

The Politics of Faith: Does a leader's personal religious practice hurt or help with voters? It depends

Slight majority say personal faith should be off limits from media coverage, 45 per cent disagree

November 28, 2019 – The role of faith in Canadian society remains part of an ongoing and unresolved debate. In a country that enshrines [freedom of religion](#) in its constitution, but whose populace is increasingly less likely to identify as formally religious, how much does a political leader's own faith help or hinder them?

These are among the questions Canadians themselves are grappling with in the wake of last month's federal election, as they weigh the election results against the party leaders' performance and positions on social issues.

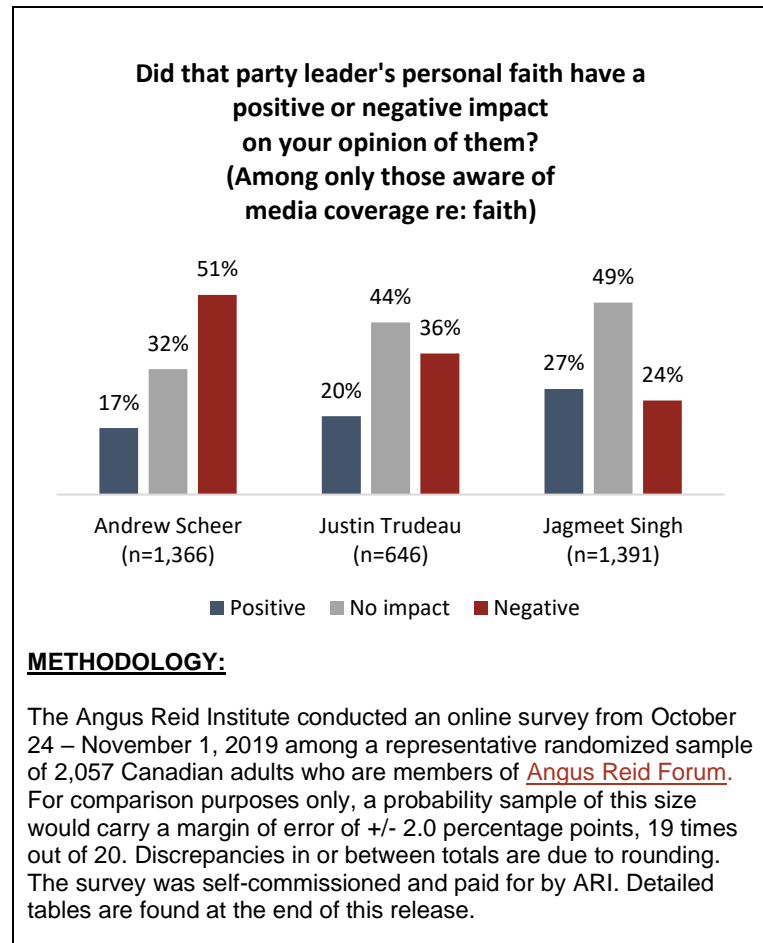
A new public opinion poll from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with [Cardus](#) – suggests that it is not necessarily a leader's faith that provokes negative or positive reactions, but how the leader approaches and handles the issue on the campaign trail.

The study shows that most Canadians were aware of (at equal levels) the faith and personal beliefs of Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, a Catholic, and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, an orthodox Sikh. However, twice as many report Scheer's religiosity having a negative impact on their views of him than say the same of Singh and his beliefs (51% versus 24%).

And while the campaign was at times dominated by Scheer's political opponents questioning whether the CPC leader's religious beliefs would influence Canadian policy and legislation, people in this country are relatively divided over whether personal faith should be a factor at all in public discussion. Just over half (55%) say it should be off limits around media coverage while the rest (45%) say it is fair game.

More Key Findings:

- Six-in-ten Canadians (62%) say that freedom of religion makes Canada a better country overall, but at the same time, half (53%) feel that reducing the presence of religion in public life is a sign of progress.



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- Six-in-ten Canadians (63%) say that it ultimately does not matter to them whether or not a political leader is a person of faith. Conservative supporters are most likely to be attracted to faith in a leader, yet just one-in-four (24%) are.
- Asked if they were likely to believe a pro-life political leader when he or she said they would not touch the issue of abortion legislatively if elected, just one-third (32%) say they would trust the leader at their word.

About ARI

*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.*

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The Politics of Faith in Canada

How do Canadians feel about politicians of faith?

