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Continuous Qualitative Data Collection of Canadians' Views – December 2023 & January 2024

Final Report

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a series of focus groups conducted by The Strategic Counsel on behalf of the Privy Council Office. The eighth and ninth cycles of the first year of this study included a total of eighteen focus groups with Canadian adults (18 years of age and older) conducted between December 5th, 2023, and January 31st, 2024.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Rapport final - Collecte continue de données qualitatives sur les opinions des Canadiens – décembre 2023 et janvier 2024.

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Political Neutrality Certification



I hereby certify as a Senior Officer of The Strategic Counsel that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity and the Directive on the Management of Communications – Appendix C – Mandatory Procedures for Public Opinion Research.

Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed: Donna Nixon

Date: February 21, 2024

Donna Nixon, Partner
The Strategic Counsel

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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 of Canada, as well as emerging trends.

This report includes findings from 18 online focus groups that were conducted between December 5th, 2023, and January 31st, 2024, in multiple locations across the country. Details concerning the locations, recruitment, and composition of the groups are provided in the section below.

The research for this cycle focused largely on the Government of Canada's priorities and performance on a range of issues important to Canadians. Related to this, some groups took part in targeted discussions on federal activities related to the middle class, official languages, and the cost of groceries. All discussed what they had recently seen, read, or heard about the Government of Canada, with a few groups focusing on the federal government's recent announcement concerning international student study permits.

This research cycle also explored a range of issues related housing. Numerous groups discussed the content of the Government of Canada's updated housing plan, including potential titles for this initiative. Participants in the group comprised of renters residing in Hamilton engaged in discussions related to the rental market and the overall housing situation in their region. A group based in Vancouver shared their perspectives on densification, while homeowners from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) discussed issues related to interest rates and mortgage renewal. Several groups were asked to share their perspectives on the current state of the Canadian economy and potential priority areas for the federal government to focus on in its upcoming Budget. A number of groups also discussed challenges in their local communities, while residents of the GTA focused on community safety and the prevalence of automobile theft in their region.

Other topics discussed this cycle included health care, carbon pricing and heat pumps, the situation in Ukraine, immigration, the Government of Canada's wordmark and musical signature, as well as creative concept testing related to supplemented foods.

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 cohorts of the population including renters, members of the middle class concerned about the cost of living, homeowners, aspiring homeowners, homeowners seeking to renew their mortgages in the next three years, parents of children under 12, university students, and lower income Canadians facing financial pressures.

Detailed Approach

- Eighteen groups across various regions in Canada.
- Ten groups were conducted among the general population residing in mid-size and major centres Atlantic Canada; Manitoba; the National Capital Region of Quebec; the Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie, and Côte-Nord Regions of Quebec; Surrey; Yukon; the Greater Montreal Area (GMA); Ontario's Niagara Region; the Greater Toronto Area (GTA); and Atlantic Canada.
- The other eight groups were conducted with key subgroups including:
 - Renters;
 - Middle class concerned about the cost of living;
 - Homeowners seeking mortgage renewal in the next three years;
 - Homeowners;
 - Parents of children under 12
 - University students
 - Lower income Canadians facing financial pressures; and,
 - Aspiring homeowners.
- Four of the groups in Quebec were conducted in French. All other groups 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, 134 participants attended, in total. Details on attendance numbers by group can be found below.
- Each participant received an honorarium of \$125.

Group Locations and Composition

LOCATION	GROUP	LANGUAGE	DATE	TIME (EST)	GROUP COMPOSITION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Mid-Size and Major Centres Atlantic Canada	1	EN	Tues, Dec 5 th	5:00-7:00 PM	General Population	8
Hamilton	2	EN	Wed, Dec 6 th	6:00-8:00 PM	Renters	7
Vancouver	3	EN	Thurs, Dec 7 th	9:00-11:00 PM	Middle Class Cost of Living Concerned	7
Manitoba	4	EN	Tues, Dec 12 th	7:00-9:00 PM	General Population	8
National Capital Region Québec	5	FR	Wed, Dec 13 th	6:00-8:00 PM	General Population	7
Greater Toronto Area (GTA)	6	EN	Thurs, Dec 14 th	6:00-8:00 PM	Homeowners Seeking Mortgage Renewal in the Next Three Years	7
Atlantic Canada	7	EN	Tues, Jan 9 th	5:00-7:00 PM	Homeowners	7
Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions Quebec	8	FR	Wed, Jan 10 th	6:00-8:00 PM	General Population	7
Alberta	9	EN	Thurs, Jan 11 th	8:00-10:00 PM	Parents of Children Under 12	8
Surrey	10	EN	Tues, Jan 16 th	9:00-11:00 PM	General Population	7
Quebec	11	FR	Wed, Jan 17 th	6:00-8:00 PM	University Students	8
Mid-Size and Major Centres Manitoba	12	EN	Thurs, Jan 18 th	7:00-9:00 PM	Lower Income Canadians Facing Financial Pressures	8
Yukon	13	EN	Tues, Jan 23 rd	8:00-10:00 PM	General Population	7
Greater Montreal Area (GMA)	14	FR	Wed, Jan 24 th	6:00-8:00 PM	General Population	7
Niagara Region	15	EN	Thurs, Jan 25 th	6:00-8:00 PM	General Population	8
Greater Toronto Area (GTA)	16	EN	Mon, Jan 29 th	6:00-8:00 PM	General Population	8
Atlantic Canada	17	EN	Tues, Jan 30 th	5:00-7:00 PM	General Population	8
British Columbia	18	EN	Wed, Jan 31 st	9:00-11:00 PM	Aspiring Homeowners	7
Total number of participants						134

