



Government  
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du Canada

# Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – May 2021

## Executive Summary

### **Prepared for the Privy Council Office**

Supplier name: The Strategic Counsel

Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY

Contract value: \$1,618,838.00

Award date: December 18, 2020

Delivery date: October 29, 2021

Registration number: POR-005-19

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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 online focus groups which were conducted between May 4<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021 in multiple locations across the country including Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are shown in the section below.

The research for this cycle of focus groups focused primarily on COVID-19, as the pandemic continued in Canada. Related to COVID-19, topics discussed included what Canadians were hearing about the Government of Canada in the news, their outlook on COVID-19 and how the pandemic has influenced their behaviours, their views on local public health restrictions, as well as the federal government's response to COVID-19 outbreaks across the country. The research also explored the vaccine rollout in Canada, including perceptions of the Government of Canada with respect to procuring and distributing vaccines as well as possible advertising and information to encourage Canadians to get vaccinated. Further, participants' views on Canada's border closures and other COVID-19 related travel restrictions were explored, including their attitudes towards vaccine 'passports'.

Other issues unrelated to the pandemic were also discussed. These included Enbridge Line 5, local issues in Northern Alberta and out-of-status workers in Canada. In addition, a portion of the discussions in some groups focused on obtaining feedback on various Budget 2021 initiatives.

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 location.
- Some groups focused on specific subgroups of the population including those who were vaccine hesitant, some of whom were racialized Canadians, people who were experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours, opinion leaders who were paying close attention to the news, some of whom were seniors over the age of 65, parents with children in daycare and those who had received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, some of whom were seniors over the age of 65.

### Detailed approach

- 12 focus groups across various regions in Canada.
- Two groups were conducted with the general population in Northern Alberta and Southern Ontario.
- The other ten groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
  - Vaccine hesitant people residing in Quebec's Eastern Townships and vaccine hesitant racialized Canadians residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA);
  - Those experiencing COVID-19 fatigue and exhibiting riskier behaviours residing in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) and in the cities of Saskatoon and Regina;

- Opinion leaders and those paying close attention to the news in Eastern Ontario and seniors, aged 65 and over, who identified as opinion leaders and paying close attention to the news in Atlantic Canada;
  - Parents with children in daycare residing in Northern Ontario and across the Lower Mainland; and
  - Those who had received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine residing in the Quebec City region and seniors, aged 65 and over, who had received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine in Manitoba.
- Groups in Quebec were conducted in French, while all others were conducted in English.
  - All groups for this cycle were conducted online.
  - A total of 8 participants were recruited for each group, assuming 6 to 8 participants would attend.
  - Across all locations, 83 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.
  - Each participant received an honorarium. The incentive ranged from \$100 to \$125 per participant, depending on the location and the composition of the group.

#### Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME (EST)	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Greater Toronto Area (GTA)	1	English	May 4	6:00-8:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant, Racialized Canadians	8
Northern Alberta	2	English	May 5	8:00-10:00 pm	General Population	5
Greater Montreal Area (GMA)	3	French	May 6	6:00-8:00 pm	People Experiencing COVID Fatigue/Exhibiting Riskier Behaviour	7
Atlantic Canada	4	English	May 11	5:00-7:00 pm	Opinion Leaders/Influencers/ Paying more attention to news/media, Seniors 65+	7
Northern Ontario	5	English	May 12	6:00-8:00 pm	Parents with Children in Daycare	6

Manitoba	6	English	May 13	7:00-9:00 pm	Received First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine, Seniors 65+	5
Saskatoon and Regina	7	English	May 17	8:00-10:00 pm	People Experiencing COVID Fatigue/Exhibiting Riskier Behaviour	8
Quebec Eastern Townships	8	French	May 18	6:00-8:00 pm	Vaccine Hesitant	7
Eastern Ontario	9	English	May 20	6:00-8:00 pm	Opinion Leaders/Influencers/ Paying more attention to news/media	7
Lower Mainland BC	10	English	May 25	9:00-11:00 pm	Parents with Children in Daycare	8
Southern Ontario	11	English	May 26	6:00-8:00 pm	General Population	8
Quebec City Region	12	French	May 27	6:00-8:00 pm	Received First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine	7
<b>Total number of participants</b>						<b>83</b>

## Key Findings

### Part I: COVID-19 Related Findings

#### Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

A range of topics and issues surfaced when participants were asked what they had seen, read, or heard about the Government of Canada within the last few days. Pandemic-related issues were mentioned frequently. Many participants commented on what they perceived to be both the positive and negative aspects of the Government of Canada’s handling of the issue. Some felt the vaccine rollout was proceeding well and expected it would accelerate with a pending influx of additional doses of the Pfizer vaccine. Others had heard about disagreements between the federal government and Ontario regarding the issue of reopening the borders and some were anxious given their perception that the distribution of second doses in Canada was trailing the rollout in other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

A number of participants had heard or read about Bill C-10, an amendment to the *Broadcasting Act*, and were aware of its intent to support Canadian artists. At the same time, some had heard that the

Bill may have implications towards freedom of expression on social media and expressed concerns about possible limitations in this area.

Several participants raised the issue of sexual misconduct in the military in Canada, although they did not elaborate further.

