

Commentary



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A renewed Canadian approach to alliance-building

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Overview

This commentary is the second of three releases based on a public opinion survey done as part of MLI's project "Leading a community of democracies in the post-COVID world order," supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. This release describes the results of our survey on Canadian views of international organizations and international affairs. Our third release will focus on Canadian views on foreign policy.

Canadians need to be aware of the changing international order, the challenges that it brings, and the fact that Canada does indeed have the necessary tools and the political will to protect and promote Canadian security, prosperity, and values. We can have an outsized impact on our international relations, but only if we take the lead in working with other democracies and like-minded states – from across the transatlantic to the Indo-Pacific. To ensure that such a reorientation is sustainable, it also needs to be informed by the views and priorities of everyday Canadians and not only the foreign policy elite.

Importantly, this does not mean that Canadian foreign policy should sim-

plistically chase public opinion. Formulating the broad contours of foreign policy should be both a political and technocratic exercise, in which defining our interests and values, setting priorities, allocating resources, and other decisions become a two-way street between the public and the government. Such an ongoing dialogue is necessary for the long-term sustainability and legitimacy of our foreign policy choices, doubly so if there is sustained divergence among different participants of this dialogue and a need for a significant reorientation.

This analysis provides a look at how Canadians view our traditional allies, international organizations, and the overall post-COVID-19 world. The following results reveal a positive net impression score for all the alliance and international organizations examined in the survey (see Figure 1). In particular, it suggests Canadians remain deeply committed to their traditional allies, such as those in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Five Eyes intelligence arrangement. Canadians also hold generally positive views of the United Nations and World Health Organization (WHO), though polarization is evident in their impressions of both organizations. Positive views are also held toward the World Trade Organization (WTO) and G7, though both lack visibility in Canada. Lastly, more Canadians are pessimistic rather than optimistic when it comes to the post-COVID world. Globalization is regarded cautiously by Canadians, with a significant portion (almost half) wishing that its pace would slow down.

Figure 1: Net impression score of international organizations

Organization	Net Score
NATO	+45%
United Nations	+35%
WHO	+32%
European Union	+36%
G7	+23%
WTO	+23%
Five Eyes	+51%*

**Question was asked in a different way than for the other organizations*

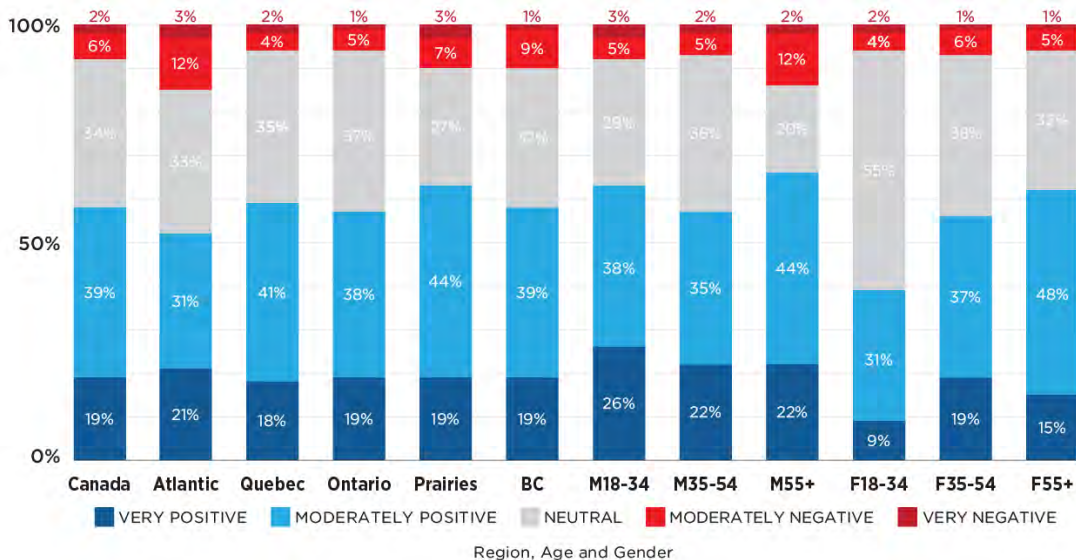
Key takeaways

1. *Canadians are broadly supportive of and have positive views toward our traditional allies. Canadians believe our relationship with Europe is of utmost importance.*

NATO holds a +45 percent net impression score while the Five Eyes (composed of Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK) has the highest net impression score (+51 percent) among international organizations. In both cases only a very small minority of Canadians (9 percent for NATO and 8 percent for Five Eyes) have negative impressions (see Figure 2). The group that has a significant minority (28 percent) with negative views on Five Eyes are those that say foreign policy is not important at all to their voting tendencies.