Key Findings

Government of Canada in the News (All Locations)

At the beginning of each group, participants were asked what they had seen, read, or heard about the Government of Canada in recent days. A wide range of announcements and initiatives were recalled. These included a range of actions and initiatives from the federal government aimed at growing the housing supply across Canada, the decision by the Bank of Canada to leave its policy interest rate unchanged, the announcement of sustainability-focused rebates such as the Oil to Heat Pump Affordability Program, and the announcement that the Government of Canada would be raising the cost-of-living financial requirement for international student study permit applications as well as setting an intake cap on these applications for 2024. Additional actions recalled by participants included the introduction of the Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP), and a ruling by the Federal Court of Canada that the Government of Canada's decision to declare a public order emergency under the *Emergencies Act* in early 2022 was unreasonable.

Participants also recalled activities related to the Government of Canada on the international stage. These included the provision of ongoing humanitarian assistance to civilians in Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank impacted by the ongoing conflict in that region, as well as the announcement of temporary immigration measures that would allow foreign national family members of Canadian citizens and Permanent Residents (PRs) to apply for free-exempt study or open work permits. Some also mentioned hearing about ongoing tensions between Canada and India following an announcement that Canadian security agencies were in possession of intelligence potentially linking agents of the Government of India to the killing of a Canadian citizen in June of 2023, as well as the attendance of several federal officials at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) which was held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates from November 30th, 2023, to December 12th, 2023.

International Student Study Permits (Greater Montreal Area)

Participants residing in the Greater Montreal Area (GMA) briefly discussed the issue of international students and the recent decision by the Government of Canada to temporarily cap new international student study permits. Several were of the impression that there had been an influx of international students to Canada in recent years and that this had served to exacerbate existing challenges related to the housing supply.

Informed that the Government of Canada had announced a temporary 2-year cap on new international student study permits, while a small number viewed this as a step in the right direction, very few felt that this action on its own would be sufficient to address current issues related to housing and immigration. Discussing the potential impacts of this measure, several expected that this would have a negative financial impact on many Canadian post-secondary institutions. It was believed that the fees and tuition paid by international students represented a significant source of revenue for Canadian universities and colleges and that these institutions may have to undergo budget reductions in response to this measure.

Asked whether they felt the Government of Canada was on the right or wrong track when it came to managing the immigration system, all believed it was headed in the wrong direction. It was strongly believed that the rate of immigration needed to be temporarily stabilized to allow for municipalities to make necessary upgrades to existing infrastructure and services in order to accommodate higher populations in the years to come.

Government of Canada Priorities and Performance (Mid-Size and Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Hamilton Renters, Vancouver Middle Class Concerned About the Cost of Living, Manitoba, National Capital Region Quebec, Alberta Parents of Children under 12, Surrey, Quebec University Students, Mid-Size and Major Centres Manitoba Lower Income, Greater Toronto Area, Atlantic Canada, British Columbia Aspiring Homeowners)

Twelve groups took part in conversations related to the issues currently facing Canadians as well as their perspectives regarding the federal government's management of these priorities. Participants were asked to identify areas in which they felt the Government of Canada was performing well and areas where they felt there was room for improvement. On a number of issues participants expressed a range of positive and negative views. These included immigration, climate change and the environment, supports for post-secondary students, and Canada's reputation on the global stage.

Participants also identified a number of areas where they felt that the Government of Canada had performed well. Areas mentioned included the offering of a wide range of benefits and supports to Canadians, protecting and promoting diversity and multiculturalism within Canada, providing humanitarian assistance to civilians seeking protection from international conflicts, and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, participants mentioned a range of areas in which they believed the Government of Canada had room for improvement. These included health care, inflation and the cost of living, the affordability of housing, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Prompted to identify what they viewed as the most important priority areas for the Government of Canada to be focusing on, many reiterated the need for further action towards improving housing affordability, bolstering the health care system, addressing the cost of living, mitigating the impacts of climate change, and pursuing further reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Other important priority areas identified by participants included increasing supports for the education system, stabilizing the rate of immigration, providing greater supports for seniors and persons living with disabilities, and increasing funding towards law enforcement and public safety.

Middle Class Issues (Mid-Size and Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Hamilton Renters, Manitoba, Vancouver Middle Class Concerned about the Cost of Living, National Capital Region Quebec)

Participants in five groups took part in discussions related to the challenges currently facing middle class Canadians and actions that the federal government had taken to support middle class households. All felt that supporting the middle class was an important priority for the Government of Canada to focus on, with several of the impression that the middle class had been disappearing in

recent decades. Several reported having personally faced financial challenges over the past year and believed that factors such as inflation, high interest rates, and the cost of living in general had made it increasingly difficult to make ends meet financially. It was thought that the Government of Canada should work to expand the eligibility criteria for the benefits and supports it offers to account for the large portion of middle-class households who were believed to be struggling with the cost of living at present.

Discussing potential measures that the federal government could take to better support middle class Canadians, many felt that there needed to be a stronger focus on increasing the affordability of essential goods and services (such as groceries and gasoline) as well as reducing housing costs for homeowners as well as renters.

