

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

CHANGE OF HEART

Despite Ottawa's fairly strong response to the pandemic, research shows the positive feelings expressed by Canadians early on did not last – and we could be entering a winter of political discontent

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

Coming out of a pandemic, you would think that Canadians might have a more positive view of the role of government as a force for good.

Massive stimulus was pumped into the economy. Cheques were put in the hands of citizens. Businesses were supported to weather the storm. Vaccinations were procured and distributed quickly and as a country Canada has among the highest job rates in the world. Economic risk was managed, and our health care system was resilient.

One would think that a minority federal Liberal government that oversaw such a pandemic response would be rewarded with a majority mandate. Instead: No majority government, no political honeymoon. Canadians sent the Liberals back to the political drawing board.

Research completed right after the federal election suggests that if the pandemic was an opportunity to showcase the role of government as a force for good, the positive feelings expressed by Canadians regarding the early response did not last. We are now entering a “winter of political discontent.”

Since 2012, Nanos has been tracking a series of policy issues and asking Canadians both what they think is important, and about their confidence in our ability as a country to find solutions. On a number of particularly important issues, Canadians are less confident in Ottawa than in previous years.

The Liberal government has bolstered the health care system and made the environment a priority, yet the numbers have declined on both fronts. At the height of the pandemic, about six in 10 Canadians were confident (15 per cent) or somewhat confident (45 per cent) in keeping the health care system strong. Fast forward to the period right after the election and the overall confidence has declined a full 10 percentage points.

When it comes to protecting our environment, confidence levels are at their lowest since Stephen Harper was prime minister. The key takeaway is that Liberal ambitions on climate change

have not buoyed the hopes of Canadians. Or rather, that they do not believe that the government can move the dial.

When asked about being energy self-sufficient, back in 2013 three of four Canadians had confidence in Canada being self-sufficient (74 per cent). Today, only 47 per cent of Canadian have confidence, a drop of more than 27 points.

How do we feel about being able to balance government budgets? Back in 2015, a majority of Canadians (54 per cent) were confident about balancing the books. Today, that number is only 21 per cent. Of course, the scope of the

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pandemic required a level of stimulus not seen since the Second World War. However, Canadians currently think that we are likely on a deficit and debt path that will be more of a hallmark than an exception for future governments.

Views on foreign affairs today are not much better than those on other policy issues. Regardless of the efforts of the Liberals, confidence in Canada's role in international affairs has hit a low never seen since the tracking started in 2012. Currently, more than four in 10 Canadians (43 per cent) have some sort of confidence in our role internationally – down

from a high of 61 per cent in the first year of Mr. Trudeau's Liberal government. There was hope that the election of Mr. Trudeau would be a renewal of Canada's reputation around the world but, six years later, this number is even lower than for his predecessor Mr. Harper.

Confidence in protecting our borders and fighting terrorism has also hit record lows.

Are there any bright spots in the numbers for the Liberals?

Out of a total of 16 public-policy areas, confidence only materially improved in one area: improving the quality of life on reserves. This historically is one measure that Canadians have very low confidence in but there was an improvement from 35 per cent having confidence in finding solutions to 41 per cent, a six-point increase between 2020 and 2021. An important improvement, yes, but that is in terms of positive news for the Liberals.

The confidence Canadians had in the rest of the policy portfolio such as preserving social programs, encouraging Canadian culture, managing the pressures of an aging population was generally flat.

Albert Einstein is said to have once quipped, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.”

