

Immigration in Canada: Does recent change in forty year opinion trend signal a blip or a breaking point?

Historical analysis finds preference for fewer, not more immigrants, regardless of actual levels

August 21, 2018 – Against the backdrop of more frequent, and increasingly fraught conversations about policy regarding immigration and migration to Canada, analysis of current and historical public opinion data by the Angus Reid Institute finds that half of Canadians would prefer to see the federal government's current immigration targets of 310,000 new permanent residents for 2018 decreased.

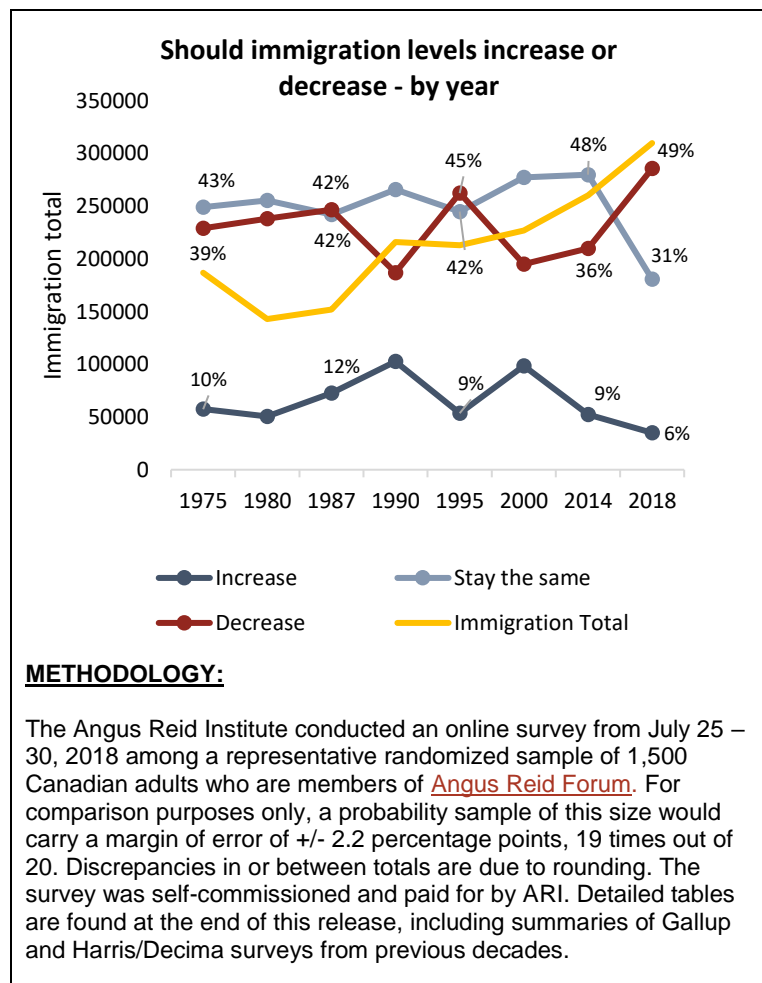
For those currently opposed, the qualifications of immigrants do not appear to matter. While Canadians are [generally positive](#) about the economic benefits of immigration for the country, across each of the three major classes of permanent residents – economic, family and refugee/humanitarian – a majority of those who say immigration is too high also say that each of these individual group totals should be reduced.

This analysis finds that over the course of four decades, the number of Canadians saying immigration is either at the right level or should be increased has remained above fifty per cent, even as immigration levels have consistently risen, beginning under the Mulroney government in the 1980's. Over the same period of time, the number saying immigration levels should be decreased has fluctuated within the 40 to 50 per cent range, suggesting the issue has been a source of division for more than 40 years.

The most recent data reveals a notable change, however. As immigration targets have risen from 260,000 to 310,000 between 2014 and 2018, so too have the number of people saying there should be fewer immigrants to Canada: one-third (36%) said this in 2014, half (49%) say it now.

More Key Findings:

- Half of Canadians (49%) say that the 2018 target of 310,000 is too high. Three-in-ten see that number as about right, while the rest say it is either too low (6%) or they are unsure (14%)



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- Past Liberal and NDP voters are far more inclined to say that levels are “about right” (41% and 35% respectively) than 2015 Conservative voters – two-thirds of whom (67%) say immigration should be reduced.
- Overall, however a significant segment – at least four-in-ten who voted for each of the three main parties in 2015 say immigration levels should be reduced
- Educational attainment appears to be a factor in views about immigration levels. Those with a high school education or less are nearly twice as likely as university educated Canadians to say that levels should be reduced (59% to 32%).

