

Politics, Immigration and Diversity in Canada: An Address to the Japanese Association for Canadian Studies

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Canada is often seen as an exceptional country, with robust immigration and multicultural programs. In an era in which many countries have been closing their borders, Canada is increasing its annual immigration targets. While other countries cope with populist movements that mobilize fears that immigration erodes historic cultures, Canada still embraces a national identity that celebrates diversity. How can we explain Canadian support for immigration?

A traditional approach to explaining Canadian support for immigration combines geography, culture and policy. First, Canada has fortunate geography, with oceans on three borders and a country of immigration to the south, which absorbs population movements from the southern hemisphere. As a result, unlike the United States and Europe, Canada has not had to cope with heavy flows of undocumented immigrants crossing its borders. The public has the sense that immigration is a managed process under firm government control. The second part of the traditional story focuses on Canadian culture and identity, which have long celebrated ethnic pluralism as a defining feature of the country. This cultural inheritance, the traditional argument insists, contributes to greater acceptance of the ethnic diversity that immigration brings. The final part of the story highlights two key government policies adopted early in the modern era of immigration. The implementation of the points-system in 1967 has encouraged Canadians to believe that immigrants contribute to the strength of the economy. Then the policy of multiculturalism, first articulated first in 1971, has reinforced diversity as a key feature of Canadian life. Fortunate geography, a diverse culture, and strategic policies: these are the factors normally considered central to Canadian attitudes to

immigration.

This standard story is undoubtedly important. However, it does not fully explain changes in attitudes towards immigration in recent decades. As we shall see, attitudes towards immigration changed dramatically in the 1990s and the 2000s in two ways: the first was a dramatic transformation in the level of overall support for immigration in the 1990s and early 2000s; and the second was a polarization of attitudes towards immigration among political parties in the years since 2006. To understand these developments, we need to dig deeper.

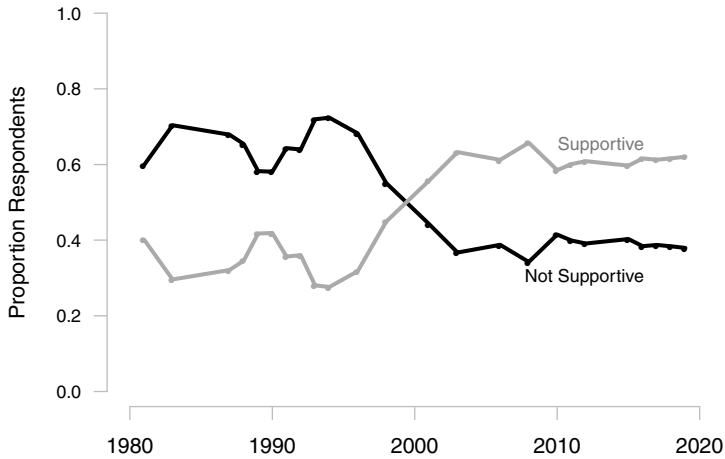
In this talk, I try to throw light on these two changes. In Section I, I look at the big shift in public support for immigration in the 1990s and early 2000s, and examine the factors driving change. In Section 2, I track the growing political polarization in support for immigration, and examine its impact of government policies. In both sections, I draw on recent work with my co-author, Stuart Soroka, who is equally responsible for the findings and messages that I present.⁽¹⁾

Section 1: The Transformation of Support for Immigration

Canadians have not always been highly supportive of immigration. Historians have demonstrated dark episodes in the first half of the twentieth century, when racism and intolerance marked too many immigration policies. However, less attention has focused on recent changes in our more recent history. To track changes in public attitudes towards immigration between the early 1980s and 2019, we draw on data from a series of surveys conducted by the Environics Institute, which contains a wealth of data on Canadian attitudes towards immigration.

I start with Figure 1, which tracks whether respondents agreed that “Overall, there is too much immigration to Canada.” As the figure makes clear, the overwhelming bulk of Canadians agreed with this proposition in the 1980s and early 1990s. This was hardly a welcoming environment. However, public attitudes then shifted abruptly. Beginning in the mid-1990s, support for immigration rose dramatically, and by the early 2000s, public opinion had completely flipped. By then, two-thirds of Canadians disagreed that immigration levels were too high. This was a remarkable change in a short period.