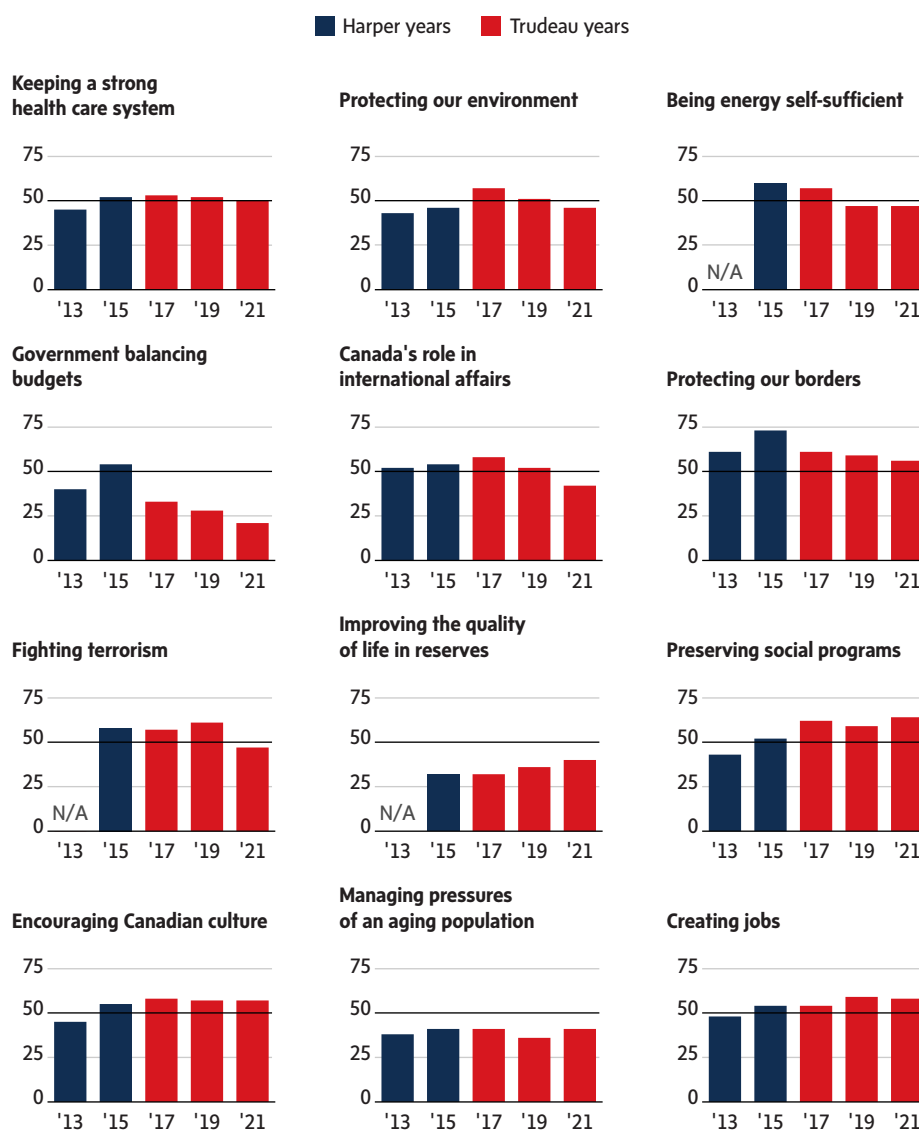
On election night Canadians heard from Justin Trudeau that in his view the election outcome was “a clear mandate.” Is this a mandate to continue the same Liberal course unchanged since 2015 or is it a mandate to adjust and adapt? The numbers suggest that if average voters were asked, it was a mandate for the Liberals to recalibrate.

If the Einstein axiom is to be believed, one can assume that if the Liberals continue the same course there is no reason to believe that they could win a majority without the willful negligence of their opponents. One should never underestimate the ability of politicians to make mistakes and defeat themselves, but a sitting government does have one advantage: It can set the public agenda and give hope to Canadians for a brighter future.

Right now, even with the pandemic under relative control and the economy stable yet not strong, there is more discontent than at any other time under this government. If the past five years put the Liberals here, doing the same thing is unlikely to change anything.

Confidence in government

Per cent of respondents who answered 'confident' or 'somewhat confident'



MURAT YÜKSELIR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

When it comes to alcohol, why can't we face the facts?

ALEC BRUCE

OPINION

Journalist and author based in Halifax. His forthcoming memoir, *The Last Car Game*, uncovers the facts and fictions about booze in history, society and his own life.

When the World Health Organization issued a warning in April, 2020, telling a small but stubborn segment of the global public that drinking alcohol does not, in fact, cure COVID-19, I had to raise my glass. Good luck with that, I toasted, before downing the last of my Earl Grey special blend.

I'd given up the “good stuff” two years earlier. But even when my liquid diet consisted primarily of gin, not Darjeeling, I noticed how even some teetotalers believed everything they'd heard about the putative health benefits of boozing, oblivious to its risks. Now, here we were debating the therapeutic properties of a substance the abuse of which would, over the next 19 months, kill as many around the world as the pandemic itself (about five million, according to recent United Nations assessments).