Other issues also mentioned by participants included a call by the Governor of Michigan to shut down Enbridge Line 5, implementation of a national child care program, the WE Charity scandal, the arrest of a Belarusian journalist, and federal government support for a ceasefire following an escalation of a flare-up in hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

In several groups, participants were given more details on Bill C-10 and discussed facets of this issue in greater depth. The conversation generated a number of concerns and questions pertaining to the intent and implementation of the Bill. Some expressed concerns about the financial impacts on Canadian consumers as a result of potential additional charges levied on streaming operations like Netflix and Spotify.

There were also some concerns that the Bill may not achieve an equitable distribution of payments in support of Canadian artists and that those artists who were already well established may benefit disproportionately, while aspiring creators may lose out. Some simply felt that a better approach to leveling the playing field for Canadian artists would be to fund the arts in Canada more directly, and that decisions in terms of support for various artists and artistic endeavours should be driven by market forces.

Numerous questions were raised about the impact the Bill would have on the development and consumption of a wider array of international content and whether Canadians might face some restrictions in the offerings from companies such as Netflix and Spotify. While participants expressed a desire for more information to better understand the Bill, specifically why it is needed, what it is proposing, and how it will be implemented, they nonetheless firmly supported funding for Canadian artists and were proud of the international success of Canadians working in the field of arts and culture.

On the topic of the recent conflict in the Middle East, few participants in the groups in which this was discussed in more detail had heard about the issue and were aware of how the Government of Canada had responded. Several were aware of a call by the United States for a ceasefire. A small number of participants who were unaware of Canada's response argued for pausing relations with Israel while others argued for taking a stance similar to the U.S. Government with respect to promoting a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas.

Bill C-96, a proposed amendment to the Constitution to recognize Quebec as a nation and French as its only official and common language was discussed among individuals in the Quebec City Region group. There was a modest level of awareness of the Bill with some commenting that the Government of Canada's response had been generally positive and open-minded.

### **COVID-19 Outlook/Behaviour (All Locations)**

Throughout May, various aspects of the pandemic were explored in the focus groups including participants' views on the public health measures and restrictions in their region and their impact on them personally, as well as perceptions of the Government of Canada's response. Some discussions also focused on participants' expectations with respect to the trajectory of the pandemic and, in particular, whether they felt the spread of COVID-19 would get worse or improve. In a few focus groups participants were asked about the idea of a 'one dose summer, two dose fall' and provided insights with regard to their interpretation of this phrase.

### **Views on Restrictions (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians, Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Northern Alberta, GMA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Exhibiting Riskier Behaviours, Atlantic Canadian Opinion Seniors, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors)**

To begin the conversation, many participants were asked about their views and feelings toward COVID-19 restrictions in their province and region. Most participants acknowledged the necessity of COVID-19 restrictions despite the economic, educational, and mental health challenges that resulted. There was a general, albeit reluctant, acceptance that ongoing restrictions were required in order to stop the spread of COVID-19. Nevertheless, there were perceptions among many participants that provincial and federal governments had been too slow to implement restrictions and had not shut down quickly enough when COVID-19 cases were rising sharply across the country. They felt that the spread of the virus could have been slowed or stopped through a much stricter lockdown over a period of two to six weeks. Overall, there was a broad view among participants that easing restrictions should only occur after COVID-19 infections have decreased significantly in their respective regions of the country.

Participants also expressed a strong concern about the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions. Many felt that authorities had been too lax in enforcing public health orders, commenting that they had observed certain people and groups who regularly ignored or violated these restrictions. A few, however, felt that some of those charged with enforcing public health restrictions had been overzealous, with several noting instances of receiving fines for neglecting social distancing measures.

Overall, most participants felt the current level of restrictions were appropriate, and no one thought that stricter restrictions were needed.

### **Government of Canada Assistance to Ontario (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians)**

GTA participants were told that the Government of Canada had announced it would be providing more help to Ontario at the request of the province. Reactions from participants were, on balance, positive. Some mentioned that if Ontario was in need of assistance, then the federal government had a responsibility to provide such assistance. Nevertheless, some participants were frustrated that Ontario had reached a point that required federal intervention, mentioning that they felt the vaccine rollout had been poorly mobilized and that the supply of vaccines would create roadblocks to further success.

### **The Atlantic Bubble (Atlantic Canada Opinion Leaders Seniors)**

In the group held among participants residing in Atlantic Canada, the issue of reinstating the Atlantic Bubble which had been in place until November 2020 was discussed. Most participants felt that Atlantic Canada should not be reinstating the Atlantic Bubble until COVID-19 infections in all Atlantic provinces had significantly subsided. The primary factor underpinning the reluctance to do so was the threat of the new variants.

Early September was the date most participants thought travel would be reopened between Atlantic Canada and the rest of the country. There were two key considerations for participants in opening up the region to visitors from other part of Canada:

- A high proportion of Canadians being full vaccinated; and
- The number of infections in the rest of the country.

There was also a common view among participants that travel should only be extended to those provinces where the infection cases levels were low.

### **Government of Canada's Performance on Managing COVID-19 (Atlantic Canada Opinion Leaders Seniors, Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors)**

There were a wide variety of views expressed about the performance of the Government of Canada in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, with some conflating with provincial actions at times.