Highly informed Canadians, on the other hand, have the highest percentage of positive views for Five Eyes (77 percent) and NATO (73 percent). An overwhelming majority of Canadians (96 percent) also believe that our relationship with Europe is moderately important or very important. This is also reflected in the positive net impression score of +36 percent for the European Union. These results also parallel an overall positive view towards NATO and Five Eyes allies such as Australia and the UK. The only exception are views toward the US. Yet we also need to take into account the fact that Canadians have positive views towards the alliances in which the US plays the central role. That suggests that the negative views of the US are primarily driven by the public’s impression of the Trump administration underpinning a historical skepticism toward America.

Figure 2: Opinion of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance



What does this tell us? “These results underscore that Canadians remain connected to the rules-based order and supportive of core institutions and groupings such as NATO and Five Eyes,” says MLI Senior Fellow and the Director of the Indo-Pacific Program Jonathan Berkshire Miller. Canadians remain committed to the transatlantic alliance and recognize the importance of our relationship with our oldest allies in securing Canada and defending our interests. Even negative views of the US do not change this perception. Furthermore, Canadians are not undifferentiated multilateralists when it comes to international organizations; that explains the differences in the net favourability scores between NATO and Five Eyes, and the rest. Additionally, Europe continues to play a major role in Canadians’ international vision, and this is unlikely to change anytime soon despite the emergence of the Indo-Pacific in Canadians’ imagination.

2. Canadian views on the UN and WHO are generally positive but there is some polarization, with significant minorities having negative views of both organizations.

Both the UN and WHO have net positive impression scores (+35 percent for UN and +32 percent for WHO), with about one in five Canadian holding a negative view of the UN (see Figure 3). Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of Canadians have a negative view of the WHO (see Figure 4). These two organizations also received the lowest percentage of neutral answers (26 percent for UN and 21 percent for WHO) among all the organizations the survey asked about.

Both positive and negative impressions of the UN (25 percent negative versus 62 percent positive among highly informed Canadians) and the WHO (24 percent negative versus 63 percent positive) increases with knowledge about international affairs. The group with the highest neutral impression for both organizations are those with very low information about international affairs (51 percent for UN and 38 percent for WHO).

There is also a partisan divide when it comes to the UN and WHO. Among Conservatives, positive and negative views on the UN are almost equal (36 percent versus 35 percent respectively), while Liberals are overwhelmingly positive (70 percent), with only a small minority having negative views (8 percent). Greater numbers of Conservatives have negative views of the WHO (42 percent) compared to positive impressions (35 percent), while only 8 percent of Liberals have negative views of the WHO, and almost three-quarters of Liberals have a positive view.

What does this tell us? “The pandemic has been a moment of clarity in a way and has fuelled skepticism of the value of some key global institutions to cope with the most pressing economic, security and social challenges,” argues Senior Fellow Jonathan Berkshire Miller. One of the consequences

