



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – December 2019

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Privy Council Office

Supplier name: The Strategic Counsel

Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY

Contract value: \$808,684.50

Award date: June 27, 2019

Delivery date: January 10, 2019

Registration number: POR-005-19

For more information on this report, please email por-rop@pco-bcp.ca

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Canada 

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Communications and Consultation Secretariat of the Privy Council Office (PCO) commissioned The Strategic Counsel (TSC) to conduct continuous cycles of focus group research across the country with members of the public on key national issues, events, and policy initiatives related to the Government of Canada.

The broad purpose of this ongoing qualitative research program is three-fold: to explore the dimensions and drivers of public opinion on the most important issues facing the country; to assess perceptions and expectations of the federal government's actions and priorities, and; to inform the development of Government of Canada communications so that they continue to be aligned with the perspectives and information needs of Canadians, while remaining both clear and easy-to-understand.

The research is intended to be used by the Communications and Consultation Secretariat within PCO in order to fulfill its mandate of supporting the Prime Minister's Office in coordinating government communications. Specifically, the research will ensure that PCO has an ongoing understanding of Canadians' opinions on macro-level issues of interest to the government, as well as emerging trends.

This report includes findings from 14 in-person focus groups which were conducted between December 9th and 18th, 2019 in seven locations across the country including in Ontario, Quebec,

Newfoundland, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are shown in the section below.

Among the specific objectives for this cycle of focus groups, the research explored a wide range of issues, many of them in-depth, including awareness and perceptions of recent Government of Canada stories in the news, specific initiatives and recent announcements in relation to the NATO Summit in London, medical assistance in dying the environment, including the Paris Agreement and the 'circular economy'. In addition, the research explored local issues of concern, identifying specific challenges with respect to infrastructure and the economy.

Specific topics such as 'Western alienation' and the Frontier Mine were explored in some locations where they were deemed more relevant. Similarly, a series of exercises were completed by participants, depending on the location and the topic being discussed. In all locations participants were asked to complete an exercise intended to identify their top issues with respect to Government of Canada goals. Additionally, in the three Western locations, participants were also asked to write down a few words which, in their view, described the relationship between the Government of Canada and their province. Participants' responses to these exercises were formally captured and recorded, as were the ensuing discussions exploring these topics in more detail.

As a note of caution when interpreting the results from this study, findings of qualitative research are directional in nature only and cannot be attributed quantitatively to the overall population under study with any degree of confidence.

Methodology

Overview of Groups

Target audience

- Canadian residents, 18 and older
- For the third cycle, groups were split primarily by gender

Detailed approach

- 14 in-person focus groups across 7 Canadian cities
- Two groups conducted per location, in Brampton and Thunder Bay, Ontario (Dec 9th and 11th), Chicoutimi, Quebec (Dec. 10th), St. John's, Newfoundland (Dec. 12th), Kelowna, British Columbia (Dec. 16th), Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Dec. 17th) and Calgary, Alberta (Dec. 18th)
- Groups in Chicoutimi, Quebec were conducted in French, while all others were conducted in English
- A total of 10 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 8 to 10 participants would attend

- Each participant received an \$90 honorarium in respect of their time
- Across all locations, 122 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.

Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Brampton	1	English	Dec. 9, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	2			7:30-9:30	Men	8
Chicoutimi	3	French	Dec. 10, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	10
	4			7:30-9:30	Men	10
Thunder Bay	5	English	Dec. 11, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	6			7:30-9:30	Men	8
St. John's	7	English	Dec. 12, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	8
	8			7:30-9:30	Men	10
Kelowna	9	English	Dec. 16, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	10			7:30-9:30	Men	10
Saskatoon	11	English	Dec. 17, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	7
	12			7:30-9:30	Men	9
Calgary	13	English	Dec. 18, 2019	5:30-7:30	Women	8
	14			7:30-9:30	Men	7
Total number of participants						122

Key Findings

The following outlines a summary of the key findings from each topic discussed during the cycle of focus groups undertaken in December, 2019. Unless otherwise noted, topics were explored in all locations.

