



Government
of Canada

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du Canada

Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – July 2019

Executive Summary

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Canada 

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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 Canadian's opinions on macro-level issues of interest to the government, as well as emerging trends.

The following report provides the findings of 12 in-person focus groups conducted between July 10th and 25th, 2019, in six locations across the country in the provinces of New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are included 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 concerning the federal government's price on pollution, the TMX pipeline, the ban of single-use consumer plastics, pharmacare, and both the First-Time Homebuyers Incentive and the Mortgage Stress Test. In addition, the research explored local issues of concern, as they relate to the environment, health care, and housing. Moreover, three exercises were conducted with participants to understand expectations for Government of Canada priorities, broadly and with respect to health care specifically, and to evaluate potential names for the federal government's universal pharmacare plan.

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 to the overall population under study with any degree of confidence.

Methodology

Overview of Groups

Target audience

- Canadian residents, 18 and older
- For the first cycle, groups were split primarily by gender
- In Mississauga and Vancouver, recruitment ensured a mix between homeowners and renters

Detailed approach

- 12 in-person focus groups across 6 Canadian cities
- Two groups conducted per location, in Mississauga, Ontario (July 10th), Barrie, Ontario (July 11th), Miramichi, New Brunswick (July 16th), Saint Jerome, Quebec (July 18th), Vancouver, British Columbia (July 23rd) and Winnipeg, Manitoba (July 25th)
- Groups in Saint Jerome, Quebec were conducted in French, while all others were held 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, 102 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
Mississauga	1	English	July 10, 2019	5:30-7:30	Men Mix of Homeowner/Renters	9
	2			7:30-9:30	Women Mix of Homeowner/Renters	10
Barrie	3	English	July 11, 2019	6:00-8:00	Men	8
	4			8:00-10:00	Women	9
Miramichi	5	English	July 16, 2019	5:30-7:30	Men	7
	6			7:30-9:30	Women	8
Saint-Jérôme	7	French	July 18, 2019	5:30-7:30	Men	8
	8			7:30-9:30	Women	9
Vancouver	9	English	July 23, 2019	5:30-7:30	Men Mix of Homeowner/Renters	7
	10			7:30-9:30	Women Mix of Homeowner/Renters	9
Winnipeg	11	English	July 25, 2019	5:30-7:30	Men	9
	12			7:30-9:30	Women	9
Total number of participants						102

Key Findings

The following outlines a summary of the key findings from each topic discussed during the first cycle of focus groups undertaken in July 2019.

Government of Canada Activity

Government of Canada news was not high on the radar in any of the groups across the country. Whether owing to summer holidays and distractions, or the upcoming election, many said they have not been paying much attention to (or seeing) federal government public policy news stories lately. The main mentions across the groups included general references to NAFTA, the diplomatic and trade-related disputes with China, and the garbage shipment to the Philippines. The “carbon tax” got a mention, unprompted, in most groups held in Ontario, New Brunswick and Manitoba, where the federal price on pollution has recently been implemented. Climate change, CO₂ and emissions came up, as well, in a number of groups, including in BC. SNC-Lavalin received a few isolated mentions in about half the groups.

Recent announcements by the Government of Canada regarding pharmacare, the plastics ban, and the TMX pipeline were not identified in any of the groups at this point in the discussion.

Government of Canada Priorities (Saint-Jérôme, Manitoba, Vancouver)

Participants in these three locations were each given a work sheet with a list of over-arching goals for the Government of Canada and asked to select the top two or three on which the federal government, in their view, should focus. "Making life more affordable" was by far the top priority selected, with nearly twice the frequency as the next most widely-selected ones. Many also felt that the federal government should be focussed on "improving Canadians' quality of life," "growing and strengthening the middle class," and "improving Canadian living standards." All of these priorities were seen to be interrelated and overlapping, to varying degrees, with each one including or enabling the others. All of the priorities were seen to encompass a wide range of important social and economic imperatives, especially the ones focussed on "quality of life" and "living standards" which tended to be interpreted most broadly to include a wide range of issues, both social and economic. The focus on affordability, however, clearly reflected participants' heightened concerns with the high cost of living - especially for basic necessities, like accommodation, food, etc. - compounded by job insecurity and stagnating wages, a common thread or theme throughout the discussion across a range of topics.

The Environment

Environmental issues were a clear concern across all groups and locations, with a wide range of national and local issues identified. Asked about the environmental issues of greatest national concern, participants most commonly cited CO2 emissions, climate change and related floods and forest fires, as well as pollution and waste, generally. Water pollution, in particular, and its affect on oceans, lakes and rivers, as well as marine life, fish and fisheries, was also a top concern, as was plastic pollution, commonly mentioned in relation to its damaging impact on waterways and marine life.

