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Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – March 2020

Executive Summary

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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 12 in-person and online focus groups which were conducted between March 4th and 26th, 2020 in six locations across the country including in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Québec, Ontario, 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 increasingly focussed on COVID-19, as the pandemic and its effects in Canada intensified over the course of the month. The research explored a wide range of related issues in depth, from information seeking and knowledge gaps, to degree of personal concern regarding health and finances, perceptions of the federal government's response to date, and priorities for information or support. Most groups also included

the testing of a series of advertising concepts aimed at communicating with the public about COVID-19, including prevention of transmission and spread, how to identify symptoms, and where to go for information.

Among the other issues explored in the research, perceptions of the Wet'suwet'en protests were examined in the Western groups, in the earlier part of the month, along with a series of issues of regional concern to Alberta and British Columbia. In the Calgary groups, the upcoming Budget was discussed, including preferences for potential themes.

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
- Groups were split primarily by gender

Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across 6 Canadian cities
- Two groups conducted per location, in Calgary, Alberta (Mar. 4th), Richmond, British Columbia (Mar. 10th), Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (Mar. 17th), Dieppe, Québec (Mar. 19th), Belleville, Ontario (Mar. 24th), and Québec City, Québec (Mar. 26th)
- Groups in Dieppe and Québec City, Québec were conducted in French, while all others were conducted in English
- Groups in Calgary and Richmond were conducted in-person, while the remaining groups with participants from Charlottetown, Dieppe, Belleville, and Québec City were conducted online
- A total of 8 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 6 to 8 participants would attend
- Each participant received an \$90 honorarium in respect of their time
- Across all locations, 92 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
Calgary, AB	1	English	Mar. 4, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	10
	2			8:00-10:00	Men	9
Richmond, BC	3	English	Mar. 10, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	9
	4			8:00-10:00	Men	7
Charlottetown, PEI	5	English	Mar. 17, 2020	5:00-7:00	Women	7
	6			7:30-9:30	Men	8
Dieppe, NB	7	French	Mar. 19, 2020	5:00-7:00	Women	7
	8			7:30-9:30	Men	7
Belleville, ON	9	English	Mar. 25, 2020	5:00-7:00	Women	6
	10			7:30-9:30	Men	6
Québec City, QC	11	French	Mar. 26, 2020	5:30-7:30	Women	8
	12			8:00-10:00	Men	8
Total number of participants						92

Key Findings

This wave of focus groups took place over the course of an eventful month. The first two sets of groups, in Calgary and Richmond, held on March 4th and 10th, respectively, were conducted prior to the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization and the first presumed case of community transmission in Canada on March 11th, followed by the declaration of states of emergency by provinces and cities across the country beginning on March 13th.

In the two weeks that followed, between the middle and end of March, the four remaining sets of groups in this wave were all moved online but with participants still regionally concentrated. These were focused on Charlottetown (March 17th), Dieppe (March 19th), Belleville (March 25th) and Québec City (March 26th).

Over the course of the last two weeks of the month, COVID-19 became the exclusive focus of the research, examining perceptions and attitudes about the pandemic and the measures being put in place by various levels of government. These measures involved shut downs and closures of the economy and public life, new restrictions on travel and border crossing, as well as the implementation of widespread physical distancing, social isolation, quarantine and stay-at-home measures. At the same time, the federal government was announcing a series of economic and financial measures to mitigate the impact of widespread shut downs on individuals, businesses, and sectors.

Government of Canada News: Early March (Calgary and Richmond)

In the Calgary and Richmond groups, in the first two weeks of the month, COVID-19 was commonly identified as a Government of Canada news story. Participants were generally aware of and watching this issue unfold. It was top-of-mind in both locations, but not prominently or especially urgently. In fact, issues related to pipelines, the Wet'suwet'en protests, and the recent drop in the interest rate were more widely mentioned and discussed as issues of note.

Beginning in the groups held after March 16th, COVID-19 became the dominant issue that was mentioned as federal government news.

COVID-19: Perceptions in Early March (Calgary and Richmond)

Prior to the events of mid-March, participants in these locations were highly-attuned to what was happening with COVID-19, but they were not especially worried. The impact on their lives and communities was still limited. Most were implementing sanitary precautions, and many were beginning to see some effects on local businesses and social events and interactions resulting from measures to avoid crowds, stay at home more, and limit contact with other people. Anti-Asian racism was a concern for a number of participants in both locations. Some were also hearing about restrictions on travel and the impact of global cases on trade, the travel industry, and travelers, as well as schools and students.