Government of Canada News

There was low awareness of Government of Canada stories beyond the recent election and resulting changes at the political level in Ottawa. Among other news, issues affecting Western Canada received a



mention in most groups, especially in the West, including the economy and pipelines in Alberta, federal-provincial relations, regional alienation, and, to a lesser extent, equalization payments. Cannabis legalization and “vaping” received a number of comments, as did environmental issues. These latter mentions were mostly in regard to climate change, with a few mentions of a “carbon tax”. Indigenous issues and immigration were also top of mind for some.

Collectively, there were a few comments pertaining to international issues, including some references to disputes with China, “NAFTA,” and the ‘hot mic’ issue at the NATO Summit.

However, no single issue or set of issues stood out, and many participants struggled to identify any news story that related specifically to the federal government.

NATO (St. John’s, Chicoutimi, Brampton, Thunder Bay)

There was very low awareness of the recent NATO Summit and even less of the defence spending issue that came up at the meeting. Provided with some background, and asked for their opinion regarding whether or not Canada should increase military spending to reach its 2% of GDP commitment, participants expressed little support (except in St. John’s).

Most felt that Canada faces more important concerns and cannot afford what many assumed would be a costly expenditure at the expense of other priorities. A number of participants were against more military spending, in principle, feeling it is inconsistent with Canada’s role as a “peacekeeper”. And some didn’t like the idea of Canada being pressured by other countries to spend more on defence.

Among those who did support it, most agreed that Canada should honour its commitment to NATO and do its part. Some felt this is in Canada’s self-interest, not only with respect to national defence but to maintain good standing with other NATO countries and avoid any potential negative repercussions for trade and economic cooperation. Some noted that increases in military spending might be good for the local economy and jobs as well.

Whether participants expressed opinions for or against the increase, they did not appear to be especially locked in to a view one way or another. Some who were initially against the increase wavered a bit over the course of the discussion, and many seemed to want more information before solidifying their opinion.

Medical Assistance in Dying (St. John’s, Chicoutimi, Brampton, Thunder Bay)

Other than in Quebec, few participants were aware of any new developments in Canada around medical assistance in dying. Some were vaguely aware of recent news concerning a court case or “lack of consistency in the rules” applied across the country. Only in Chicoutimi, among the men, was anyone aware that changes to the law are pending that could possibly make assisted dying more accessible.



Government of Canada Priorities

Throne Speech

There was extremely low awareness of the recent Throne Speech. Among the handful of those who said they knew something about it when asked, there was limited mention of priorities such as climate change, tax cuts, pipelines, “east-west issues,” and Pharmacare. A few had positive comments about the speech striking the right tone, while some others were critical based on a sense that the West was overlooked or that the Speech simply reiterated previous commitments. Most who said they were aware of the speech however had little recall of any particulars and generally held neutral opinions overall.

Unaided Priorities

Asked to identify what the Government of Canada’s priorities should be in the next two years, there wasn’t strong convergence around any particular theme or set of issues. The most common mentions related to the environment, immigration, and economic concerns.

The environment was identified in most groups primarily in relation to climate change, with a few references to a “carbon tax”. Immigration arose as a concern specifically relating to jobs, government spending, refugees, borders, and security. Economic issues received some specific mention in the context of jobs, incomes, the cost of living, taxes, and exports, with many mentioning these issues as a local or regional concerns. Other regional priorities included water quality in Thunder Bay and Western-specific issues in Calgary and Kelowna, including regional alienation and pipelines.

Aided Priorities

In every group, participants were provided with a list of priorities from the Throne Speech and asked to select the three most important to them personally, including their number one priority, and to identify any items they felt that the federal government should not pursue.

In general, across most groups, the priorities that rose to the top of the list were universal access to family doctors, tax relief for the middle class, and the implementation of a national Pharmacare program. There were, however, some notable regional differences, with the elimination of water advisories on reserves identified as the top priority in Thunder Bay and Saskatoon, and among the top three in Kelowna. Conservation of oceans and land, along with raising the federal minimum wage, were higher priorities in St. John’s compared to other locations. Lowering taxes for the middle class was more widely identified as an important priority in Calgary and Kelowna and was near the bottom of the list in Thunder Bay.