Figure 1 Support for immigration levels, 1981-2019

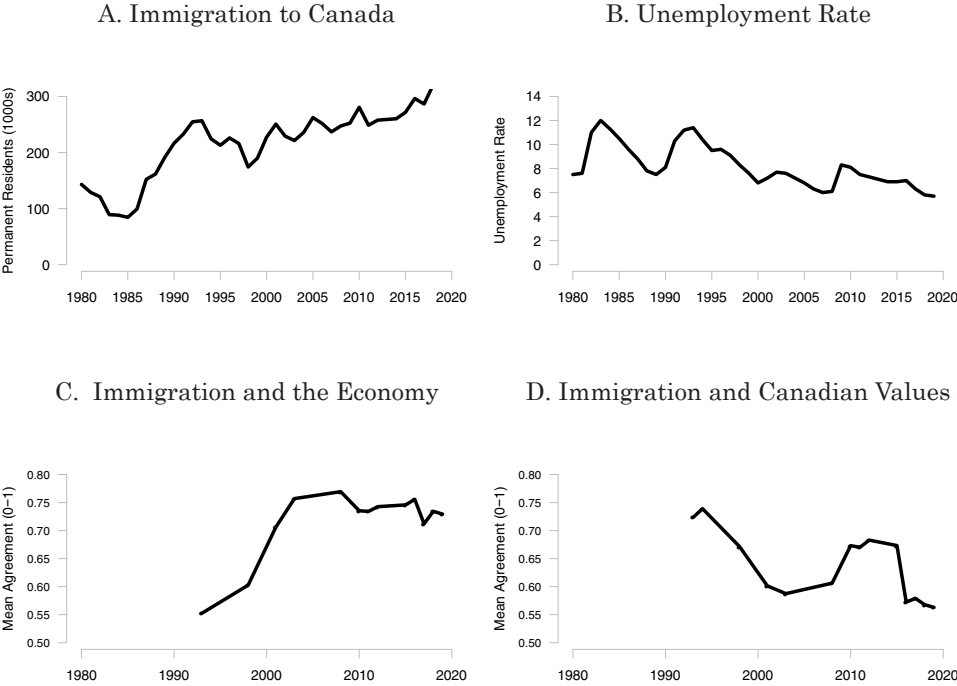


The traditional story about Canada and immigration cannot explain this dramatic change. After all, secure borders, the points system and the multiculturalism policy were all in place during the years when most Canadians rejected existing levels of immigration, and they remained in place through the period of change. It is possible, of course, that Canadian culture was changing in the 1990s, but cultures tend to change slowly and it seems difficult to explain such a rapid attitudinal shift by reference to culture alone. Other factors must have also been at work.

To search for other possible factors, we turned to the comparative literature on immigration, on the intuition that Canadian attitudes may be influenced by factors also at work in other countries. The first factor that emerges from this search is the speed of change in the level of immigration. There appears to be no specific level of immigration that triggers public backlash. Countries with long histories of immigration, including Canada, seem to be able to sustain quite high levels of immigration without political difficulty. However, rapid *increases* in immigration can be politically sensitive, as we saw in Europe after the 2015 surge in refugees displaced by the war in Syria. Perhaps this is the case in Canada as well. Table 2A, which tracks the annual intake of permanent residents between 1980 and 2019, provides some initial evidence. The immigration program expanded rapidly in the

1980s and early 1990s, rising from an annual intake of 100,000 in the early 1980s to more than 250,000 a decade later. Throughout this period, Canadians thought immigration levels were too high, as we saw in Figure 1. In the mid-1990s, however, the government slammed the brakes on growth, and the immigration program stabilized at about 250,000, remaining close to that level for over two decades. In this period of stability, support for immigration grew strongly. The speed of change seems to matter.