Most expected COVID-19 to get worse, but few felt a high level of immediate concern for themselves or their families. The relatively few cases in Canada, a number of participants pointed out, were still related to travel. Many downplayed the potential impact of COVID-19 on public health in Canada, and some felt that concerns were being overblown. Despite engaging in at least some precautionary measures or changed behaviour, participants tended to compare COVID-19 to the flu for most people and to associate major health concerns with older people and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

Participants were not especially attuned to federal government actions regarding COVID-19, except with regard to the border and travel. A number of participants commented on efforts by the Government of Canada to bring stranded Canadian travelers home from Asia, and implement quarantines. A number of participants also felt that the federal government was being slow to act in restricting travel or communicating clearly with air travelers about restrictions and measures to reduce the risk of spread.

COVID-19: Perceptions from Mid-month to the End of March (Charlottetown, Dieppe, Québec City, Belleville)

Impact

With the declaration of a global pandemic, the beginning of community transmission in Canada, and emergency measures rolling out in provinces and cities across the country, attitudes among participants underwent a decisive shift. COVID-19 was now widely viewed as a serious issue for Canada. Most participants were being directly impacted by widespread closures and shut downs in their communities – of schools, businesses, workplaces, and events – as well as widespread social distancing and isolation measures. Some had lost work, business or jobs, many had changed their working arrangements, and most were staying home as much as possible and changing their behaviour in public when they were going out. No one said they were continuing to physically socialize with others outside their household.

COVID-19 in the news

Participants were paying close attention to a wide range of issues in the news related to COVID-19. Most commonly, they were following the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in Canada and in their province and community, as well as globally. The widespread shutdowns and the new phenomena of ‘social distancing’, house isolation, and quarantines were top of mind as well. Participants were also attuned to information about symptoms, testing, and what to do if they or a family member became sick. The frequency of government communications, press conferences and announcements were also prominently mentioned. Many, if not most, were seeing the daily press conferences being held by the Prime Minister outside his residence, and by provincial Premiers and public health officials from different levels of government.

Awareness of federal government initiatives

Most said that they were paying close attention to communications from the Government of Canada, which they described as engaged, visible, and active in its efforts to manage the crisis. Asked about what they had seen or heard with regard to specific policies, participants tended to highlight two key areas of focus: economic and financial initiatives, and measures related to the border and travel.

There was widespread awareness that economic relief was being offered by the federal government through a range of initiatives aimed at individuals, employers, and businesses. Participants tended to be up to date on recent announcements and aware that the effort was evolving. Many had basic knowledge of specific initiatives, such as the employee supplement for small businesses, changes to employment insurance (EI), and monthly benefits being offered to those not covered by EI, as well as deferrals for payments related to taxes, student loans and mortgages. Most felt that the federal government was preparing a significant and comprehensive aid package.

Participants had also heard about measures to close the borders and restrict travel. Participants spoke about restrictions on cross-border travel for non-essential reasons, with exceptions being made for commerce, trade, and US citizens (at the time of some of the groups), as well as some of those measures being revised and tightened. Many were also aware of measures in place for returning travellers, including screening and home isolation. Some mentioned, unaided, that they had also heard that there were issues with these measures being properly implemented.

Top concerns

Participants were concerned about a wide range of issues related to COVID-19. Most commonly, they were paying close attention to the spread of the virus and its impact on health. Participants were concerned about cases nationally as a key indicator of the magnitude of COVID-19 and its impact on the country. And they were interested in local cases as a measure of personal risk. Overall, participants were more concerned with public health than personal risk, and they were most concerned about the health impacts on older people and those with medical conditions, especially members of their own families, than on themselves or their children.

Most participants were equally concerned, if not more so, about the economy than about public health. They commented on the negative impacts of widespread closures and social distancing on businesses and industry, including employment and supply chains, as well their personal finances and incomes. Some felt that the economic disruptions had the potential to create more harm and longer-term negative consequences for the majority of people than the virus itself.

Financially, a number of participants had already been affected by the shutdowns and had lost jobs, prospects, hours, shifts, business and clients. Among those affected, a number of participants were very concerned about their ability to manage in the immediate term and pay for rent and basic living expenses. While some felt secure for now, few felt prepared to weather a prolonged downturn.