Figure 3: Opinion of the United Nations

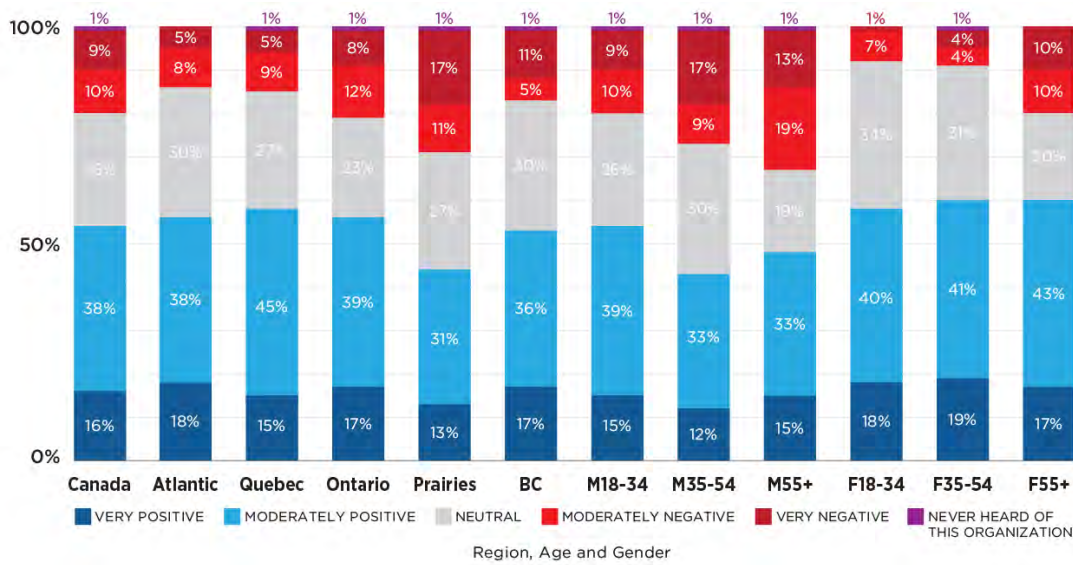
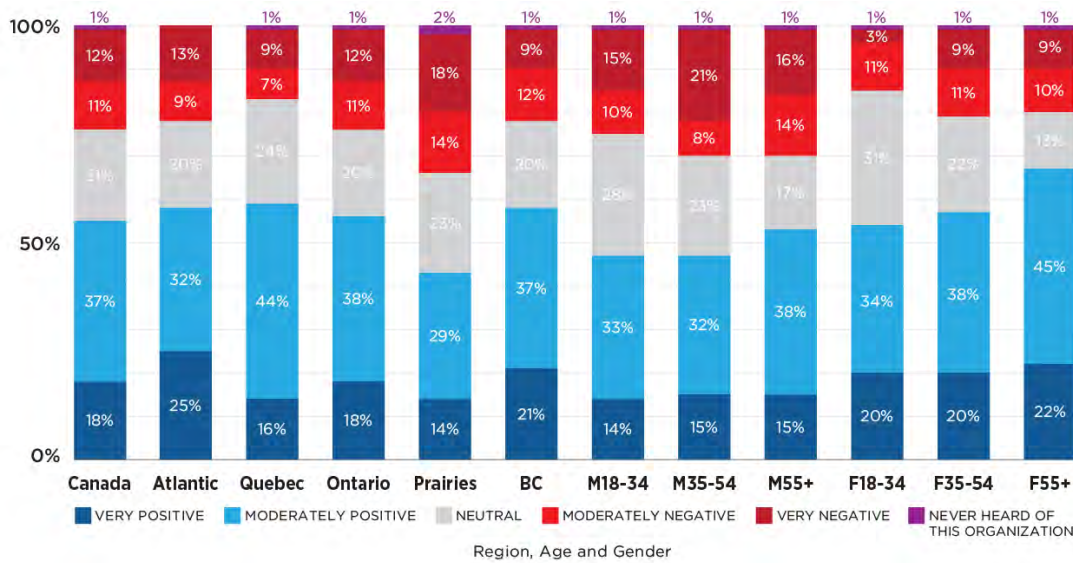


Figure 4: Opinion of the World Health Organization



of the pandemic is to highlight the dysfunction of international institutions like the WHO in a very public way. That has contributed to the skepticism shown by almost a quarter of Canadians towards it. The same could also be said of the UN, though that skepticism could have even deeper roots – given the steady decline in Canada’s UN peacekeeping in the past few decades and growing controversy over the role of authoritarian states in UN bodies like the Human Rights Council.

We do not see the same level of partisan divide and polarization of attitudes that we see towards the UN and WHO when it comes to other organizations

in the survey. The data here also reaffirms the observation that Canadians are not necessarily reflexive multilateralists but have more differentiated attitudes towards international organizations that reflect their priorities.

3. Plurality of Canadians view G7 and WTO in positive terms but both organizations suffer from lack of visibility among Canadians.

Both the G7 and WTO have net positive impression scores of +23 percent each, though this is less than all the other alliances and international organizations examined in this survey. Almost four in 10 Canadians have a positive view of the G7 and WTO, but an equal number of Canadians expressed neutral views of both. This suggests an ambivalent attitude and a lack of information. Older, educated, better off, and highly informed Canadians have a more positive view of both G7 and WTO, reaching 56 percent among high-information Canadians. In contrast, about one in four among middle aged men (35 to 54) have negative views of both organizations.