Participants in the group comprised of middle-income individuals residing in Vancouver who were concerned about the cost of living engaged in an extended conversation regarding their perspectives as members of the middle class. All felt that the quality of life for the middle class had changed in their lifetimes, with many believing that life had become considerably less affordable in recent years. Several expressed the view that it had become difficult for middle class families to get ahead financially and/or save for the future, due to what they perceived as a significant increase in prices across all sectors of the economy. Asked whether they felt that the Government of Canada cared about the middle class, very few believed that it did. Several strongly felt that greater urgency needed to be placed by the federal government on supporting middle class families and creating a long-term plan regarding how it would go about achieving this goal.

Official Languages (Quebec University Students)

Participants in the group comprised of university students residing in Quebec engaged in a brief conversation related to Canada's official languages. Asked how they would describe the current state of the country's official languages, a number were of the impression that there had been tension in their province as of late concerning this issue. This was thought to be mostly related to the Government of Quebec's Bill 96 which was viewed as having primarily been enacted to promote the use of the French language in the province and affirm the status of French as the common language of Quebec.

Asked what role they felt the Government of Canada should play in protecting and promoting the language rights of Quebecers, most believed that it should primarily be focused on ensuring that all federal services were available in both English and French in communities across the country. A few also believed that additional resources should be allocated by the federal government towards providing free or affordable language education in both official languages to all residents of Quebec, as well as Canada more broadly.

Groceries (Vancouver Middle Class Concerned about the Cost of Living, Atlantic Canada)

Participants in two groups were asked a few additional questions about recent measures taken by the Government of Canada related to the cost of groceries. Each group discussed activities from the federal government that had occurred in the days prior to the group being held.

The group based in Vancouver was provided with information related to a number of measures the Government of Canada had recently announced aimed at stabilizing rising grocery prices. While most reacted positively to these measures, a large number expected that the success of these actions would be largely dependent on how effectively they are implemented as well as the degree to which major grocery chains cooperate with these initiatives. Several believed that more urgent action needed to be taken by the Government of Canada on this front, and that a greater emphasis needed to be placed on creating a long-term plan to make groceries more affordable for all Canadians going forward.

At the beginning of their discussion, participants in Atlantic Canada were informed that the Government of Canada had sent a letter to the Competition Bureau, calling on it to start using the additional powers it had been provided to help compel major grocery chains to stabilize grocery prices for Canadians. While believing that it was important for the federal government to be focusing on this issue, participants felt that this action was unlikely to have much of an impact on the cost of groceries. A number believed that rather than imposing increased regulations, the federal government should be working to incentivize major grocers (through measures such as tax breaks) to stabilize or lower the prices they charge. It was also thought that more could be done to support smaller grocery businesses as well as to encourage greater competition within the grocery sector overall.

Housing (Hamilton Renters, Vancouver Middle Class Concerned about the Cost of Living, GTA Homeowners Expecting to Renew Mortgages in the Next Three Years, Atlantic Canada Homeowners, Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions Quebec, Alberta Parents of Children Under 12, Surrey, Quebec University Students, Mid-Size and Major Centres Manitoba Lower Income, Yukon, Greater Montreal Area, Niagara Region Ontario, British Columbia Aspiring Homeowners)

Thirteen groups engaged in conversations related to housing. These discussions respectively focused on updates that the federal government could potentially make to its housing plan, issues impacting renters, opinions related to increasing densification in Canadian municipalities, and the perspectives of homeowners related to current interest rates and the mortgage renewal process.

Housing Plan (Atlantic Canada Homeowners, Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions Quebec, Alberta Parents of Children Under 12, Surrey, Quebec University Students, Mid-Size and Major Centres Manitoba Lower Income, Yukon, Greater Montreal Area, Niagara Region Ontario, British Columbia Aspiring Homeowners)

Ten groups took part in conversations related to updates that the federal government was currently making to its housing plan. To begin, participants in the groups comprised of homeowners in Atlantic Canada, parents of children under 12 in Alberta, and residents of the Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie, and Côte-Nord regions of Quebec were asked how they would describe the current state of housing in Canada. All believed that the housing situation was facing considerable challenges, with a large number expressing the opinion that affordability and a limited supply of available housing had been significant issues in recent years. It was believed that these issues had made housing less affordable for homeowners while also making it difficult for prospective home buyers to qualify for mortgages.

Asked what they felt to be the biggest drivers of housing unaffordability at present, participants identified a range of issues. These included the perceived rising costs of home ownership, the increased cost of building new homes, and a higher rate of immigration in recent years.

Asked what actions they felt needed to be taken to address the housing situation, participants shared a number of suggestions. Several believed that the Government of Canada should place a greater focus on the building of publicly funded housing as well as transitioning existing buildings (such as unused office space) into residential complexes. Discussing additional actions that could be taken, participants recommended measures such as making it easier for prospective first-time home buyers to qualify for a mortgage, the implementation of rental caps and stricter regulations on short-term rentals, and temporarily reducing the rate of immigration for the next few years.

Provided with information regarding updates that were being considered by the Government of Canada to its housing plan, participants engaged in an exercise where they were asked to select which of the measures listed would be most important towards making housing more affordable. On balance, participants were most supportive of the initiatives to build more affordable housing units and assist a greater number of Canadians in achieving home ownership. Many believed that these initiatives would have the greatest positive impact and would benefit the largest number of Canadians. Several also selected the initiative of making the math work for homebuilders. It was widely felt that the cost of constructing homes had risen substantially in recent years and a number believed that assisting developers in building more homes would be a critical factor towards increasing the housing supply. While also believed by many to be important, only a small number of participants selected the initiatives related to addressing homelessness, changing the way communities build homes, and launching an industrial strategy.