Uncertainty itself was another top concern. Many wanted more information concerning how bad the impact of the virus might be on public health, the economy, and personal finances, and how long the closures, shut downs, and disruptions might last.

Another key area of concern related to the effectiveness of social distancing and isolation measures, especially enforcing compliance. Most felt that that more needed to be done to encourage and enforce these measures and get everyone to take them seriously.

COVID-19: Assessments of the Federal Government Response (Charlottetown, Dieppe, Québec City, Belleville)

Overall assessment

Participants were somewhat mixed in their assessment of the federal government's overall response to the COVID-19 crisis. In Dieppe and Belleville, participants were overwhelmingly positive. They felt that Canada was enacting a more effective response than many other countries and doing a good job, overall. They credited the federal government with good communications, fast action on economic and financial measures, and strong support for the messages related to prevention and stopping the spread through social distancing and home isolation.

In Charlottetown and Québec City, many were more divided or critical in their views. These participants were primarily concerned with what they saw as an initial slowness to act by the federal government, specifically mentioning a slow start to tightening the border, restricting travel, and mitigating the risks associated with returning travellers.

Key issues: strengths and weaknesses

Regardless of their overall assessment, most tended to agree that the federal government was doing a good job in some important areas and needed to improve in others.

Communications: The Government of Canada's public communications were generally given high marks. Most felt that the Prime Minister, in particular, and Canada's Chief Public Health Officer were doing a good job. They are being highly visible, authoritative spokespeople for the national effort, and keeping the public informed with frequent updates. Many said that they appreciated the overall quality of this effort and were looking to the federal government for updates and announcements on policy, and as a trusted source of information. Areas for improvement included communicating more forcefully about physical distancing, isolation, and quarantines, for example by issuing 'directives' with consequences for non-compliance, and providing more information about cases, locations, testing, screening, and the impact of current measures. Many also wanted to see more projections regarding the impact and duration of the pandemic and its disruptions to public life and the economy. Some also wanted to know more about economic and financial initiatives, especially qualifying criteria, how to apply, and how quickly money or relief would be made available.

Economic and financial measures: Most liked the swiftness and magnitude of the federal government's response to the economic and financial impacts of COVID-19. Participants generally felt that the government was doing a lot to buttress the economy, mitigate the impacts of an unprecedented disruption, and meet the urgent needs of the many businesses and individuals affected. Many liked the focus of these measures on people, and not just employers, business and industry. A number of participants felt that even more needed to be done, and that the federal government needed to move more swiftly to issue financial assistance and ensure that no one was being left out.

Borders and Air Travel: Many felt that the federal government should have tightened the border and limited travel earlier than it did. A number of participants also felt there had been problems associated with Canadians returning home in response to new measures and restrictions, including travellers crowded together in customs, a lack of screening or other precautions being implemented at airports, and shortcomings in communicating about the obligatory two-week house isolation or enforcing it in any way.

Federal-provincial coordination: Some felt that there should be more federal-provincial coordination on major responses and measures, to avoid gaps, inconsistency or confusion.

Priorities for next steps

Asked specifically what federal government should be doing, based on the issues and concerns most important to them, participants had some key suggestions.

Contain the spread: Most commonly, participants wanted to see the federal government continue to implement or strengthen measures necessary to contain the virus and slow down its spread until a vaccine or treatment could be found. This included stricter measures, and more forceful communications, regarding the closures of nonessential businesses and workplaces and compliance with stay-at-home directives, physical distancing, and quarantines. Participants generally felt that more testing was needed, as well, to monitor and manage cases and risk more effectively.

Deliver comprehensive economic and financial support, quickly. Most felt that the federal government should continue to do whatever was needed to respond to the economic and financial crisis for citizens, employers, and businesses. Most agreed that the priority now was to continue to ensure that everyone was covered, and to get the money out quickly, recognizing the urgent need among many businesses and individuals.

Provide more detailed information about financial supports and programs. Many wanted to know where to go to get more detailed and comprehensive information about the range of financial benefits and relief being made available to individuals. Some also wanted more work done to ensure that the application process was clear, easy, and straightforward, and that people could easily determine if they qualified or not.

