

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

ENCOURAGING RESULTS

Despite a year marked by pandemic-related upheaval and economic uncertainty, polling shows Canadians came out of 2020 with improved views on the state of the country and the direction it's headed

OPINION

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Grappling with rising COVID-19 case counts, climbing death rates and anxious citizens, the pandemic has tested the resilience of governments around the world.

The responses of countries have been diverse. China, because of strong central powers, has been able to respond swiftly and enforce public-health directives. Sweden's response, which had been more about recommendations for behaviour rather than quarantines and curfews, is largely influenced by its constitution and the fact it has no provision for declaring a state of emergency outside wartime. But the country just passed a new pandemic law giving it the same levers as many other countries.

Then there is Canada. The postholiday period has seen a climb to more than 670,000 coronavirus cases and more than 17,000 deaths, according to the epidemiology update by the Government of Canada. A second wave is in full swing. Provinces are restricting businesses. Vaccines are being procured and the logistics to jab Canadians with doses are in motion.

A look at the arc of public opinion suggests Canadians were generally satisfied with most of their governments in 2020, as federal and provincial leaders stayed focused on the scientific advice of public-health officials. Likewise, the open collaboration among premiers, and between them and the federal government, helped create an environment in which partisanship was seen to take a back seat.

For many Canadians, a key point of comparison is the United States. In contrast to Canada, the messaging from the White House was influenced more by partisanship than by public-health concerns. U.S. President Donald Trump openly criticized Democratic governors and the U.S. political environment was characterized more by bickering than collaboration.

Even with an imperfect pandemic response, things looked much better in Canada than they did south of the border. This fuelled an attitude of relative satisfaction.

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Yet feelings of satisfaction remain high even as COVID-19 cases mount. The top emotions noted by Canadians include "satisfac-

tion" (33 per cent), followed by "optimism" (18 per cent), "pessimism" (18 per cent), "anger" (15 per cent) and "disinterest" (8 per cent).

A newly released 14-year tracking study on the federation by Nanos suggests that even though people may not be outright happy, they are giving increasingly positive assessments of the country.

After four years of declining scores on the relations between the federal and provincial governments, 2020 showed a significant jump. In 2019, a measly 12 per cent of respondents said relations had improved or somewhat improved. Fast forward to the 2020 evaluation and this increased to 40 per cent, the third-highest score in 14 years.

Asked whether Canada is moving in the right or wrong direction, the proportion who said the country was moving in the right direction jumped from 41 per cent to 58 per cent over the past year -

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among the highest scores in more than a decade.

Forty-seven per cent said the Trudeau Liberal government was doing a very good or somewhat good job (up from 27 per cent in 2019), while 31 per cent said the government was doing a very poor or somewhat poor job (down from 44 per cent in 2019). The positive evaluation was the second highest since tracking began in 2007.

Scores on Canada's international reputation remain below average for the tracking study. Thirty-six per cent say our reputation has improved or somewhat improved (up from 22 per cent in 2019), 26 per cent say it has not improved or somewhat not improved (down from 43 per cent in 2019), while more than three in 10 (36 per cent) say the change is neutral.

The twist in the data is that even with the COVID-19 infections and deaths, a second spike and our

economy effectively on ice as many businesses cope with the pandemic, Canadians felt comparatively better in 2020 than 2019.

The federation's pandemic response should be considered imperfect because we can never fight back the virus too quickly, help enough businesses survive or protect our at-risk populations enough. Imperfect is not bad, but it is an acknowledgement that we can do better as a country.

The upshot is even with the imperfections, Canadians felt better about the state of our federation in 2020 than in 2019.

The imperfect response to the pandemic has also put a spotlight on the resilience of the federation - the ability of our politicians to set aside political gain for the public good, spurred by a common sense of purpose.

Last year may be a political walk in the park compared with what lies ahead. The real stress test of the federation will occur over the next 12 months.

First, the cost to fight the pandemic and keep Canadians economically above water will begin to mount.