Figure 2. Potential Drivers of Immigration Support, 1985-2019



The comparative literature also spotlights the strength of the economy. Popular views of the state of the economy condition attitudes toward immigration, with support for immigration rising and falling with the business cycle and falling particularly sharply during economic crises. Figure 2B hints at the relevance of this factor in Canada. The unemployment rate was higher and more volatile in the

1980s and early 1990s, but declined steadily during the mid-to-late 1990s, reaching a much lower and more stable level after 2000. Canadians' support for immigration seems to have tracked the business cycle quite closely during the 1980s and 1990s, and then rose steadily as unemployment fell and stabilized in the new century. The economy seems to matter.

The impact of the economy is magnified in Canada by a distinct twist. Although the points system dates from 1967, it did not matter much because the stream of economic immigrants admitted under its terms remained small, with the family reunification stream being by far the largest category until the 1990s. At that critical juncture, the government changed track, squeezing the family reunification stream hard and expanding the economic class dramatically. In effect, Canada turned immigration into a truly economic program for the first time and, as Figure 2C indicates, Canadians' belief that immigration is good for the economy rose sharply in the years that followed.

Cultural factors also feature prominently in the comparative literature. Multiple studies demonstrate that the populist backlash, which has transformed democratic politics in many countries, has been fueled by a fear that immigration is undermining the culture and identity of the receiving country. Despite our celebration of multiculturalism, cultural anxiety matter in Canada as well. Figure 2D tracks responses to the statement “Too many immigrations are not adopting Canadian values.” (Note that to ensure consistency with the other measures in this talk, we measure disagreement with the statement, so that a high score is the pro-immigration position, that is, low anxiety about cultural effects). The figure shows a slow decline in the level of cultural anxiety during the 2000s, during the years when support for overall immigration was rising. However, this did not represent a permanent shift in Canadian culture, as the anxiety rises again between 2007 and 2015 and then decreases again thereafter. The level of cultural anxiety seems to track shifts in the politics of the country.

Finally, the comparative literature on immigration points to the importance of political partisanship in shaping the attitudes of voters, with supporters of left and centrist parties more supportive of immigration and supporters of conservative parties and especially far-right parties more opposed. I return to the role of politics in more depth in Section 2.

In summary, we have a host of possible factors that may explain shifts in public

attitudes towards immigration in Canada: change in the level of immigration, the strength of the economy, faith in the economic benefits of immigration, fears that immigrants undermine Canadian values, and the political partisanship of voters. Elsewhere, Stuart Soroka and I conduct a multiple regression analysis to estimate the relative importance of these factors in shaping the views of Canadians. I provide a succinct summary our findings here, and refer those interested in the full analysis to Banting and Soroka (2020).

First, our findings give greater weight to change in the level of immigration and economic factors than does most commentary. Indeed, we can account for a good portion of over-time change in support for immigration with a combination of change in immigration and unemployment. The surge in support for immigration in the 1990s and early 2000s in part reflected a new stability in the level of immigration after a period of rapid increases, coupled with a lower and more stable level of unemployment, after years alternating recessions and growth. Stability in both mattered.

Second, we found that culture anxiety matters in Canada as it does in other countries. A worry that immigrants do not adopt Canadian values is negatively associated with respondents' support for immigration in the Environics surveys. Critically, however, we find that the effects of cultural anxiety appear to be counterbalanced almost exactly by belief that immigration is good for the economy. This is critical in the analysis. Indeed, the way in which faith in the economic benefits of immigration offsets the effects of cultural anxiety may well be one of the truly distinctive features of the Canadian story of immigration.

Finally, political partisanship plays an intriguing role. The partisan preferences of Canadians had little effect in the explaining the large shift in attitudes during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, partisanship became more important in the years after 2004, with partisans of the Liberal Party and New Democratic Party (NDP) becoming more supportive of immigration and Conservative voters becoming less so. Indeed, in statistical terms, the impact of supporting the Conservative party more than triples from the pre- to post-2004 periods. I turn to this tantalizing finding about political partisanship and polarization in the next section.

To summarize our progress so far, the traditional story about Canadians and immigration needs to be adapted in several ways. First, high levels of support are actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the early 1990s, the great mass of

Canadians thought immigration levels were too high, and understanding the great shift in opinion in the 1990s and early 2000s is critical. Second, the explanation of the factors shaping Canadian attitudes needs to include a wider range of factors than have traditionally featured in commentary. Finally, if one is searching for a particularly distinctive feature of the Canadian case, one obvious candidate is the way in which faith in the economic benefits of immigration counterbalances the cultural anxieties it brings in its wake.

