

Faith in the Public Square? A comprehensive study of the segments of Canadian society

Public Faith Proponents more likely to be younger, more educated, than those who voice Opposition

November 23, 2018 – The appropriateness of faith in the public square is often a source of debate in Canada. There are pockets of Canadian society where faith is [valued](#) and areas where it is [discouraged](#).

A new study from the Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with [Cardus](#), finds that when it comes to this debate, the Canadians taking each side may not be those that one may expect.

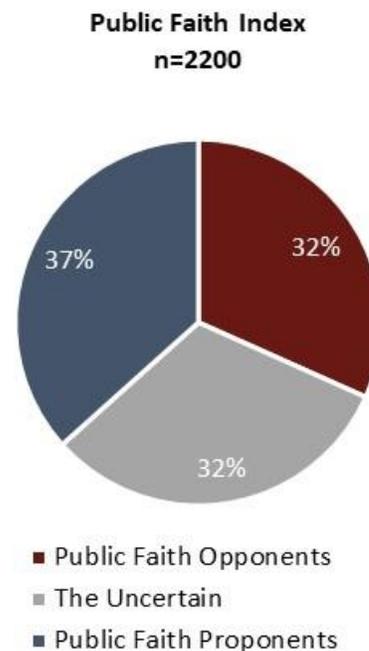
Using responses to 17 questions about their openness to faith in both their own life and the public square, researchers created a Public Faith Index and constructed three groups – Public Faith Proponents (37% of the population), Public Faith Opponents (32%), and the Uncertain (32%).

Notably, the results may challenge a traditional view of who Canadians within the Proponent group are. While one may assume this group is more likely to be made up of older and more Conservative voting Canadians, this study finds Proponents more likely to be younger, more highly educated, and largely Liberal-supporting.

This suggests that a range of Canadians – not just the highly religious – appear willing to accept certain elements of faith in public life. In fact, one-quarter of those who are most accepting of public faith have never read a religious text. Similarly, those with more strongly held religious beliefs may not necessarily be accommodating of the beliefs of others, or want to see them participating in the public discourse.

More Key Findings:

- Three-quarters of Public Faith Proponents (73%) say that the contributions of faith-based communities to Canada are more good than bad, or good outright, while just six per cent of Public Faith Opponents hold this opinion.



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from October 30 – November 12, 2018 among a representative randomized sample of 2200 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.0 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 ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Dave Korzinski, Research Associate: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org

- Half of Public Faith Proponents (50%) strongly agree that having a religious or faith-focused upbringing helps shape good citizenship characteristics. The Uncertain are more likely to moderately agree (53%) while two-thirds of Opponents (68%) disagree with this idea
- Canadians are deeply divided about the relevance of faith communities in addressing social issues. Regardless of political affiliation, half say these groups are increasing or maintaining relevance, while half say they are losing or have already lost it
- Seven-in-ten (68%) Canadians say that the basics of world religions should be taught in public high schools, and that government leaders should be knowledgeable about the tenets of major religions (70%)

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Part 1: Views on different elements of faith in Canada

Some of the most divisive conversations in Canadian society this century have been about religion's place in public life. Whether it's the appropriateness of [public prayer](#) at council meetings, the acceptability of [face coverings](#) in public view, or the [funding of religious schools](#), Canadians are confronting a number of issues that test the multifaith fabric of their society. It is therein, important to assess where Canadians stand on these debates for the furtherance of policy discussions.

The questions asked in this survey fall thematically into three broad groups:

- contributions from faith groups to life in Canada,
- the relevance of religion today in society,
- and religious freedom and respect for religion.

The first aspect of the religious landscape to explore is views regarding the contributions of religious and faith communities, and whether these have a positive impact on a person's development and contributions as a citizen within Canada.

