

Prayer in Canadian Public Life: a Nation Divided

Secularist views reign on SCOC public prayer ban; but very few want to remove "God" from O Canada

June 08, 2015 – The recent [Supreme Court of Canada ruling](#) regarding prayer at public meetings has touched off a national debate over the place of God in civic life, and the possible ways governments should amend the long tradition of starting meetings with heads bowed.

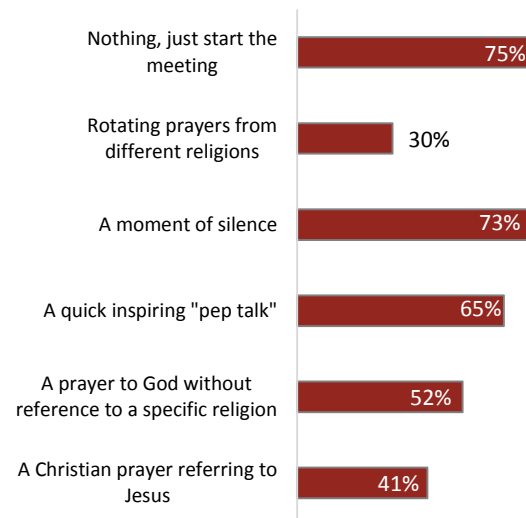
The latest public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds that fewer than half (41%) of respondents support the idea of a Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ at the beginning of a council meeting, compared to nearly twice as many (75%) who say the meeting should just start without any formal ceremony or pause.

The survey of more than 1500 Canadian adults also canvassed opinions on personal importance of religion in everyday life, the SCOC decision itself, and whether the reference to God should be removed from the national anthem.

Key Findings:

- Just over half (56%) of respondents are in favour of the court's decision while the rest (44%) are opposed.
- That support drops to one-third (34%) among the religiously inclined, and jumps to nearly four-fifths (78%) among those who say religion isn't important to them.
- In spite of the secularist view on prayer at public meetings, very few (7%) of respondents want to see the lyrics to O Canada changed so that reference to God is removed.

Thinking about your own municipal council meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning?
Summary of "Acceptable"



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from April 30th - May 3rd among a representative randomized sample of 1504 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by the Angus Reid Institute. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

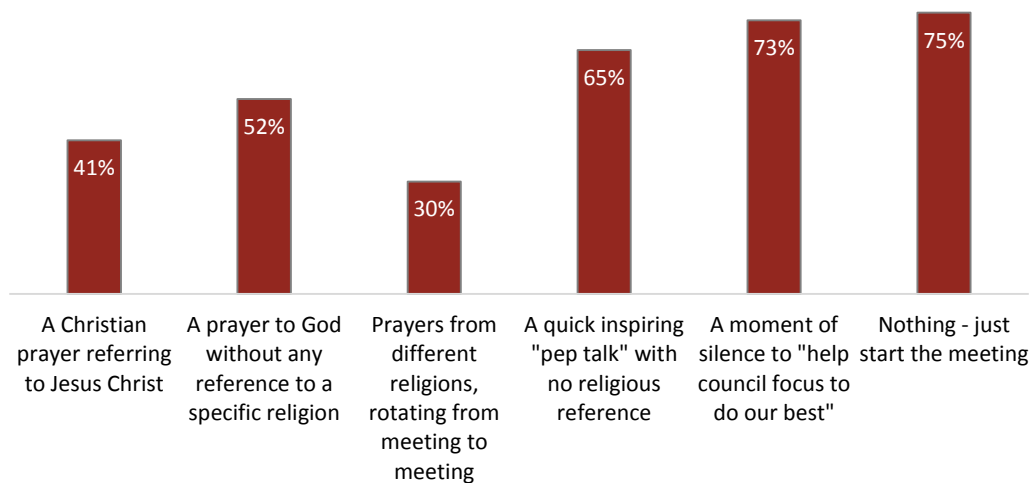
What's the alternative to starting council meetings without God?

This spring's unanimous decision from the Supreme Court touched off a flurry of changes to the way governments at all levels begin their public meetings.