Participants widely agreed it is unlikely that the federal government will be able to accomplish all the priorities on the list in the next few years. Most felt this would be “overly-ambitious” or “unrealistic”. Many of the individual priorities were viewed as challenging to accomplish, especially the commitments to ensure universal access to a family doctor, implement a national Pharmacare program, and eliminate water advisories on reserves. These priorities, while important to many, were



viewed as complex and complicated for the government to address effectively, from a practical point of view, in such a short period of time.

There was fairly widespread opposition to the banning of assault rifles, and many felt this would be politically challenging to accomplish, as well as hard to implement to good effect if the intent is to reduce gun-related crime and violence more broadly. A number of participants were wary of government intrusion into what they viewed as the right of law-abiding citizens to own and use guns responsibly, especially for their own protection, and felt that a ban on assault rifles could represent a step toward greater restrictions of gun ownership in the future. Even among those who identified this as a top priority – with those in Ontario most likely to do so – many felt that assault rifles are not really the issue in relation to concerns about guns, and that a ban would not effectively address illegal guns coming across the border or getting into the hands of criminals. Most anticipated strong opposition to this initiative.

Reducing cell phone costs, while important to some, also engendered a fair bit of opposition, and was at the bottom of the list in terms of importance. The main issue, widely identified, was a sense that government does not have a legitimate role to play in regulating the prices set by industry. Most felt that this should be left to the market (but that there should be competition) and that the Government of Canada should focus on bigger problems within its purview.

Putting a price on pollution didn't generate much support, but it wasn't widely opposed either. It was in the middle of the list, although some expressed confusion with the language used for what was more commonly understood as a "carbon tax". Comments suggest that participants were somewhat divided on this priority. They were also personally ambivalent when it comes to balancing environmental and economic concerns and the ability of the federal government to implement this kind of pricing scheme effectively. Moreover, some disagreed with the federal government imposing a pricing pollution system on the provinces, especially in Calgary.

Local Challenges (St. John's, Chicoutimi, Brampton, Thunder Bay)

In all locations, participants identified a need for more investment in infrastructure - most commonly highways, roads, and public transit - as well as health care and supports for vulnerable populations.

The challenges associated with demographic shifts were also quite prominent, though differing by community. In Brampton, the population boom was widely identified as a key issue, creating significant challenges with traffic, transportation, and what is perceived as rapid, poorly-planned development. In smaller communities, population aging was a common concern, creating increased demand on the health care system and social programs while at the same time reducing the tax base and causing a financial squeeze. In Chicoutimi, population aging combined with overall population decline was identified as leading to a shortage in the labour force for local industry.

In many of the smaller communities, participants pointed to industrial shifts and the resulting disruptions and challenges related to jobs. Poverty and social issues were top of mind in both Thunder Bay and St. John's, along with issues concerning the safety of the local water supply. In Thunder Bay

there were also marked concerns about crime and the inequities faced by the local Indigenous population.

Federal government investments were not high on the radar among most participants in any location.

Western Alienation (Saskatoon, Calgary, Kelowna)

Federal-provincial relationship - Exercise

Participants in the western groups were asked to write down those words or phrases that they would use to describe the relationship between the Government of Canada and their province. All the descriptions tended to be negative or suggestive of some level of friction or misalignment, and focussed on a few key dynamics and descriptions (note that the word choice was unprompted).

Damaged: Participants widely used words like fractured, strained, disconnected, dysfunctional and, in Calgary, separation.

Unproductive: Most felt that the current dynamic is polarized, immature, and adversarial, and characterized by bickering, rhetoric, misunderstanding and a lack of compromise.

Lacking trust: Many stressed that “both sides” are to blame for a relationship lacking in good will, described with words like animosity, hostile, unfriendly, hateful, greedy, and shifty.

Unfair: Participants clearly felt their own provinces were not being treated fairly, leaving them feeling frustrated, disappointed, misunderstood, neglected, left out, unseen, used, and an afterthought.