Although there is federal fiscal capacity, idling swaths of the economy such as the restaurant, hospitality and bricks-and-mortar retail sectors will not bode well for job prospects or the health of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Second, the true unemployment rate and job disruption has been masked by government stimulus. In most recessions, unemployment is a lagging indicator. This means fallout of the labour market disruption that began last year may have a long tail rolling into late 2021 and 2022.

Third, news of virus variants is a curveball for public-health officials and creates uncertainty in the battle against COVID-19.

Finally, the promise and hope of vaccines to help transition to a new normal has buoyed optimism. One possible interpretation of current trends is that we are in a public opinion "vaccine halo." This will be the year of the vaccine and people can put the pandemic behind them.

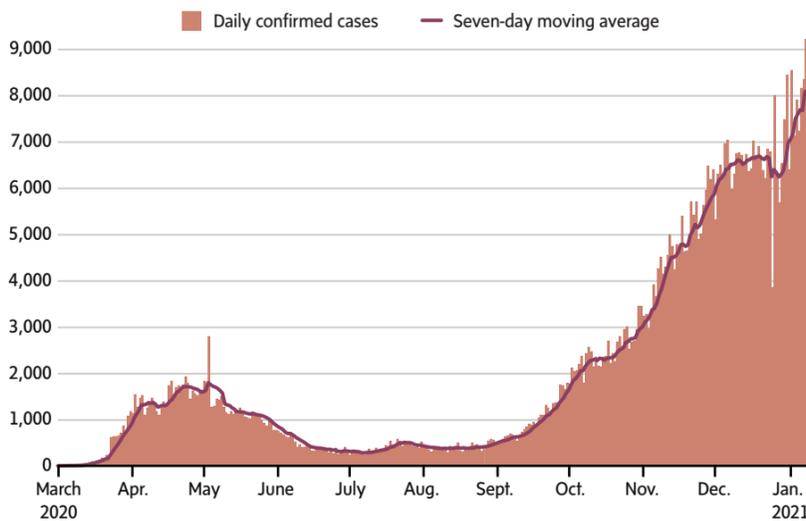
That is an optimistic view of the situation. A more pessimistic view is that the logistics of vaccinating Canadians will be complicated and perhaps it will take longer than anticipated to hit the herd immunity public-health officials are striving to reach.

Last year proved that even in the imperfect world, our federation remained resilient. The real test may be 2021 - whether we fight back the pandemic or become mired in a longer-term economic and public-health war of deadly attrition.

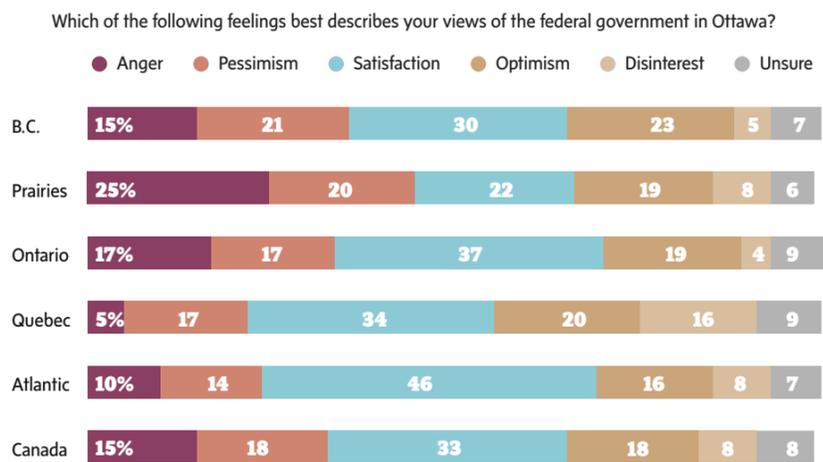
Nanos conducted an RDD dual frame (land- and cell-lines) hybrid telephone and online random survey of 1,048 Canadians, 18 years of age or older, between Dec. 27 and Dec. 30, 2020, as part of an omnibus survey.