[Regina](#), [Ottawa](#) and [Calgary](#) have all suspended their council prayers in favour of a silent moment of reflection, while other municipalities, including Toronto and Vancouver, had already done away with prayer in council.

But what do Canadians say about the best way to begin? The Angus Reid Institute offered a number of options, and asked respondents to write in their own.

Thinking about your own municipal govt's council meetings,
how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning?
Summary of "Acceptable"



As noted in the graph above:

- 75% of respondents want their council to get down to business, forgoing any ritual
- 73% say a moment of silence for reflection would be acceptable. (Some cities have already [moved to this](#))
- 65% say that a quick inspiring "pep talk" free of religious references would be a suitable way to begin
- 52% say the idea of a prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion is acceptable

- 41% support a Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ
- 30% like the concept of starting meetings with a rotating prayer that would give time to a different religion at each meeting

The Supreme Court Decision itself:

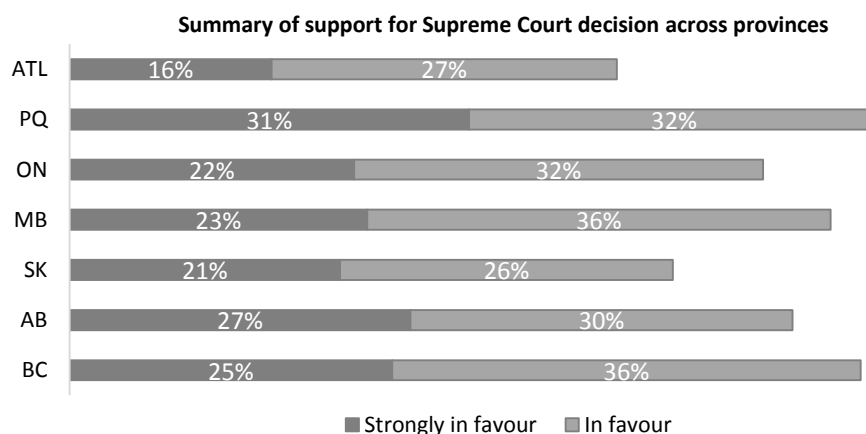
In 2007, Alain Simoneau, of Saguenay, Quebec filed a complaint with the [Quebec Human Rights Tribunal](#) objecting to elected officials praying in council chambers before meetings. The tribunal initially ruled that council cease the practice, though this was overturned by a challenge from Mayor Jean Tremblay in the Quebec Court of Appeal in 2011.

Ultimately, Simoneau took his complaint to the highest court in the country, generating the April 2015 decision. The [ruling](#) stated that in performing prayer as a precursor to city council meetings, the Saguenay government had “breached its duty of neutrality.”

It appears that the SCOC ruling that starting a public meeting with a prayer is an infringement on the rights to freedom of conscience and religion is in line with the views of a slim majority of Canadians: 56 per cent say they are in favour of the ruling (25% strongly in favour) while 44 per cent are against it (18% strongly against).

That said, levels of support for the ruling are varied across the country:

- Quebec (63%) and British Columbia (62%) have the highest levels of favourability to the court decision
- People in Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada were least pleased with the ban on public prayer, with only a minority voicing support (47% and 43% respectively)

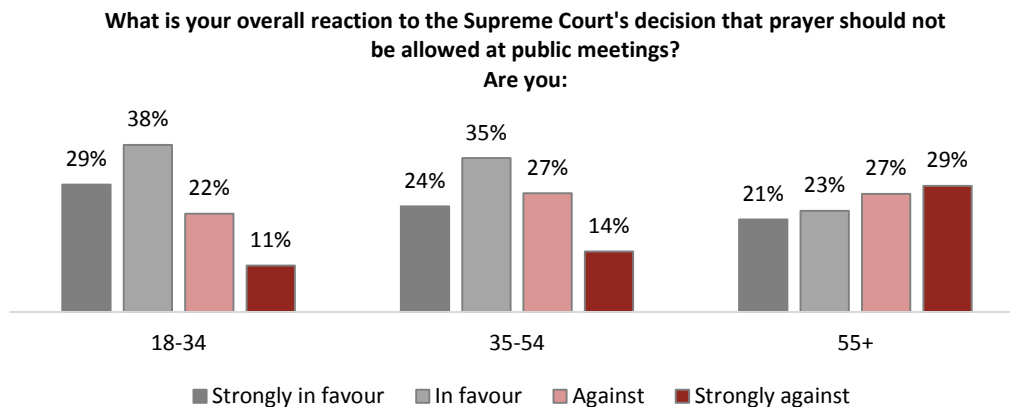


MEDIA CONTACT:

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The generational and religious divide:

There is a large generational gap in perspectives on this issue. Younger Canadians support the court decision by a margin of two-to-one: (67% in favour versus 33% opposed). Conversely, those aged 55+ are much more likely to oppose than support (see chart below).

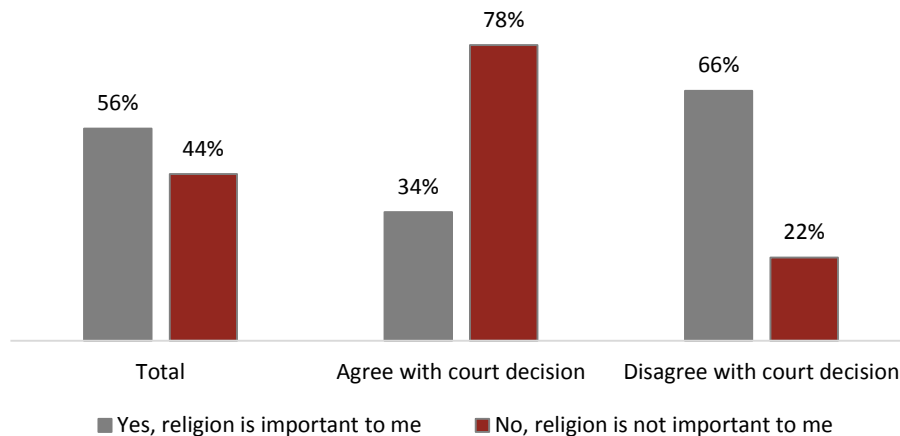


These findings are consistent with the Angus Reid Institute's special [Faith in Canada](#) study from March 2015, which highlighted important generational differences in terms of personal religious importance and views on religion's impact on society.

Unsurprisingly, there are also notable differences in views on this topic depending on a person's engagement with religion. Asked whether "religion is important to me in my day to day life", Canadians are evenly divided (48% agree, 52% disagree).

This division leads to inverse views on the Supreme Court ruling: a strong majority (66%) of religiously inclined respondents disapprove, while the non-religious are firmly in support of it by an even stronger margin (78%).

Agree/Disagree with SCOC decision
compared by personal importance of religion



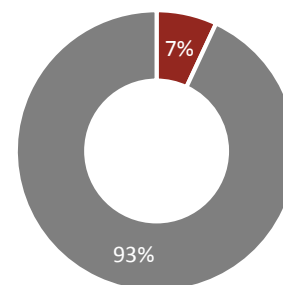
O Canada and God

However, an interesting contrast arises when Canadians are asked about other areas of secular conflict in society, in particular the national anthem. There have been questions recently about the line "God keep our land, glorious and free..." and whether this religious reference should be changed.

The Angus Reid Institute poll asked respondents what they think about the anthem in the context of this debate, and while there may be contention over the Supreme Court decision, there is little conflict regarding God being included in Canada's national anthem. As evidenced in the corresponding graph:

- Fewer than one-in-ten (7%) Canadians said they think "we should change the anthem to remove the reference to God"
- One-in-three (35%) say the line is "maybe not ideal, but that's how it was written so just keep it"
- This leaves a majority of 58 per cent of Canadians who believe "it is fine that *O Canada* includes a reference to God"

Canada's national anthem includes a reference to God in the last verse: Would you say...?