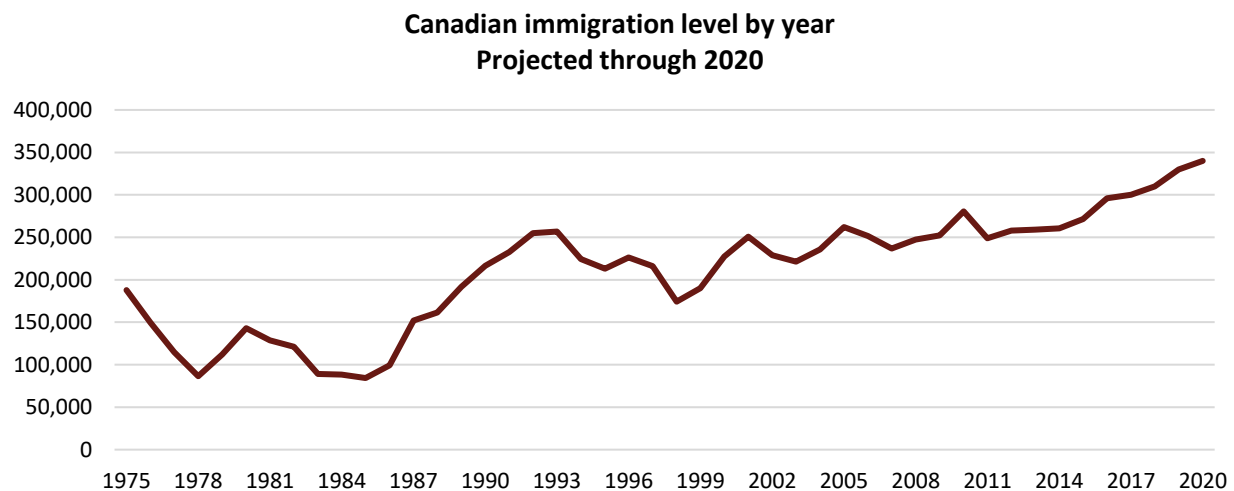
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Too much immigration?

While this analysis studies long term trends and current public opinion about immigration levels, it is far from the last word on a complex subject. In the coming months the Angus Reid Institute will delve deeper into this issue, looking at the unique attitudes and beliefs that make up opinion on immigration to Canada.

The Liberal government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has raised the target for new permanent residents from approximately 250,000 under the Conservative government of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. This has arguably brought attention to an issue that generally does not register as top of mind for most Canadians, who are often most concerned about economic issues and health care. The target for 2017 was 300,000, rising to 310,000 for this year and increasing incrementally in the coming years to 340,000 in 2020:



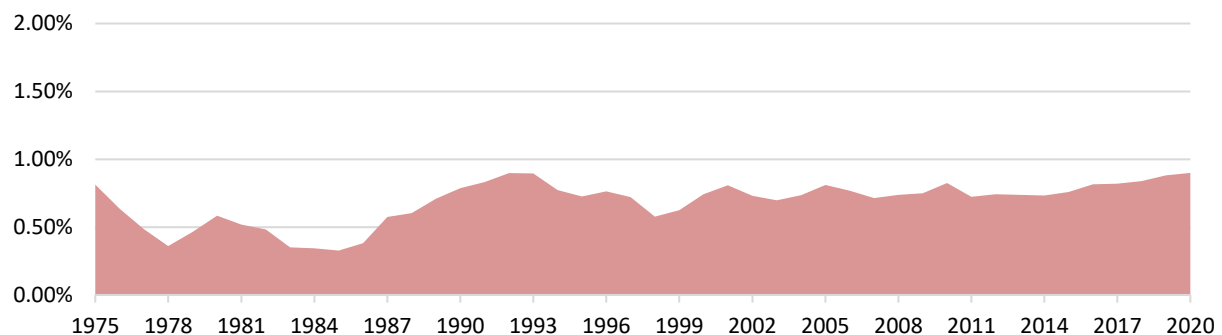
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These current targets equate to roughly 0.8 per cent of the total population, rising closer to 0.9 per cent in 2020 and are in line with the proportion that Canada has accepted since 1990. At that time, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his Conservative government were in the midst of tripling immigration totals during the party's 9-year term.

