were recruited for each session to ensure that a minimum of eight to ten participants would attend. In total, 82 participants took part in the discussions. All participants received an honorarium of \$75 for attending the sessions at the focus group facilities. The screening questionnaire helped ensure that participants included a good cross-section of the general population, with good mixes of gender, ages, education and income levels, as well as household composition. Additional methodological details can be found in the appendix of this report.

This second wave of research is part of a continuous qualitative research project that will include a total of 144 focus groups to be held in multiple waves over the 2017 calendar year, with the option of renewing the cycle of research for two additional years. The contracted amount for this research project for calendar year 2017 is \$916,865.05, including HST.

## Key Findings

### *Government Actions*

At the start of each group, participants were asked to relate what they had seen, read or heard about the Government of Canada recently. Items spontaneously mentioned covered a broad range of issues:

- Legalization of Marijuana (in all locations)
- Canada- United States relations (in all locations)
- The environment and the Paris Agreement,
- Softwood lumber negotiations
- Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations
- Immigration and refugees
- CPP improvements or expansion
- Foreign aid
- Free trade agreement negotiations (NAFTA)
- Childcare assistance for parents
- Military spending
- Transgender rights
- Agreement with First Nations (in Whitehorse only)
- Pipeline approval (in Coquitlam only)

Designated (prompted) topics discussed in the focus groups included:

- Canada’s defense and foreign policies
- Canadian Tax System (not covered in Whitehorse)
- Poverty (not covered in Trois-Rivières)
- Carbon Pricing (not covered in Trois-Rivières)
- Local Challenges (in Whitehorse and Trois-Rivières only)
- Impaired Driving (in Whitehorse only)

### *Canada’s Defence and Foreign Policies*

While this issue was seldom raised on an unprompted basis, a majority of participants across all locations had heard that Canada was going to increase its defence spending when prompted on the topic. Spending on new planes was most often mentioned, while a few participants also said they had heard that defending Canada’s north was becoming a higher priority for the government. In general, the idea of increasing Canadian military spending was well-received. Most participants who had heard about an increase in spending felt that this change was likely being spurred by foreign policy changes in the United States that would entail more military responsibilities for Canada and its allies in coming years.

This general impression regarding a shift in U.S. foreign policy made participants think that Canada was, and needed to, start looking for alternatives on the trade front as well. Many said they sensed that Canada was now seeking to diversify its trading opportunities with the European Union and Asian countries, starting with China. They reported being worried about recent developments in U.S. politics and felt the Canadian government needed to tread carefully in dealing with the American administration.

### *Canadian Tax System*

An extended discussion on the Canadian taxation system took place in Trois-Rivières, Toronto and Coquitlam. Most participants in Trois-Rivières and Toronto felt that the Canadian tax system needed to be modified in some ways, while participants in Coquitlam were more divided on the issue. Some said it needed a complete overhaul, while others believed that small adjustments may be sufficient. However, almost all agreed that the system needed to be “fairer”. They viewed the system as favouring the richest members of Canadian society, mostly because it allowed people with more resources to reduce their tax payments by using various tax loopholes that were deemed to be unavailable to Canadians from lower income groups.

In all three cities, participants were asked to complete an exercise in which they were tasked to reform the Canadian tax system by identifying up to three groups they felt should pay more taxes and another three groups that should pay less taxes. Two groups clearly stood out among those who should be paying more taxes: the top 1% of income earners and big corporations. These were quasi-unanimous choices across all groups. Most participants were not concerned with the actual taxation rates established for these individuals and corporations, but commented that the rich were capable of eluding current rules in order to reduce their tax burdens.

As for groups who should be paying less taxes, the choices were more diversified. The working poor and lower-income Canadians ranked as the top-two groups needing their tax loads reduced. These two groups were followed by retired Canadians, families of young children, the middle class, and small corporations, with choices depending mostly on personal or family experiences.

Once this exercise completed, participants were tasked with providing a name or expression that best represented how they felt about the fiscal changes that they had suggested as part of the exercise. The words “fair” and “equitable” dominated all others. Participants believed that this ideal system would close tax loopholes and force richer individuals and companies to pay more than Canadians from the middle class or those with lower incomes, as they believed it should be.