Among local issues, water-related concerns continued to be top-of-mind, with specific mentions ranging from chemical pollution in lake Ontario from factories and excess winter salt in the water shed of Lake Simcoe, to invasive fish species killing the salmon stock in Miramichi and concerns about TMX-related tankers on the BC coast.

Loss of green space to development, and both air and noise pollution from traffic, were also top concerns in Mississauga, Barrie, Saint-Jérôme and Vancouver, where many pointed to a lack of sufficient public transportation options as an aggravating factor.

Asked what the federal government might do to help address local environmental issues, participants were short on specifics but common mentions included protecting green space, water, and natural resources from development and pollution, and investing more in public transportation and related infrastructure projects. In Miramichi, where environmental issues were mentioned as having a considerable negative impact on local industries, especially the fisheries, many wanted to see the government work more collaboratively with local stakeholders to develop solutions more responsive to local realities.



Very few could recall any recent federal government announcements concerning the environment. The most common mentions focussed on the “carbon tax” and related issues, which surfaced more readily in most of the groups in Barrie, Mississauga, Miramichi and Winnipeg, the provinces where the federal price on pollution is being implemented. Mentions of this tended to be quite general, including references to climate change and CO₂, or focussed on increased prices at the gas pumps or the challenge to the program from some provincial governments. There was very modest awareness of the recent announcement to ban single-use plastics. Similarly, there were only a few general mentions of “pipelines” in some of the groups.

The Price on Pollution

There was moderate awareness of the federal government’s program to put a price on pollution in the locations where the ‘carbon tax’ (as it is was commonly referred to in all groups) is being implemented, and considerable confusion about how it works. The description of the program provided in the groups appeared to lead to more questions, about the household incentive payment, in particular, which many interpreted as undercutting the basic objectives of the program.

Where the money goes was one of the key questions participants had about the program, but most wanted (and expected) it to go toward investments in the transition to a greener economy, not households. Moreover, while the rising cost of living and the health of industry and jobs were big concerns for participants (who all anticipated that the price on pollution could exacerbate these challenges, in the short term at least), the primary concern about the price on pollution was whether or not it will work to reduce emissions.

Information about the incentive payments did not mitigate concerns about anticipated price increases, and their impacts on consumers, small business, and civic organizations, but raised questions for many about whether or not the program will actually be effective.

Most supported federal government action on climate change and perceived this to be a high priority, but most also needed to better understand the fundamentals of this program in order to develop a sense of confidence that it will work. Most believed that to be truly effective, consumers have to change their behaviour too, and that investments have to be made directly into green technology and innovation to support the transition to cleaner energy. Many wondered how those elements factored into an overall Government of Canada climate change strategy, if at all.

The Ban on Plastics

As noted, awareness of this recent announcement by the federal government was fairly low. There was little top-of-mind mention or awareness and, when specifically asked, many said they had not heard about it. Those who had tended to only vaguely recall seeing or hearing something about it.

Provided with a brief description, most supported this ban as a good idea. Most also felt that plastic pollution is a significant issue and important priority for the federal government. Similarly, many participants overwhelmingly supported the idea of the federal government requiring companies in Canada to clean up the plastic waste they produce, and implementing a ban across its own



departments and agencies. Most agreed that successful reduction and clean up of plastic pollution requires this kind of broad, coordinated effort and leadership from the Government of Canada.

The biggest concerns related to costs and implementation. Participants raised concerns about the inconvenience which they anticipated in the transition, particularly for consumers and businesses. Most also felt that all these initiatives need to be implemented properly in order to succeed, meaning that government will have to be an effective manager and enforcer ensuring compliance, and that companies will have to respond in good faith, not only reducing and cleaning up their plastic waste but investing in the development of new products that are acceptable, affordable and environmentally-friendly alternatives to single-use plastics.

TMX Pipeline (Saint-Jérôme, Vancouver)

Awareness of this project was fairly high in Vancouver and, by contrast, quite low in Saint-Jérôme.

Among those who were aware of it most had a fairly good grasp of the competing environmental and economic issues involved, and that opposition and concerns have led to delays and uncertainty with the project.

Opinion about whether the project should go ahead or not was mixed in Vancouver, with some supporting it, some not, and others unable to decide, while participants in Saint-Jérôme were more likely to be opposed or on the fence.