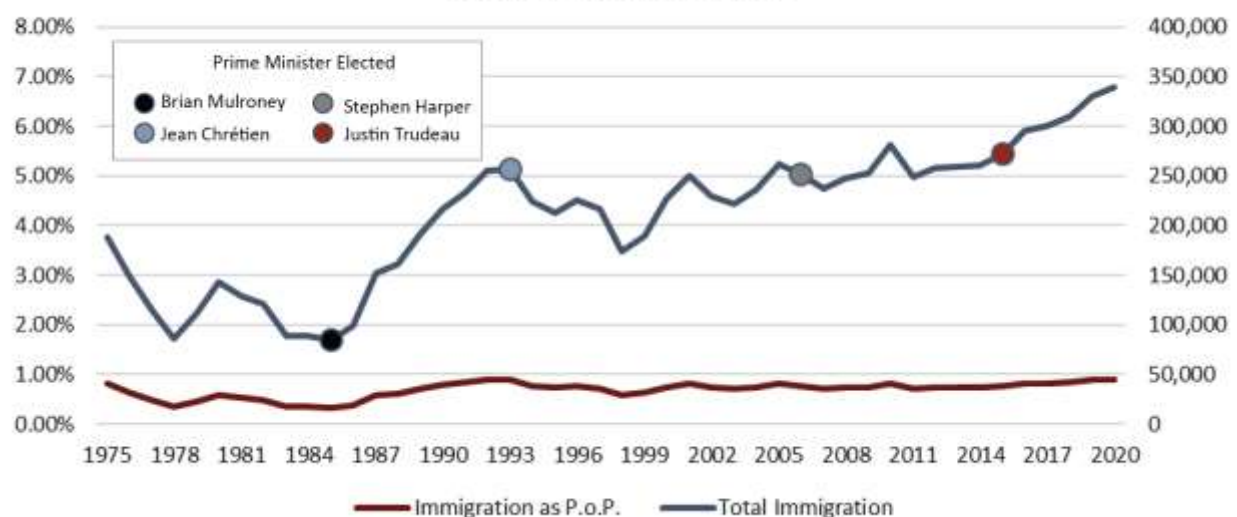
Recent increases in targets pale in comparison to the pre-First World War rush, which peaked at more than 400,000 immigrants in 1913, representing more than five per cent of the population at the time:

**Immigration by percentage of population
Projected through 2026**



The following graph compares these trends. One can clearly see the increase in immigration, with a relatively small change in the percentage of the Canadian population that immigration now accounts for each year.

Canadian immigration trends



As immigration levels have risen in recent years, so to has the [prominence of immigration](#) in public debate. In the United States, President Donald Trump has been at the forefront of this, saying recently that immigration has changed the culture of Europe and has been [bad for that region](#).

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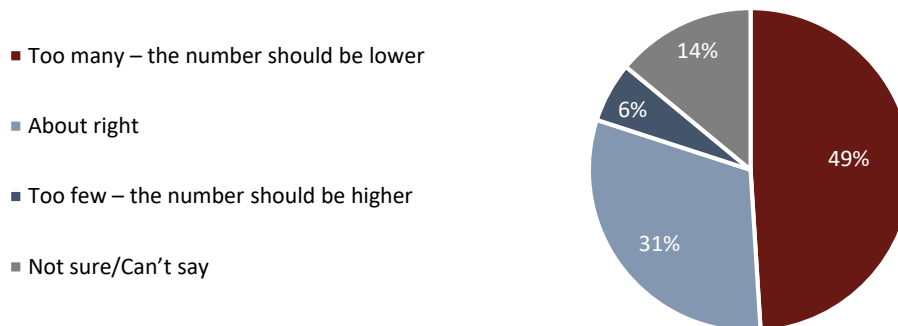
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His message has often been one in direct opposition to the immigrant foundation of both his own country and this one. Trudeau – and indeed most post-war Canadian prime ministers - have [espoused the importance](#) of immigration to both the Canadian economy and progress of this nation. Not all Canadians politicians feel this way. Conservative MP Maxime Bernier recently [criticized Trudeau](#) and the federal government for creating “a cult of diversity” which threatens to erode Western values in Canada. This speaks to a sense among the Canadian public that they would like newcomers to do more [to fit in](#) and adopt Canadian values rather than hold on to customs from their previous home country.

[Related: What makes us Canadian?](#)

While concerns about asylum seekers crossing the border have Canadians particularly worried (read recent Angus Reid Institute polling on that issue [here](#)) it appears the desire to allow fewer newcomers to Canada extends further – to official, vetted, government sponsored immigrants. Overall, half of the Canadian population says immigration levels are too high (49%). Three-in-ten say that 310,000 this year is the right number (31%), while a handful would like to see more people coming to Canada (6%):