Section II. Political parties and immigration

The image of strong support for immigration tends to obscure a growing polarization in our politics over the issue. This polarization is evident at two levels: a fraying of the historic consensus among political parties on the fundamentals of immigration and diversity policy; and a striking polarization in the attitudes of the voters who support each of the major political parties in the country.

This polarization represented a departure from the past. Throughout much of the postwar period, there was a multiparty consensus on the basic lines of a liberal immigration policy. This multiparty consensus underpinned the passage of the 1976 Immigration Act, which codified the basic elements of the country's immigration system. Consensus persisted through the Progressive Conservative government led by Brian Mulroney, which embedded the multiculturalism policy in legislation in 1988 and steadily increased immigration levels during the economic turbulence of the early 1990s, breaking with the traditional reflex of cutting admissions during recessions.

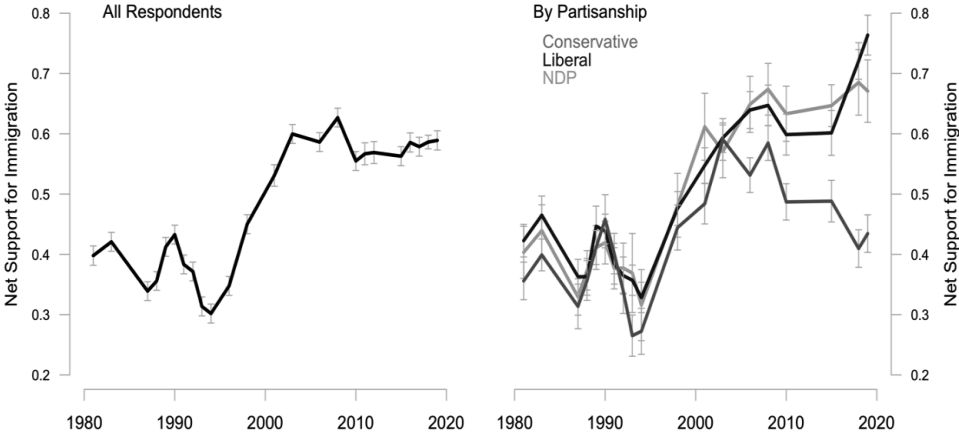
The fraying of this all-party consensus began with the breakthrough of the populist Reform Party in the 1993 election. Reform was a right-wing populist party, which injected a potent strain of social conservatism into Canadian politics. The new party was critical of the size and racial composition of the immigration flow, criticizing immigration policy for changing the ethnic makeup of Canada (Laycock 2012). To block this trend, the party promised to lower the level of immigration and deny health and social benefits to all immigrants before they became citizens (Flanagan 1995: 197-198). The Reform party did not last long as a separate entity, as it was absorbed in a restructured Conservative Party in the early 2000s.

However, its attitudes to immigration and diversity did not disappear. Rather, Reform's social conservatism flowed into the new Conservative Party, mixing with the more traditional neoliberalism in the ideological complexion of the party. Although social conservatism has never fully dominated the party, the legacy of Reform is present at all levels of the organization. At the grass-roots level, former Reform supporters became part of the Conservative base. At the level of party elites, social conservatives have been represented among the party's elected MPs, and have been an important block of votes in successive party leadership contests.

This restructuring on the right precipitated a period of greater polarization in approaches to immigration and diversity at both the level of voters and the level of successive governments. I start with the polarization among voters and then move to polarization between parties in governments.

Party supporters: Polarization among voters is captured in Figures 3. The right panel of Figure 3 tracks a growing partisan gap in support for immigration levels in Canada. There were few real differences among voters for the major parties until the mid-2000s. At point, support among Liberal and NDP partisans continued to grow, while support among Conservative partisans began to decline. By 2019, Liberals' support for immigration is almost twice as high as it was in the early 1980s; Conservative support, in contrast, has returned closer to its level at that time. The gap between Liberals and Conservatives in 2019 is striking.

