

# Canadian Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

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*The Canadian public rarely concerns itself with foreign policy issues. When it does, the government of the day has three options for managing it—it can align policy to match opinion, it can shape or lead public opinion in the direction of policy, or it can gamble with an unpopular policy that is opposed by the public. We explore some recent foreign-policy issues and look at the degree to which government policy was aligned with public opinion.*

Since being elected in October, the new federal Liberal government has interpreted its mandate as broad public support for change in general (absolutely correct), but also very specific support for all that they promised during the election campaign (not so correct). Put another way, the Liberals said they would do “X” and they won a majority of seats (although only 39 per cent of the popular vote), therefore “Canadians” have now endorsed implementing every promise detailed in the Liberal Party platform. This is why the new government feels justified when it announces changes from

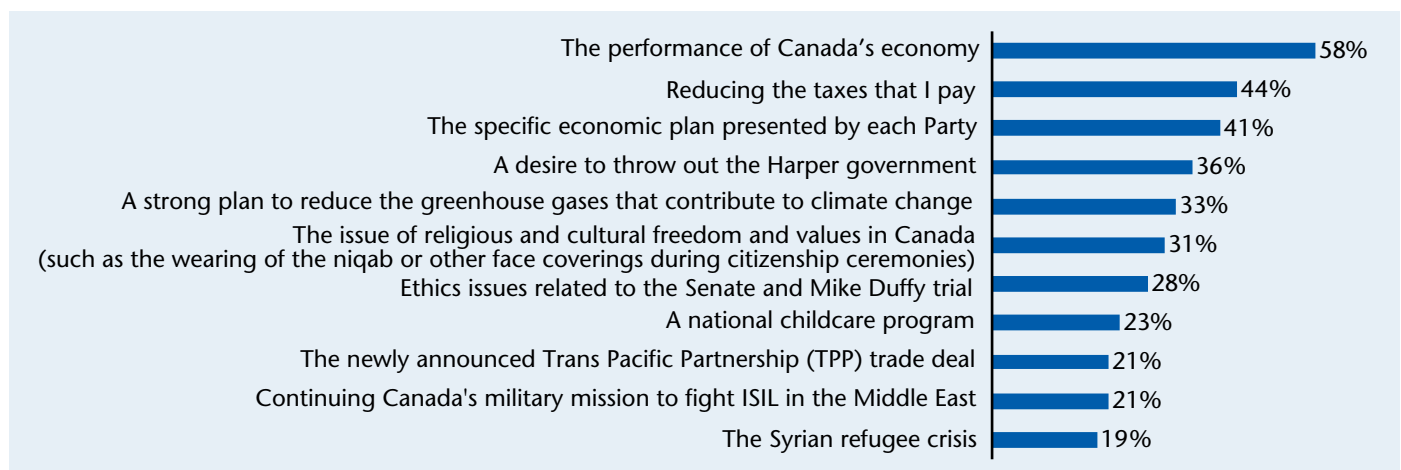
the previous government’s policies, or introduces any of its own policies, saying that “this is what Canadians have asked us to do.”

The Trudeau government says it is responding to the will of Canadians, as well as to Canadian values. We’ve certainly heard this message when it comes to changes in domestic policy, including implementing a national inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls, bringing back the long-form census, and beginning a massive investment in infrastructure to stimulate the economy and create jobs. They’ve also cited the views of Canadians—and Cana-

dian values—as justification for some of their internationally-focused decisions, such as signing the Paris Agreement on Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and ending air strikes on ISIS targets in the Middle East.

How does all of this square with prevailing public opinion in Canada? In our view, the relationship between public opinion and any government’s policies can be categorized in one of three ways. First, a government’s decisions can be in sync with public opinion and be regarded as the government giving the public what it wants. Second, a government can be ahead of public opinion on a policy but understand that, with the right persuasion, it can bring the public on side, effectively shaping public opinion. Third, a government can enact a policy that is at odds with public opinion, either because it is being forced to (by the legal system, external actors or events, etc.), because it feels the policy isn’t a priority for the public and won’t serve as a flash point for organizing opposition, or because it firmly believes it is the right thing to do and is prepared to gamble with the electoral consequences.