- We should change the anthem to remove that reference to God
- We should keep the anthem as it is

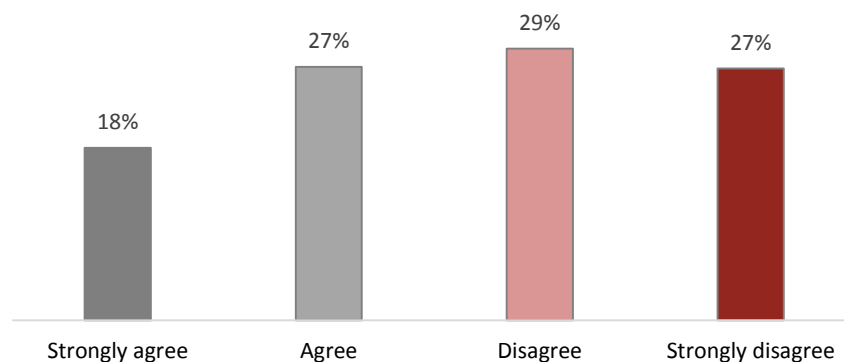
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(It should be noted that while the French and English versions of *O Canada* contain different lyrics, there are religious references in both. The Angus Reid Institute survey, therefore, contained a modified but similar question for both languages.)

When Canadians are asked for their views on whether "reducing the presence of religion in our public life is a sign of progress in our society," there's no clear consensus: 45 per cent of those polled agree, while 55 per cent disagree that this is a sign of social progress.

**Reducing the presence of religion in our public life is a sign of progress
in our society:**



When asked whether they agree or disagree that the anthem issue is "a case of political correctness gone too far" more than eight-in-ten (85%) agree.

Evidently, while the country is growing more secular in many ways, Canadians are in solid agreement on one thing: we can just leave the anthem alone.

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

First of all, how interested are you yourself in this issue of whether or not prayer should be allowed at public meetings?								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Read/saw stories about it and discussed it with friends	23%	14%	23%	32%	28%	22%	30%	23%
Saw a story or two, and had the odd conversation about it	24%	24%	26%	24%	18%	26%	19%	27%
Just scanned/saw the headlines	28%	30%	24%	23%	32%	25%	37%	25%
Not read/seen anything at all	24%	32%	27%	21%	22%	27%	15%	25%

What is your overall reaction to the Supreme Court's decision that prayer should not be allowed at public meetings? Are you:								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Strongly in favour of the court's decision	25%	25%	27%	21%	23%	22%	31%	16%
In favour	32%	36%	30%	26%	36%	32%	32%	27%
Against	26%	23%	25%	18%	23%	28%	21%	37%
Strongly against the court's decision	18%	15%	19%	35%	18%	18%	16%	21%

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What is your overall reaction to the Supreme Court's decision that prayer should not be allowed at public meetings? Are you:

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Strongly in favour of the court's decision	25%	30%	20%	29%	24%	21%
In favour	32%	28%	35%	38%	35%	23%
Against	26%	24%	27%	22%	27%	27%
Strongly against the court's decision	18%	18%	18%	11%	14%	29%

[Summary of Acceptable] Thinking about your own municipal government's council meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
A Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ	41%	35%	41%	49%	39%	43%	39%	46%
A prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion	52%	47%	54%	58%	52%	54%	48%	62%
Prayers from different religions, rotating from meeting to meeting	30%	27%	38%	31%	31%	33%	19%	37%
A quick inspiring "pep talk" with no religious reference	65%	63%	71%	66%	71%	62%	65%	69%
A moment of silence to "help council focus to do our best"	73%	67%	73%	67%	72%	74%	76%	72%
Nothing - just start the meeting	75%	83%	82%	75%	74%	70%	77%	66%

[Summary of Acceptable] Thinking about your own municipal government's council meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
A Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ	41%	41%	41%	36%	40%	47%
A prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion	52%	50%	54%	47%	50%	60%
Prayers from different religions, rotating from meeting to meeting	30%	29%	30%	38%	28%	24%
A quick inspiring "pep talk" with no religious reference	65%	63%	67%	76%	68%	52%
A moment of silence to "help council focus to do our best"	73%	70%	76%	75%	72%	72%
Nothing - just start the meeting	75%	73%	76%	81%	77%	66%