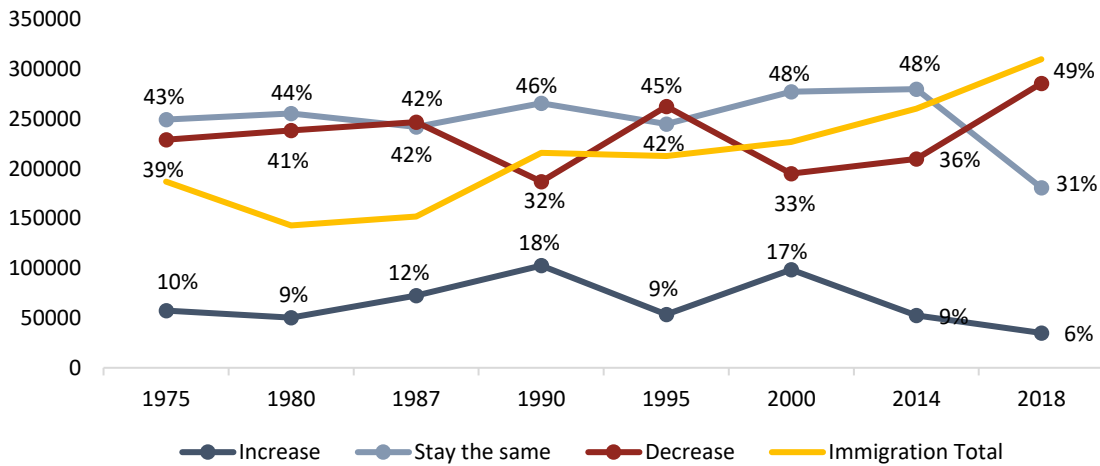
What is your opinion on this? Would you say 310,000 new permanent residents in 2018 is ...



It is important to note Canadians have been generally averse to the idea of accepting more immigrants for several decades. Analyzing historical data from Gallup Canada, Harris/Decima and Angus Reid, the Angus Reid Institute notes that since 1975, the number of Canadians saying this country should increase immigration levels has never exceeded one-in-five. Instead, they have been much more likely to prefer the status quo or a reduction to immigration levels.

The 2018 increase in immigration does appear to be correlated with a rise in the proportion of Canadians saying levels are too high. The number today is comparable with 1995, the year that Jean Chretien announced a [“landing fee”](#) for new immigrants and a plan from the federal government to reduce in immigration overall:

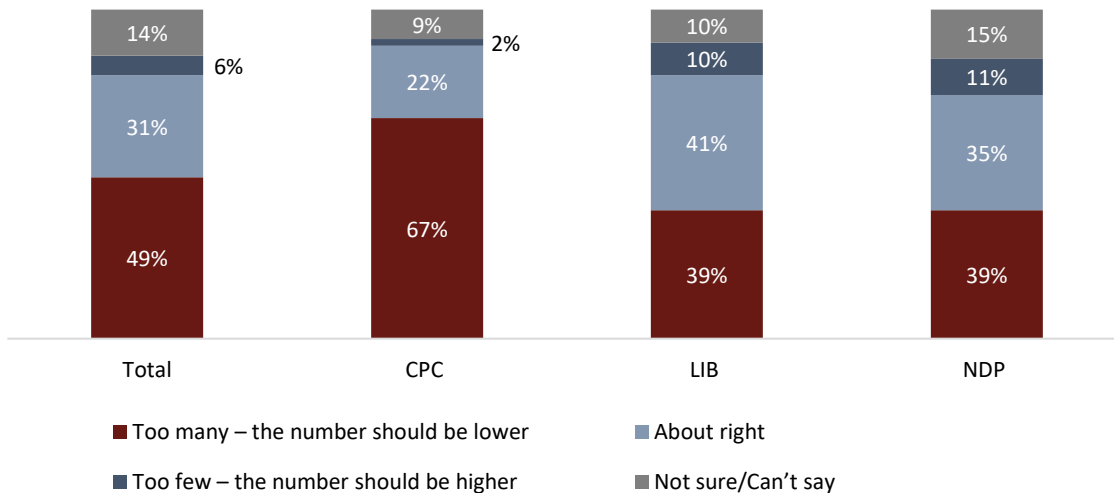
Should immigration levels increase or decrease - by year



Politics, education drive opinion

Whatever the long-term trends, it is the current situation that may present a more immediate political problem for the Trudeau government. Indeed, while past Conservative voters are most critical of immigration levels, past Liberal supporters are four times more likely to prefer a reduction to an increase, as are past NDP voters:

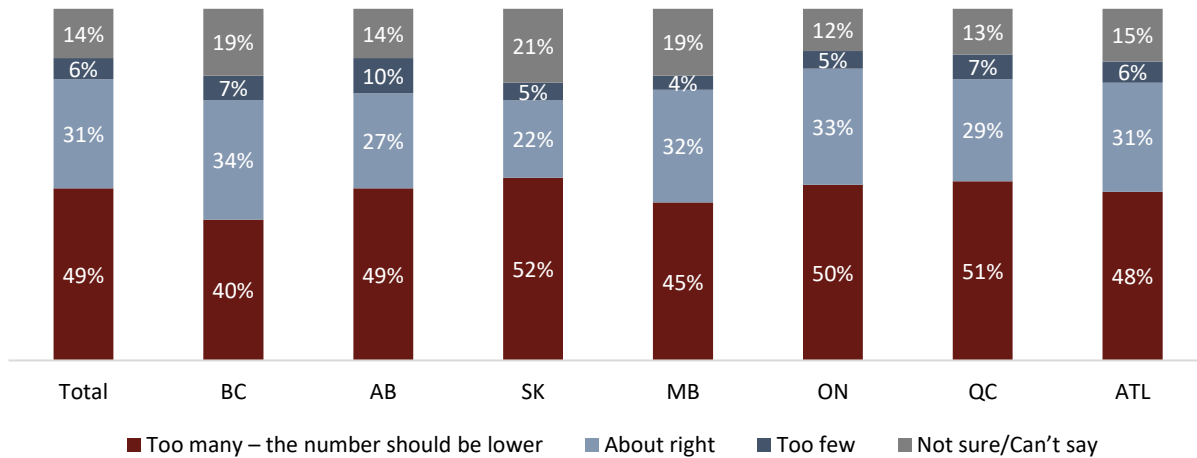
What is your opinion on this? Would you say 310,000 new permanent residents in 2018 is ...



Regionally, British Columbia and Manitoba are slightly more amenable to increased immigration – both are divided between levels being too high or about right – but half of residents in the rest of the country

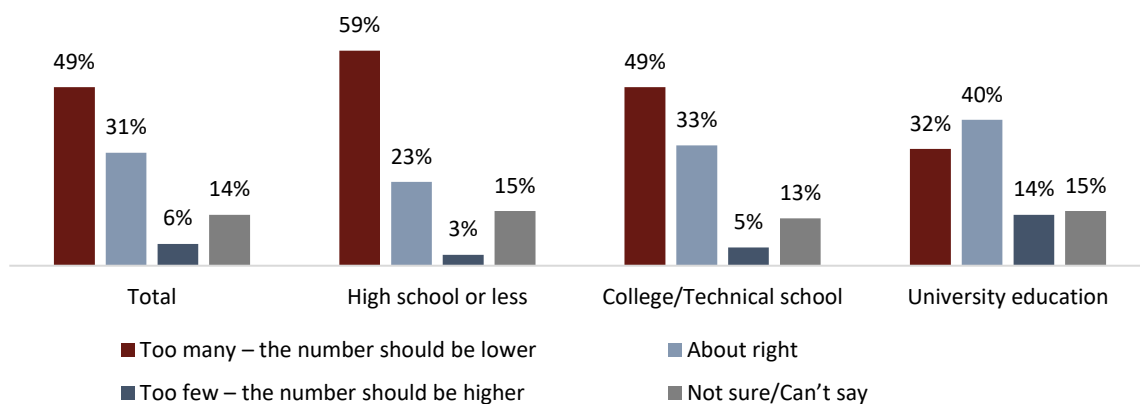
say levels should be reduced. In Ontario, the province where most immigrants settle by a wide margin, one-third (33%) are satisfied with national levels, while half (50%) say they should be reduced:

What is your opinion on this? Would you say 310,000 new permanent residents in 2018 is ...



A notable factor in the likelihood of supporting increased immigration is a university education. Those with degrees are twice as likely to say more immigrants should be accepted, and significantly less likely to say that too many are already coming into this country, though three-in-ten (32%) still do:

What is your opinion on this? Would you say 310,000 new permanent residents in 2018 is ...



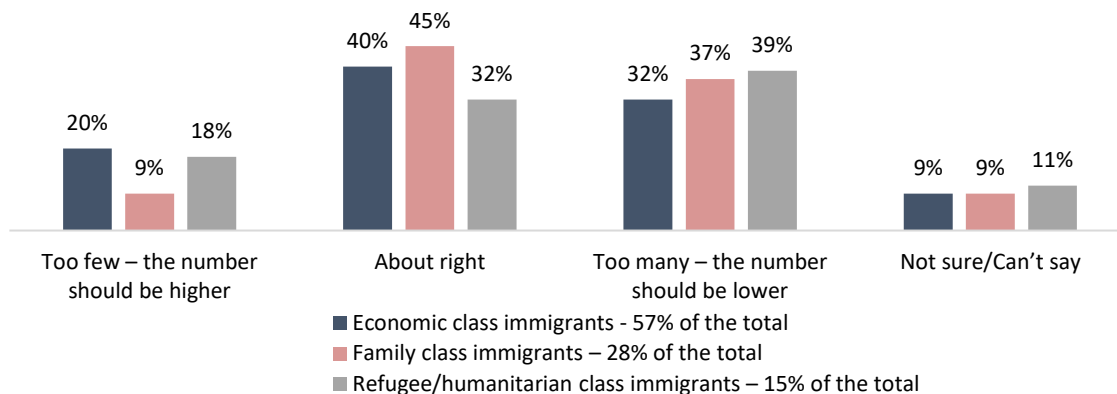
Views of different immigration classes

Not all immigrants come to Canada under the same circumstances and with the same skills. Generally speaking, permanent residents fit into one of three groups, distributed for 2018 as follows:

- 57 per cent are expected to be within the “economic class”. These are people who come to Canada to work, including caregivers, skilled labourers, and professionals
- 28 per cent are expected to be “family class”. These are people who are sponsored by a relative who is already a Canadian citizen or permanent resident
- 15 per cent are expected to be “refugee” or “humanitarian” class. These are people who are fleeing conflict or persecution abroad

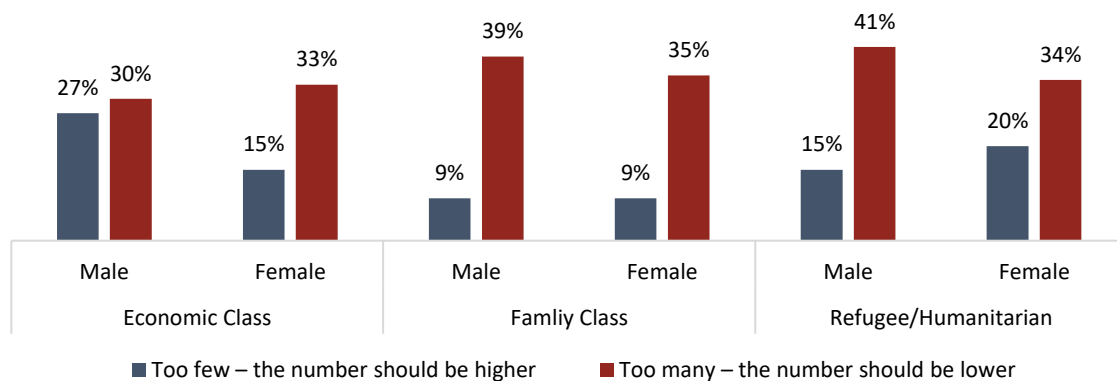
Having presented these descriptions and proportions to respondents, the Angus Reid Institute asked whether there were too many, too few, or about the right number of each being offered entry. When looking at this issue with more nuance, approximately one-in-five show support for more economic and humanitarian cases being allowed:

What are your views on these immigration proportions?



Men are significantly more supportive of economic class immigrants than any other type, while women are most likely to say Canada should take in more from the refugee and humanitarian class:

Male vs Female opinions on immigration totals



Economic Class

The largest group of permanent residents is made up of so-called economic class immigrants. There are a number of streams wherein these individuals can achieve permanent residency, including the [federal](#)

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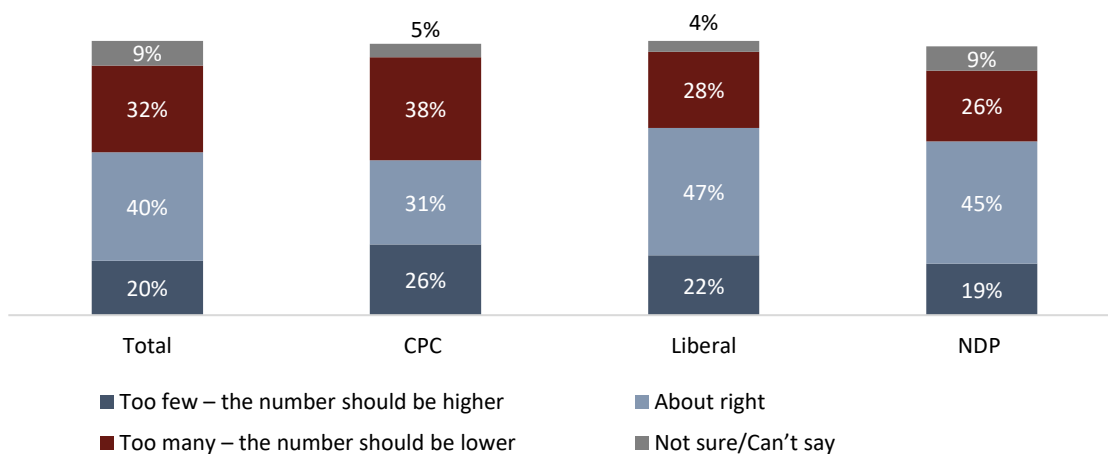
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skilled worker and provincial nominee programs. While immigration is perceived skeptically by some Canadians, its value to others in society is immense.