FIGURE 1: Priority Issues for Canadians: 2015 General Election (Ipsos: October 14, 2015)



In our experience, almost all government policy falls within the first two categories—the government is aligned with public opinion, or believes that with the right information the public can be brought onside. The last category, especially at the extreme (a major stand on principle), is a big gamble for any government in our democratic system. Some political parties and prime ministers believe that a gamble is worth taking for the good of the country. An example of this would be former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's championing of constitutional reconciliation with Quebec with the Meech Lake Accord in 1987 and again in 1990. For Mulroney, this really was a gamble—he described it as “rolling the dice.”

Turning now to recent Canadian foreign policy, there are a number of examples over the last few years that show our governments aligning, shaping or going against public opinion. It's early days for the Trudeau government, but we've already seen a few examples of where they've wrestled with the public-opinion implications of their foreign policy decisions. But, while these may have been high profile issues from the perspective of our media and political elites, they have been back-burner issues for most Canadians. As a result, they have represented relatively low risk confrontations with public opinion for the new government.

It's low risk because Canadian politics is dominated by domestic issues. In an Ipsos poll conducted during the 2015 election, Canadians were presented with a list of eleven key issues and asked the degree to which each was “absolutely critical” in determining the party for which they would vote. Topping the list was the performance of the Canadian economy (58 per cent), followed by tax reduction (44%), the specific economic plan presented by each party (41 per cent), a desire to throw out the Harper Conservatives (36 per cent) and a strong plan to reduce greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change (33 per cent). While some aspects of climate change could be considered a matter of foreign policy, the dominant issues in the campaign were all clearly domestic.

The issues at the bottom of the list were all matters of foreign policy. These included the newly-announced Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) deal (21 per cent), continuing Canada's military mission to fight ISIL in the Middle East (21 per cent), and the Syrian refugee crisis (19 per cent). This is not to say that some voters weren't thinking about foreign policy issues when they marked their ballot, but that these issues were less important to how they voted than the domestic (especially economic) issues on the agenda.

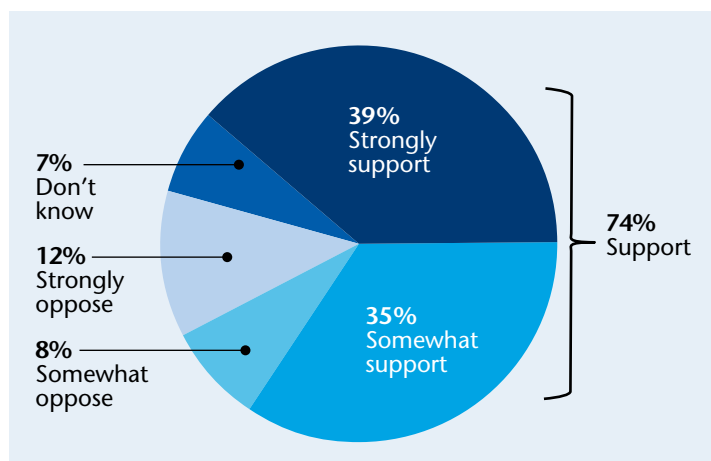
The 2015 federal election was not an anomaly. We saw a similar ordering of domestic

and foreign policy issues during the 2011 election when the Harper Conservatives won their majority government. An election-day poll conducted by Ipsos with over 30,000 voters showed that just 1 per cent chose “international issues,” such as the war in Afghanistan, as the most important question in determining their vote. Regardless of whether the Tories or the Grits won the election, foreign policy simply didn't have a significant impact on the outcome.

Going back further, there are a number of other interesting examples of the interplay between public opinion and foreign policy. For example, the Kyoto Protocol, which was signed by the Liberal Government in 1997 and ratified in 2002, was definitely aligned with public opinion during its early days. Ipsos polling at the time showed that 74 per cent of Canadians supported the Kyoto Protocol. Yet, it became a millstone for then Liberal leader Stéphane Dion in the 2008 federal election because this foreign policy initiative ended up being defined in terms of its domestic costs. Once again, a foreign-policy initiative was trumped by domestic-policy considerations.