[Summary of Unacceptable] Thinking about your own municipal government's council meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
A Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ	59%	65%	59%	51%	61%	57%	61%	54%
A prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion	48%	53%	46%	42%	48%	46%	52%	38%
Prayers from different religions, rotating from meeting to meeting	70%	73%	62%	69%	69%	67%	81%	63%
A quick inspiring "pep talk" with no religious reference	35%	37%	29%	34%	29%	38%	35%	31%
A moment of silence to "help council focus to do our best"	27%	33%	27%	33%	28%	26%	24%	28%
Nothing - just start the meeting	25%	17%	18%	25%	26%	30%	23%	34%

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[Summary of Unacceptable] Thinking about your own municipal government's council meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
A Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ	59%	59%	59%	64%	60%	53%
A prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion	48%	50%	46%	53%	50%	40%
Prayers from different religions, rotating from meeting to meeting	70%	71%	70%	62%	72%	76%
A quick inspiring "pep talk" with no religious reference	35%	37%	33%	24%	32%	48%
A moment of silence to "help council focus to do our best"	27%	30%	24%	25%	28%	28%
Nothing - just start the meeting	25%	27%	24%	19%	23%	34%

[A Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	14%	12%	16%	27%	12%	16%	10%	13%
Usually acceptable	27%	24%	25%	23%	27%	27%	29%	33%
Usually unacceptable	22%	22%	22%	17%	21%	21%	22%	31%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	37%	43%	37%	33%	40%	36%	39%	23%

[A Christian prayer referring to Jesus Christ] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	14%	14%	14%	11%	14%	16%
Usually acceptable	27%	28%	27%	25%	26%	31%
Usually unacceptable	22%	19%	25%	23%	23%	21%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	37%	39%	34%	41%	38%	32%

[A prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	22%	16%	23%	29%	20%	26%	18%	18%
Usually acceptable	31%	31%	31%	30%	33%	28%	30%	44%
Usually unacceptable	19%	18%	17%	16%	22%	19%	19%	21%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	29%	35%	29%	25%	26%	26%	33%	17%

[A prayer to God without any reference to a specific religion] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	22%	20%	24%	15%	20%	30%
Usually acceptable	31%	31%	31%	32%	30%	31%
Usually unacceptable	19%	18%	20%	21%	19%	16%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	29%	32%	26%	32%	31%	23%

[Prayers from different religions, rotating from meeting to meeting] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	8%	8%	8%	10%	5%	10%	4%	5%
Usually acceptable	22%	19%	30%	21%	26%	23%	15%	32%
Usually unacceptable	25%	23%	20%	25%	30%	25%	26%	32%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	45%	49%	42%	44%	40%	42%	55%	31%

[Prayers from different religions, rotating from meeting to meeting] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	8%	6%	9%	8%	8%	7%
Usually acceptable	22%	22%	22%	30%	21%	17%
Usually unacceptable	25%	23%	27%	24%	24%	27%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	45%	48%	42%	38%	48%	48%

[A quick inspiring "pep talk" with no religious reference] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	22%	26%	28%	28%	16%	21%	23%	13%
Usually acceptable	42%	36%	43%	38%	55%	41%	42%	56%
Usually unacceptable	16%	14%	18%	12%	13%	18%	15%	19%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	19%	23%	11%	22%	16%	20%	21%	13%

[A quick inspiring "pep talk" with no religious reference] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	22%	19%	25%	31%	24%	13%
Usually acceptable	42%	43%	42%	45%	44%	39%
Usually unacceptable	16%	16%	17%	14%	14%	20%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	19%	22%	16%	11%	17%	28%

[A moment of silence to "help council focus to do our best"] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	30%	26%	25%	33%	26%	32%	35%	19%
Usually acceptable	43%	41%	48%	33%	46%	42%	41%	53%
Usually unacceptable	13%	13%	16%	14%	15%	12%	11%	16%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	14%	20%	11%	19%	13%	14%	13%	12%

[A moment of silence to "help council focus to do our best"] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	30%	26%	34%	32%	28%	31%
Usually acceptable	43%	45%	41%	43%	44%	42%
Usually unacceptable	13%	14%	12%	12%	14%	12%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	14%	16%	13%	13%	14%	16%

[Nothing - just start the meeting] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	45%	61%	48%	44%	43%	43%	42%	36%
Usually acceptable	29%	22%	34%	30%	30%	26%	34%	31%
Usually unacceptable	11%	4%	10%	6%	12%	12%	13%	18%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	14%	12%	8%	19%	14%	18%	11%	15%

[Nothing – just start the meeting] Thinking about your own municipal government's meetings, how do you feel about each of the following occurring at the beginning of those meetings?

