

Crossing the Floor: Canadians weigh in on elected members who quit their parties between elections

Four-in-ten say floor-crossing should be banned & prefer by-elections if members want to change parties

December 11, 2018 – With one Ontario MPP [leaving](#) the governing Progressive Conservative Party to sit as an independent and party leaders [reportedly concerned](#) about future defections, a new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds Canadians divided on the practice of “floor-crossing” in their nation’s legislatures.

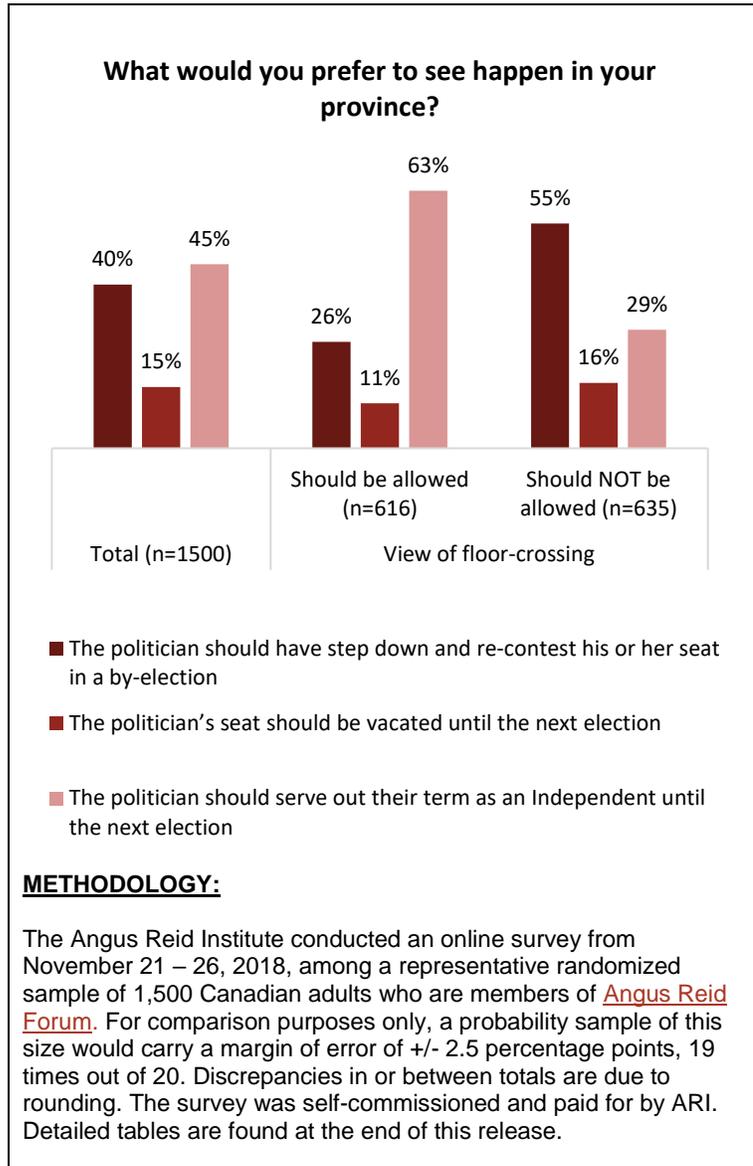
Politicians changing parties is not uncommon in Canada. Some 20 members of Parliament have crossed the floor of the House of Commons in the last decade, and numerous other elected officials have switched parties at the provincial level in that time.

That said, four-in-ten Canadians (42%) are of the opinion that politicians leaving one party and joining another between elections should not be allowed. Roughly the same number (41%) say the practice is acceptable.

Asked about potential alternatives to representatives switching their party affiliations, those opposed to floor-crossing are inclined to say would-be floor-crossers should be required to step down and re-contest their seats in by-elections (55% of floor-crossing opponents say this), while those who support the practice tend to prefer allowing members to continue their terms as independents (63% of floor-crossing supporters say this).

More Key Findings:

- Ultimately, Canadians can be divided into five broad categories in terms of their perspectives on floor-crossing: Those who support it (41% of the population), those who oppose it (42%, subdivided into three groups based on how they would prefer to see would-be floor-crossings addressed), and those who are unsure (17%)



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- Quebec residents are most opposed to floor-crossing as a concept (50% are), while those in Alberta (50%), Saskatchewan (49%) and Ontario (47%) are most likely to say it should be allowed
- Three-quarters of Canadians (75%) are aware of the practice of floor-crossing, with men and older respondents more likely to express familiarity with the procedure

INDEX:

- **Four-in-ten would prohibit floor-crossing**
- **Continuing as an independent the most popular alternative**
- **Five perspectives on floor-crossing**
- **Demographic divisions**