Most could see both sides of the argument, pro and con, with those supporting the construction of the pipeline saying it is an economic necessity and that the environmental risks and challenges can be mitigated, if managed properly. There was also a sense that the expansion of the pipeline does not preclude the transition toward a greener economy. Those who opposed the pipeline felt that the environmental negatives simply outweigh any economic positives. Among this group, the view was that economic arguments were short-sighted.

Relatively few were aware of the current status of the project, the federal government's ownership status, or the federal government's recent announcement that the project will be going ahead, and that revenues raised from the pipeline will be invested in Canada's transition toward a green economy. Nevertheless, even those who opposed the project view the government's plan for investment as a good idea, provided they follow through with that plan, and invest that money in Canadian companies and innovation. There was a fair bit of skepticism that this would actually happen.

Local Issues (Barrie, Miramichi, Saint-Jérôme)

There were a wide range of local issues in common across these locations, with major concerns focussed on housing and jobs, increasing strains on already insufficient public services and infrastructure, and social issues like growing poverty and mental health, as well as a scarcity of local supports, services, and health care.

In each location infrastructure was a major concern. Few were aware of any federal government investments but underscored the importance of federal funding in public transit and transportation infrastructure, hospitals, and schools. In Miramichi, where participants described their community as



especially in need, there was mention of repeated but unfulfilled promises by government (federal and provincial) to invest in local roads and bridges. Moreover, participants in this community, suffering from a number of compounding factors affecting the health of traditional industry and jobs, wanted to see more local consultation and collaboration by government to implement solutions in ways that reflect the needs and perspectives of local businesses and community members.

Health Care

When it comes to healthcare issues, participants in all locations, and across all groups, focussed primarily on shortages (of family doctors, specialists, hospitals and beds) and the negative impacts on wait times and access to care. Poor mental health and addiction issues were also top-of-mind, along with the lack of services and supports available to address them, in addition to increasing pressures on an already stretched health care system as a result of growing and aging populations.

Few had heard of any recent government announcements to address these challenges in particular or health care in general. When provided with a list of possible priorities for the Government of Canada on health care, consistent with the concerns identified above, a majority of participants selected doctor and nurse shortages as the number one issue for the government to address, followed by a second tier of issues that included reducing wait times for mental health care and improving access to healthy food and prescription drugs.

Pharmacare

Few were aware of the Government of Canada's recent pharmacare announcement, but most thought it was a good idea and would address a very real problem for those not already covered by some kind of insurance plan through their employer or provincial government. Participants in all groups and locations across the country widely agreed that it is unfair, and inconsistent with the principles underpinning Canada's universal health care system for Canadians to suffer severe financial consequences or be denied treatment because they can't afford their medications.

When asked to identify a potential name for such a program from a list provided, the general consensus centered on 'Canada Prescription Plan' as the top choice, with the caveat, identified in nearly all the groups, that the acronym CPP is already in use in reference to the Canada Pension Plan. Asked if they could improve on the name, there was widespread agreement in most of the groups that "Canada" or, especially, "Canadian" should be included. This underscores that the plan is not only national but distinctly Canadian, part of the country's world class health care system, and belongs to citizens.

"Prescription" was widely preferred over "drug", which has negative connotations, and "pharmacare", which some thought could be confusing or unfamiliar. "Plan" was also preferred over "program", with the latter suggesting to many an application or sign up process, while "strategy" was widely viewed as too vague.

To get around the issue with the likelihood that Canada Prescription Plan would be more commonly known as CPP, one participant suggested Canadian Affordable Prescription Plan (CAPP) as a workable option to widespread agreement in that particular group.



Housing (Mississauga, Vancouver)

The cost of housing was identified as a serious issue by all participants in both these cities, for owners and renters alike, but especially the former, given the excessively high purchase prices in these markets. While housing prices are viewed as affecting the general public, there was significant empathy expressed for the particular circumstances facing especially younger people and first-time home buyers to be able to meet the minimum down payment and income requirements to qualify for a mortgage.

Few had heard of the federal government's First-Time Homebuyer Incentive, administered through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and offering between 5-10% toward their down payment on a home. While some liked the idea and felt it could help a portion of first-time homebuyers with their purchase, many were perplexed as to how this program would work. The fairness of the program was questioned, specifically in regards to how CMHC recoups its initial investment, as was the extent to which it would actually make a meaningful difference to most, given just how out-of-reach prices are. A number of participants were especially critical of the idea that an equity stake by CMHC would entitle this government agency to a percentage of the sale price in a market where housing prices are rising so much, so quickly.

More had heard of the federal government's "Mortgage Stress Test" and felt it was a wise safeguard to protect both home purchasers and the housing market overall from over-leveraged and unsustainable debt in the event of an increase in interest rates.

MORE INFORMATION

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