COVID-19 and feelings toward the federal government

THE SECOND WAVE



SENTIMENTS ACROSS CANADA



Note: Survey results are from Dec. 27 to 30. Numbers may not add up owing to rounding.

MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH; GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

Will Ottawa seize the chance to improve work-life balance?

LORI TURNBULL

OPINION

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Earlier this week, there was a small but significant cabinet shuffle, triggered by Navdeep Bains's decision to leave politics. His departure comes at a pivotal moment for the government and the country. As Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, he was poised to make an impact on Canada's economic growth strategy in the months and years to come. Why leave now?

In a videotaped statement, Mr. Bains speaks of his desire to focus more of his energy on being a dad. He said: "Family is the most important thing in my life. They have sacrificed so much over the last 17 years. It's time for me to put my family first." Two years ago, almost to the exact day, Scott Brison did the same thing, announcing an immediate departure from the Liberal cabinet and a decision to end a long and successful political career to spend more time with his family, including his two

young daughters.

Mr. Bains's announcement seems to have been prompted by the prospect of a writ drop. Although no election is scheduled until October of 2023, there is much speculation that a federal vote will happen some time this year and perhaps as early as the spring. The Liberal government is, after all, a minority government. There was a spirit of co-operation in Parliament in the early days of the pandemic, but that collegiality deteriorated over the course of the summer and into the fall as the WE Charity controversy dominated headlines and committee investigations. Although the Liberals have survived all tests of confidence that have occurred up to this point, this could certainly change.

Politics has a way of being all-encompassing, so perhaps we should never be surprised when an elected official, especially a cabinet minister, decides that they've fought their last campaign. It is worth noting, however, that this government promised to do things differently when it comes to the work-life balance - both for politicians and for Canadians. Back in 2015, the Liberals' election promises included commitments

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for flexible work hours and increased options for parental leave. In 2019, the government announced changes to the Canada Labour Code that are meant to improve the balance for federally regulated workers; measures included new personal leave, expanded bereavement access and improved access to existing leaves.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made it clear early in his tenure that he planned to manage his own commitments to work and family in a healthy way as best he could. He encouraged his ministers and all parliamentarians to do the same. The government considered ideas such as holding re-

mote sittings and ending Friday sessions as ways to help Parliament Hill become friendlier to family life. (Neither option was enacted until the pandemic moved some proceedings online.) In 2016, when the Prime Minister was criticized for taking a day off during an official trip to Japan to celebrate his wedding anniversary, he explained that the right mix of work and life is "essential" to one's ability to serve the country "with all one's very best."

For many ministers, as well as many Canadians, the goal of a healthy balance between home and office, and the peace of mind that would come with it, has proved elusive. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, for example, has spoken of the pressures of being both a parent and a minister. At a panel discussion in Winnipeg in 2016, Ms. Freeland admitted: "I worry about my kids and also my husband. And I worry at work - I worry about my officials will think, 'Oh God, we're the department that has the mom as a minister.'"

The struggle to calibrate a healthy work-life balance is a common one and is no way confined to the political class. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has both com-

pounded pre-existing challenges and created new ones. For front-line health care workers and others in essential services, any such balance is out the window. Parents working from home in jurisdictions with school closings are doing double-duty all day long. On the flip side, the economic crisis has meant drastic declines in both rates of employment and hours worked. Some Canadians are more slammed than ever while others desperately need work.

Cabinet ministers are holding a retreat before the return of Parliament on Jan. 25. In some ways, knowing that they struggle like the rest of us is a comfort, as they are able to bring that perspective to policy discussions. While the first order of business is facilitating the rollout of the vaccine, they will also talk about the economic recovery plan. Job-creation strategies are a key part of this. These conversations need to consider the realities of work-life pressures and develop strategies for getting this right for Canadians of all incomes. A Canada-wide child-care program, for example, would be an essential step forward. Otherwise, we will miss an important opportunity for meaningful and inclusive economic reform.