- It was generally understood that managing the pandemic was new and different from other issues and problems to which governments are charged with responding. Participants acknowledged that government leaders and public health experts have been highly visible in communications with Canadians regarding the government's decisions to stop the spread of COVID-19.
- There was a widespread view that the federal government performed well in providing a range of financial support for individuals, families and business to weather the pandemic.
- The travel restrictions imposed early on in the pandemic by the federal government were viewed positively by some, although several felt the federal government should have been more proactive in imposing travel restrictions.
- Some participants thought that federal public health leaders had done a good job in utilizing scientific evidence to support their decisions, helping to avoid the politicization of public health.
- Many participants also felt that the government had done a good job in procuring the vaccines, particularly given that Canada lacked any domestic manufacturing capacity to produce the vaccines.
- Some expressed negative comments about the changing messaging regarding the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Several commented that the federal government should have been more consistent in its communications about the safety of this vaccine.
- The changing length of time between the first and second vaccine dose from 14 days to up to 105 days was viewed negatively by a few participants.



- A few felt that the constantly changing public health guidelines and regulations was also problematic. These participants did not understand the context or the rationale for these regulatory changes.
- Finally, a few participants felt it was unacceptable that Canada did not have domestic vaccine manufacturing capability.

### **COVID-19 Outlook**

Participants were asked about their personal outlook for the COVID-19 pandemic, including their thoughts on the spread of COVID-19 throughout the spring.

Many participants felt that the worst of the pandemic was in the past. A key part of this optimistic outlook was rooted in the view that the vaccine rollout was already gaining momentum. In short, they felt that the threat of being infected by the virus would significantly diminish. In addition to the vaccine rollout becoming more aggressive, there was a view that governments would become more skilled in addressing and managing future COVID-19 outbreaks.

Nevertheless, many participants remained uncertain as to the future course of the pandemic. Several were more pessimistic, believing the pandemic would worsen. Many of these participants resided in provinces where COVID-19 cases were still rising and robust public health restrictions were being maintained. Uncertainty and pessimism were driven by concerns about the threat of COVID-19 variants and specific concerns about reduced efficacy of the vaccines.

There was a widespread view that it would be difficult to fully eradicate the virus given the trajectory and its impact to date. In this context, it was expected that the COVID-19 virus would become a seasonal event which would need to be managed, similar to seasonal influenza, for which there is an annual flu vaccine.

### **Change in Behaviours (Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors, Lower Mainland Parents with Children in Daycare)**

Participants were then asked if they had changed their behaviour in the past few weeks and if they were doing anything differently now in comparison to a few months ago. Relatively few participants reported changes to their daily life. Some did comment on the state of their own and other's mental health. While mental health struggles related to the pandemic were familiar to many, some reported they had worsened in the last few months given the continued isolation and public health impacts of the pandemic.

When asked how COVID-19 and COVID-related restrictions impacted them, participants primarily recalled stories of struggle and hardship. Parents tended to mention the impact that COVID-19 had on their children, including the difficulties of online schooling and the related increase in screen time. Some parents also mentioned the difficulties of finding child care. Others mentioned that the pandemic had resulted in job loss and that they were facing financial difficulties.

**One Dose Summer, Two Dose Fall (Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors, Saskatoon and Regina Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Quebec Eastern Townships Vaccine Hesitant, Eastern Ontario Opinion Leaders, Southern Ontario)**

Very few participants had heard of the phrase 'One Dose Summer, Two Dose Fall,' but interpreted it as referring to the timing of vaccinations with the intention that most Canadians would receive their first dose by the summer and the second dose sometime in the fall.

Further clarification was provided to participants and some felt the phrase made sense, noting it was clear, fairly self-explanatory, accurately depicted the outlook for those who are vaccinated, and generally reflected how they had interpreted it. However, many others commented that the phrase did not necessarily invoke any sense of a change in public health measures and restrictions and found it difficult to see the connection to what people would be able to do under each scenario.

The phrase sparked some questions from participants, including:

- Is there a possibility of a third dose being required?
- If people get vaccinated and public health measures remain in place, then what exactly has changed between the summer and the fall in terms of what Canadians can do?

A few participants expressed skepticism about achieving the goal of 75 per cent being fully vaccinated in the fall of 2021. When asked what types of activities they thought Canadians may be permitted to do this summer, based on the projected vaccination rates, participants felt that masks would still be required but that small outdoor gatherings with friends and family may be allowed.

By contrast, the expectation for the fall was that a return to more normal activities and social events would likely occur, including the opportunity to hold more gatherings indoors, as well as to patronize retail outlets and restaurants, and travel.

**Public Health Agency of Canada Vaccine Postcard (Saskatoon and Regina Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Quebec Eastern Townships Vaccine Hesitant, Eastern Ontario Opinion Leaders, Southern Ontario)**

Mid-month, participants in three groups were shown a postcard on this topic and asked for their comments.

Many participants reacted positively to both the style and content of the postcard, pointing to the colours, the graphics, and the layout. In particular, some felt the traffic light colour coding system was a useful creative tool. Participants appreciated that the postcard ostensibly laid out a plan and provided Canadians with a hopeful outlook. Most also thought the message to get vaccinated was well communicated, along with the supplementary message that doing so would protect your neighbours and your community.