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Definitely acceptable to start a public meeting that way	45%	46%	45%	50%	48%	38%
Usually acceptable	29%	28%	31%	30%	29%	28%
Usually unacceptable	11%	11%	11%	12%	9%	14%
Definitely unacceptable to start a public meeting that way	14%	15%	13%	7%	14%	20%

Awareness of public prayer story vs overall reaction to Supreme Court decision

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Read/saw stories about it	Saw a story or two	Just scanned/ saw the headlines	Not read/ seen anything
Strongly in favour of the court's decision	25%	28%	27%	22%	22%
In favour	32%	14%	32%	41%	38%
Against	26%	21%	26%	28%	27%
Strongly against the court's decision	18%	37%	16%	9%	13%

Religion is important to me in my day to day life vs. opinion on court decision

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Agree with court decision	Disagree with court decision
Yes, religion is important to me	48%	34%	66%
No, religion is not important to me	52%	78%	22%

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**Canada's national anthem - O Canada - includes a reference to God in the last verse:
"God keep our land, glorious and free..."? Would you say...?**

(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
We should change the anthem to remove that reference to God	7%	11%	4%	9%	7%	6%	7%	6%
Maybe not ideal, but that's how it was written so just keep it	35%	32%	31%	20%	30%	33%	45%	33%
It is fine that Canada includes a reference to God	58%	57%	65%	70%	63%	61%	48%	61%

**Canada's national anthem - O Canada - includes a reference to God in the last verse:
"God keep our land, glorious and free..."? Would you say...?**

(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
We should change the anthem to remove that reference to God	7%	9%	5%	10%	6%	5%
Maybe not ideal, but that's how it was written so just keep it	35%	34%	36%	38%	37%	31%
It is fine that O Canada includes a reference to God	58%	57%	59%	52%	57%	65%

Religion is important to me in my day to day life] Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with these statements.								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Strongly agree	19%	16%	21%	31%	20%	22%	14%	26%
Agree	29%	26%	24%	34%	32%	29%	31%	32%
Disagree	25%	22%	27%	20%	29%	24%	28%	23%
Strongly disagree	26%	36%	28%	15%	19%	25%	27%	18%

Religion is important to me in my day to day life] Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with these statements.						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Strongly agree	19%	18%	21%	18%	17%	24%
Agree	29%	29%	29%	25%	27%	35%
Disagree	25%	24%	27%	23%	28%	24%
Strongly disagree	26%	29%	24%	34%	28%	17%

[Reducing the presence of religion in our public life is a sign of progress in our society] Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with these statements.								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Strongly agree	18%	20%	14%	9%	18%	19%	21%	12%
Agree	27%	29%	29%	18%	22%	23%	33%	24%
Disagree	29%	27%	25%	30%	36%	29%	28%	33%
Strongly disagree	27%	24%	33%	43%	24%	29%	19%	31%

[Reducing the presence of religion in our public life is a sign of progress in our society] Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with these statements.						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Strongly agree	18%	22%	14%	21%	20%	14%
Agree	27%	27%	26%	33%	26%	23%
Disagree	29%	24%	33%	29%	29%	28%
Strongly disagree	27%	26%	27%	18%	26%	35%

MEDIA CONTACT:

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This issue is a case of political correctness gone too far -- leave things like the anthem alone								
(unweighted bases)	Total (1504)	Region						
		BC (200)	AB (152)	SK (101)	MB (100)	ON (500)	PQ (351)	ATL (100)
Agree	85%	83%	86%	88%	85%	83%	85%	91%
Disagree	15%	17%	14%	12%	15%	17%	15%	9%

This issue is a case of political correctness gone too far -- leave things like the anthem alone						
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (1504)	Gender		Age		
		Men (735)	Women (769)	18 – 34 (430)	35 – 54 (563)	55+ (511)
Agree	85%	83%	87%	77%	86%	91%
Disagree	15%	17%	13%	23%	14%	9%