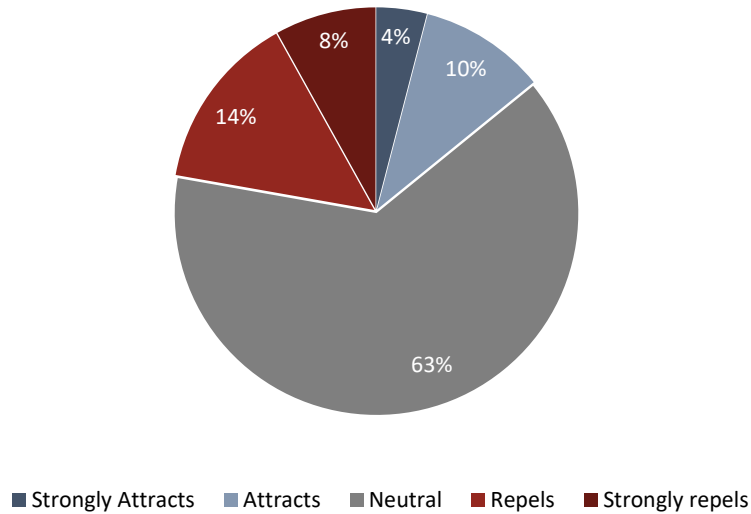
The question of their politicians' religious beliefs is not a top of mind issue in Canada, but it arose early and often during the election cycle. Perhaps most prominent were the questions posed to Conservative leader Andrew Scheer over [past comments](#) about same-sex marriage and his choice to [not participate](#) in pride parades throughout the country.

But how much do these issues resonate with potential voters – and in what way? For just over one-in-five (22%), faith is a repelling factor when it comes to political candidacy, while for 15 per cent it is an attraction. The majority – however – say a candidate's faith is not part of their decision-making process.

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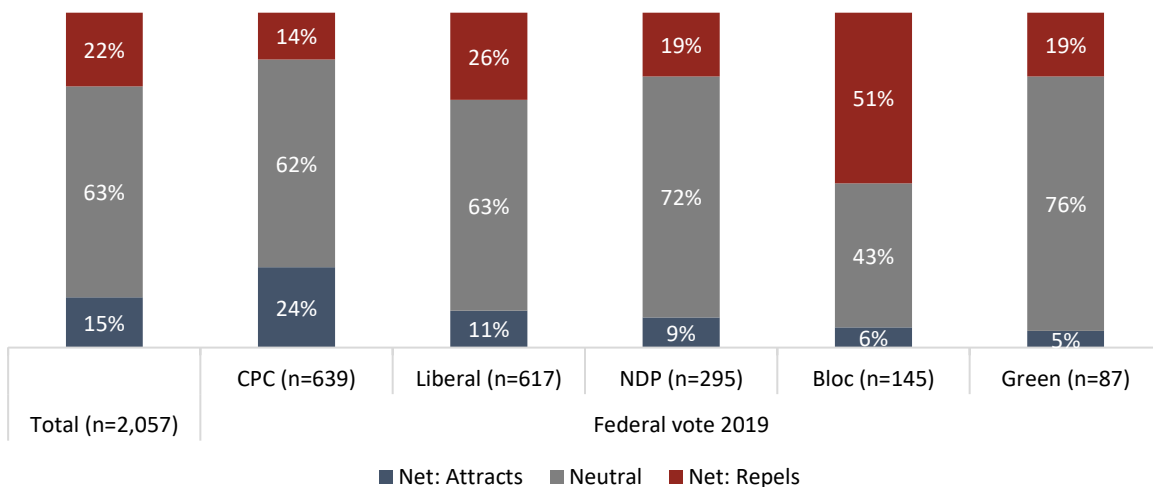
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Does the idea of a political candidate being a person of faith attract you to that candidate, does it repel you away from them, or do you feel quite neutral about it?



For those who voted Conservative on October 21, faith is a more important factor, while for half of those who supported the Bloc Quebecois, a Quebec-only federal party, faith is a liability:

Does the idea of a political candidate being a person of faith attract you to that candidate, does it repel you away from them, or do you feel quite neutral about it?

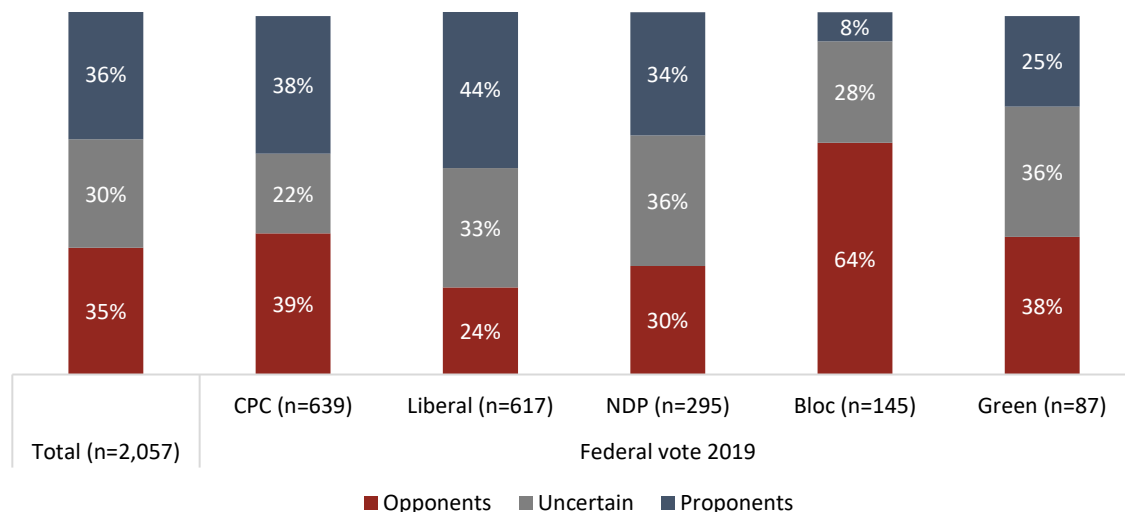


In the past – and as part of this analysis – the Angus Reid Institute identified three categories by which to group Canadians according to their attitudes about faith and public life in Canada.