Discussing whether there were any additional aspects that they felt the Government of Canada's housing plan should cover, participants suggested a number of areas. A number felt that the federal government should work to ensure that new arrivals to Canada were not just settling in major urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, but were being evenly distributed throughout the country. It was felt that taking this approach would help to reduce the pressure on what were viewed as hot housing markets in Canada's largest cities. Participants also believed that the federal government should focus on implementing greater protections for renters, including increased regulations related to practices such as renovictions as well as placing limits on rental increases by landlords while transitioning between tenants.

All groups engaged in an exercise where they were shown a list of potential titles for the housing plan and asked to select which they felt best suited this initiative. On balance, *Solving the Housing Crisis: Canada's Housing Plan* received the highest level of support among participants. Many believed it was the most straightforward title and effectively conveyed the gravity of the housing issue by referring to it as a crisis. *Building Canada: Canada's Renewed Housing Plan* and *A Road to Home* received a moderate level of support from participants. Regarding the former, several reacted positively to the use of terms such as 'building' and 'renewed', commenting that the phrasing invoked thoughts of a revitalized housing market and the rebuilding of the country on a national level. Considering the latter, many believed that this was the most creative of all the names, and that the notion of establishing a

home was something all Canadians could identify with and aspire to. Few selected *Canada's Enhanced Housing Plan* or *The Blueprint: Canada's 2030 Housing Plan*.

Renters (Hamilton Renters)

Participants in the group comprised of renters residing in Hamilton engaged in a discussion related to issues facing renters at present. Asked how they would describe the housing situation in their community, almost all believed that housing costs (including rent) had risen considerably in recent years and that there was a significant shortage of affordable rental housing in their community. Several expressed the opinion that along with rising rental costs, the quality and size of the rental units available in their area had also worsened as of late. In addition to what they viewed as a widespread lack of affordable rental options, participants believed that issues such as the high cost of living, rising immigration rates, and the perceived tendency of developers to build larger, more expensive homes (rather than affordable units) had contributed to growing housing challenges in their community.

Discussing actions that could be taken to improve the housing situation, participants believed that a greater focus needed to be placed on increasing the supply of affordable homes and rental units for lower and middle-income families, implementing measures such as rent caps, and adjusting municipal zoning laws to eliminate red tape and make it easier to build more homes, faster.

Asked whether they were aware of any recent actions from the federal government aimed at addressing the issues facing renters and increasing the rate of home construction across Canada, participants identified a range of initiatives. These included the introduction of programs such as the First-Time Home Buyer Incentive, First Home Savings Account (FHSA), the provision of a one-time \$500 top up for eligible low-income renters through the Canada Housing Benefit (CHB), and the creation of the Housing Accelerator Fund. Provided with information about the Housing Accelerator Fund, all reacted positively, with several expressing that this initiative would likely assist in growing the housing supply and improving the overall affordability of housing.

Questioned whether the federal government was headed in the right direction when it came to making home ownership more attainable for first-time home buyers, most were uncertain or held mixed views, with a smaller number believing that it was headed in the wrong direction. Provided with information related to actions the Government of Canada was taking to assist first-time home buyers almost all felt that these measures would be helpful towards improving the housing situation and making home ownership more attainable for Canadians. Asked whether they had any questions regarding any of the initiatives they had been shown, several expressed interest in learning more about rent-to-own housing options and the specifics of how these programs operate.

Densification (Vancouver Middle Class Concerned about the Cost of Living)

Participants in one group, comprised of middle-class individuals residing in Vancouver, took part in a conversation related to the housing situation in their community and their perspectives related to the densification of housing. All described the housing situation in Vancouver as being very poor and felt that housing needed to be a top priority for the Government of Canada.

Discussing what came to mind when they heard the term 'densification', participants expressed concerns related to what they viewed as rapid increases to the number of people living in a specific neighbourhood or area, and an overall reduction to individual living space as a result. Asked whether they felt that greater density was something that should be encouraged in Canada's larger cities, participants were mixed in their views. Among those who supported this action, it was felt that given the perceived high level of population growth in Canada over the past decade, that densification was a necessity in order to ensure a sufficient amount of housing would be available for everyone. For those who felt that densification should not be pursued, it was believed that taking this approach would lead to increased strain being placed on existing infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, waste management systems, and the energy grid.

Asked what types of infrastructure projects the Government of Canada should be investing in to best support growing communities, participants suggested a wide range of projects. These included expanding and repairing roadways and bridges, constructing new hospitals and health care facilities, increasing public transportation infrastructure, and building new community spaces including parks, playgrounds, and community gardens. Questioned whether they felt the Government of Canada should focus more on supporting the construction of affordable housing units, which are subsidized and rented at below-market rates or concentrate on maximizing the overall number of homes built, most believed that the primary focus should be on affordability. Among these participants, it was believed that affordability represented the most significant barrier related to housing in most parts of the country, and that increasing the supply of housing would do little to address the housing situation if the units built were not affordable.

Interest Rates and Mortgage Renewal (GTA Homeowners Expecting to Renew Mortgages in the Next Three Years)

Participants in one group, comprised of individuals residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), engaged in an extended discussion related to interest rates and issues currently facing mortgage holders. All participants were homeowners who were planning to renew their mortgages within the next three years. Asked whether they were facing any significant challenges related to housing costs, many expressed concerns related to high interest rates and the impact that this would have on their financial situation going forward. Several were worried that their mortgage payments could as much as double when it came time to renew their mortgages in the next few years. A number also identified additional expenses related to homeownership, such as high energy costs and rising property taxes as other challenges that they were currently facing.

