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Spring 2019 Focus Groups (First Cycle) **Executive Summary**

Prepared for the Privy Council Office of Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a series of focus groups conducted by Phoenix SPI on behalf of the Privy Council Office. The research study was conducted with Canadians aged 18 and older between April 7 and April 27, 2019. In total, 12 focus groups were conducted in six locations across the country: Prince Albert, St. John's, Sherbrooke, Sarnia, Edmonton and Burnaby.

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Executive Summary

The Communications and Consultations Secretariat of the Privy Council Office (PCO) provides advice and support to the Government of Canada, the Clerk of the Privy Council, as well as federal departments and agencies on matters relating to communications and consultations. One tool used by PCO in order to fulfil this mandate is public opinion research. Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by PCO to conduct a series of focus groups to explore the views of Canadians on current events of relevance to the federal government.

1. Research Objectives and Purpose

The main objective of the focus groups was to explore the perceptions of Canadians on the state of current events, which included their opinions on the environment, pipelines, immigration, gun violence, and foreign interference in elections. This input was needed because complex issues are often difficult to communicate to the Canadian public in a manner that is easily and clearly understood. The target population for the focus groups was adult Canadians aged 18 and older. By carrying out this research, PCO was able to ensure a better understanding of the views and concerns of the public. This understanding will be used to develop effective communications strategies and products.

2. Methodology

Twelve focus groups were conducted with Canadians in the following locations: Prince Albert, St. John's, Sherbrooke, Sarnia, Edmonton, and Burnaby. The groups in Sherbrooke were conducted in French and the groups elsewhere in the country were conducted in English. In each location, two groups were conducted, one with Canadians who self-identified as 'financially secure', and the other with Canadians who self-identified as 'financially insecure'.

The following specifications applied to this research: eleven individuals were recruited by phone for each two-hour group; groups included a mix of participants by age, education, gender, income and employment situations, and; participants received an honorarium of \$100 in appreciation of their time. All groups were held in a facility that allowed observation of the sessions, either behind a one-way mirror, or via closed-circuit TV in a room adjacent to the meeting room where the focus groups took place.

In total, 111 Canadians took part in this research:

Location	Language	Audience	Number of Participants	Date and Local Time
Prince Albert, SK	English	Secure	10	April 9; 5:30 pm
Prince Albert, SK	English	Insecure	11	April 9; 7:30 pm
St. John's, NL	English	Insecure	9	April 16; 5:30 pm
St. John's, NL	English	Secure	8	April 16; 7:30 pm
Sherbrooke, QC	French	Secure	8	April 17; 5:30 pm
Sherbrooke, QC	French	Insecure	10	April 17; 7:30 pm
Sarnia, ON	English	Insecure	9	April 23; 5:30 pm

Sarnia, ON	English	Secure	8	April 23; 7:30 pm
Edmonton, AB	English	Secure	8	April 25; 5:30 pm
Edmonton, AB	English	Insecure	10	April 25; 7:30 pm
Burnaby, BC	English	Secure	10	April 27; 10:00 am
Burnaby, BC	English	Insecure	10	April 27; 12:00 pm

All steps of the project complied with *The Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research*.

The investigators for this study were Philippe Azzie and Alethea Woods. Philippe moderated the groups in St. John's, Sherbrooke and Sarnia. Alethea moderated the groups in Prince Albert, Edmonton and Burnaby. Both moderators contributed to the final report.

3. Limitations and Use of the Research Results

This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. 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. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population of Canadians. Specifically, 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.

4. Summary of Findings

Government of Canada News

Among things participants had seen, read, or heard about the Government of Canada recently, the one most often identified was the SNC-Lavalin affair, with some participants specifically referring to resignations from Cabinet. The 'carbon tax' (or some variation) was also mentioned in almost all locations. Other top-of-mind issues were identified by smaller numbers. These included pipelines, legalization of cannabis, tensions between China and Canada, the Phoenix payroll issue, Canada's garbage dispute with the Philippines, federal funding to Loblaws to upgrade its refrigerators, federal funding for media, the prime minister's travels to Tofino and India, Indigenous issues, a national Pharmacare program, housing for seniors, the federal budget, and the upcoming federal election (fall 2019).

Environment

The price on pollution and pipelines were top-of-mind when participants were asked what they recalled about the environment. Asked explicitly if they had heard about the Government of Canada's plan to put a price on pollution, most participants said they had. Things heard about the plan included it being described as 'a tax', that it is applied to the price of gasoline, that it will affect the cost of many things, that big businesses are exempted, that some provincial governments oppose it, that there is a 'rebate' associated with it, that it has become a political issue, and that there is a lack of clear communication about it.

Many participants were aware that revenues from the price on pollution are returned to individuals via an incentive, but fewer were knowledgeable about how the federal government's plan to put a price on pollution works. To date, the primary or only impact of the federal price on pollution felt by participants has been an increase in the price of gasoline. Looking ahead, however, participants expect to feel the impact in other areas, such as the cost of utilities (e.g., home heating) and any consumer goods transported over long distances.

Views on using a price on pollution as an approach to help reduce carbon emissions and combat climate change were mixed. Positive feelings included the impression that it is a good first step, a belief that the onus is on everyone to play a role in reducing pollution and that polluters have to pay a price for their actions, recognition that it is important to act now to save the environment, and a belief that it is an effective way to get people to reduce their personal carbon footprint. On the critical side, it was suggested that the average Canadian seems to be hit most by this approach, that it will not be effective if other countries do not do their part, and that this approach will increase the overall cost of living in a way that will affect people's ability to manage their finances.