Most felt it was important to “move on” from the current dynamic and that the federal government needs to do a lot more than is currently the case to assume leadership in that regard by being more present and visible in their province, making more effort to listen and understand their perspective and by being more collaborative and responsive. Participants said they want to hear more about the ‘bigger picture’ and what the Government of Canada is accomplishing for Western provinces.

Most also said they want to see some concrete efforts on specific issues of importance to their provinces, including: re-examining equalization payments in Alberta and helping with the transition of their economy toward more job-rich and sustainable industries; rethinking immigration and “focusing on Canadians first”; making more effort to assist with the challenges faced by Indigenous people and communities; and collaborating more with the provinces on reducing international and interprovincial trade barriers.

TMX Pipeline

There was fairly widespread confusion and lack of awareness about what is happening with the Trans Mountain Pipeline (TMX) pipeline, even in Calgary. Many weren’t sure if construction had started on the pipeline, or even if a final decision had been made about it going ahead. Few believed that the pipeline will be built on time, simply because it’s a large complex project and especially because of all the challenges, sensitivities and obstacles involved, including opposition on so many fronts. Some were



concerned about a lack of consultation and the possibility that corners could be cut on construction quality, conceding that there are legitimate concerns and that it needs to be done properly, even if it takes more time. Only one person felt that the pipeline will be constructed on time, because it is needed to generate revenues. A number of participants, unaided, stated their support for the project.

Bills C-69 and C-48

Few participants were familiar with these bills by name. When provided with descriptions a number of participants felt they had heard something about them, or simply assumed that these kinds of measures and requirements were already in place.

Most could see both sides of the argument for and against each of these bills. Many acknowledged the importance of protecting the environment, especially water, in building pipelines and transporting oil in tankers along the coast.

With respect to Bill C-69, many acknowledged the importance of consulting with and respecting the concerns of local communities. At the same time, many were concerned about getting bogged down and being unable to move forward with projects that are critical for the economy.

Similarly, with respect to Bill C-48, participants tended to support the environmental protections in principle, but many wondered if the regulation would work in practice, or if industry would simply find a way to work around it.

While seeing the pros and cons of both bills, most felt that they needed more information before drawing any conclusions about whether either of these bills should go ahead or would work to produce the kinds of protections they've been designed for, while also supporting much-needed economic activity. Participants wanted to know more, including the costs involved, how they would be implemented, and what the implications would be on jobs. Few expressed much faith in government to get the balance right.

Equalization payments

Familiarity with the term 'equalization payments' was high in Calgary while those in Saskatoon and Kelowna were much less knowledgeable. Only a few participants could describe how the equalization system works in Canada with any degree of accuracy or confidence. A number of participants in the Calgary groups, and a few others elsewhere, had a visceral sense that the arrangement is unfair to the West and Alberta, in particular, which they believe pays out significantly more than it gets, to the benefit of Central and Eastern Canada.

Many weren't sure if the system should be changed, owing to a lack of understanding of the current model. Those with an opinion about it in the Calgary groups tended to be critical of the current system and supportive of some relief for Alberta, if only temporarily. But few held particularly well formed views owing to an admitted lack of knowledge, the complexity of the issue, and how politicized it has become in recent years. Those with the strongest negative opinions tended to be participants in the men's group in Kelowna who felt that the West, in general, was being shortchanged.

Due to their lack of detailed knowledge about how the system of equalization payments works, there were no concrete suggestions put forward as to how it might be changed or improved.

China's boycott of the Canadian canola industry

Very few participants in most groups were aware of this issue, with familiarity higher in Calgary and lower in Saskatoon. Most didn't know the details, but felt it is part of a larger diplomatic and trade dispute between Canada and China. No one was aware of the regional impact the boycott is having or what the federal government has been doing to respond to the issue.

All groups were then provided with some background for clarity and asked to consider three options in terms of a possible response from the Government of Canada:

- Make concessions so that China will buy Canadian canola again;
- Retaliate against China by imposing our own sanctions on their products; or
- Continue to financially support farmers while trying to negotiate a solution with China that doesn't involve concessions or retaliation.

