

# NATION BUILDING THROUGH IMMIGRATION: WORKFORCE SKILLS COMES OUT ON TOP

Nik Nanos



With the Harper government's immigration reform bill under political scrutiny, we asked Nik Nanos to probe Canadians' attitudes on immigration. A strong majority agreed immigration and immigrants were important to our future prosperity, and that selecting immigrants to meet Canada's work force requirements should be the top priority.

Alors que la réforme de la politique d'immigration était scrutée à la loupe, nous avons demandé à Nik Nanos d'interroger les Canadiens à ce sujet. Une forte majorité d'entre eux jugent que l'immigration et les immigrants eux-mêmes sont nécessaires à notre prospérité future et estiment prioritaire de les sélectionner selon nos besoins en main-d'œuvre.

Canada is recognized as a country of immigrants. With the exception of Aboriginal people, all of us or our ancestors came from somewhere else. The nature of Canadian immigration policy has changed over time from being restrictive and white-centric toward more of an open-door, humanitarian focus. Many of these changes in the priorities have been in response to changing attitudes of Canadians about immigration over the decades and our growing multicultural mosaic.

Indeed, some argue there is a link between prosperity and views toward immigration. In the early 1900s and the post-Second World War booms, Canada needed skilled labour to help support a booming economy, and Canada's doors were wide open.

So what are the current attitudes of Canadians to immigration and immigrants? Nanos Research, in a poll for *Policy Options*, sought to find out. The research found that Canadians consider immigration as a partnership in nation building.

According to the views of Canadians, immigration is expected to serve the needs of Canada. In other words, if you want to immigrate to Canada, you'd better have something to contribute to family or country.

Nearly three Canadians in four in our poll thought that attracting new immigrants was important or somewhat important. But more Canadians, nearly 85 percent, thought it was important to select immigrants whose skills met the needs of Canada's workforce.

Meanwhile, four Canadians in five also thought family reunification was important or somewhat important. Almost seven Canadians in ten thought "being a refugee" was an important reason for admitting someone to Canada.

Nanos Research polled 1,002 Canadians by telephone between May 1 and 6, 2008. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percent, 19 times out of 20.

The two big drivers of Canadians' attitudes on immigration are economic necessity and family compassion. Canadians are looking for a balance in their immigration policies, particularly between those two factors. It's not a question of supporting an open-door policy. It's much more strategic and selective. If immigration is a nation-building exercise, then making our economy stronger and making families stronger are at the centre of that.

On most of the questions, Quebecers, although generally positive, are somewhat less positive about immigration than Canadians in the rest of the country. It's a thread that runs throughout the piece — Quebecers put less importance on immigration than Canadians in other regions of the country though, significantly, not on the most important issue of economic necessity. For Quebecers, if immigration is about nation building from an economic point of view, then they're on board with it.

In our national sample, 84.9 percent of respondents thought improving Canada's workforce skills through immigration was important or somewhat important. Only 12.3 percent thought it was somewhat unimportant or unimportant. And Quebecers are generally aligned with this opinion. In Quebec, 80.5 percent of respondents thought improving our workforce was important, while only 18.1 percent didn't think it was important.

Family reunification was a close second on the scale of importance, with 81.1 percent of Canadians saying it was important or somewhat so, while only 15.6 percent thought it was unimportant or somewhat so. In Quebec, support for family reunification as a criterion stood at three Quebecers out of four — 74.9 percent, while 23.2 percent thought it wasn't important.

QUESTION 1. WOULD YOU SAY THAT ATTRACTING NEW IMMIGRANTS TO CANADA IS IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT UNIMPORTANT OR UNIMPORTANT TO THE FUTURE OF OUR COUNTRY?

		Total N	Important %	Somewhat important %	Somewhat unimportant %	Unimportant %	Unsure %
Region	Canada	1,002	45.5	27.1	9.8	15.6	2.1
	Atlantic	97	38.9	33.5	3.1	21.6	2.8
	Quebec	249	48.1	18.3	20.0	13.0	.7
	Ontario	301	45.6	28.7	6.9	15.9	2.8
	West	355	45.2	30.2	6.9	15.4	2.3
Gender	Male	476	50.0	26.2	8.7	13.4	1.7
	Female	525	41.2	28.0	10.8	17.5	2.5
Age	18 to 29	197	39.6	32.2	11.4	15.4	1.3
	30 to 39	192	49.4	25.6	8.8	14.4	1.9
	40 to 49	215	41.8	26.9	12.9	15.9	2.5
	50 to 59	173	45.1	29.5	9.0	15.2	1.2
	60 plus	225	51.0	22.3	6.9	16.6	3.2

QUESTION 2. THINKING ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT WHICH IMMIGRANTS ARE WELCOMED TO CANADA, PLEASE RATE THE FOLLOWING AS IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT UNIMPORTANT OR UNIMPORTANT: FAMILY REUNIFICATION.

		Total N	Important %	Somewhat important %	Somewhat unimportant %	Unimportant %	Unsure %
Region	Canada	1,002	58.8	22.3	6.5	9.1	3.4
	Atlantic	97	61.0	26.5	3.3	5.0	4.2
	Quebec	249	59.0	15.9	13.1	10.1	1.9
	Ontario	301	58.6	24.8	3.4	9.4	3.8
	West	355	58.3	23.4	5.4	9.1	3.8
Gender	Male	476	56.5	22.8	7.6	10.8	2.3
	Female	525	61.1	21.6	5.5	7.5	4.3
Age	18 to 29	197	55.7	23.5	5.4	9.4	6.0
	30 to 39	192	59.4	24.4	3.8	8.1	4.4
	40 to 49	215	61.2	21.4	9.5	7.5	.5
	50 to 59	173	57.4	23.8	6.1	11.9	.8
	60 plus	225	59.9	19.0	7.3	8.9	4.9

QUESTION 3. THINKING ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT WHICH IMMIGRANTS ARE WELCOMED TO CANADA, PLEASE RATE THE FOLLOWING AS IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT UNIMPORTANT OR UNIMPORTANT: CANADA'S WORKFORCE SKILLS REQUIREMENTS.