Foreign interference in elections

The expression *foreign interference in elections* brought various things to participants' minds. Often the first reaction was to cite examples of the phenomenon, most often reports of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Other reactions included references to 'China', 'social media/Facebook', 'cyber attacks', and 'fake news'. Just as often, participants offered descriptions or explanations of the phenomenon, usually variations on the theme of a foreign entity or country trying to disrupt or influence the outcome of elections in another country through illegal or unethical practices.

Participants tended to be divided about foreign interference in Canada's upcoming election. Reasons for concern included the precedent in the last U.S. presidential election, the prevalence of 'fake news', the apparent ease of conducting such interference, and foreign interests in the outcome (e.g., economic opportunities, access to Canada's resources), among others. Some did not provide a specific rationale, but simply felt that because they were hearing discussions about it, it must be an issue. Reasons for lack of concern were most often based on the impression that Canada is not a significant enough actor on the world stage to warrant such interference.

When it comes to Canada's ability to deal with such interference, some expressed confidence, some expressed doubt or concerns, and some said they did not know. Reasons for confidence included the impression that if it hasn't happened yet it must be because the government is vigilant, the impression that security networks have the expertise to deal with it, and the impression that few foreign actors would be interested in interfering in our elections. Reasons for lack of confidence or doubts included lack of faith in government in general, disputes between levels of government preventing a coordinated approach to the problem, Canada being susceptible to foreign interests for economic reasons, lack of dedicated resources, and difficulty detecting/controlling such interference.

There was virtually no awareness of anything the Government of Canada is doing to combat the possibility of foreign interference in Canadian elections and reaction was mixed when participants were informed of the government's plans to deal with this through a federal task force, though the idea of a task force was seen as good in principle. Concerns or questions about this approach

focused mainly on specific points (e.g., how members of the task force are chosen and how the task force will decide if and when an incident is ‘important enough’ to be disclosed).

Gun violence

At least a few participants in each group said they have heard something related to gun violence in Canada recently. Most often, participants recalled hearing about alleged increases in incidents of gun violence in the country, often Toronto, or recalled hearing about specific incidents (e.g., armed robberies) or increases in gun violence in their own communities.

Opinions differed as to whether gun laws need to be changed. Nearly all those who said gun laws need to be changed think they should be tightened. Reasons for thinking this were based on the impression that gun violence is on the rise, that it is too easy to get access to a gun, that there are too many handguns in circulation, and that no one ‘needs’ a handgun. Most participants of the opinion that no change in gun laws is needed suggested that the existing rules and regulations are strict enough and rigorously applied. While there were differences of opinion within each group regarding the primary source of guns used in violent crimes in Canada, most participants think they are mainly smuggled in from the U.S. (but also elsewhere).

Many participants said they would be in favour of the Government of Canada banning handguns. Only in Prince Albert and the ‘financially secure’ group in Sherbrooke did most participants oppose a general ban on handguns. Were the government of Canada to do this, nearly all participants think the ban should extend across the country rather than leave the decision up to individual cities and provinces. As well, most participants were of the opinion that people who currently own handguns legally should have them bought back by the government rather than to allow existing owners to keep their guns while allowing no one else to buy new ones. There was also near unanimity among participants that any ban on handguns should be extended to assault rifles, for reasons of uniformity as well as based on a belief that no one needs an assault rifle.

Canada’s immigration system

Participants collectively identified a variety of things they had seen, read, or heard recently about immigration. One topic raised in most locations concerned refugees/migrants coming to Canada, but the specific issues related to this differed by region. For example, the focus in St. John’s was on the intake of Syrian refugees and specifically the members of the Syrian refugee family who perished in a house fire in Halifax. Participants in Prince Albert, Sherbrooke and Sarnia were most likely to focus on issues involving asylum seekers, with participants routinely referring to migrants crossing the border irregularly into Canada.

Participants across all groups routinely identified the same or similar benefits and challenges of immigration to Canada. Perceived benefits included replenishing the population and the work force, contributing to economic growth and prosperity, expanding the tax base, fostering cultural diversity in the country, and bringing new/needed skills/knowledge to Canada, among others. Perceived challenges included the segregation of ethnic communities, a sense that some immigrants were unwilling to integrate, clashes of values and loss of Canada’s cultural heritage, overtaxing of existing resources/social services, and the circulation of misinformation about immigrants, among others.

Asked to focus on their own communities and identify both the positive and negative effects of immigration, participants typically provided concrete examples of effects they associated with immigration in general. For example, positive effects (or contributions) included the availability of more diverse foods and the opening of new businesses in their community, and negative effects (or challenges) at the community level included rising housing/rental costs and limited capacity of social services and resources to support new immigrants in a community.

Energy vision

Participants were asked to provide feedback on three creative approaches or concepts designed to capture an energy vision for the country. Asked which concept explains the initiative the best, participants most often identified the concept that included clear panels overlaid across different images of Canada ('concept A'). This included half or more of the participants in most groups. This concept was also most likely to be identified as the approach whose pictures made participants feel hopeful/inspired about Canada's energy future. When it came to the concept that was most memorable and whose words resonated more, participants tended to be divided between concept A and the concept which included a sphere or dome-shape structure in the forefront and canoes on a lake in the background ('concept C'). Many suggested that the words from concept C be incorporated with the images from concept A. Overall, the concept featuring a dark coloured background with each image ('concept B') was the approach most likely to elicit critical or neutral reactions.

The contract value was \$249,535.19 (including HST).

Political Neutrality Certification

I hereby certify, as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives, that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.

Signed:



Alethea Woods, President
Phoenix Strategic Perspectives