



## Canadian public opinion on Brexit

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### Summary

- \* *Most Canadians have a negative view of Brexit, and think that Canada should prioritize relations with the European Union (EU) over those with the United Kingdom (UK) once Brexit has occurred. However, there are clear differences in perceptions between supporters of various political parties; Brexit hence has the potential to become a politically contentious issue within Canada.*

### Background/Challenge

- In spite of various delays, the government of the UK remains committed to the objective of withdrawing the country from the EU. The current Brexit deadline in January 31, 2020.
- Brexit poses challenges for Canadian foreign policy. These include negotiating a new Canada-UK trade agreement, which will become necessary once the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement no longer applies to the UK. Transatlantic policy cooperation on a broad range of issues—from security to climate change—will need to be adjusted to new realities.
- Beyond these policy challenges, Brexit raises questions about Canada's identity as a global actor. Traditionally, Canada has maintained a close alignment with the UK, its former colonial power. However, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau seems more comfortable partnering with the EU than embracing the Brexiteers' vision of a renewed alliance of Anglosphere countries. Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, by contrast, has been an outspoken advocate of Brexit.
- In the light of these debates, this policy brief examines Canadian public opinion on Brexit and on the future of the transatlantic relationship. It draws on a survey 1,013 Canadians that was conducted by Nanos Research in September 2019. The survey forms part of a research project on "The Reconfiguration of Canada-Europe Relations after Brexit", funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The project is coordinated at Carleton University and involves partners from across Canada.

### KEY FINDINGS

- ◇ **Europe is the world region outside of North America to which most Canadians feel the strongest affinity.** When asked to rank regions based on the closeness of their attachment, 52% of respondents ranked Europe first.
- ◇ **This affinity to Europe reflects political, historical and economic factors.** Asked about the most important aspects of the Canada-Europe relationship, respondents mentioned that both Canada and Europe have democratic systems of government (27%), are committed to a rules-based international border (23%), have historical ties (21%), and close economic relations (14%). Only 8% mentioned Europe's influence on Canadian culture.
- ◇ **Within Europe, Canadians feel most attached to the UK.** The UK (or one of its regions) was mentioned by 40% as the European country to which they felt the closest affinity, followed by France (18%) and Germany (6%).
- ◇ **A clear majority of Canadians have a positive view of the EU.** Nearly three in four Canadians reported a very positive (21%) or somewhat positive (54%) opinion. Less than two in ten Canadians had a very negative (6%) or somewhat negative view (10%).
- ◇ **Brexit is perceived negatively by most Canadians.** A majority are unsympathetic (48%) or somewhat unsympathetic (16%) towards the idea of Brexit. Only about a quarter of Canadians said they were very sympathetic (11%) or somewhat sympathetic (13%). Differences between men and women, people of different age groups, and various regions of the country were relatively small.
- ◇ **Negative perceptions of Brexit existed in spite of the fact that Canadians generally have a positive view of referendums.** 57% view them as a good way to decide contentious issues in society, 28% disagree.

## KEY FINDINGS (continued)

- ◇ **Brexit has hurt how Canadians view the UK as an international partner.** In spite of the general affinity to the UK, a majority think that Canada should prioritize its relationship with the EU over that with the UK after Brexit.
  - ◆ On **trade and investment**, 67% expressed a preference for prioritizing relations with the EU, 18% for prioritizing relations with the UK, and 15% were unsure.
  - ◆ On **security and defence**, 56% preferred prioritizing relations with the EU, 29% relations with the UK, and 15% were unsure.
  - ◆ In the area of **climate change and the environment**, 71% preferred prioritizing relations with the EU, 13% relations with the UK, and 17% were unsure.
  - ◆ On **energy policy**, 68% preferred prioritizing relations with the EU, 14% relations with the UK, and 18% were unsure.
- ◇ **Perceptions of Brexit and preferences for the future of transatlantic relations differed clearly along partisan lines, especially between Canadians who usually vote Conservatives and supporters of other parties.**
  - ◆ **Conservatives** were split in their assessment of Brexit, with 46% sympathetic, 43% unsympathetic, and 11% unsure. They were also more likely to prioritize relations with the UK than supporters of other parties. However, in all fields except security, most Conservatives still placed their priority on relations with the EU.
  - ◆ Sympathies towards Brexit were much lower among supporters of other parties. Among **Liberals**, 13% were sympathetic, 76% unsympathetic, and 11% unsure. Among **New Democrats**, 8% were sympathetic, 81% unsympathetic, and 11% unsure. Supporters of the **Bloc Québécois** were ambivalent, with 28% sympathetic, 37% unsympathetic, and 35% unsure.
- ◇ The full survey report with data tables is available at <https://carleton.ca/ces/brexit-project/publications-and-twitter-feed/>. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

## Policy Implications

- Canada has an interest in maintaining a close partnership with both the UK and the EU after Brexit. This would be beneficial economically as well as politically; it would also minimize internal divisions within Canada. However, the extent to which this can be achieved depends in part on how the UK and the EU resolve controversies about their future relationship.
- Should Canada have to decide on whether to prioritize relations with the UK or the EU after Brexit, most Canadians consider the EU a more important partner across a range of policy fields. A strategy that privileges an Anglosphere alliance over the EU would not enjoy popular support.
- The reconfiguration of transatlantic relations that Brexit will necessitate has the potential to become a politically contentious issue among Canadians. Splits are most likely to emerge between Conservative voters and supporters of other parties. Canadian foreign policy must aim at preventing a further deepening of these divisions.

### Further Reading

- ◇ Hurrelmann, A. (2018), "Perceptions of Brexit in Canada: Transatlantic Relations and Domestic Politics", *DCU Brexit Institute Blog*, <http://dcubrexitinstitute.eu/2018/10/perceptions-of-brexit-in-canada-transatlantic-relations-and-domestic-politics/>.
- ◇ Hurrelmann, A., Atikcan, E.Ö., Chalmers, A.W., and Viju-Miljusevic, C. (2019), "Political Controversy about International Economic Agreements: Lessons for Canada-UK Trade Negotiations after Brexit", *International Journal* 74:3, 453-462.



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