Continue to communicate well and move quickly. Participants were paying close attention to the federal government and its announcements and communications. Most felt that the federal government was doing a good job with public communications, and had begun to move quickly and proactively, especially with widespread shutdowns and preventative measures, such as social distancing and home isolation, and the announcement of financial and economic initiatives. They wanted to see this continue.

Share more information: Most participants wanted more information to help them assess the situation with COVID-19 and get a better understanding of associated impacts, risks and timelines. Most commonly, participants wanted to get a clearer picture of the true number of cases in Canada, based on testing, as well as where those cases were located in communities. They also wanted to see projections to better understand how bad the pandemic or its impact on the economy might become, how long it might last, and what the various scenarios, trajectories or outcomes might be.

Address travel-related concerns: While some of the main concerns with the border and travel were widely viewed as problems of the past, some felt that that key issues remained that needed to be addressed to ensure that travellers were screened on their arrival and received more information about the need to self-isolate at home, including stronger messages about the compulsory nature of the directive and consequences for non-compliance.

COVID-19 Ad Testing (Richmond, Charlottetown, Dieppe, Belleville, Québec City)

As COVID-19 emerged as a significant and urgent issue, and an increasing focus of government, the public, and the media, discussions within each of the groups included the testing of a number of advertising concepts. The testing started with the Richmond groups on March 11th and looked at a series of concepts and executions intended for distribution across a range of media – online/social media, print, radio and television. The main insights are summarized below by media platform, rather than by location.

Online and Social Media Ads (Richmond, Charlottetown, Dieppe)

As COVID-19 was becoming a more serious global public health threat, PCO took the opportunity to test a series of four concepts for social media with the groups in Richmond, British Columbia, on March 11th. Two of the concepts were designed for Facebook and two for Twitter. Three of the four concepts focused on COVID-19 information specific to travelers, including what travelers need to know prior to traveling abroad (Twitter), what to do if falling ill while traveling (Twitter), and the symptoms to watch for when returning from abroad (Facebook). The fourth concept was focussed on preventive measures to protect against transmission of COVID-19 and was broadly applicable to the general public (Facebook). Participants were shown paper copies of each storyboard, which included individual video frames depicting the imagery and messages. All of the ads concluded by showing the website (Canada.ca/coronavirus) and a toll-free telephone number for more information.

Based on responses to the individual ads, and comments overall, participants preferred a more broadly relevant message, and executions that were simple, clear, uncluttered, and visual. In general, the ads that focused on information for travelers were viewed as less relevant, while the Facebook ad, which included information about prevention, was seen as more broadly applicable. This ad focused on five simple measures to protect against the virus (i.e., handwashing, coughing/sneezing into your elbow, avoiding contact with sick people, avoiding touching your face and staying home if you feel ill).

Participants tended to feel strongly that copy-heavy ads were inappropriate for social media. They felt that they ran counter to expectations in this medium, and would have the reverse effect of engaging the user. Participants also noted the importance of having the Government of Canada logo or wordmark appear early in the ad, both to capture immediate attention and to enhance the credibility of the content.

Two banner ad concepts were tested in Charlottetown and Dieppe. These concepts focused on key messages related to reducing the spread of COVID-19, similar to the messages relayed in the social media ad which centered on prevention, as noted above. Using both images and words, these concepts leveraged the idea of repetition in slightly different ways. Repetition was generally viewed by most participants as an effective creative technique to get audience attention and to reinforce the key steps to reduce the spread of the virus.

Television Ads (Belleville and Québec City)

Two television ads were tested in Belleville and Quebec City both of which featured Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada. One emphasized frequent handwashing, avoiding face-touching, sneezing into your arm, and staying at home as much as possible. The other centered primarily on messages regarding social distancing, avoiding non-essential travel and self-isolation for those who have been exposed to the virus. In this concept, Dr. Tam also urged Canadians to stay connected by telephone or online.

Both ads were viewed as credible and easy to understand. They were widely seen to be communicating important facts, information and advice to slow the spread of the virus. Comments suggest that, as Canadians were becoming more informed and concerned about COVID-19, participants were in fact poised for messaging that took a somewhat more urgent and emphatic tone. For a number of participants, there was a sense that more definitive messages about the severity of the virus, and

specifically on social distancing and stay-at-home directives, were required to address concerns that some were not adequately adhering to these measures.