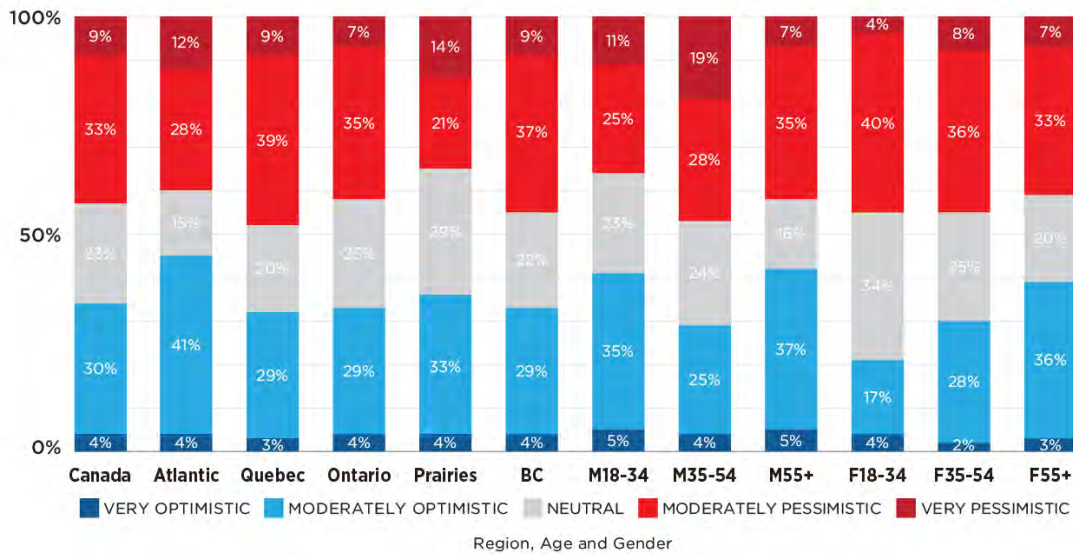
What does this tell us? These results reflect the stagnation of WTO as a forum for international trade and an erosion of the G7's importance. It is no wonder that those who have the most positive views are those who follow international affairs closely. These organizations are also stand-ins for globalization and free trade, and negative views about them could portend an increasing weariness on these topics. The quarter of middle-aged men who might be bearing the brunt of rapid changes in the global economy are the canary in this coal mine.

4. Canadians are more pessimistic about the world after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Slightly more than four in ten Canadians (42 percent) are pessimistic about the world after the COVID-19 pandemic compared to about a third of Canadians (34 percent) who are optimistic about what comes next after the current crisis (see Figure 5). There are regional differences, with Atlantic Canadians being the most optimistic (45 percent) and Quebeckers among the most pessimistic (48 percent).

There is also a partisan divide with Liberals being more optimistic (46 percent) than Conservatives (30 percent). Interestingly, both foreign policy voters and highly informed Canadians have the lowest neutral views (14 percent versus 17 percent respectively), and the pessimists and optimists among them are close in numbers (-6 percent net score for foreign policy voters and +4 percent net score for highly informed Canadians).

Figure 5: Thinking about the world stage after the COVID-19 crisis, are you pessimistic or optimistic?



What does this tell us? Unsurprisingly, the effects of the pandemic will be felt long after it is over. Canadians seem to be divided along party and regional lines on how fast the recovery will be. As MLI Senior Fellow Jonathan Berkshire Miller points out, “the data here represents an important recognition from Canadians that the international landscape is changing, and this change is happening quickly.”

“Canadian pessimism may be directly attributed to the health and economic costs generated by the global pandemic, in which a failure of the federal government to provide clear and decisive leadership have powerful consequences on Canadians,” notes Shuvaloy Majumdar, Program Director for MLI’s Centre for Advancing Canada’s Interests Abroad. “In a world riven by strategic competition between China and the West, which the pandemic has only further highlighted, Canadians may be concerned their interests are under-represented.”