More recently, the Trudeau Government jumped feet-first into the climate change issue at the Paris Climate Conference. However, unlike Dion, who was seen by most voters as lacking the leadership skills and

**FIGURE 2: Support for Kyoto Protocol**  
(Ipsos: November 8, 2002)



**FIGURE 3: Opinion on Trans-Pacific Partnership Deal**  
(Ipsos: October 14, 2015)



judgement to be trusted with the fundamental domestic changes required by his Kyoto-driven Greenshift program, Trudeau was able to use his charisma and new electoral mandate to confidently sign an agreement in Paris that was greeted with support by most Canadians. How did Trudeau pull this off? A big reason was because over much of the last decade public opinion had been “shaped” by the growing international and domestic consensus about the priority of climate change. This was not the case back in 2008 when Dion sought a mandate to implement the Kyoto Accord. Also, during his election, Trudeau didn’t stake everything on this one issue, as Dion had. Remember, the environment ranked fifth—not first—in influencing vote choice during the last federal election.

Moving on to the issue of international trade during the last election, while the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) didn’t prove to be a big vote driver, it was broadly supported by Canadians. An Ipsos poll released on October 14, 2015, showed that 64 per cent thought that it was a good deal for Canadians, compared to 36 per cent who believed it was a bad deal. While the TPP should have given the Tories an opportunity to tout their ability to effectively manage foreign relations for our domestic benefit, they had already lost their reputation with voters as effective economic managers due to the recession.

Economic growth, trade and environmental protection are mostly consensus issues in Canada, and so far the new government has done a good job of sticking to what works on all three. But, as any student of Canadian politics knows, the devil can be in the details. In particular, the issue of climate change stands out due to strong regional discontinuities in public opinion—especially those dividing Alberta and the provinces east of Ontario. Even though the Trudeau government has been widely lauded for signing the Paris Agreement, its implementation could prove to be difficult given the prevailing negative economic mood in Alberta.

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While the government and public are mostly aligned on trade, climate change and the economy, they are not aligned these days on military

intervention and refugee policies. On refugees, Canadians are much more concerned about security than the Government has argued is reasonable, and most (60 per cent) opposed Trudeau’s plan to settle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015.

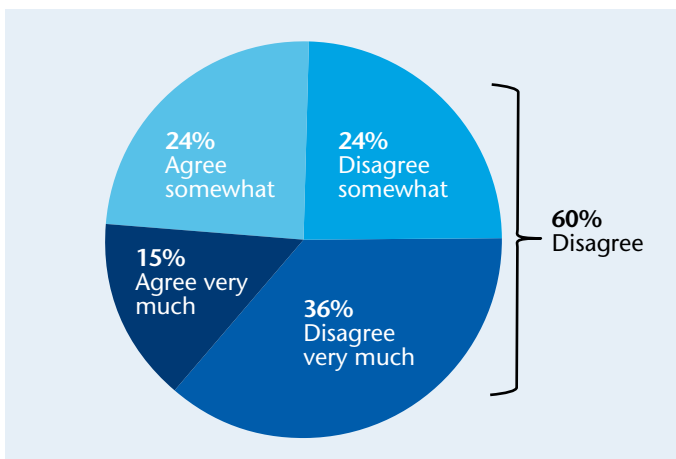
On Canada’s military mission against ISIL, Canadians were more aligned with the previous government’s policy than with what the Trudeau Government has now started to implement, as 66 per cent supported an extension of the air strikes in Iraq and Syria. As much talk as there was about both issues during the election campaign, neither was decisive in terms of voter opinion.

Going forward, of the two issues, refugee policy has the most potential to create a public opinion problem for the government. That’s because it’s a foreign policy issue with serious domestic security implications. As we’ve seen in a number of European countries recently, Canada is one security incident away from major tension on the refugee file. **P**

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**FIGURE 4: Accepting 25,000 Government Sponsored Refugees in 2015 (Ipsos: November 20, 2015)**



**FIGURE 5: Extending the Canadian Forces Mission in Iraq Against ISIS (Ipsos: March 23, 2015)**