Figure 3. Support for Immigration



This polarization in support for overall levels of immigration is paralleled by changes in the attitudes I emphasized earlier: belief that immigration helps the economy, and anxiety about whether immigrants adopt Canadian values. Beginning in the mid-2000s, faith in the economic benefits of immigration became stronger among Liberal and NDP voters and weaker among Conservative voters. Polarization was even more dramatic in the case of cultural anxiety. Beginning around 2005, fears that immigrants do not adopt Canadian values increases sharply among Conservative voters, but declines among Liberal and NDP voters, with a particularly sharp decline after 2015. The polarization between the two largest political parties was greatest on this measure. (See Banting and Soroka forthcoming for details).

The cumulative pattern is clear. From 2005 onwards, Conservative party voters become less supportive of immigration levels, less inclined to see economic benefits to immigration, and more inclined to express concerns about the impact that immigrants may have on Canadian culture. Liberal and NDP electorates have become markedly more supportive of immigration on all three measures. The electoral bases of the major parties have moved apart.

Political parties and government: The weakening of consensus over immigration is also apparent between political parties, as demonstrated by the orientation of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, which governed from 2006 to 2015 and the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau, which came to power in 2015.

When the Conservatives came to power, the government faced a complex set of political imperatives on the immigration file. On one side, they needed to expand their political base. The entire rationale for the new Conservative Party was to become the dominant governing party, and the party therefore needed to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters across the country. Given the size of immigrant communities in Canada, especially in major urban conurbations such as Vancouver and Toronto, the drive to expand the party's electoral base required appealing to immigrant voters. Yet, the party also needed to retain the commitment and enthusiasm of the social conservatives in their electoral base, which was becoming more critical of immigration, as we have just seen. This strategic necessity to appeal simultaneously to immigrants and social conservatives has been called the “populist's paradox” in Canada (Marwash et al. 2013; also Triadafilopoulos and Taylor 2020).

Constructing a response to these conflicting imperatives required a tricky balancing act. The government's strategy emerged along three tracks, which were inevitably in tension with each other. On the first track, reflecting the neoliberal strain in the party's ideology, the Harper government sought to define immigration generally in economic terms. They maintained the existing immigration levels, and retained the high priority awarded to education and skills in admission decisions. Over time, this economic approach increasingly took on a pro-business form. Beginning in 2010, the government made an existing offer of employment an important consideration in admission decisions (Alboim and Cohl 2012).

On the second track, the Conservatives worked hard to attract the votes of immigrants. The party assumed they could appeal to socially and fiscally conservative members of minority communities by emphasizing neoliberal themes and their resistance to social issues such as same-sex marriage. This strategy gained momentum with the appointment of Jason Kenney as Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multiculturalism. Kenney's outreach campaign included ministerial participation in countless community events, strategic mailings, and the creation of large databases of minority voters. In addition, the Conservatives significantly increased funding for integration programming, especially language training, which had the coincidental political benefit of generating more ministerial announcements of financial support at community events (Griffith 2013).

On the third track, however, the Harper government used cultural policies to provide reassurance to social conservatives. Refugees were a favourite target. Conservative speeches repeatedly emphasized security, control and fraud, promising to root out “cheaters”, “queue-jumpers” and “terrorists”, and in 2012, the government passed the *Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act*. Conservatives also reduced federal health benefits provided to refugees in their first year. The strategy spread to the fields of diversity and citizenship, as the government sought to redefine Canadian identity around conservative themes. Their 2009 revisions to the citizenship guide, which is used by immigrants preparing for the citizenship test, downplayed multiculturalism in favour of the history of Canada's military triumphs and its legacy of British institutions and traditions (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2009). Further, the Conservatives questioned the loyalty of dual citizens, and toughened standards in the citizenship test, driving down the success rate, especially among immigrants with low family income, low proficiency in official

languages, and low educational levels (Feng and Picot 2020). The government also repeatedly criticized Muslims, the least popular minority in the country. They symbolically denounced “barbaric cultural practices” in the revised citizenship guide and countless ministerial speeches, and in 2011, they announced that those wishing to become Canadian citizens would have to uncover their face during the citizenship oath. In 2015, the government legislated on a range of its complaints in the *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act*.