Most said that Canada should try to negotiate with China, without retaliation or concessions, while continuing to support farmers, which they widely felt to be the most reasonable, constructive, and "Canadian" approach to the problem.

Some felt that concessions might be wise, depending on what they are, given the size of the Chinese market and the country's importance to Canada as a trading partner. But many believe that China would take advantage of any capitulation. Those few who favoured retaliation in some groups were met with resistance by others who thought this approach would be counterproductive and only lead to an escalation of the dispute and possibly further counter-retaliation from China.

Top Federal priority for Western Canada

Of the various issues discussed that specifically affect Western Canada – the TMX pipeline, Bills C-69 and C-48, equalization payments, and China's boycott of canola – participants were asked to select the one they felt should be the priority for the Government of Canada.

In most groups, there was a consensus among participants that the TMX pipeline, and getting it built, should be the top priority for the federal government, given its importance to the regional economy and resulting stimulus to jobs. Many also felt that Bill C-69 has a direct role to play in enabling this project and is also important. The only outlier was the Kelowna women's group, where environmental concerns were heightened and some felt it would be better to either resolve the canola boycott with China or negotiate a better deal for the West on equalization payments.

Frontier Mines (Calgary)

Most had not previously heard of the Frontier Mines. When provided with a description and asked if the federal government should proceed with approval, most said yes but only if there were sufficient regulations in place to ensure oversight and enforcement from government, in addition to assurances

being given by the company to protect the environment. Participants felt that the company should be required to commit to a wide variety of safety precautions and environmental protections, in addition to guaranteeing jobs for Albertans.

Many believed that the environmental costs of this project can be offset through thoughtful measures. Assurances that this would happen, and be paid for by industry, did make a number of participants feel more comfortable with the project. Told that some experts have questioned whether the mine would be able to generate sufficient revenue to justify the costs of constructing it, this made a number of participants somewhat more wary of the project, especially among women. On balance, while some were against the project, or ambivalent, most felt the project should go ahead, with appropriate regulations, conditions, technologies and investments in place to safeguard the environment and minimize the harms, while ensuring that jobs and benefits accrue to the province.

Environment

Top of Mind Awareness

Top-of-mind, the most commonly identified environmental stories were related to global warming and climate change, especially with regard to their impact on glaciers, ice caps, and polar bears. Other related issues identified included forest fires, droughts, rising oceans, and the loss of coral reefs. The “carbon tax” was cited by some, as was Greta Thunberg and her recent selection as Time Magazine’s person of the year. Among the few issues unrelated to climate change, plastic pollution and, to a lesser extent, the plastic ban were identified in a few groups.

Awareness of Government of Canada actions

There was low awareness of any recent Government of Canada initiatives related to the environment, with most participants unable to cite anything, unprompted. The most common mentions were related to the “carbon tax” or plastics ban, with a few references to rebates for electric cars or federal-provincial conflict over pipelines and putting a price on pollution.

Paris Agreement

Most had not heard of the Paris Agreement. Of those familiar with it, some were able to describe it as a global contract among nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), but no one was able to provide any details of the 2030 reduction targets to which Canada has committed.

When provided with more information on the Agreement, participants were somewhat divided about whether or not Canada would meet its reduction targets. Participants cited a wide range of barriers, from public complacency and the inherent difficulty of transitioning our economy and making the sacrifices and investments required, to political division and opposition from business, to a lack of political will by the Canadian government and follow through from other countries.

Some were more positive about advances to date in responding to the challenge, but few felt Canada was currently on track. And despite some difference in opinion regarding the outlook, or whether or

not the Paris targets are realistic, most agreed that they play an important role as a concrete goal to work towards, and that Canada and other countries must do more to reduce their emissions.

While few were certain, most felt that the Paris targets were likely a good measure of progress, having been so widely agreed to by many countries. Asked to identify other indicators, many participants weren't sure, but some did generate a modest list, including evidence of behaviour change such as more recycling and less waste, improvements in the health of wildlife, oceans, and forests, scientific data and reporting, and more investments in green technologies, energy and infrastructure, as well as activities like tree planting.