A few participants were somewhat more critical, believing that increased activities and the loosening of restrictions should be more clearly linked to cases of COVID-19 rather than to vaccination rates. They also found it to be somewhat vague in terms of identifying specific types of activities that Canadians

can or cannot do (e.g., church gatherings, attendance at baseball games, etc.) and felt that it essentially described the current context and expectations without providing much new information.

When asked specifically if the postcard would encourage them to book an appointment to be vaccinated, most responded in the affirmative noting that it would, at a minimum, serve as a good reminder. Although some participants commented that those who wish to be vaccinated would do so without a reminder, there was also a perception that those who are hesitant may be influenced by the information contained in the postcard.

### **COVID Fatigue (GMA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Saskatoon and Regina Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)**

During May two focus groups were conducted with participants who reported being tired of the ongoing public health measures and restrictions, and who indicated having engaged in activities which exposed them to a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. These groups were asked to elaborate on their experience through the pandemic and, specifically, what they found most difficult about following public health advice.

Participants expressed frustration associated with the following:

- The perceived inconsistency in the application of public health measures;
- Isolation;
- Loss of freedom; and
- Line-ups at retail outlets.

A few participants in these groups mentioned having contracted COVID-19, after which they felt more comfortable visiting other family members given their sense that they had developed a natural immunity to the virus.

### **COVID-19 Vaccines (All Locations)**

Participants shared their views on the COVID-19 vaccines and the vaccination campaign. This included what they had seen, heard or read about the vaccines and their perspectives on how well the Government of Canada was doing towards securing sufficient vaccine supply as well as encouraging Canadians to get vaccinated.

A wide array of participants across all groups reported they had been closely following the news about the COVID-19 vaccination rollout. Many commented upon the accelerated pace of the rollout, noting increasing vaccination rates within their respective provinces and the extension of first doses to those in younger age cohorts.

There was also widespread awareness and discussion regarding the pause in administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine due to concerns about the possibility of blood clots. Some were of the opinion that this issue was occurring at a higher rate than originally thought, while others argued that scientists and experts were continuing to emphasize the rarity of this type of adverse event.

Other comments from participants focused on issues such as mixing vaccine doses, the varying levels of immunity among the vaccine brands, the issue of blood clots, a growing preference for Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, concerns about the lag time between doses, and the impending receipt of a large Pfizer shipment.

Several participants commented on paying less attention in general to news and information about COVID-19, including the vaccines.

**Performance on Obtaining Vaccines and Rolling Out Vaccinations (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians, Northern Alberta, GMA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Atlantic Canada Opinion Leaders Seniors, Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors)**

Participants were asked to evaluate the job the Government of Canada was doing in procuring and distributing COVID-19 vaccines to the provinces and territories. Across the groups, participants were either neutral or negative about the current response. Some felt the federal government was doing the best it could under the circumstances and that the deficiencies lay with the country's infrastructure and lack of vaccine production capability. Others attributed the disruptions and delays in vaccine distribution to vaccine manufacturers rather than the Government of Canada.

Criticism of the federal government's response centered around poor vaccination rates and distribution relative to the United States, the extended length of time between first and second doses, Canada's reliance on international vaccine manufacturers and the lack of domestic production, and the communication from the federal government in general regarding the vaccine. Messaging surrounding the AstraZeneca vaccine in particular was pointed to as confusing by several participants.

Participants discussed Canada's performance in terms of vaccinating our population and, specifically, which other countries we ought to be comparing ourselves to when evaluating our performance.

Most mentioned the United States as our key peer when it came to comparing relative vaccination rates, primarily due to its geographical proximity. Others pointed to countries in Europe, pointing to their similar population sizes. Some also mentioned the G7 or G20 countries, due to the relatively similar financial means of those groups. It was also argued that any comparison between Canada and countries with domestic vaccine manufacturing capacity was inherently one-sided.

Participants were shown data regarding Canada's performance at the time these discussions were held. The percentage of Canadians who had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose ranged from 34 to 41 per cent depending on when in the month the focus group was held. Canada's ranking in this metric within the G20 during this time frame was 3<sup>rd</sup> overall and the country's international ranking was 13<sup>th</sup> overall to begin and end the month.

When asked if this information surprised them at all, many participants across the groups indicated that they were pleasantly surprised and felt Canada was doing better than expected. Many voiced that Canada's performance should be publicized as a way to counter the narrative that the vaccination campaign was being mishandled. It was also mentioned that this strong uptake might encourage other Canadians to get vaccinated themselves.

Others expressed skepticism about the data in general, stating that these numbers could be manipulated or skewed to present more positive messaging. They felt the positive data did not reflect their perspective from the ground that the vaccine rollout had been quite slow. It was also noted that the relevant metric was the percentage of Canadians fully vaccinated, not just those who had received one dose.

### **Vaccination Experience and Behaviours among Those Who Have Been Vaccinated (Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors, Quebec City Region Recipients of First Dose COVID-19 Vaccine)**

Two groups, one based in Manitoba and the other in the Quebec City region, were invited with the understanding that they all had received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. These participants discussed their experiences with the vaccination process and their thoughts on the vaccine rollout overall.

Participants were widely positive about the rollout of vaccines thus far, expressing they believed the process was proceeding quickly and effectively. The experience of booking and receiving the vaccination was also described in positive terms. Participants felt the system had been well organized and were generally impressed with the process.