Asked what factors they felt contributed to changes in interest rates, many believed that the perceived high rate of inflation in recent years had played a significant role. Several believed that rising inflation had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and had contributed to an overall increase in the cost of living.

Discussing the types of actions that they hoped to see from the Government of Canada in response to changing interest rates, several believed that efforts should be taken to reduce the overall cost of living and make life more affordable for Canadians, especially in terms of the cost of housing. A number believed that actions should be taken to support homeowners struggling with higher mortgage

payments, including implementing measures to prevent these individuals from potentially losing their homes.

Focusing on their own housing situations, all believed that their mortgages were currently affordable. Several, however, reiterated that this would likely no longer be the case once it came time to renew their mortgages. A few indicated that they had already begun to cut back on household spending in areas such as travel and recreation in anticipation of facing higher mortgage payments in the near future.

Asked what role they felt the Government of Canada should play in supporting homeowners who were renewing their mortgages, participants suggested a range of potential actions and initiatives. Several believed that it could provide Canadians with increased educational resources, financial literacy training, and information regarding what to expect and look out for while navigating the mortgage renewal process. A number also believed that further action could be taken to regulate the mortgage market to ensure that all Canadians were being offered a fair rate and not being taken advantage of or placed in potentially financially precarious positions by lenders.

Provided with information related to the recently announced Canadian Mortgage Charter, while most felt this represented a positive step by the Government of Canada, several questioned what specific regulations would be put in place to enforce the guidelines and expectations outlined by this initiative. Discussing specific measures included in this Charter, a number believed that the removal of compound interest during difficult times would be very helpful for those with significant debt loads. It was also felt that earlier communication from banks related to renewing their mortgages would assist mortgage holders in being better prepared for this process. Some also felt that the introduction of flexible payment options as well as the ability to switch lenders more easily at renewal would assist homeowners in obtaining the best terms possible for their renewed mortgage.

All felt that the Canadian Mortgage Charter was on the right track when it came to supporting mortgage holders. It was widely thought that while this would not solve the overall issue of housing affordability, the measures included would likely provide some degree of relief to Canadian homeowners concerned about their future mortgage payments.

Budget 2024 (Surrey, Quebec University Students, Mid-Size and Major Centres Manitoba Lower Income, Yukon, Greater Montreal Area, Niagara Region Ontario, Greater Toronto Area, Atlantic Canada, British Columbia Aspiring Homeowners)

Participants in nine groups engaged in conversations related to the 2024 federal Budget, which was expected to be tabled by the Government of Canada in the coming months. Asked how they felt the Canadian economy was performing at present, most were of the impression that it had faced numerous challenges in recent years and had not been performing well as of late. Many cited the perceived high rate of inflation and rising cost of living over the past few years as factors that they felt had negatively impacted the Canadian economy. The view was expressed by several that wages in general had not kept pace with the cost of living, and that not enough well-paying jobs were currently

available. It was felt that this had made it increasingly difficult for Canadians (and especially young people) to build wealth and save towards important goals such as purchasing a home.

Discussing what would need to happen for them to begin feeling optimistic about the Canadian economy, several believed that there would have to be observable growth of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) as well as the creation of more well-paying, full-time jobs for Canadians. A number expressed that they would begin to feel better about the Canadian economy once the cost of essentials such as groceries and gasoline became more affordable. Other factors mentioned by participants that they felt would inspire optimism in the economy included the lowering of interest rates, reduced federal spending, and increased efforts by the Government of Canada to address the national debt.

Participants next engaged in an exercise where they were presented with numerous items that could potentially be included in the 2024 Budget and asked to select those that they felt should be prioritized by the Government of Canada.

The initiative to address affordability and the high cost of living received the highest level of support among participants, with many believing that this would impact the largest number of households. The view was expressed that addressing this issue would be especially important for assisting groups such as younger Canadians and families with young children, who were believed to be facing considerable challenges in keeping up with the current cost of living.

Improving the health care system also received significant attention from participants. Many felt that health care had become increasingly inaccessible as of late, leading to an increasing number of negative health outcomes for Canadians.

Growing the housing supply and raising taxes on the wealthiest Canadians also received high levels of support. It was felt that increasing the housing supply would help to address the high demand for housing at present and would lead to lower housing costs in the long-term. Discussing the priority of raising taxes on the wealthiest Canadians, many believed that this would help to decrease what they viewed as the growing wealth gap between the richest and poorest Canadians and would assist in making life in Canada more equitable going forward.

There was a moderate level of support for actions such as maintaining a responsible plan for government spending, supporting the middle class, and providing more opportunities for good careers. Some also identified fighting climate change and promoting long-term economic growth through clean technology and energy as important priorities. Few participants selected the initiatives related to helping Canadians save for retirement, protecting seniors' benefits, and unlocking pathways to the middle class.

Carbon Pricing (Mid-Size and Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Atlantic Canada)

Two groups based in Atlantic Canada, one comprised of individuals residing in mid-size and major centres and the other conducted among the general population, took part in discussions related to the federal government's carbon pricing system. Asked whether, to the best of their knowledge, there was

currently a price on carbon in their province, most believed that there was, while a smaller number were more uncertain. Provided with information related to the measures the Government of Canada was taking to reduce carbon pollution, most were unsure as to whether they supported this approach.

Several felt that while carbon pricing was an important initiative, they did not want Canadians to incur higher financial costs for goods and services, especially if other jurisdictions throughout the world were not also doing their part to reduce emissions.