For a plurality of Canadians this change means things could be worse in the post-COVID-19 world. That concern about an uncertain future in a rapidly changing world is what we see here. The partisan divide is perhaps also a function of the level of voters’ trust in the government’s ability to navigate this uncertain future.

5. Globalization is viewed positively by a significant majority but almost half of Canadians think it should slow down now.

A majority of Canadians (69 percent) see globalization as a positive force but almost half (48 percent) would like it to slow down now. Only one in six (16

percent) says globalization should be rolled back while one of five (21 percent) believe it should keep accelerating. Older men (55+) have the highest negative view of globalization (47 percent), together with those who do not vote based on foreign policy (67 percent). In contrast, younger women and men have the most positive views on globalization (79 percent and 75 percent respectively) along with well-off and Liberal voters (81 percent for both).

What does this tell us? Globalization, free trade, and the rules-based international order have been beneficial to Canada over the past three decades. The data from this survey suggest that Canadians are largely aware of this fact. However, globalization did not bring in the same level of benefits to everyone and the global financial crisis of 2008 and the erosion of rules-based international order in the last half decade made those discrepancies more visible.

“After the Great Recession of 2008-09, Canadians widely supported the highest per capita immigration rates in the world, an expanding middle class, and an agenda that saw Canadian trade agreements go from five to 55 – spanning Europe, Asia and North America,” says Shuvaloy Majumdar, Program Director and Munk Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy. “A shift has occurred in Canadian attitudes toward global prosperity, in which technology and other disruptions require the fierce promotion of Canadian economic interests in a competitive age, rather than the virtue-signalling that has come to define the concept of globalization.”

This cautious attitude towards globalization among almost half of Canadians represents the realization that globalization has not been an unalloyed good but has a social and economic cost too.

Conclusion

Canadians do not have an undifferentiated view of international organizations. Instead, they see some organizations with a greater degree of positivity compared to others. Simply put, despite the popular view of Canadians being lovers of all things multilateral, we are not in fact undifferentiated multilateralists, in which all multilateral organizations are viewed in the same way.

As our survey data demonstrate, Canadians view alliances like NATO and Five Eyes with greater positivity than other organizations, such as the UN, WHO, WTO, and G7. Some of this difference could be from recent events, including a failure of international institutions to manage the global pandemic or define an economic recovery agenda. Other organizations, like the WTO and the G7, suffer from a lack of visibility in Canada, which could result in greater skepticism about these organizations amongst the Canadian public.

It is telling that the two organizations that have the greatest net positivity (NATO and the Five Eyes) are also security-focused alliances that feature some of Canada’s oldest allies. The fact that Canadians are pessimistic about the

world after the COVID-19 pandemic may also play a role in that net positivity.

Importantly, positive Canadian views for both NATO and Five Eyes do not seem to be diminished by negative views toward the United States, which plays the central role in both alliances. That may not only reflect how Canadians dislike the Trump administration but not the United States per se, but also the high regard that Canadians have towards these venerable alliance arrangements.

About the author



Balkan Devlen is a Senior Fellow at Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Adjunct Research Professor at Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, and Superforecaster for Good Judgment, Inc. He is also the publisher of Hindsight 20/20, a newsletter on uncertainty, foresight, and geopolitics.

His primary research interests are: geopolitics from the Baltics to the Middle East, foreign and security policies of Russia, and Turkey, decision-making under uncertainty, and forecasting and strategic foresight.

He has published extensively on foreign policy, international security, and international affairs and has given several invited talks and lectures to diverse audiences including senior policy-makers in Europe, the US, and Canada. He is a regular commentator in a wide range of international media outlets on Turkey, Russia, and the Middle East. He has nearly two decades of international experience in teaching, research, and academic management in Europe, the US, and Canada. Dr. Devlen is an external expert for the European Commission's Horizon 2020 program since 2014 and has been a Vice-Chair for panel of experts. He was a "Superforecaster" in IARPA-sponsored geopolitical forecasting competition (ACE).

Previously he was Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow, Ozerdinc-Grimes Fellow at Carleton University, Black Sea Young Reformers Fellow, and Levin Institute Fellow.

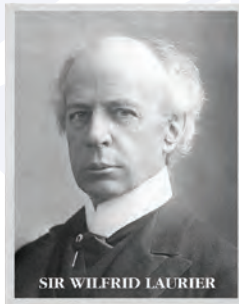
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