Just under four-in-ten (36%) are classified as “Public Faith Proponents”. Members of this group hold a supportive posture when it comes to increasing the public’s knowledge of faith and religion and recognizing their importance to society. Another group of the same size, the “Public Faith Opponents” (32%) feel the opposite. This group generally feels religion should have a reduced role in politics and government. Another three-in-ten (30%) take the middle position in this debate, with a more mixed view, and are labeled as “the Uncertain”. For a detailed description of the additive index that was used by researchers to determine these groups, [click here](#).

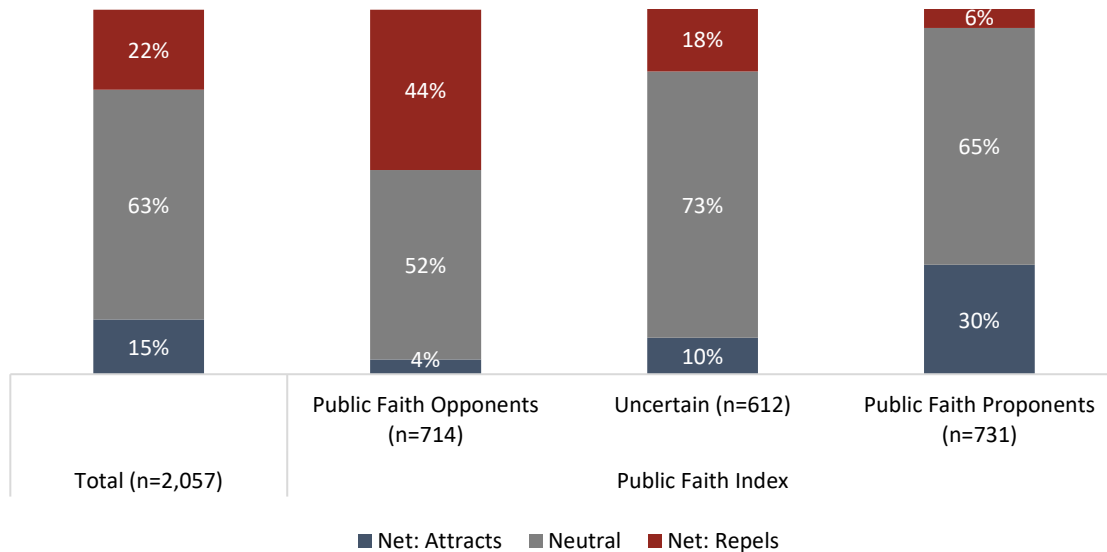
Note that, importantly, each portion of the Index is made up of a relatively diverse political group. One would be incorrect to assume that Proponents, for example, all voted for one party and Opponents for another. Indeed, BQ voters are the only segment who voice majority opposition to faith in public life.

Public Faith Index by 2019 federal vote



Those who see more of a role for faith in public life are twice as likely as the national average to say that they are attracted to faith in a political leader, while those who are more opposed to it are twice as likely to be repelled:

Does the idea of a political candidate being a person of faith attract you to that candidate, does it repel you away from them, or do you feel quite neutral about it?

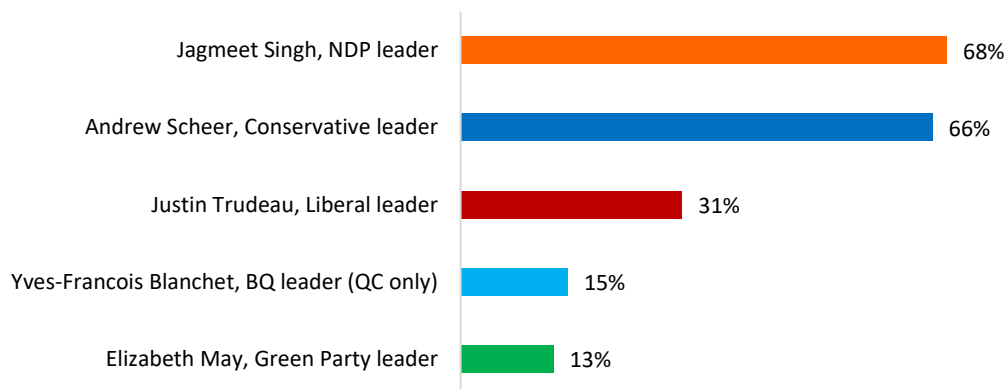


Faith, Leaders and the 2019 campaign

Awareness of leaders' personal faith

When it comes to the recent election, awareness – due to media coverage – of the faith and beliefs of two leaders were higher than that of others: the NDP's leader Jagmeet Singh, an orthodox Sikh, and Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer, a Catholic. Indeed, this awareness was significantly higher than it was for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, or other leaders:

During this recent federal election campaign, were you aware of any media coverage or attention on the personal faith and beliefs of any of the following...?