Those in the group conducted among the general population were asked what they perceived to be the main objectives of the price on carbon pollution. While most believed that this initiative had been introduced as a method of encouraging Canadian households and businesses to reduce their emissions and partake in more environmentally sustainable behaviours, very few felt that this strategy had been effective. It was thought that many households did not have the option to reduce emissions related to activities such as driving and heating their homes, and that a price on carbon had only served to make life more expensive for these families while doing little to curb emissions. A number believed that, given the global scale of the issue of climate change, any actions taken by Canadians would be negated so long as major emitters in other jurisdictions continued their industrial activities unabated.

Asked whether they had seen, read, or heard anything about the Climate Action Incentive Payment (CAIP), a number indicated that they had. Unprompted, a few recalled that they had received one of these payments in recent months. Most were of the impression that these payments were primarily aimed at compensating Canadians for the increased costs incurred due to the price on carbon, though few were aware of the specific mechanisms used to calculate them. Asked whether, to the best of their knowledge, they or someone in their household had received this rebate, a roughly equal number reported that they had as those who were more uncertain or did not believe they had received a payment.

Based on their understanding of the carbon pricing system, participants were asked if they felt this initiative had made them better or worse off financially. Several were uncertain and felt that it was difficult to determine the degree to which the price on carbon had impacted their financial situation, given that they were unsure as to how much they had paid in additional costs relative to the rebates they had received.

Heat Pumps (Atlantic Canada Homeowners, Atlantic Canada)

Participants in two groups based in Atlantic Canada, comprised of homeowners and members of the general population respectively, engaged in a conversation related to heat pumps and recent initiatives from the federal government aimed at encouraging Canadians to consider installing heat pumps in their own homes.

Those in the group comprised of homeowners were informed that the federal government would be increasing the amount of funding available for eligible homeowners looking to switch to a heat pump from \$10,000 to \$15,000, essentially making the average heat pump effectively free for low-to-median income households. While reacting positively to this initiative, several expected that their income

would be too high to qualify for this assistance. It was felt that in order to be more impactful in encouraging a greater number of households to make the switch to using a heat pump, the income thresholds for these supports would likely need to be increased substantially.

Both groups were asked whether they currently heated their home with a heat pump. Several in the group comprised of homeowners indicated that they did, while very few in the general population group reported the same. Among those who did not have a heat pump, when asked if they would consider switching from their home heating system, many indicated that they would. A number, however, were skeptical as to whether a heat pump would be able to sufficiently heat their home. Some of those who had already installed a heat pump reported having found it necessary to install additional heat pumps and/or had combined their heat pumps with other home heating systems such as those powered by electricity or burning wood.

Participants in the group comprised of homeowners were asked an additional question regarding what these upfront payments should be called. On balance, participants expressed a preference for the term *Heat Pump Bonus* as opposed to *Heat Pump Cheque*. It was thought that the term cheque was somewhat outdated in the digital age, especially given how few people participants believed still used cheques on a regular basis. A number suggested alternative terms that the Government of Canada could use to describe this program, including 'incentive', 'rebate', or 'initiative'.

Health Care (Mid-Size and Major Centres Atlantic Canada, Manitoba, Atlantic Canada)

Three groups took part in conversations related to health care and the issues currently impacting the health care systems in their respective provinces. Almost all believed that the health care system in their area was facing significant challenges. A large number had heard accounts of increasingly long wait times at emergency rooms and walk-in clinics, with several reporting having personally experienced waits of over 12 hours to receive care. Many believed that these long wait times were directly connected to what they viewed as a widespread shortage of doctors and nurses in their community. Discussing potential actions that could be taken by the federal government to address this issue, many believed that more needed to be done to recruit foreign-trained health professionals, as well as to streamline the certification process for these individuals, ensuring that they would be able to work in their fields of expertise upon arriving in Canada.

Participants residing in Manitoba and in mid-size and major centres in Atlantic Canada were presented with information regarding five priority areas that the Government of Canada had recently identified related to health care. These included addressing health worker shortages and reducing wait times, increasing access to family health services, improving long term care and home care, addressing mental health and substance use, and modernizing health data management and virtual care.

On balance, participants reacted largely positively to these priorities, with many expressing the view that all were important areas for the Government of Canada to be focusing on. Several believed that the priority of addressing health worker shortages and reducing wait times was of particular importance and felt that improvements on this front would likely have a positive impact on the rest of the priority areas listed above. The priorities of increasing access to family services, improving long

term and home care, and addressing mental health and substance use were also viewed as being of critical importance going forward. While a few felt that the priority of modernizing health data management and virtual care was less pressing than the other areas listed, some felt differently, believing that expanding the capacity of virtual care and making it easier for health data to be transferred between different health care providers would provide patients (and especially those living rurally) with a wider range of options when it came to accessing health care.

Opioids (Hamilton Renters)

One group, comprised of individuals residing in Hamilton, engaged in a brief conversation related to opioid addiction, both in their communities as well as across Canada more broadly. Almost all felt that opioids represented a major concern in their communities at present, with several believing that this issue had worsened in recent years. Asked whether they were hopeful that progress could be made on addressing this issue in the coming years, almost all indicated that they were.

Prompted to share what came to mind when they heard terms such as 'safe supply' and 'safe consumption sites', most believed that these phrases related to ensuring that individuals suffering from addiction were not consuming toxic drugs and had a safe location where they could consume illicit substances (such as opioids) in the presence of health workers. While generally supportive of initiatives such as these, some believed that there needed to be additional actions taken to address what were viewed as the root causes of addiction, such as challenges related to homelessness, poverty, and mental health.