When asked what Canada has done to address climate change, few were able to cite anything specifically. Responses included a "carbon tax" and the proposed single-use plastics ban, most commonly, as well as tightened industry regulations around emissions, investments in green energy and recycling, rebates for electric vehicle (EV) purchases, and investments in charging stations and infrastructure.

Many participants stressed the need to do more, from more education, encouragement and incentives directed toward the public, to stronger laws and regulations to force businesses to act, especially, to more investments in technology, alternative energy, sustainable products and initiatives. Many also felt that more leadership is required by all levels of government to work together more effectively toward the goal of reducing emissions. Only a few mentioned a price on pollution or a "carbon tax".

GHG reduction/pipelines

Opinions were split on whether or not Canada can effectively take action on climate change while at the same time supporting its oil and gas industry by building the TMX pipeline. Although participants were somewhat ambivalent, many ultimately sided with the view that we can do both, as long as we strike a balance. And many felt that we must in fact do both, at least in the short term, in order to protect our economy so that we can make the investments needed to transition away from fossil fuels and toward more sustainable sources of energy over the longer term. Most saw this as a process. Most of the participants in Thunder Bay and Chicoutimi ultimately sided with this approach, as did everyone in the Calgary groups and in the men's group in Kelowna.

Some others were, however, less supportive or outright opposed to this approach. These participants held the view that combating climate change and building pipelines were fundamentally at odds, and some stressed that going ahead with the pipeline fails to recognize the reality and urgency of the climate crisis. There were participants in every location, other than Calgary, who did not support the government's plan to build the TMX, and others who were either indifferent or wanted to know more about the impact of the pipeline and the efforts and investments being made to mitigate adverse effects on the global warming. In Brampton, most participants were on the fence or unsupportive of the government's decision to build the TMX pipeline. In St. John's and the Kelowna women's group, participants were split.



Circular Economy (St. John's, Chicoutimi, Brampton, Thunder Bay, Saskatoon, Kelowna)

Few participants were previously aware of the term 'circular economy' but most were familiar with the concept or readily grasped it after being provided with an explanation.

Universally, across all groups and locations, participants strongly supported this way of doing business as a "good idea" and an approach that "makes sense". Most felt that they were already participating in the circular economy to some degree and were able to provide a wide range of examples, from recycling and spending more on higher quality, more durable goods to buying second hand or refurbished items or products made of recycled materials. Many commented on the "feel good" element of these types of purchases, viewed as beneficial for the environment, by reducing waste and extending the life of existing products, while also saving money.

While strongly in favour of a "circular economy", and readily citing evidence of it in the marketplace and their own participation, most also felt that we could do much more, although they also noted that there were significant barriers to widespread adoption. In fact, most felt that there were strong countervailing tendencies among businesses and consumers, evident in the increased production and consumption of cheap, disposable goods, as well as excessive packaging by retailers, food waste, and the proliferation of single use plastics. Participants blamed businesses for pursuing profits at the expense of the environment. They blamed consumers, including themselves, for complacency and prioritizing convenience and short-term affordability above social responsibility. And they blamed governments for a lack of leadership and the political will required to implement stricter regulations and penalties to force change.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that all businesses should be expected to participate in the circular economy and not only do more but be forced to do more by government to reduce waste across the board.

Some mentioned the proposed ban on single-use plastics as a positive step by the federal government and many acknowledged that we have come a long way, in many respects, toward embracing a more circular economy. At the same time, most felt that we have not done nearly enough to adopt what everyone agreed is a very meaningful approach to protecting the environment.

Most agreed that the Government of Canada can and should do more to encourage the public to take part. But, they also wanted to see more concrete action in the form of laws, regulations, penalties and incentives that would force the kind of change everyone agreed is needed.

MORE INFORMATION

The Strategic Counsel
Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY
Contract award date: June 27, 2019
Contract value: \$808,684.50