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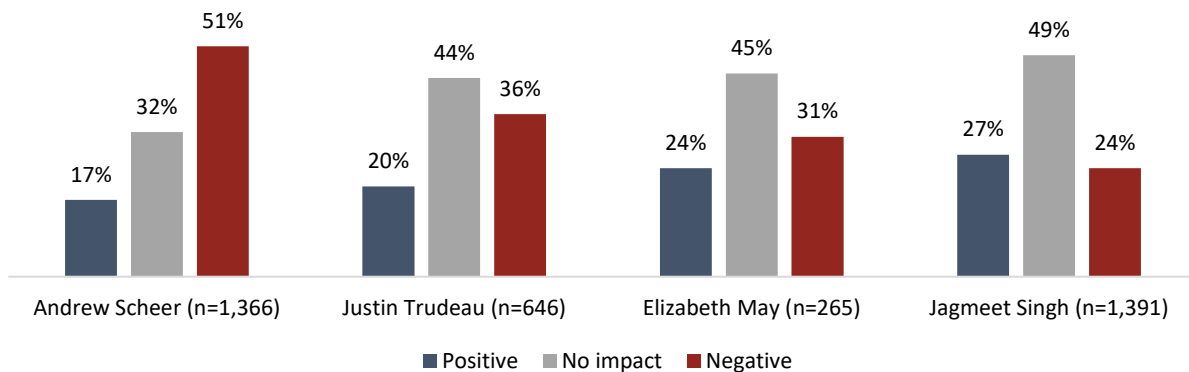
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Scheer perceived more negatively on beliefs than Singh

While awareness levels of Singh and Scheer's faiths were equal, interpretation of their religiosity among respondents was widely divergent. For Singh, it was equally likely to have made them feel positively about him (27%) as negatively (24%). For half of the nearly 1,400 respondents (49%), their view of the NDP leader was unchanged by what they saw or heard relating to his faith.

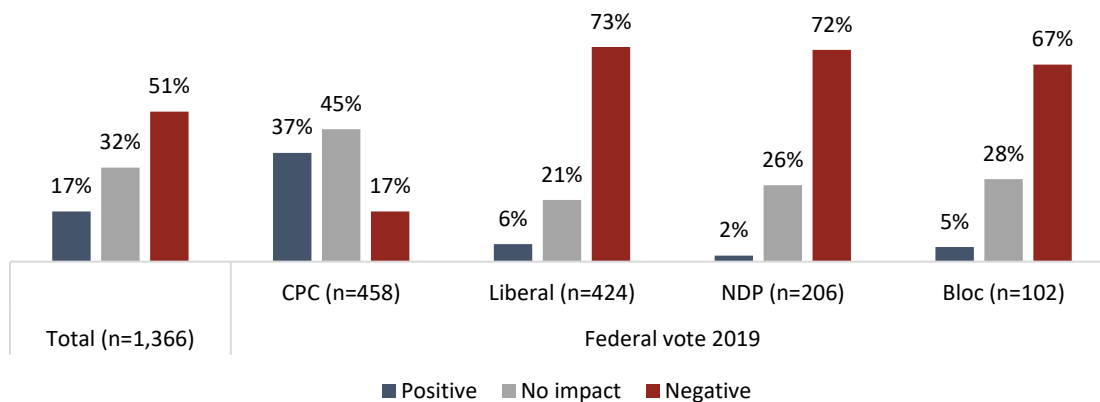
For CPC leader Andrew Scheer, fewer (17%) felt more positive about him based on the coverage they saw, while half (51%) said their opinion of him was negatively affected:

**And did whatever you saw, heard or read about that party leader's personal faith and beliefs have a positive or negative impact on your opinion of them?
(Among only those aware of media coverage re: faith)**



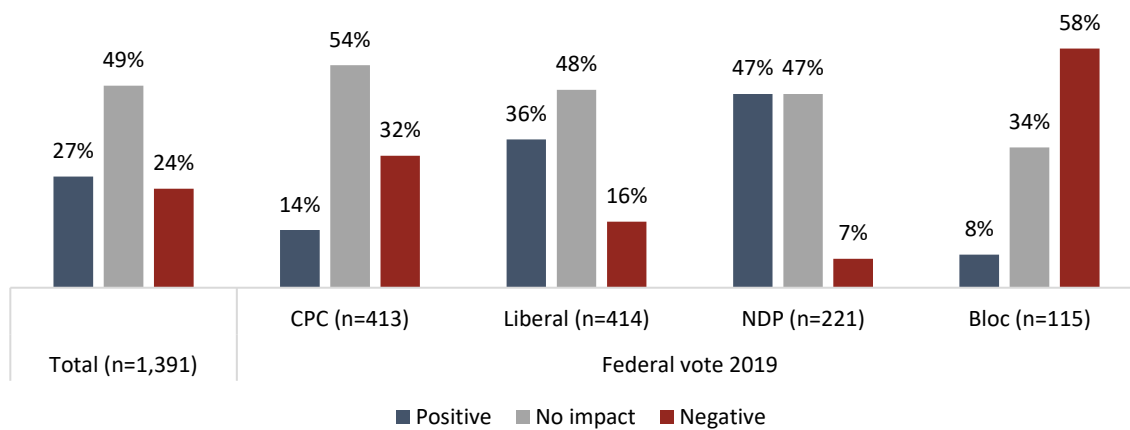
When it comes to Andrew Scheer, his supporters were more likely to say that the coverage they saw of him, related to his faith and beliefs, made them view him more positively, by a two-to-one ratio (37% positive vs 17% negative). Meanwhile, for those outside of his party, the impact on opinion was overwhelmingly negative:

**Did media coverage in the campaign of Andrew Scheer's personal faith and beliefs have a positive or negative impact on your opinion of them?
(Among only those aware of media coverage re: faith)**



For NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, responses are considerably more positive among both his own base as well as Liberal supporters. Further, supporters of each party base were also more likely to say that the coverage they saw surrounding Singh and religion had no impact on them. Bloc supporters were the most negative, about both Scheer's and Singh's faith:

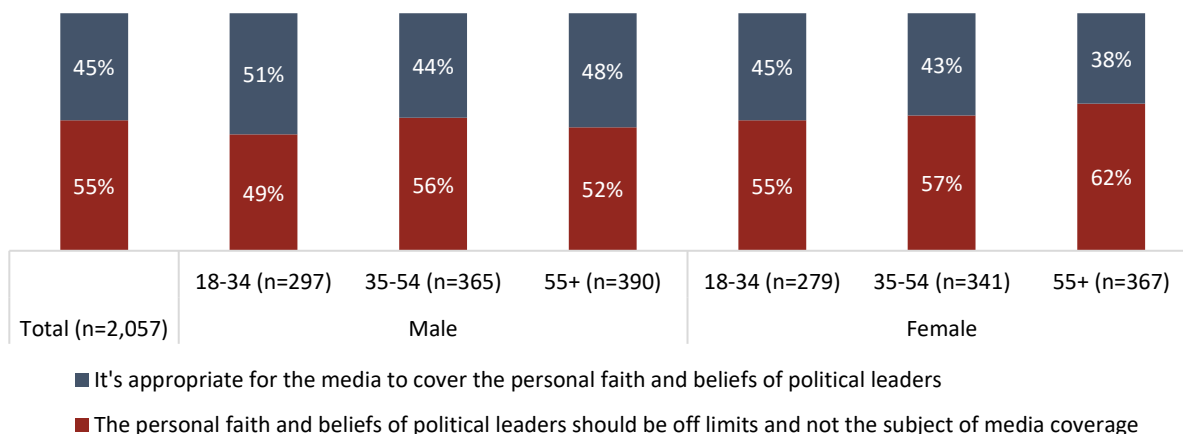
**Did media coverage in the campaign of Jagmeet Singh's personal faith and beliefs have a positive or negative impact on your opinion of them?
(Among only those aware of media coverage re: faith)**



Should media cover faith and beliefs of leaders?

Canadians have differing degrees to which they consider faith in a candidate as a political factor and it appears that they are divided over how much the topic should be discussed in the media. Slightly more than half say that they feel the personal faith and beliefs of political leaders should be off limits when it comes to media coverage. Women are more likely than their male counterparts of comparable age to say this. Men tend to be more divided about whether or not this type of coverage is appropriate:

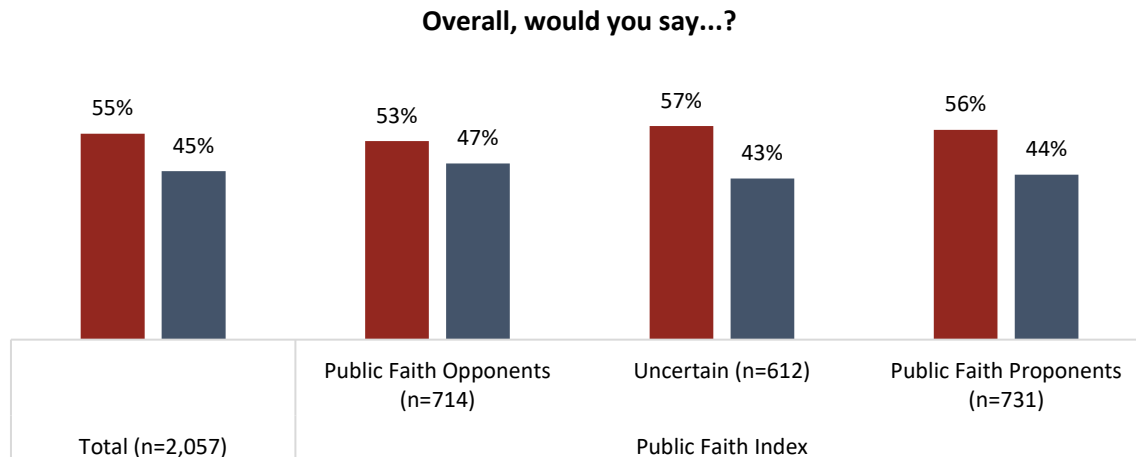
Overall, would you say?