Once having received their vaccination, participants stated that they felt better protected, especially against the variants, and were generally more relieved. At the same time, most remained vigilant, continuing to comply with public health measures within their provinces.

When asked about their outlook once they had received their second dose of the vaccine, participants felt that some restrictions were likely to remain. Specifically, they pointed to the likelihood that mask wearing would persist. When asked to estimate when people might be able to gather indoors with others who have been vaccinated, some suggested this may not occur until at least 75 per cent of the population are fully vaccinated.

Participants in the Manitoba group were additionally asked for their opinions on the recent recommendation from the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) to delay second doses by up to four months and the decision by some regions to act on this advice. Some supported the recommendation, feeling it was more important to prioritize a wider number of Canadians receiving their first dose. Others questioned the idea, concerned that only having one dose for months on end may not be effective in combating the virus.

### **Vaccine Hesitancy (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians, Quebec Eastern Townships Vaccine Hesitant)**

A pair of groups, one based in the Greater Toronto Area and the other in Quebec's Eastern Townships, were composed of individuals who expressed at least some degree of vaccine hesitancy.

Reasons stated for their continued hesitation regarding the vaccine included a desire to wait until more data was available, a lack of trust in the pharmaceutical industry, a reluctance to be vaccinated

until the interval between doses was shortened, concerns about contracting COVID-19 after getting vaccinated, as well as the belief that the decision to get the vaccine should be a personal one.

Some participants reiterated that they were not opposed to vaccines in general, but specifically to the COVID-19 vaccines. They believed these vaccines had not been put through the rigorous testing typically required of vaccinations.

### **COVID-19 Vaccine Ad Testing (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians, Northern Alberta, GMA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)**

Participants were shown an ad that was currently being developed by the Government of Canada regarding COVID-19 and a short video with information about the approved vaccines in Canada. Participants discussed their thoughts and reactions to each.

The key messaging of the ad, an encouragement for everyone to do their part and get vaccinated so life can get back to normal, was clear to most participants. Those who had expressed positivity regarding the COVID-19 vaccines generally found the ad heartwarming and emotionally appealing, while those participants who were vaccine hesitant argued the positive tone of the spot did little to assuage their doubts about the overall safety of the vaccine.

The groups were also shown a second video, this time providing detailed information about the vaccines approved by Health Canada and the process by which they are manufactured and tested. Participants described the video as effective, motivating, and informative. Among those who had expressed vaccine hesitancy, there was also a general positivity towards the spot, particularly its educational and informative tone. A small number of participants wished to see more information about potential side effects. Others argued it would be helpful to hear from those who had already gotten vaccinated and what their experiences had been.

### **Outlook Post-Vaccination**

Participants discussed their views on the impact of vaccinations and whether ongoing public health measures would be necessary once everyone who wants a vaccine had been vaccinated.

Most were of the view that at least some public health measures would continue to remain in place, even as more Canadians got vaccinated. The most commonly cited measures that may persist included hand washing and sanitizing, mask wearing, socially distance when possible, gathering limits, and some travel restrictions.

While there was acknowledgement that widespread vaccinations would create the conditions for some kind of return to normalcy, most felt that the 'new normal' would not necessarily mean a return to pre-pandemic conditions. Others argued that with 20-30 per cent of the population expressing some degree of vaccine hesitancy, it would be unwise to lift all of the current public health restrictions. Several participants acknowledged that there was considerable pressure among certain segments of the population to get back to normal and to be able to socialize in public settings with friends and family.

When asked if they believed future restrictions, such as lockdowns, could be possible if the situation were to worsen, several participants voiced the belief that while the federal and provincial governments should have plans in place for such an eventuality, they believed the vaccines and subsequent booster shots would ward off the worst effects of the virus.

### **Borders and COVID-19 Travel Restrictions (All Locations)**

Participants were generally familiar with Canada's current travel restrictions, including requirements to show proof of a negative test for COVID-19 prior to entry, the 3-day hotel quarantine, 14-day isolation period, fines for those contravening these measures and general discouragement of non-essential travel. They were also aware of the ban on flights from India and Pakistan.

Overall, participants expressed high levels of support for the travel restrictions. Although they found some aspects of the restrictions confusing (such as the differences applying to those traveling by air versus land), most felt the restrictions should be more strictly enforced at the risk of any backlash from those who might feel they impinge on freedom of movement. They were concerned that some travelers were able to easily circumvent the restrictions.

When asked when the Government of Canada should consider easing these restrictions, participants were reluctant to suggest a proposed date. Rather most agreed that the decision should be contingent on three primary factors: high vaccination rates (ideally nearing the point required for herd immunity), low case counts, and low hospitalizations (e.g., stress on hospital capacity). Indeed, many participants voiced a strong desire to retain the restrictions until more individuals were vaccinated on a global basis, not just in Canada. At the same time, there was some support for loosening the requirement for the 3-day hotel quarantine, with some feeling that this particular requirement was both expensive and ineffective.

Participants favoured a case-by-case approach to opening the borders, moving cautiously to allow some countries certain border exemptions based on high vaccination rates or low case counts. A number of participants commented that proof-of-vaccination rather than country of origin was the more important criterion and were more inclined to hold off on permitting those who are not fully vaccinated entry into Canada. Most felt this approach should also apply to the U.S., noting the differing approaches to public health undertaken in Canada and the U.S. which have influenced vaccination rates in each jurisdiction, hospitalizations, testing frequency, and case counts.