Four-in-ten would prohibit floor-crossing

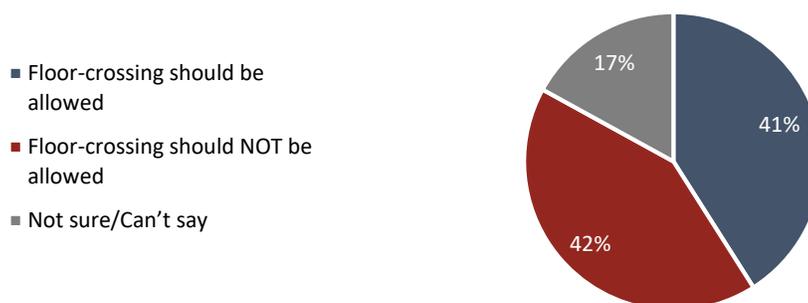
Canadian politics has [a rich history](#) of cross-party defections among elected representatives. From early shifts between pro- and anti-Confederation parties in the 1800s to contemporary maneuvers like MP Leona Alleslev [leaving the federal Liberals](#) for the Conservative Party; MP Maxime Bernier leaving the Conservatives [to found the People’s Party of Canada](#); or five Bloc Quebecois MPs leaving that party, forming a new one, and then [returning to the BQ fold](#); floor-crossing has long been a source of intrigue for Canadian political junkies and consternation for Canadian constituents.

Most recently, Ontario MPP Amanda Simard [left the governing Progressive Conservative Party](#) to sit on the opposition benches as an independent.

It’s perhaps unsurprising, then, that the vast majority of Canadians (75%) profess familiarity with the concept of a politician crossing the floor to sit with a different party.

In terms of their opinion on the matter, four-in-ten Canadians (42%) say it should not be allowed in their country’s legislatures, while roughly the same number say it should be. The remaining 17 per cent are uncertain:

Which would you say is closest to your view?



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Demographic divisions on this question will be discussed in greater detail in the final section of this report.

Continuing as an independent the most popular alternative

When a politician wants to leave the party with which they were elected, what should happen? While there are no rules at the federal level governing whether Canadian politicians can change party affiliations, other jurisdictions place limits on the ability to cross the floor.

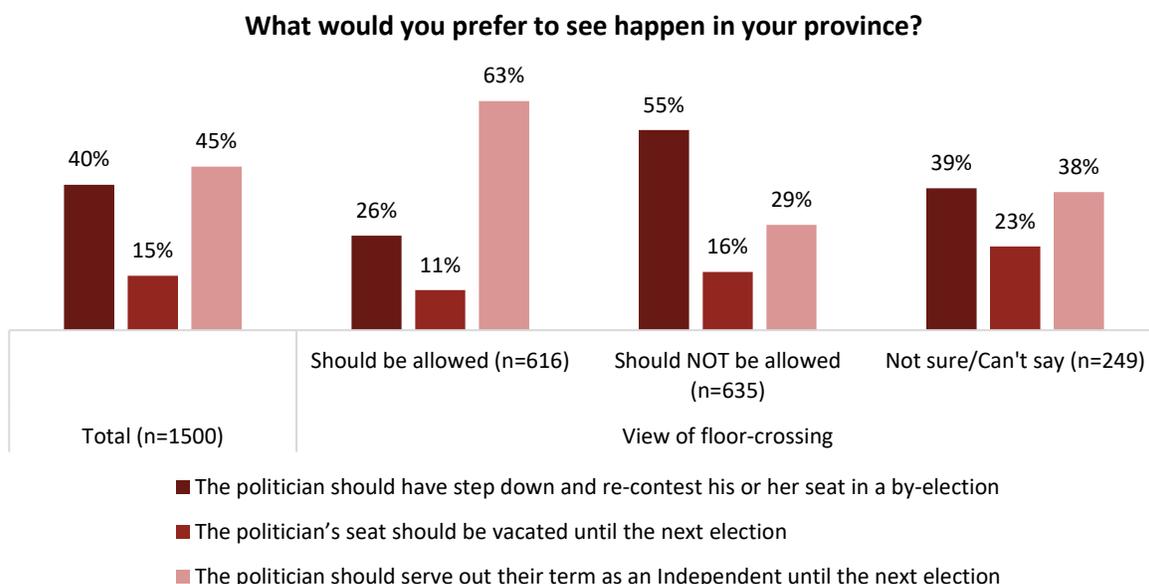
In Manitoba, for example, legislation [passed in 2006](#) requires members of the legislative assembly who wish to leave their parties to sit as independents for the remainder of their terms, effectively banning them from officially joining another party until the next election.

Similarly, in New Zealand, where elections are conducted under a system of mixed-member proportional representation, a law in effect from 2001 to 2005 banned party switching and required members of parliament who left their party caucuses to step down. Those who vacated their seats – if they were elected from a specific constituency, rather than a party list – were allowed to contest them for a different party in a by-election.