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Interestingly, there is very little difference on this question when it comes to a person's place on the Public Faith Index. Both those who support and oppose public faith are divided on the role the media should play in discussing a candidate's personal beliefs:



- The personal faith and beliefs of political leaders should be off limits and not the subject of media coverage
- It's appropriate for the media to cover the personal faith and beliefs of political leaders

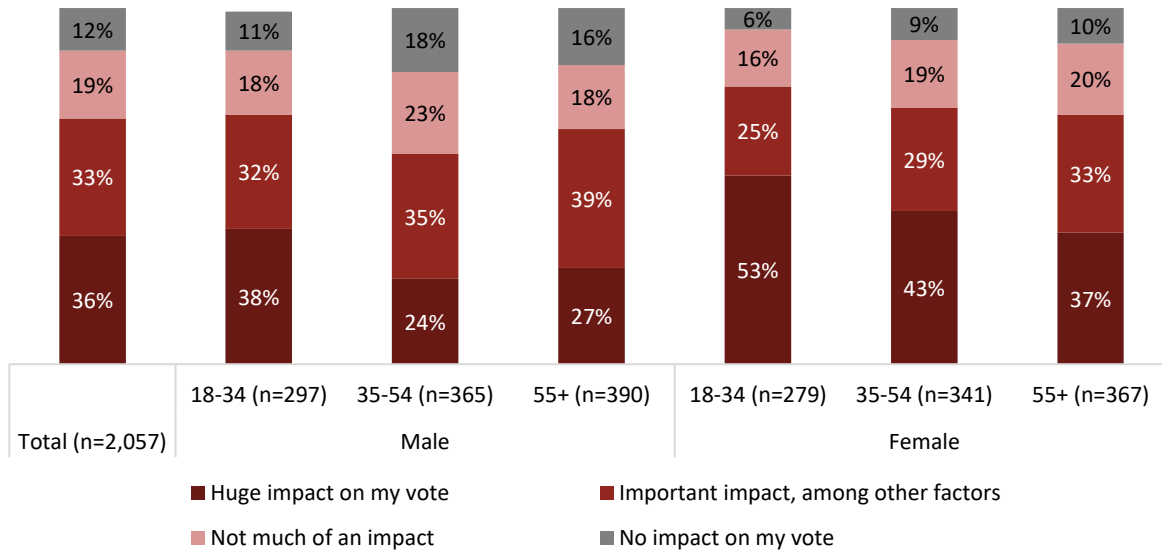
Part Two: Social Values, Faith and Canadian Policy

How much would stance on same-sex marriage, abortion affect vote?

As noted previously, two of the most common discussions on leaders' religious views centered on how they might affect policy and legislation on abortion and same-sex marriage. Thus, the Angus Reid Institute asked Canadians how likely it is that a leader's views on these issues would affect their vote. Young women, those under the age of 35, are considerably more likely than all other age and gender cohorts to say that these are a huge consideration. That said, for seven-in-ten overall (69%), views on these issues are likely have an impact on their decision to vote for a given party.

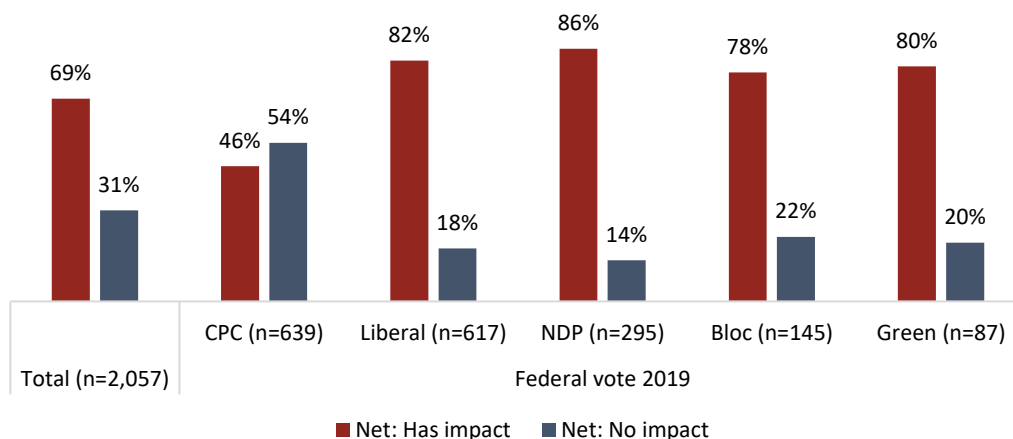
Note that this question does not investigate directionality – that is, whether a person is for or against certain regulations on these issues – it only asks whether Canadians personally consider a leader's stance while making a voting decision:

Would a party leader's personal views on issues such as abortion and same sex marriage have an impact on your own decision as to whether or not you'd vote for them?



Political ideology, however, does offer some insight. Half of those who supported the Conservative Party say a leaders' stance on such social issues is important to their vote. For supporters of the other federal parties, the importance is increased considerably:

Would a party leader's personal views on issues such as abortion and same sex marriage have an impact on your own decision as to whether or not you'd vote for them?