The question of whether or not professional sports teams should receive certain border exemptions sparked active debate among participants. Overall, however, most participants viewed the proposed exemption to be in line with essential business travel and felt comfortable as long as proper measures were in place to ensure that travel was safe and controlled.

**Vaccine 'Passports' (GMA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Atlantic Canada Opinion Leaders Seniors, Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors, Saskatoon and Regina Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours, Quebec Eastern Townships Vaccine Hesitant, Eastern Ontario Opinion Leaders)**

Most participants were both aware of and anticipating the implementation of COVID-19 vaccine 'passports' by the Government of Canada. Some had heard that the development of a vaccine passport prototype was already underway in Quebec.

Vaccine passports for air travel were also supported, more so for international rather than domestic air travel. There was a sense among some participants that such passports were inevitable and, in fact, not substantially different from what was already required for travel to certain countries. Some wondered why such a system had not been implemented earlier in the pandemic and felt that international travel was a key vector for transmission of the virus, particularly the spread of variants.

Participants were firmly of the view that the Government of Canada should actively engage in negotiations with other countries with the goal of establishing a vaccine passport standard in terms of which vaccines, combinations of vaccines, or interval between first and second doses would be acceptable. Even among those who disliked the idea of a vaccine passport, there was a recognition that if it was inevitable, negotiated international norms would be necessary. A few did comment that this type of system should be temporary in nature, and that the requirement for a vaccine passport should be discontinued once the pandemic has receded.

Opinions on the use of vaccine passports for domestic air travel were divided, though many were open to it as a temporary measure. Several saw domestic vaccine passports as a useful tool in the immediate future, in order to control the public health situation before Canada had reached herd immunity.

In both scenarios, the most common concern raised centred on possible infringements to Canadians' civil liberties, specifically the right of people to travel whether or not they are vaccinated. Others saw this as the first step towards a mandatory vaccination policy and felt that this might have adverse implications for marginalized groups, including those who for medical reasons could not be vaccinated. Some also worried that it may be used to restrict employment opportunities for those who are unvaccinated and severely limit their ability to provide for themselves and their families. A few believed the vaccine passport was being used as a tool to increase the uptake of vaccinations and, again, felt that this breached an individual's right to make a personal choice about vaccination. Several put forward that the requirement to carry proof-of-vaccination documentation might become a more permanent feature in Canadians' lives going forward.

When thinking about the application of a vaccine passport for domestic air travel, participants raised issues regarding the practicalities of such an initiative. Specifically, they questioned whether it could be effectively implemented. The discussion prompted them to consider the impact on families with children unable to get vaccinated, noting that a vaccine passport would either limit travel or make it more complex and onerous.



The discussion as to whether or not to require proof-of-vaccination in order to attend large events such as concerts or sporting events generated mixed responses and, on balance, participants were less supportive of this scenario relative to the other two. Some felt that making it a requirement would have a net positive effect on public health and wellbeing, while others were not convinced of the efficacy of such a policy or did not see this as a pressing issue. Like vaccine passports for domestic air travel, several participants voiced concerns about the difficulties of enforcing these programs and felt that it might lead to even further restrictions in the future.

Participants were also asked if they felt that vaccine passports would pose a risk to privacy, given that a proof-of-vaccination system would require some form of sharing of vaccination records between jurisdictions. Most were unconcerned, with many assuming that vast information sharing across and between levels of government was already taking place. However, some were concerned about the possibility that additional information about their medical history and status might also be captured and possibly leaked. It was argued that some groups could potentially be harmed in more significant and systemic ways and that the information could be used as a means of tracking the movement of Canadians.

## Part II: Other Issues

### **Budget 2021 Initiatives (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians, Atlantic Canada Opinion Leaders Seniors, Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors, Saskatoon and Regina Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Exhibiting Riskier Behaviours, Quebec Eastern Townships Vaccine Hesitant, Eastern Ontario Opinion Leaders, Lower Mainland Parents with Children in Daycare, Southern Ontario, Quebec City Region Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine)**

Participants discussed their thoughts on the recent federal budget, although relatively few participants were aware of Budget 2021 or were familiar with the details. Among those who were, expenditures pertaining to childcare were recalled top-of-mind, along with support for seniors and initiatives to address the issue of affordable housing. While awareness was low, participants' impressions of Budget 2021 were neutral to positive, with many pointing to a variety of increased financial supports for Canadians as well as greater spending in what were perceived to be priority areas, such as affordable childcare.

### **Systemic Racism (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians)**

Most participants had not heard of any initiatives dedicated to fighting systemic racism and empowering racialized communities. Some noted the federal government's goal of creating jobs for racialized individuals, particularly in the trades.

To prompt discussion, participants were shown a list of five initiatives included in Budget 2021, including funding intended to combat racism at the community level, protect communities at risk of

hate-motivated crimes, improve the social and economic outcomes of Black communities, and to implement a data plan overseen by Statistics Canada to fill relevant data and knowledge gaps.

Opinions on these initiatives were largely split. Many viewed them as necessary under the current climate. Participants conveyed the need to promote greater participation by equity-deserving communities in a wider range of activities, including political, education, institutional, and employment opportunities.