A recent report from the Conference Board of Canada suggests that if Canada reduced levels of newcomers the country would experience a shrinking labour force, more difficulty funding social programs and weaker economic growth. Perhaps in recognition of this, Canadians are least likely to say this group should be reduced and most likely to say it should be increased in size.

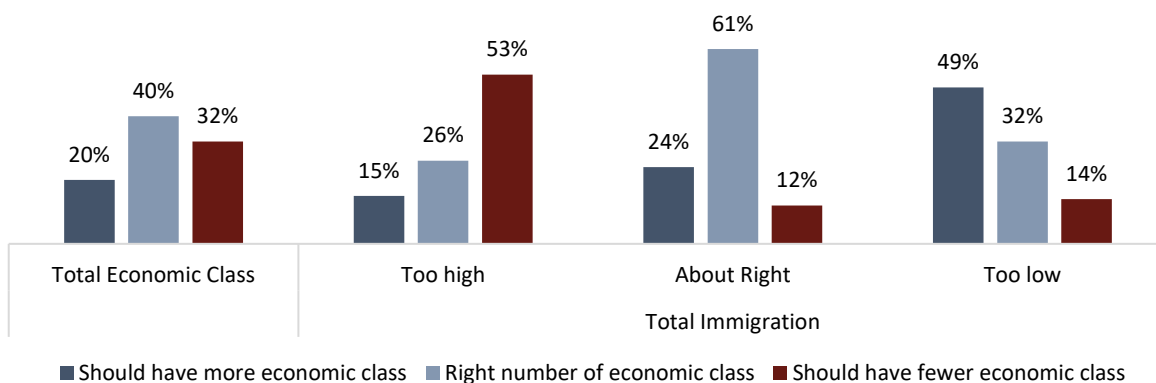
Notably, close to half of New Democrats and Liberals are satisfied with the current number of economic class immigrants, and Conservatives are most likely to say Canada should *both* increase (26%) and decrease (38%) this number:

Economic class immigrants - 57% of the total



While 40 per cent of Canadians overall say the country should increase this proportion of immigration, that number rises to half (49%) among those who say 310,000 is too few overall. Conversely, half of those who say immigration is too high are also of the opinion that Canada needs fewer economic migrants:

View of economic class immigrants versus total immigration

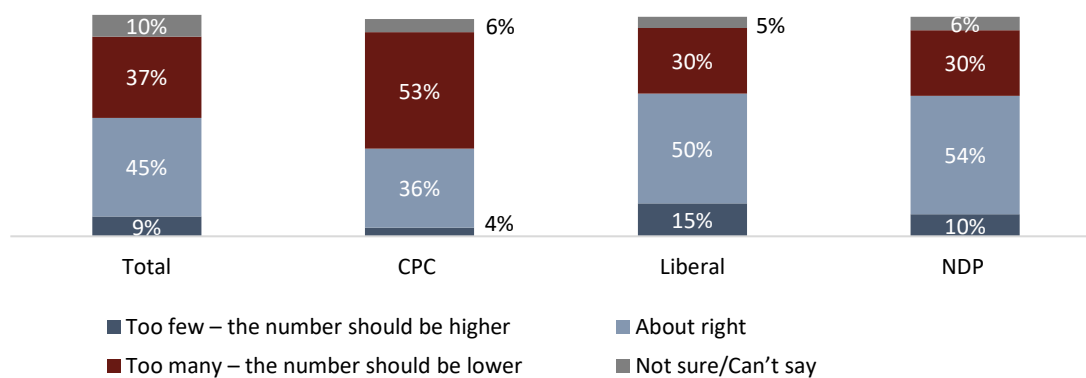


Family Class

The least supported group of immigrants when it comes to Canadian public opinion are those who enter as “family class”. That is, they are sponsored by a relative who is already in the country as a permanent resident or citizen.

Overall, only one-in-ten (9%) say that this group should comprise a greater portion of the total, with four-times that many saying they should account for fewer of this country’s immigrants.