		Total N	Important %	Somewhat important %	Somewhat unimportant %	Unimportant %	Unsure %
Region	Canada	1,002	68.2	16.7	3.6	8.7	2.8
	Atlantic	97	60.5	21.6	4.1	10.5	3.2
	Quebec	249	68.1	12.4	9.3	8.8	1.4
	Ontario	301	71.7	15.5	1.2	9.0	2.5
	West	355	67.5	19.4	1.3	7.9	3.9
Gender	Male	476	71.9	14.6	3.6	8.0	2.0
	Female	525	65.1	18.4	3.5	9.3	3.6
Age	18 to 29	197	60.4	23.5	4.7	8.1	3.4
	30 to 39	192	69.4	15.6	1.9	10.0	3.1
	40 to 49	215	70.1	16.4	4.0	9.0	.5
	50 to 59	173	66.4	17.6	4.5	9.8	1.6
	60 plus	225	73.7	11.3	2.8	6.9	5.3

QUESTION 4. THINKING ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT WHICH IMMIGRANTS ARE WELCOMED TO CANADA, PLEASE RATE THE FOLLOWING AS IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT, SOMEWHAT UNIMPORTANT OR UNIMPORTANT: BEING A REFUGEE.

		Total N	Important %	Somewhat important %	Somewhat unimportant %	Unimportant %	Unsure %
Region	Canada	1,002	40.1	28.6	10.8	16.1	4.4
	Atlantic	97	39.3	30.6	7.0	19.0	4.2
	Quebec	249	39.9	15.6	26.6	15.4	2.6
	Ontario	301	40.2	31.7	7.1	17.3	3.7
	West	355	40.3	34.5	4.0	14.8	6.4
Gender	Male	476	37.6	27.4	11.0	20.2	3.8
	Female	525	42.4	29.7	10.5	12.4	5.0
Age	18 to 29	197	42.3	31.5	10.7	9.4	6.0
	30 to 39	192	38.8	30.0	11.3	14.4	5.6
	40 to 49	215	37.3	27.9	11.9	20.4	2.5
	50 to 59	173	41.8	25.8	12.7	18.0	1.6
	60 plus	225	40.5	27.5	8.1	17.8	6.1

QUESTION 5. DO YOU SUPPORT, SOMEWHAT SUPPORT, SOMEWHAT OPPOSE OR OPPOSE THE CONCEPT OF DUAL CITIZENSHIP WHERE A CANADIAN CAN BE A CITIZEN OF CANADA AND ANOTHER COUNTRY?

		Total N	Support %	Somewhat support %	Somewhat oppose %	Oppose %	Unsure %
Region	Canada	1,002	51.3	13.1	6.5	25.4	3.7
	Atlantic	97	49.6	14.6	4.8	24.4	6.6
	Quebec	249	41.9	11.8	12.7	31.4	2.2
	Ontario	301	54.2	14.4	5.0	22.2	4.2
	West	355	55.9	12.6	3.8	24.1	3.5
Gender	Male	476	49.8	11.5	6.4	29.6	2.8
	Female	525	52.8	14.4	6.6	21.6	4.6
Age	18 to 29	197	55.7	16.8	4.0	20.8	2.7
	30 to 39	192	56.9	13.1	5.6	18.8	5.6
	40 to 49	215	56.2	14.9	7.5	18.9	2.5
	50 to 59	173	43.9	12.3	7.0	33.6	3.3
	60 plus	225	43.7	8.9	8.1	34.8	4.5

But on “being a refugee” Canadians are in a comparatively less welcoming state of mind, and decidedly less so in Quebec. Across Canada, 68.7 percent of Canadians thought refugee status was important, while 26.9 percent thought it was unimportant. And in Quebec, only 55.5 percent thought “being a refugee” was an important consideration, while 42.0 percent thought it was unimportant.

The refugee issue is not as strategic or as important as the others. Although still supported by a majority, being a refugee does not make the same compelling case as family reunification or ensuring a good skills fit. It is, in a sense, lower on the immigration food chain.

Overall, 72.6 percent of Canadians thought immigration was important or somewhat important for the future of the country while in Quebec 66.4 percent agreed it was important. Nationally, 25.4 disagreed, while in Quebec the number rose to 33.0 percent, from one in four to one in three.

Finally, we tested the attitudes of Canadians toward dual citizenship — holding Canadian citizenship and that of another country.

Across Canada, 64.4 percent supported dual citizenship, while 31.9 percent were opposed. In Quebec, support fell to 53.7 percent, while 44.1 percent opposed dual citizenship. Quebecers are much more likely than Canadians in the rest of the country to be opposed to dual citizenship.

In sum, Canadians are saying to Ottawa: be strategic, be compassionate, but it’s all about building the nation.

However, as Canadians become more uncertain about the long-term strength of the economy, Canada’s immigration policy could become a key opportunity for our political leaders to share their economic and cultural vision for the future.

In that sense, many Canadians will be closely watching the Harper government’s immigration reform initiative.

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