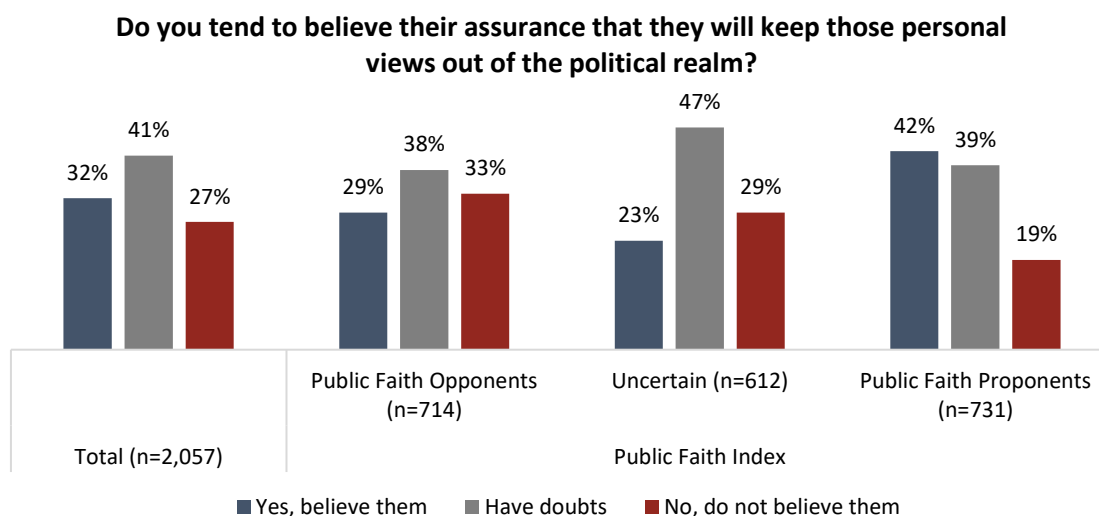


Just one-third would trust a politician to leave their personal views aside

Canadians were then asked to examine a politician’s stated willingness to put aside his or her own religious views while holding office. Respondents were asked:

“Suppose you hear a party leader acknowledge they are personally pro-life and believe abortion is wrong, but also say they will definitely not support any attempts to introduce any legislation that would restrict a woman’s right to choose an abortion. Do you tend to believe their assurance that they will keep those personal views out of the political realm?”

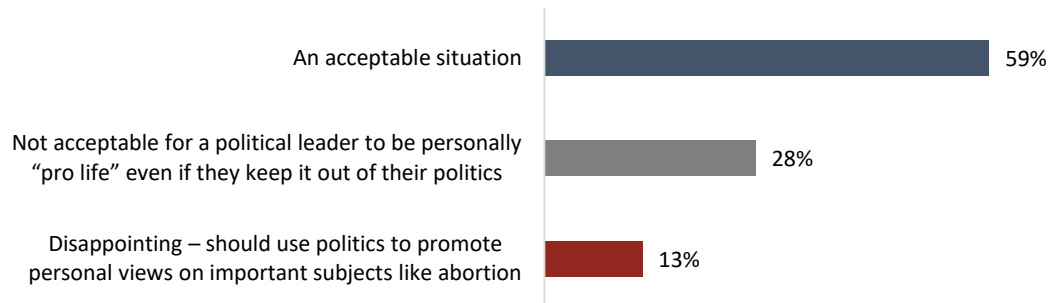
Just one-third of Canadians (32%) overall say that they would trust a politician at their word in this case, while four-in-ten say they would have doubts (41%) and another one-quarter (27%) say they would not believe the person at all (27%). Public Faith Proponents are much more likely to believe them, while Opponents are most likely to dismiss their word outright.



Interestingly, while this issue appears to have hindered Andrew Scheer in the minds of some voters, former prime ministers Jean Chretien, a Roman Catholic, and Stephen Harper, an Evangelical Christian, were both successful as Prime Ministers while holding personal views at odds with Canada’s policy on abortion rights. An additional datapoint confirms the potential for the issue to be navigated effectively.