Family class immigrants – 28% of the total



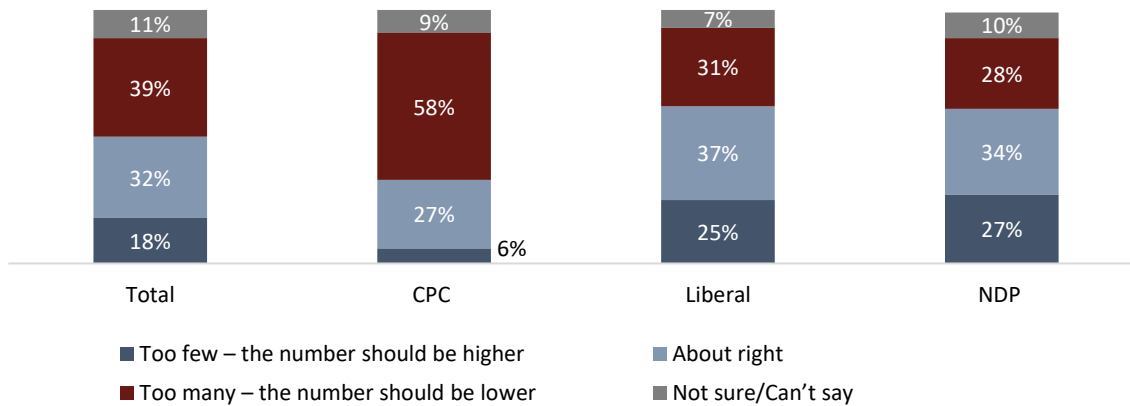
Much of the pushback in this area may be due to the perception, and in many cases fact, that family class immigrants are less economically productive and more taxing on the nation’s social services. Parent and grandparent sponsorship can come alongside Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement benefits, leading many to question the balance of family needs with taxpayer burden.

Refugee/Humanitarian Class

The group of permanent residents that generates the largest political divide in opinion are those in the refugee and humanitarian class. The global refugee crisis has only exacerbated the needs of this group, but only half of Canadians say the number should stay the same (32%) or increase (18%). Four-in-ten (39%) would like to see the total lowered.

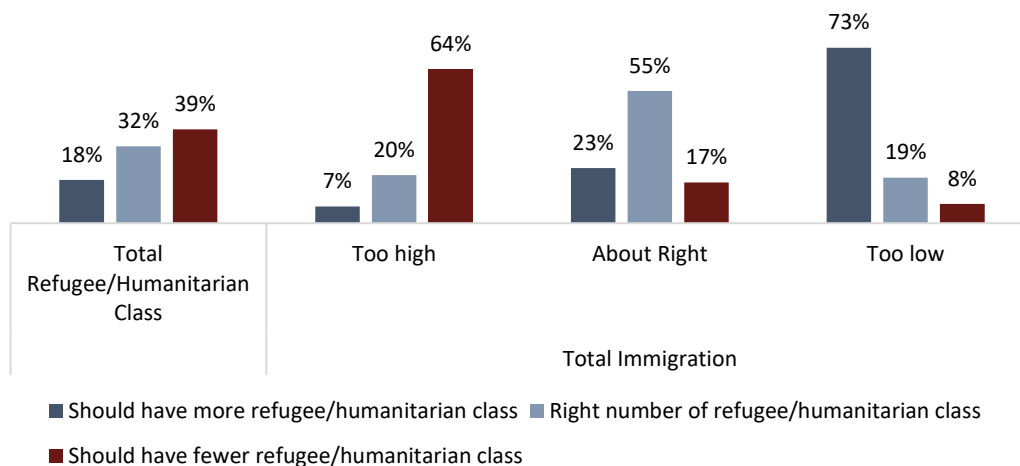
More than half of 2015 Conservative party voters say that there are too many refugee and humanitarian cases entering the country, and only six per cent say the opposite. Liberal and NDP supporters are much more divided. Close to equal groups in each party say that Canada should increase this proportion or decrease it, with a significant number supporting the total, as-is:

Refugee/humanitarian class immigrants – 15% of the total



This group generates the highest level of support for an increase among those who say Canada should be opening up its doors to more immigrants. More than seven-in-ten (73%) from this group say this class should be expanded. Conversely, those who say immigration is too high in general are most likely to favour a decrease among the humanitarian class:

View of refugee/humanitarian class immigrants versus opinion of total immigration



*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](#).

Opinion on Immigration levels across time					
Polling Firm, Date of Poll	Sample Size	Should Immigration totals: (Note preamble wording changes slightly for some questions)			
		Increase	Stay the Same	Decrease	Don't Know
Angus Reid Institute, 2018	1,500	6%	31%	49%	14%
Harris/Decima, 2014	3,016	9%	48%	35%	8%
Gallup, 2000	999	17%	46%	33%	4%
Gallup, 1995	1,015	9%	42%	45%	4%
Gallup, 1990	1,051	18%	46%	32%	4%
Gallup, 1987	1,051	12%	42%	42%	4%
Gallup, 1980	1,062	9%	44%	41%	6%
Gallup, 1975	1,067	10%	43%	39%	8%

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