Radio Ads (Charlottetown and Dieppe)

Participants were shown three different radio ads throughout the course of the month of March, which all focused on key messaging around the various ways Canadian's could protect themselves from COVID-19. In Charlottetown and Dieppe, participants listened to an ad recorded by the Prime Minister and in Belleville and Quebec City, scripts (*Take Care* and *Save Lives*) were read aloud by the moderator.

Response to the three proposed ads were mixed. Overall, the women were more positive about the ads, whereas men tended to be more critical. The *Take Care* script garnered the strongest positive response overall, as it conveyed an encouraging message about collective strength and appealed to Canadian values, while the other two scripts received more mixed reviews.

Regardless of the scripts, participants liked some key features. They liked communications that were clear and to the point, and informative and comprehensive in terms of offering advice. Many also cited strengths around setting an encouraging and reassuring tone and drawing on Canadian values. By contrast, other participants, mostly men, believed the message needed to be more hard-hitting and use stronger language to be effective. In particular, participants questioned references to "non-essential travel" and "crowds", which many cited as dated advice. Other weaknesses included the speed and comprehension of the ad (specifically with regards to French versions), the importance of including both a URL and telephone number, and a generally low memorability factor across the board.

Both taglines used in the ads performed reasonably well. There was a slight preference for "When you take care of yourself, you take care of others", due to its implied messaging around personal responsibility. However, "Stay Home. Save lives," was a clear preference for the men's group in Belleville for its brevity.

Print – Postcard (Charlottetown and Dieppe)

Participants in Charlottetown and Dieppe were shown a postcard with information about three key issues regarding COVID-19: precautions to take to avoid transmissions, symptoms, and what do if symptoms developed. Overall response to the postcard was positive and strong. Participants liked that the postcard provided comprehensive and useful information, while also being clear and succinct. The one common issue with the postcard, given the amount of information it contained, was that the content might be hard to read and better-suited to a larger format such as a poster. Suggestions for improvements included tweaks such as bolder font and brighter colours to make the postcard stand-out more, and the inclusion of a telephone number.

Campaigns (Charlottetown and Dieppe)

In order to provide direction to an overall campaign strategy, two different concepts were shown to participants in Charlottetown and Dieppe. While they both focussed on the same overall theme, with

regards to precautions to stop the spread and transmission of the virus, different approaches were taken to how content was presented.

There was no clear preference overall, or by location or gender. About half of the participants selected the concept where the messages were stated repeatedly ("Concept 1") and the other half selected the concept which showed individuals in various settings performing actions to stop the spread ("Concept 2"). Those who selected Concept 1 found repetition to be a more effective technique for getting the message across, in a way that was eye catching and understandable. By contrast, those who selected Concept 2 felt the graphic approach taken was simpler and more engaging and noticeable, and did a better job of conveying the message effectively.

However, few felt that the campaigns, regardless of the concept chosen, would prompt them to take more action or change their behaviour. Most said that they were already aware of and following these directions.

Message Testing (Richmond, Charlottetown, Dieppe)

Participants in the second, third and fourth locations of the month undertook an exercise to evaluate potential messages about COVID-19. Presented with a list of these messages, participant's responses varied by location. In Richmond, participants chose "*Help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Here's what you can do to help*" as their clear preference. Reasons for selecting this messaging included its plea for 'help', the fact that it specifically referenced "COVID-19", and that it encouraged direct, personal action. Post March 15, in Charlottetown, the majority chose as their top choice "*When you take care of yourself, you take care of others*" due to its empathetic tone, which softly urged the reader to take action by appealing to enlightened self-interest and social values. This style of messaging, however, did not resonate with participants in Dieppe, where most chose "*Do your part. Help reduce the spread of coronavirus disease*". Comparatively, Francophones appreciated how this message was very direct and to the point. In terms of the other selections "*Take Care of Canadians*" and "*Now is the time to act and we must act together*" were the least favoured.

Non COVID-19 Findings (Calgary, Richmond)

The first two sets of focus groups in March, held in Calgary (March 4th) and Richmond (March 10th), covered a range of both national and regional issues. While these were fruitful discussions which captured some valuable contemporary views, these no longer became the priority for the March research in face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, this research program was redesigned after March 15th to run online and to conduct focus groups that were specifically designed to provide direct input into Government of Canada COVID-19 response policy and communications.

The detailed findings from the focus groups in Calgary and Richmond have been retained however and can be found in the Detailed Findings of this report.

MORE INFORMATION

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