The current New Zealand government [is considering legislation](#) that would reintroduce these rules, which stem from the desire to [maintain the proportionality](#) of parliament between general elections.

When presented with some alternatives to the unrestricted floor-crossing allowed in most Canadian legislatures, respondents seem to like the Manitoba model best. More than four-in-ten (45%) say politicians who wish to leave their parties should have to serve out their term as independents if they can't legally cross the floor. This option tends to be the preference of those who don't have a problem with Canada's current rules allowing floor-crossing at the federal level.

Among those who would prefer to see floor-crossing banned, more than half (55%) say the would-be floor-crosser should have to step down and re-contest their seat in a by-election:



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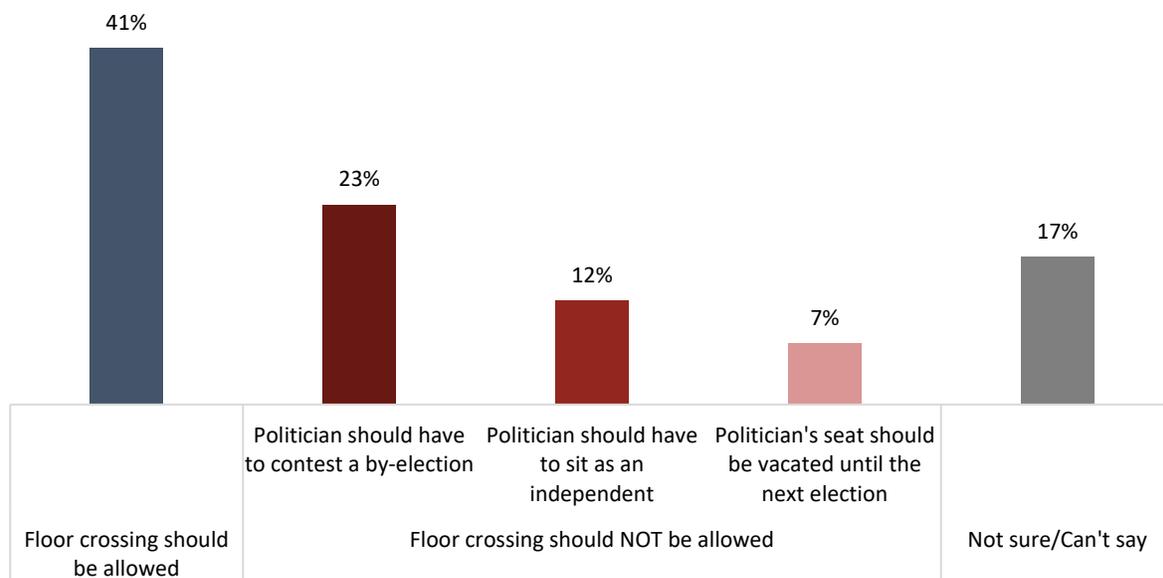
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Five perspectives on floor-crossing

Looking at responses to these two questions another way, one could reasonably conclude that the public opinion landscape on this issue includes five main viewpoints:

- Those who say floor-crossing should be allowed (41% of the overall population)
- Those who say floor-crossing should not be allowed (42%). Among this group...
 - Politicians should have to face a by-election if they want to change parties (23%)
 - Politicians should have to serve out their terms as independents if they want to switch parties (12%)
 - Politicians who wish to switch parties should have their seats vacated until the next general election (7%)
- Those who are unsure how they feel about floor-crossing (17% of the overall population)

Canadian public opinion on floor-crossing:



Demographic divisions

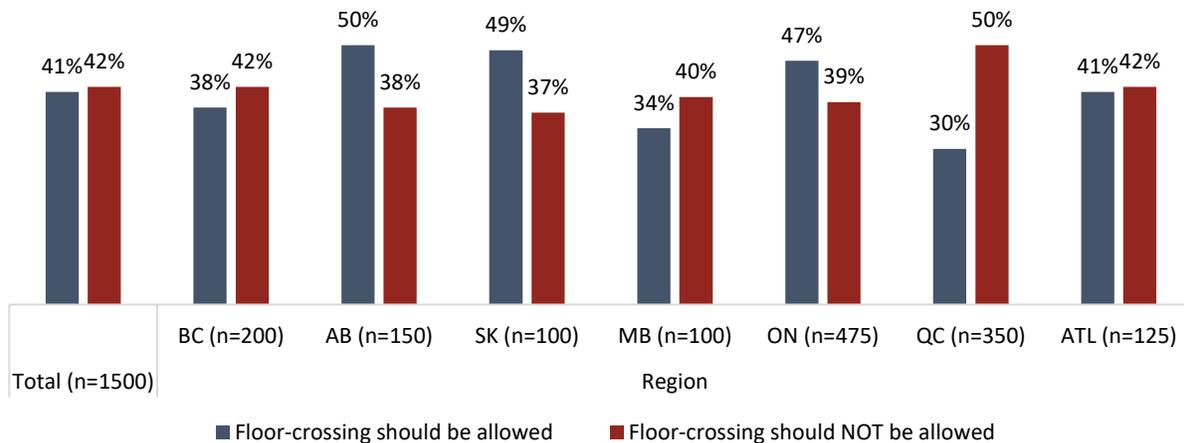
Regionally, it is the federal Conservative strongholds of Alberta and Saskatchewan that are most likely to say elected parliamentarians should be allowed to switch parties, while Quebec – which the federal Liberals dominated in 2015 – is more likely to say such changes in party affiliation should be banned.