The WHO's official statement was cluttered and jargon, but the bottom line was clear as a bell: Learn the facts. Put on your mask. Keep your distance. And, while you're at it, you might want to cut back, not ramp up, the

drinking.

Good luck, indeed. Since the first bars, pubs and airport lounges shut down in March, 2020, alcohol consumption across North America has not declined, but skyrocketed.

Between April and June of that year, store sales of booze in the U.S. bounced up by 34 per cent, compared with the same period in 2019, reports the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. The journal *Alcohol* reports the long, hot American summer that followed was also intoxicating, as sales of beer, wine and spirits soared to US\$42-billion between March and September – 20 per cent more than in the year-earlier period.

In Canada, the story was much the same: A federal government survey last May said 24 per cent of alcohol users in this country were drinking more and had no plans to slow down. (To be fair, Statistics Canada also reported that almost as many Canadians were drinking less since COVID-19, but the overall trend was up).

In my home province of Nova Scotia, liquor Corporation president and CEO Greg Hughes was positively glowing about the 23.1-per-cent increase in the average value of his Crown enterprise's transactions since the beginning of the emergency.

“A full year in pandemic mode certainly impacted our financial performance,” he crowed to the press in June. “We were pleased to see our customers continue to

That humans have enjoyed a long and often mystical love affair with alcohol is a matter of record. Ever since we started fermenting fruit some 9,000 years ago, we've expected unrealistic boons from consuming it.

be passionate about supporting our local industry partners.”

The notion that consistent imbibing kills the virus that causes COVID-19 hasn't abated in the darker corners of the internet.

Meanwhile, nearly two years of barely bridled boozing has shown that many otherwise rational folks appear to believe that while alcohol may not be a silver bullet, it's a helpful sedative with no nasty side effects should one, heaven forbid, ever contract the germ.

Wrong again. According to the WHO and several other health organizations, drinking automatically puts you at risk. COVID-19 compromises your immune system. So does booze. Together, they're a match made in epidemiological hell. If nothing else, they have that in common.

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fair with alcohol is a matter of record. Ever since we started fermenting fruit some 9,000 years ago, we've expected unrealistic boons from consuming it.

Ancient Thracian physicians dispensed wine to treat cancer; medieval European monks believed it cured the Black Plague. Hospitals in Edwardian London apportioned gin to patients with gout, gallstones and liver disease. Sufferers of Spanish Flu received rum for their secondary infections of pneumonia.

Even now, with the benefit of 21st-century medicine, we assume facts about alcohol that are not evident, and we happily ignore those that are.

I certainly did. I spent most of my adult life drinking prodigiously, thinking that alcohol somehow fortified my character and gave me the courage to tackle projects I couldn't imagine doing otherwise. I also decided that I'd developed, over the years, a physical tolerance to it – the way some snake handlers build their immunity to venom by allowing themselves to be bitten over and over again.

“Yeah, it doesn't actually work that way,” said the doctor, who told me I had an existential choice to make, given the condition of my liver.

“You're a journalist. I thought you were supposed to know stuff.”

So did I. Still, it's not necessary to be addicted to alcohol to think magically about the stuff. The

most sober-minded among us do it all the time.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Ontario government declared liquor stores an essential service. Some public-health experts at the time approved of the move because they feared cutting people off from their hooch would propel at least some, suffering from withdrawal, to emergency rooms already jammed with COVID-19 patients.

Absent any real evidence, it's not hard to go from there to: “Throw me the hooch. I've been feeling a little COVID-ed lately. Gout's been acting up, too.”

It may be that alcohol, being one of humanity's first drugs, will always exert a particularly infrangible influence on us, occasionally undermining our mental faculties even when we're stone-cold sober. We're besotted more by our collective memory of its legendary wiles than by its actual charms. Or, maybe, we just like to drink.

In either case, the solution to our shared alcohol problem – to all of our social problems, from climate change to pervasive poverty – is self awareness.

Learn the facts. Parse the fictions. Act accordingly, in your own best interest and that of everyone around you.

It should be simple. But to anyone who manages the feat in a roomful of braying, nonsensical boozers, I will raise my glass.

Earl Grey, of course.