Provided with information related to the Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP) reactions were mixed among participants. While a number believed that harm reduction initiatives played an important role in supporting those suffering from addiction, several believed this additional funding should instead be directed towards the treatment of addiction and assisting individuals to stop using these substances in the long term. Discussing the potential impacts of increasing funding towards harm reduction programs, a number believed that this could lead to decreased stigma towards those suffering from addiction and increased education among the public regarding the challenges faced by these individuals.

Asked what more the Government of Canada could be doing to address these issues, it was suggested that actions should be taken to find affordable housing for those suffering from addiction, providing these individuals with the opportunity to live in a safe and drug-free environment.

Community Safety (Greater Toronto Area)

Participants residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) engaged in a brief discussion related to crime and their perspectives regarding the safety of their community. Asked how big of an issue they felt crime was in their community, many were of the impression that the crime rate had risen in recent years, and that incidents such as assaults, property damage, drug crime, and automobile theft had been occurring with increasing frequency as of late.

Asked whether they viewed auto theft as a major issue in the GTA, many indicated that they did, with several indicating having personally known someone who had been impacted by this type of crime. Almost all believed that this issue had increased considerably in recent years and recalled having heard far more about this topic as of late, both on the news and from personal connections. Describing what they felt was behind this perceived rise in automobile thefts, a number attributed this to the advanced technology in newer vehicles, believing these innovations had provided more ways for criminals to potentially break into and steal vehicles. It was also felt that a perceived growth in the global market for stolen vehicles had contributed to the increasing frequency of these crimes in the GTA and across Canada more broadly.

Discussing what should be done by the Government of Canada in response to rising auto theft, a number believed that a greater focus should be placed on increasing surveillance and inspections of shipping crates at Canadian ports to ensure that stolen vehicles were not being trafficked overseas. Additional actions suggested by participants included introducing legislation to increase the penalties for automobile theft, mandating that automakers install global positioning technology (GPS) technology in all new vehicles, and seeking to address what were viewed as the potential root causes of auto theft, such as poverty and gang activity. Informed that the Government of Canada was in the process of organizing a National Summit on Combatting Auto Theft, while most believed this to be a step in the right direction, a number believed that more urgent action would need to be taken in order to address this issue.

Immigration (Greater Toronto Area)

Participants residing in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) took part in a brief conversation about immigration. Asked how they would describe the current state of the immigration system, all expressed concerns regarding the country's ability to maintain its current level of immigration while still being able to provide adequate housing and employment opportunities, health care, and education for those already living in Canada. All felt that the Government of Canada should decrease the rate of immigration going forward. While most supported continued immigration in the long term, it was felt that a temporary decrease would allow the country time to grow the housing supply and expand the capacity of important services and infrastructure to accommodate a larger population in the future.

Informed that the federal government had announced a temporary two-year cap on new international student study permits, participants expressed a range of reactions to this information. While some believed that this would have a positive impact on the housing situation, especially in terms of decreasing demand in the rental market, a roughly equal number were worried that this might lead to staffing and programming cuts at many Canadian universities and colleges which currently relied on the tuition paid by international students as a significant portion of their annual budgets.

Ukraine (Manitoba, National Capital Region Quebec)

Participants in two groups engaged in a discussion regarding the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the financial and military assistance provided to Ukraine by the Government of Canada over the

course of this conflict. All reported being aware of this issue, though with varying levels of familiarity. While most in the group based in Manitoba reported that they were no longer as worried about the conflict as they had once been, a few expressed concerns regarding the potential impacts this conflict could have on the Canadian economy and fuel prices. In contrast, most residing in Quebec expressed high levels of concern about the conflict. These concerns focused on numerous factors, including potential economic issues, global security and stability concerns (related in particular to Russia's possession of nuclear weapons), and a perceived lack of progress on negotiations towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Asked if they felt it was important for Canada to continue to assist Ukraine, most in the group from Manitoba and all in Quebec felt that it was. Several highlighted the importance of this assistance to protecting the health and wellness Ukrainian civilians, who were believed to have suffered greatly due to this conflict. Among the small number in the group from Manitoba who viewed it as less important for Canada to help Ukraine, some expressed concerns regarding the financial cost of this ongoing support and whether these funds should instead be used to help Canadians in Canada who were currently struggling to make ends meet financially.

Discussing what they had seen, read, or heard regarding the federal government's response to the war in Ukraine, many reiterated their understanding that Canada had been providing financial and military assistance throughout the entirety of the conflict and had brought in many Ukrainians who had been displaced from their homes. Some also recalled the imposition of several sanctions by the Government of Canada on Russia, as well as upon numerous Russian individuals and businesses. All felt that the Government of Canada was currently on the right track with its response. Asked whether they felt the federal government should be doing more or less in its response to the conflict, most believed that the current approach was ideal and should be maintained.

Most reported having been at least somewhat aware of the recent visit by the President of Ukraine to Canada. Provided with information related to financial and military commitments that the Government of Canada had made to Ukraine during this visit, several in Manitoba questioned how long the Government of Canada could feasibly support the defence effort in Ukraine and worried that this conflict would continue for several years to come. Conversely, all in the group from Quebec expressed positive sentiments, believing that this type of ongoing support was necessary to help the Ukrainian war effort.