This complicated juggling act of appealing simultaneously to the mainstream, to immigrant voters and to social conservatives fell apart during the election campaign of 2015. The pre-campaign period was marked by the Syrian refugee crisis, with the Conservative government adopting a historically cautious policy of admitting only 10,000 refugees. During the election campaign itself, the Conservatives turned to their anti-Muslim position, campaigning hard against the niqab. They promised a “barbaric cultural practices” tip line on which Canadians would be encouraged to inform on their neighbors, and proposed to ban the niqab not only during the oath of citizenship but also for employees in the civil service (Kymlicka forthcoming). These measures proved a step too far, and generated a backlash. Support for the Conservatives dropped in the last weeks of the campaign, and the Liberals won the election. Later, the former Conservative immigration minister admitted that their emphasis on “barbaric cultural practices” made many immigrants, including non-Muslims, nervous. “It’s why we lost—we allowed ourselves to be portrayed in the last election as unwelcoming. That was a huge mistake.” (CTV News 2016).

The Liberal party that took power in 2015 faced less contradictory pressures on the immigration file. As the party that introduced the points system in 1967 and the multiculturalism program in 1971, Liberals have a history of support for immigration and diversity. Moreover, for decades, immigrant voters had identified strongly with the Liberal party, contributing to the political dominance of the party during the 20th century. Given the Harper government’s efforts to eat into that base, the Liberals had every incentive to remain attentive to immigrant communities. Finally, this long-standing tradition was aligned with the party’s electoral base. As we have seen, Liberal voters were becoming even more strongly committed to immigration and less worried about cultural diversity. As a result, the Liberal government did not have to cope with internal contradictions. Indeed, given the problems the Conservatives had with the issue in the 2015 election, the new

government had an electoral incentive to expand the immigration envelope.

This expansion emerged quickly. The new government immediately raised the target intake of Syrian refugees from 10,000 to 25,000, with the Prime Minister meeting the first arrivals at the airport. The government also reversed a number of the most symbolic parts of the Conservatives' cultural policies. However, the nature and limits of the government's openness became clear in its approach to immigration levels on one hand and asylum seekers on the other.

The Liberals adopted an ambitious policy on immigration levels. A number of advocacy and business groups urged the federal government to increase immigration levels dramatically, including the government's own Advisory Council on Economic Growth, which recommended an increase of the annual intake from the long-standing level of about 270,000 to 450,000 admissions by 2021, an increase of approximately 65 per cent (Advisory Council 2016). The Liberals did not go that far, but they did embark on a steady expansionist path, with a multi-year plan to increase admission targets to 350,000 by 2021, a 30 per cent increase over the actual intake in 2015.⁽²⁾

The limits of the Liberal government's openness became clear when one pillar of the traditional foundation of immigration policy – secure borders – seemed challenged. Canadian governments have always responded to apparent breeches in the borders, and the Liberal government remained faithful to this tradition. Beginning in 2017, a growing number of asylum-seekers, who feared the direction of US policies under the Trump administration, began to walk across the border in open fields, immediately requesting asylum when taken into custody. The numbers were not large, but they triggered an intense political debate. Once again, supporters of the Liberal government and the Conservative opposition reacted very differently, and in Parliament, the Conservative opposition hammered the government over what they described as a ‘crisis’ at the border. The Liberal government responded. They provided increased funding to the provinces having to cope with the costs of settling the asylum-seekers, but also introduced legislative amendments that further restricted access for asylum seekers. It was a reminder that even with a sympathetic government, public support for immigration depends on a sense of secure borders. Clearly, the standard story remain important, even if it does not tell the entire story of Canadian immigration.

Conclusions

Clearly, the image of Canada as a long-standing bastion of support for immigration needs to be refined. Strong public support for immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, the product of a major shift in public attitudes that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Moreover, the image of a steadfast Canada obscures a polarization of opinion along partisan lines among voters and political parties. Canada is a more complex place than it sometimes appears from afar.