Interestingly, while they represent opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of public opinion, major party changes have both Alberta and Quebec to be among the most likely places to see [floor-crossing at the provincial level](#) in recent years:

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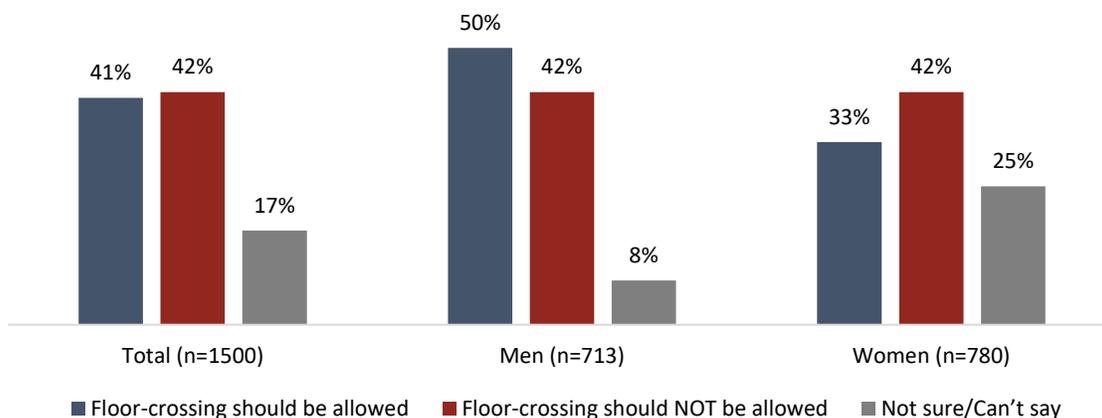
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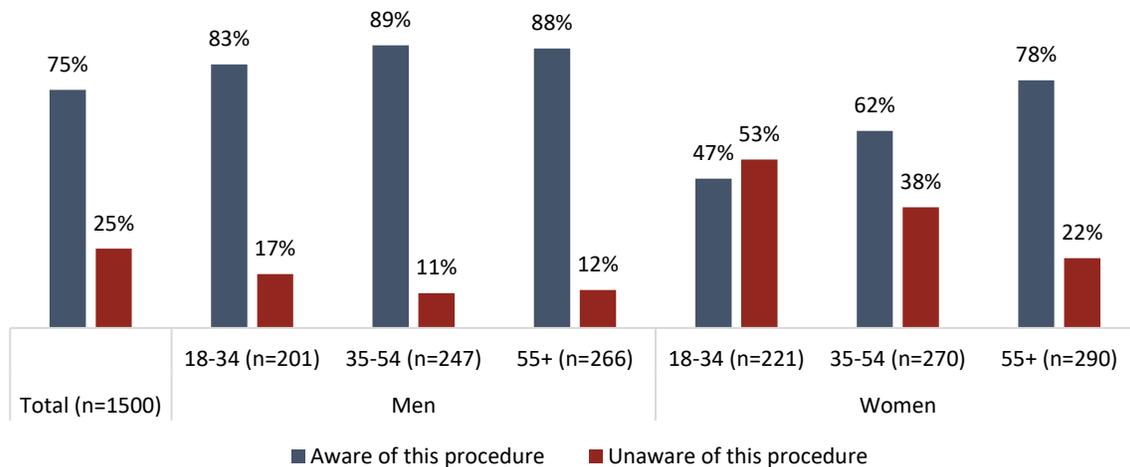
Men are more likely than women to express awareness of the practice of floor-crossing. They're also more likely to say it should be allowed:

Which would you say is closer to your view?



Much of this gender gap can be attributed to awareness of the issue. Women – especially those under 35 – are much more likely to say they are unfamiliar with the concept of politicians switching parties between elections, as seen in the graph that follows.

Are you aware of an issue in politics called 'floor-crossing'?



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 foundation 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.

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).