No participants were aware of the Canada-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA). Asked if it was important to have a free trade agreement with Ukraine, many expressed support for such an initiative, believing that this represented a non-violent, humanitarian approach to providing support to Ukraine that also had the potential to benefit Canadians and the Canadian economy.

Discussing whether they had ever come across information about this conflict that had seemed false or misleading, many reported that they had. Those who had encountered misinformation or disinformation reported that this had primarily come from sources on social media platforms such as Facebook. It was felt that, on balance, Canadian media organizations had been largely successful in filtering out misinformation and disinformation from their articles and broadcasts. This false and

misleading information was viewed by many as a major issue that, at minimum, may result in a lack of knowledge about the facts of the conflict, or, more critically, erode Canadians' support for Ukraine.

Government of Canada Wordmark (National Capital Region Quebec)

One group took part in a discussion related to the visual symbols and audio signature that the federal government uses to identify itself. Asked how they would typically go about identifying information as coming from the Government of Canada, many described a logo including the word 'Canada' and the Canadian flag that they believed accompanied all federal communications. Discussing specifically how they would determine whether information that they heard was emanating from the Government of Canada, several mentioned a jingle that typically followed federal advertisements or announcements on audio platforms such as the radio.

Presented with an image of the Government of Canada wordmark all recognized this symbol, with several confirming that this was the logo they had been referencing earlier. Asked what they felt the wordmark symbolized, many believed that it represented the federal government as well as Canada more broadly. Asked why they felt the Government of Canada included this symbol in its communications, most believed that it served as a visual indicator confirming that the information it accompanied was trustworthy and from an official source.

The group was next provided with a recording of the Government of Canada's audio signature. All were familiar with this jingle, with several describing it as being derived from the first four notes of the Canadian national anthem. Discussing what they felt to be the primary purpose of this jingle, all believed that (similar to the wordmark) it was used to confirm that audio information and advertisements were officially from the federal government and important to pay attention to.

Supplemented Foods Concept Testing (GTA Homeowners Expecting to Renew Mortgages in the Next Three Years)

Participants in one group were asked to share their perspectives related to creative concepts and messaging designed by the Government of Canada to highlight the potential risks related to supplemented foods, with a particular focus on products such as caffeinated energy drinks. Many felt that products such as energy drinks were being marketed too heavily towards younger Canadians and believed that this was an important issue for the federal government to be focusing on.

Shown a pair of visual concepts designed to highlight this issue, participants provided a wide range of reactions. While some thought that the campaign's 'read the label' message stood out to a greater extent in the shopping cart concept (where it was included in the image and as a hashtag in the text), several believed that the energy drink concept placed a more direct focus on the issue of supplemented foods, specifically in its inclusion of images of an energy drink can and a mock-up of an ingredient label. Some also spoke positively of the caution-identifier referenced in the right-hand concept and believed that the inclusion of this feature on food products would be helpful for parents in determining which products were safe to purchase for their children. Discussing the advertisements

more generally, many felt that the phrase ‘supplemented foods’ might be confusing to those who encounter it, with several expressing that they typically associated the term ‘supplemented’ with positive connotations such as bolstering one’s health through the use of supplemental micronutrients, such as vitamins or minerals, rather than potentially harming it.

Asked whether they believed that these concepts would catch their attention if they encountered them on social media, only a small number expected that they would. While a few felt that the inclusion of the Government of Canada wordmark, the verified checkmark, and the Healthy Canadians organization name would intrigue them and prompt them to learn more, most did not believe that the images and text used in the concepts would stand out amidst the rest of the content typically found on social media platforms. Discussing ways to improve these concepts, a number suggested that the mock-up of the ingredients label in the energy drink concept should be made more detailed as well as provide examples of potentially dangerous ingredients that parents and other consumers should be looking out for.

Community Challenges (Bas-Saint-Laurent/Gaspésie/Côte-Nord Regions Quebec, Yukon, Niagara Region Ontario)

Participants residing in Yukon, Ontario’s Niagara region, and the Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie, and Côte-Nord regions of Quebec, engaged in discussions related to the challenges currently facing their respective communities. Asked to identify what they viewed as the most important issues impacting their communities at present that required greater attention from the federal government, participants in all three groups identified health care as a major area of concern. Many described what they perceived as increasing challenges related to accessing health services in their community, including issues such as long wait times for emergency and primary care, a lack of family doctors, and limited resources available to treat issues related to mental health and addiction. Housing affordability was also identified by all groups as a significant concern in their communities. It was believed that housing costs had increased substantially for both homeowners and renters in recent years, and that there was a widespread shortage of safe and affordable housing available at present. Several also described what they viewed as a lack of well-paying, full-time employment opportunities in their respective regions, with some believing this was a particular issue for those living in smaller or rural communities.

Discussing the most important industries in their respective communities, participants in the Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie, and Côte-Nord regions identified areas such as agriculture, forestry, paper production, mining, tourism, and construction as playing significant roles in their local economies. Those residing in the Niagara region mentioned tourism, wine production, and manufacturing as important local sectors, with some specifically recalling recent investments made by the federal government towards the increased production of electric vehicles (EVs) in their area. Participants in Yukon identified mining, tourism, the transportation of goods and materials, and the construction of new infrastructure as the most important sectors in their region. Several in this group were of the impression that there were significant staffing shortages across many of these sectors (as well as in key areas such as health care) at present and that more needed to be done by governments at the federal and territorial level to recruit and incentivize skilled professionals to work and reside in the region.

MORE INFORMATION

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