On its own, the standard story about Canadian support for immigration cannot explain these patterns. The key elements of the story – secure borders, a diverse culture, and strategic policy choices in the postwar era – remain relevant, as we saw in the response to irregular asylum seekers. Nevertheless, the standard story needs to be expanded to include other factors: surges in immigration numbers, the strength of the economy, public faith that immigration benefits the economy, cultural anxiety among the majority population, and political polarization. When this wider set of factors comes into view, perhaps the most distinctive feature of Canada is the way in which public faith in the economic benefits of immigration offsets the cultural anxiety that is so toxic in many other countries.

It is fair to ask how our interpretation squares with recent increase in the level of immigration under the Liberal government. Assuming Canadians reacted in the same way they did in the past, our analysis would suggest that a significant increase in immigration levels would lead to a softening of public support for immigration. This did not happen. The Liberals' increase in the intake did trigger pushback at the level of elite politics. In 2018, the newly elected Quebec government chose to reduce total immigration into that province, moving back to pre-2015 levels. Anxiety about whether immigrants adopt Canadian values was an issue in the Conservative leadership contest to choose Mr. Harper's successor. In addition, the 2019 federal election featured the arrival of a new political party, the People's Party of Canada, which also advocated a sharp reduction in immigration levels. Nevertheless, the federal government's increase in immigration levels did not lead to a major softening of *public* support for immigration. How can we explain this? Given the importance of the unemployment rate in our analysis, it appears that the continued decline in the rate of unemployment to near historic lows between 2015

and 2019 mitigated the effects of the increase in admission numbers. In effect, the strength of the economy provided the government with greater political room for manoeuvre when dealing with the immigration file. In this context, it was perhaps not surprising that the new People's Party of Canada received only 1.6 per cent of the popular vote nationwide.

More research is required to explain the polarization among voters and political parties since 2006. Elsewhere, political backlash has been rooted in a lethal combination of economic and cultural insecurity. Globalization, technological change, the spread of precarious work and growing inequality have generated considerable economic anxiety, especially among those on the margins of the labour force, and have led to widespread scapegoating of immigrants. Such economic insecurity has combined with cultural insecurity driven by fears that historic cultures and identities are threatened (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Canada is not immune from these pressures, and they may be relevant to the decline in Conservatives' comfort with diversity. However, such factors cannot explain the other side of polarization, the steady growth in support among Liberal and NDP partisans. A future research agenda awaits.

It is also difficult to untangle the extent to which polarization was a top-down or bottom-up process. Was polarization among voters actually the result of greater conflict between party elites, with sharper conflicts between parties shaping the views of their supporters and attracting like-minded voters who had previously supported other parties? Alternatively, was polarization a bottom up process, in which party leaders changed their immigration policies in order to keep up with their partisan supporters whose attitudes were shifting for other reasons? Most likely, both processes were involved, although we have argued elsewhere that in the case of the Harper government's diversity policies, the party leadership was trying to catch up with movement in its base rather than leading the charge (Banting and Soroka, forthcoming).

Our findings have implications for future policy debates. Most importantly, we should not assume that public support for immigration is simply baked into Canadian culture. The challenge of sustaining public support for immigration rests not only with the ministers responsible for immigration and multiculturalism but also with ministers of finance and economic development. The ability of governments to preserve low levels of unemployment and—by extension—to sustain Canadians'

faith in the economic benefits of immigration is critical. The toxic combination of economic and cultural anxiety has not emerged as strongly here, not simply because of a distinctive culture but also because of Canada's unemployment record, the mildness of the 2007–2008 recession in this country and the widespread faith that immigration has a positive impact on the economy. Those who support Canada's approach to immigration—and especially those who seek to increase immigration—should not assume support for immigration is a cultural given. Supporters need to focus not just on immigration policy but also on issues of economic inequality and economic security for the population as whole.

Notes

- (1) Fuller details of the analysis on which this talk is based can be found in Banting and Soroka 2020 and Banting and Soroka forthcoming.
- (2) The government's planned increase was interrupted by the pandemic, which is not dealt with in this paper. Admission numbers fell significantly during the pandemic, but as the crisis fades, the government seems to return to the admission levels set out in its earlier policy.

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