When presented with the federal tax rates for small and large corporations, most participants felt this was somewhat low, especially for larger businesses. They also agreed that it made sense for smaller corporations to pay a lower tax rates compared to larger ones. Participants in all three cities were also presented with five legal ways through which businesses could use the existing laws to lower their annual tax burdens or that of their employees. Reactions to all of those tax schemes were mostly negative as participants felt they provided businesses and business owners with unfair advantages over other taxpayers.

At the end of this extended discussion on taxes, participants nearly all agreed that the number one tax priority for the Canadian government was to close tax loopholes that allowed the richest members of society to avoid paying their fair share.

### *Poverty*

An in-depth discussion on poverty and ways to fight it was held in Whitehorse, Coquitlam and Toronto. Poverty was a concern in all three communities, but perceptions regarding its prominence and causes varied from one location to the next. When asked whether the Canadian government’s number one priority should be to reduce the number of people living in poverty or increase the number of low-income Canadians who join the middle class, most participants in all three locations chose the latter. They felt that the first option was nice in principle but may not help in solving the root causes of the problem nor provide a good long term solution. By contrast, getting more people to join the middle class implied that these individuals would become active members of society who contributed to the well-being of the community and were more likely to feel like they belonged.

In all three locations, participants were tasked with identifying which among a series of poverty-fighting approaches should be prioritized by the Government of Canada. The highest-ranking solutions tended to focus on the provision of long-term help for individuals so they could stay out of poverty without relying on government financial support. The number one priority identified was thus to invest in skills training so people could find well paid jobs. Building more affordable housing units and increasing resources available for mental health formed a second tier of priorities, ranking slightly lower than investments in skills training but well above any other solutions. Redefining what counts as “low-income” in Canada so

that more Canadians are eligible for support and introducing a child benefit so that less children grow up in poverty formed a third tier of preferred approaches to fighting poverty.

### *Carbon Pricing*

A short discussion on carbon pricing was held in Whitehorse, Coquitlam and Toronto. Nearly all participants were aware that Canada was a signatory to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and expressed support for the country’s commitment. While very few participants could recall the name of the national agreement signed between the federal and provincial governments on carbon pricing, most had heard about the federal government’s decision to impose a price on carbon. While most participants in Toronto and Coquitlam agreed that it was a necessary policy, the depth of their support, or the extent of their hesitation, varied greatly. Whitehorse participants were the most conflicted about the concept of a carbon tax. On the one hand, many of them expressed strong support for all efforts aimed at improving the state of the environment. On the other hand, many among them believed that imposing a carbon tax on Canadians living in remote areas was unfair.

### *Local Challenges*

Trois-Rivières and Whitehorse participants were provided with a list of 24 different government priorities and asked to identify which ones they would personally select among the top three priorities for their local community. Aside from a handful of items that were chosen across all groups, results varied greatly from one location to the next. Housing costs ranked as the number one priority in Whitehorse, but was absent from discussions in Trois-Rivières. In Trois-Rivières, healthcare stood out as the most important priority for almost all participants, while this issue was only raised by a handful of participants in Whitehorse.

Among the priorities that were shared across both communities, we find the preservation of a clean environment, the ability of local businesses to succeed, poverty and an aging population. Views on the importance of preserving a clean environment were nevertheless expressed with more urgency in Whitehorse.

### *Impaired Driving*

A majority of Whitehorse participants mentioned having heard something recently about government efforts to improve testing for drivers who may have consumed marijuana as it moves to legalize its usage in 2018. They were also asked whether it would be good idea or a bad idea to allow police officers to impose roadside breath tests for alcohol, even in situations where they don’t have reasons to suspect that a driver has been drinking. Most of them felt this would not be a good idea, believing that officers needed probable cause to impose such tests.

### **Note on Interpretation of Findings**

Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations rather than to measure what percentage of the target population holds a given opinion. These results must not be used to estimate the numeric proportion or number of individuals in the population who hold a particular opinion because they are not statistically projectable.

Focus group research on government priorities seeks to provide a deeper understanding of participants’ views, often complementing quantitative findings gathered through survey research. Discussions allow for deep probing on key issues that is not possible with quantitative research. This type of information is essential for the Privy Council Office in its role advising and supporting the Cabinet and its committees.