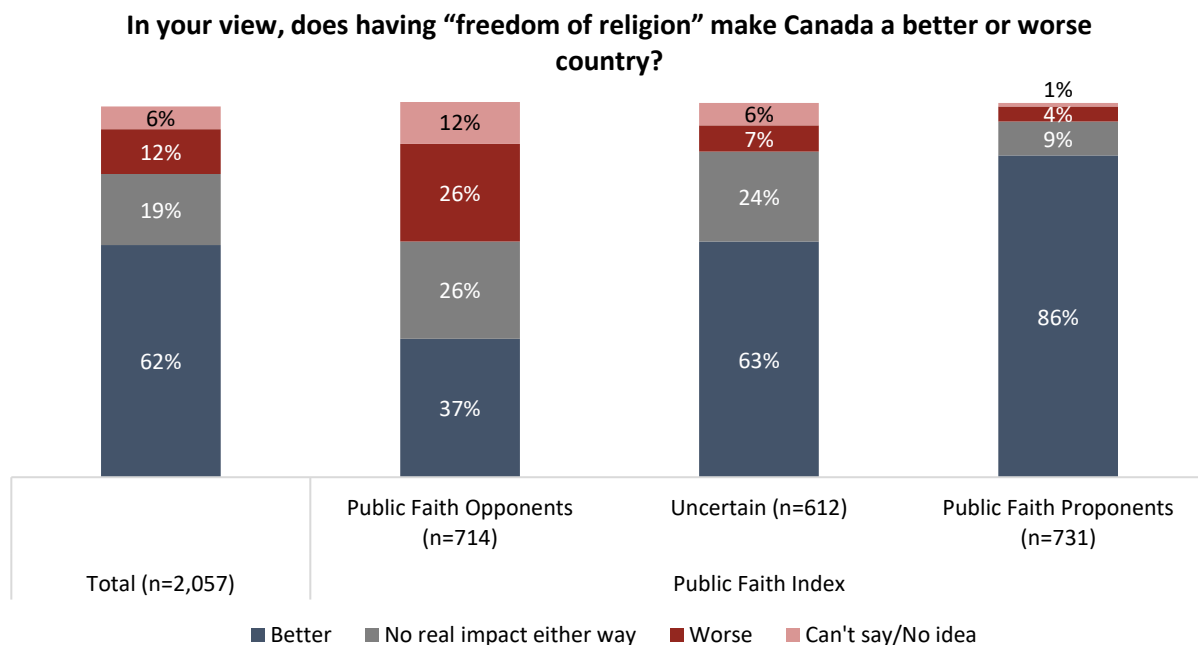
In a hypothetical situation where a politician makes it clear their own pro-life views would not influence their political actions, most Canadians say this would be acceptable.

Suppose it becomes clear that they are 100% convicted when they say their own “pro-life” views will not enter their politics and actions in office. Would you consider that:



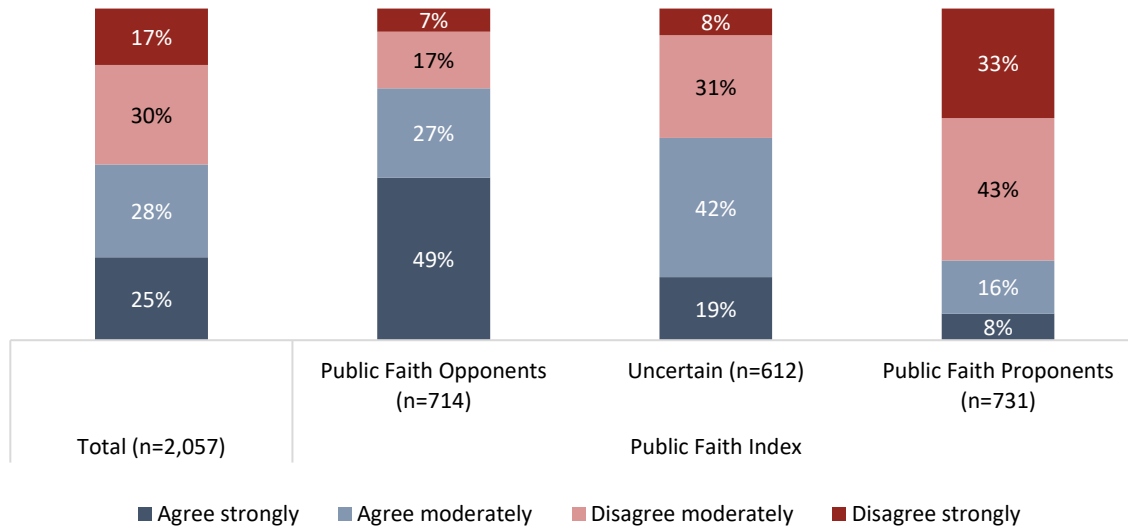
Support for freedom of religion, but also secularism

Some of this may speak to competing perspectives in Canadian society when it comes to faith in the public square. Consider first that only a slim minority (12% overall) say that freedom of religion worsens Canada:



That said, while Canadians are firmly in favour of freedom of religion, they are divided near-evenly about whether the role of faith should be increasing or decreasing in public life. Half (53%) say that reducing the presence of faith in public life is a sign of progress, while half (47%) disagree. This question is among the most polarizing when measured against the Public Faith Index:

Agree vs Disagree: Reducing the presence of religion in our public life is a sign of progress in our society



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

For detailed results by religious identity, [click here](#).

Agree vs Disagree: Reducing the presence of religion in our public life is a sign of progress in our society				
	Total (n= 2,057)	Public faith opponents (n=714)	Uncertain (n=612)	Public faith proponents (n=731)
Agree Strongly	25%	49%	19%	8%
Agree Moderately	28%	27%	42%	16%
Disagree Moderately	30%	17%	31%	43%
Disagree Strongly	17%	7%	8%	33%

In your view, does having “freedom of religion” make Canada a better or worse country?				
	Total (n= 2,057)	Public faith opponents (n=714)	Uncertain (n=612)	Public faith proponents (n=731)
Better	62%	37%	63%	86%
No real impact either way	19%	26%	24%	9%
Worse	12%	26%	7%	4%
Can’t Say/No idea	6%	12%	6%	1%