Some participants held concerns regarding the accountability and transparency of such initiatives. Others specifically emphasized the importance for the funding to directly reach grassroots-level programs in order to make a tangible difference. A small number of participants raised concerns about the intentions of these initiatives, arguing they appeared to be designed to amass public support rather than provide concrete assistance.

While others acknowledged that such initiatives represented a step in the right direction, they remained concerned about the Government of Canada's ability to finance these initiatives amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Seniors (Atlantic Canada Opinion Leaders Seniors, Manitoba Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine Seniors)**

Groups composed of seniors, based in Atlantic Canada and Manitoba respectively, were asked whether they recalled hearing or seeing anything in Budget 2021 aimed at helping seniors. Most responded that they had not.

A list of various initiatives pertaining to seniors was then shown to participants following which the group discussed their thoughts and reaction. These initiatives included increasing regular Old Age Security (OAS) payments, providing a one-time \$500 payment, \$3 billion in funding towards ensuring better standards in long-term care, and \$90 million toward the *Age Well at Home* initiative.

Participants were generally in favour of all initiatives. Funding for improving long-term care homes and the *Age Well at Home* initiative were especially popular. Several participants mentioned that long term care homes need to shift their focus away from profit-seeking and towards providing a high quality of care. It was also voiced that seniors should be able to live at home as long as possible and would be supported by the *Age Well at Home* program. It was added that the program would likely be massive in its size and scope and would potentially need further funding.

In regards to the increase of OAS payments most were generally in favour of the initiative. Opinions were initially mixed, however, regarding whether only those 75+ in age should qualify for the extra support, or whether the initiative should be expanded to all Canadians 65 and over.

When asked if it made sense to provide specific support towards those 75+ and over, participants generally agreed. Higher expenses relating to mobility, transportation, and medical costs were mentioned as reasons for why this additional support would be necessary.

### **Childcare (Northern Ontario Parents with Children in Daycare, Lower Mainland B.C. Parents with Children in Daycare)**

Two groups of parents with children in daycare participated in discussions focused around Budget 2021 initiatives aimed at reducing the cost of childcare while simultaneously increasing the availability of placements. Participants expressed their views on these initiatives as well as opinions on whether the Government of Canada should invest in childcare.

Most spoke positively of the proposed measures, pointing to the \$10/day daycare as particularly impactful. There was a strong sentiment among both groups that the Government of Canada should be investing in childcare. Participants widely conveyed that they felt childcare was extremely expensive at present and that placements are increasingly harder to find.

When shown a range of initiatives from Budget 2021, participants were generally supportive. Many spoke positively about the initiatives aimed at reducing childcare costs, with the implementation of \$10/day childcare being especially popular. There was a widespread feeling among participants that these measures would have a direct impact on the lives of Canadian parents. Pointing to the benefits of these measures, participants indicated they would be immediately helpful in getting mothers back into the workforce. Even those who stated their own children would be too old to benefit from the initiatives voiced support that they be implemented.

Some raised concerns about the fiscal sustainability of a national childcare system. It was argued that instead of applying these initiatives universally, there should be a means-based test to determine which families should be eligible. Expanding existing benefits and tax credits were also pointed to as possible alternatives.

Reactions to increasing the median wage of childcare workers were widely positive. It was emphasized that in order to obtain the best possible childcare, wages would need to be increased to attract talented individuals to the field. However, concerns were simultaneously raised that this initiative would have the effect of increasing early learning class sizes, with poorer overall education as a consequence.

When asked if they thought the intended timeline for these initiatives was feasible, participants were uncertain. Some felt that full implementation by 2025-26 was reasonable, while others were concerned that a rapid rollout could lead to unintended and possibly negative outcomes, particularly in the context of the quality of the care and education offered to children.

There was a consensus that investment by the Government of Canada in childcare was an important priority in order to support mothers re-entering the workforce and as a policy which would have long-term positive economic impacts. Investments in early childhood education were viewed as critical to cultivating productive members of society. To others, greater investment in childcare was seen as important in order to offset the rising costs of childcare and more generally, the cost of living. When the idea was raised that some would oppose increased funding for childcare out of concern for the national deficit, participants argued that the long-term benefits of childcare investment outweighed the financial costs.

### **Housing (Lower Mainland Parents with Children in Daycare, Southern Ontario, Quebec City Region Recipients of First Dose of COVID-19 Vaccine)**

In three groups where the topic of housing was discussed, participants all agreed that housing prices across Canada had increased over the past year, attributing this mainly to reduced housing stock, increased demand, and inflationary pressures on the cost of building materials. There was a sense that all levels of government had at least some ability to control housing prices, but most particularly the municipal and provincial levels of government given their responsibility for urban planning and development within and across regions. At the same time, participants acknowledged that the federal government's role in setting the threshold for and the rules pertaining to mortgage qualification also affected housing demand and, ultimately, housing prices.

Participants had some awareness of measures and actions taken by the Government to support individuals in the market to purchase a home, including the Home Buyers' Plan (HBP), as well as rebates and tax credits for first-time home buyers. Reaction to specific measures included in the 2021 federal Budget was generally positive, although some saw these measures as only part of the solution to addressing housing affordability across Canada. With respect to the proposal to implement a 1 per cent tax on the value of foreign, non-resident owned residential homes which are considered to be vacant or underused, some felt that rate was too low to act as a strong deterrent to foreign buyers entering or operating within the Canadian housing market. When participants were asked about a recent tightening of rules on the mortgage stress test for home buyers they were generally supportive. Although some felt this would add to the challenges already facing young people looking to get into the housing market, the more common response was that it would protect consumers and prevent them from taking on an onerous and unmanageable debt load.

### **Enbridge Line 5 (Saskatoon and Regina Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Exhibiting Riskier Behaviours, Quebec Eastern Townships Vaccine Hesitant, Eastern Ontario Opinion Leaders)**

Participants in three groups discussed issues pertaining to Enbridge Line 5 with those in Saskatoon and Regina exhibiting higher levels of awareness of the topic relative to the other two groups. When provided with more context on the issue, participants expressed concerns about the environmental risks and safety issues, but views on whether it should be shut down or remain open varied with the location of the group. In Saskatoon and Regina participants viewed the issue primarily through an economic lens, focusing on the importance of delivering western oil by pipeline to other regions within Canada. By contrast, views were more mixed among participants in the other two groups with most examining the issue from an environmental perspective. As a result there were stronger opinions in these groups about shutting down the pipeline based not only on these risks, but on the age of the pipeline. Some noted that any environmental impact of a leak would have implications that would be felt beyond Michigan.

In line with these views, participants in Saskatoon and Regina were generally more united in their view that Enbridge Line 5 should be a high priority in Canada-U.S. relations. They were of the opinion that Canada should have authority over its own exports and imports of oil and gas and that, in general, Canada's dependence on pipelines running through the United States would continue to be an issue in

the future. Opinions varied in the other two groups – some felt it was a lower priority and that the pipeline should simply be shut down, while others saw it as a mid-to-higher level priority and one that could serve as precedent going forward.

### **Local Issues (Northern Alberta)**

The group from Northern Alberta discussed issues specifically pertaining to the region, most notably the oil and gas, and agricultural sectors.

When asked to identify key issues, participants widely pointed to the continued vitality of the oil and gas industry and its importance to the provincial economy. Participants expressed concerns regarding declining employment in the sector and the difficulty in getting projects such as pipelines approved and built.

While most participants were unaware of any support from the federal government for the oil and gas sector, a few were able to provide examples of some specific initiatives. Some mentioned financial support for the natural gas pipeline running from the Tidewater Brazeau River facility. Others cited the Greenhouse Gas Offset System, stating that the program was a positive effort by the federal government towards helping those industries and sectors adversely affected by the federal carbon pricing system.

Few participants had heard of any specific measures by the federal government to support the agricultural sector. It was added, however, that it was possible that much of the aid provided by the Government of Canada over the past year may have gone unnoticed due to all the attention towards the pandemic.

Specifically discussing the issue of orphan wells (oil or gas wells abandoned by fossil fuel companies) participants were largely split as to whether they were aware of the problem. Some participants mentioned they had heard the clean-up of these wells was now the responsibility of the provincial government and local landowners, while others heard the federal government had stepped in to support the clean-up process.

Participants then discussed a specific initiative by the Government of Canada to spend \$1.7 billion towards cleaning up orphan wells in British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Opinions were mixed. Some felt the initiative was a positive development, providing jobs in the province and working to clean up the environment. Others argued that the initiative would not be necessary in the first place had the sector continued to thrive, adding that the jobs gained by this program would in no way balance out the number of jobs lost in recent years.

### **Out-of-Status Workers (GTA Vaccine Hesitant and Racialized Canadians, Northern Alberta, GMA Experiencing COVID Fatigue and Riskier Behaviours)**

Participants discussed the issue of out-of-status workers (people who were residing and working in Canada without documentation).

The impression among many participants was that the many of these individuals were those who had initially entered the country legally and had since overstayed the terms of their initial student or work visa. Several believed the category of out-of-status workers also applied to refugees seeking to obtain legal work permits as well as foreign workers filling lower wage jobs in Canada. When asked to estimate how many out-of-status workers they thought were currently in Canada, estimates varied considerably from as low as 25,000-50,000 to upwards of 5 to 10 million.

Opinions were mixed when discussing whether a path to permanent residency and citizenship should be available to these individuals. Those in favour believed these people already contributed to the Canadian economy and should be allowed a way to stay in the country permanently. Others added that many would also face adverse or dangerous conditions in their home countries were they forced to return. Some argued that while a path to citizenship should be available, it should be done on a case-by-case basis rather than a blanket provision.

Some participants were generally not convinced there was a strong economic argument in support of out-of-status workers being provided with a path to permanent residency and citizenship, arguing that many do not pay income taxes and were doing jobs where labour shortages are often experienced. The issue of fairness was also raised, arguing that we should not prioritize one group of immigrants and refugees over another just because they were a part of the workforce.

Others argued that bringing these workers into the economy would be beneficial as they would pay more in taxes, resulting in a net benefit for everyone. It was also mentioned that most of these individuals are living and working here in the same manner as most Canadians and that there was no reason to deny them a path to citizenship.

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#### **MORE INFORMATION**

The Strategic Counsel  
Contract number: 35035-182346/001/CY  
Contract award date: December 18, 2020  
Contract value: \$1,618,838.00

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