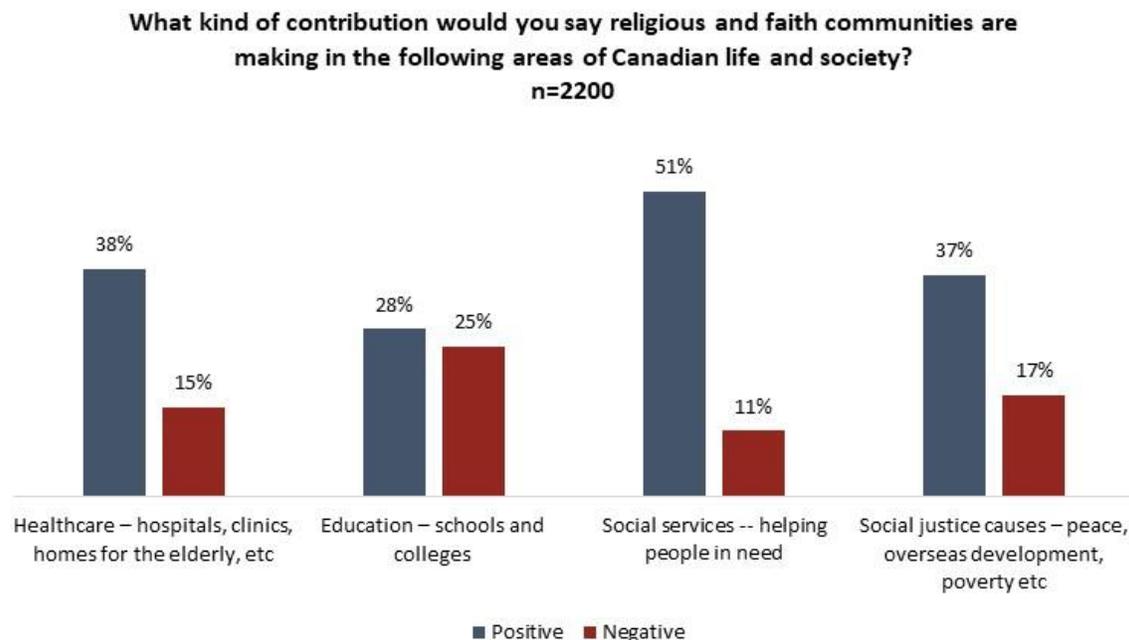
Contribution to life in Canada

Canadians are generally positive when it comes to assessing the role of faith in public spaces. From assisting in social services, to operating hospitals, to advocating for social justice and human rights, Canadians are significantly more likely to say the contributions from religious groups are more positive

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Dave Korzinski, Research Associate: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org

than negative. There is one exception, however, where Canadians are more divided – the place of faith in education:



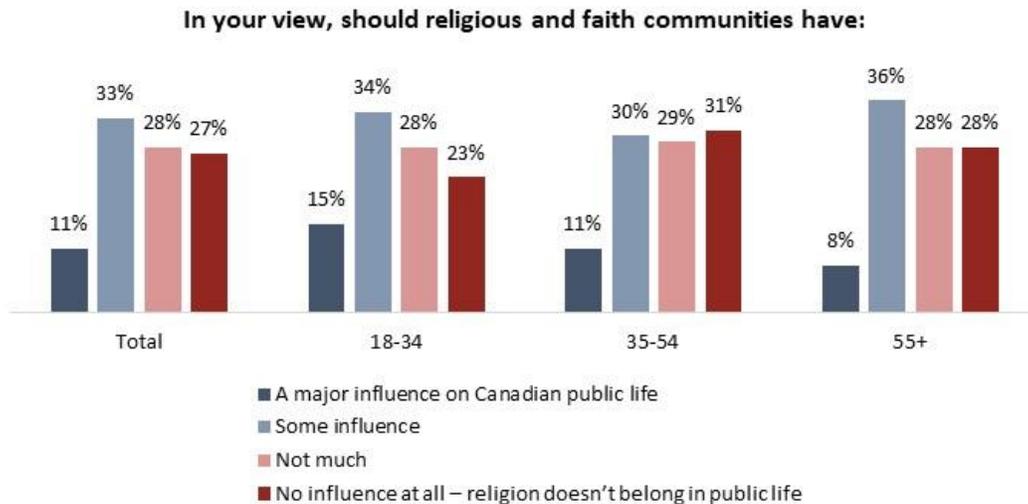
In some cases, those most supportive of the intersection of faith and public life are individuals in non-traditional demographics. For example, while they are often less likely to profess an active faith or take part in religious activities, younger, and university educated Canadians are more likely to recognize contributions from the faith-based community in the aforementioned areas:

Percentage saying religious and faith communities are making “positive” impact in the following areas of Canadian life and society

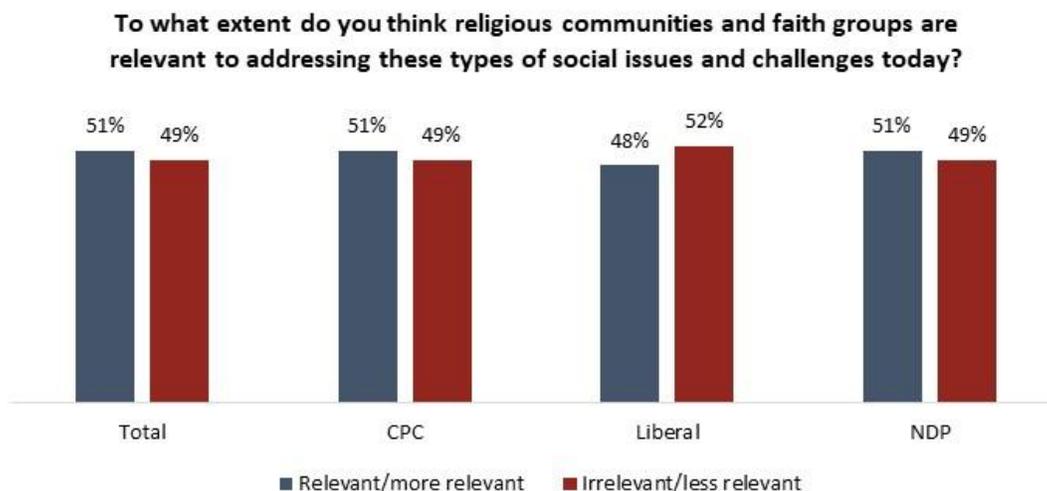
	Total	Age			Education		
		18-34 (622)	35-54 (760)	55+ (818)	High school or less (910)	College/ Trade School (694)	University+ (595)
Healthcare	38%	43%	37%	34%	36%	37%	40%
Education	28%	35%	25%	25%	27%	28%	28%
Social services	51%	57%	50%	48%	46%	50%	61%
Social justice causes	37%	43%	35%	35%	36%	36%	42%

Role and relevance

Although Canadians are more positive than negative regarding the contributions of faith in the public square, just one-in-ten (11%) say religion should ideally have a major influence on Canadian public life. Each age group is most likely to say that religion should have “some” or “not much” of a role in this space:



Canadians are evidently divided over whether or not they would like to see public conversations informed by what they might consider to be more personal beliefs. Asked whether they believe the relevance of religion is growing or receding when it comes to some of the social issues and challenges in the preceding section of this report, significant disagreement is noted. There is no better indicator of this than political affiliation. Regardless of which party they supported in the 2015 election, Canadians are split, resulting in an even divide overall:



Religious freedom and respect for religion

Does freedom of religion make Canada a better country? Most Canadians, roughly six-in-ten (59%) say yes. One-in-five say that they don't think it makes a real impact either way, and 14 per cent believe that it makes Canada worse off:

In your view, does having “freedom of religion” make Canada a better or worse country?							
	Total	Age			Education		
		18-34 (622)	35-54 (760)	55+ (818)	High school or less (910)	College/ Trade School (694)	University+ (595)
Better	59%	64%	57%	55%	51%	57%	72%
Worse	14%	9%	16%	16%	15%	17%	9%
No real impact either way	21%	19%	19%	24%	24%	20%	16%
Not sure/Can't say	7%	8%	8%	5%	10%	6%	3%

If religious freedom is indeed a net positive as most Canadians say, then how do they feel their country scores on this front? Overall, three quarters (73%) say that they feel the government respects their religious community's faith and traditions, however, this drops to 55 per cent among past Conservative voters, and rises significantly among past Liberals (86%) and past New Democrats (75%).

Looking at this at a more interpersonal level, Canadians are more divided. Asked about their own personal values, just one-in-three (32%) say that they feel society makes room for them, while one-quarter feel shut out (23%). A significant group say they have no real opinion on this matter – they either don't know (10%) or say society has no impact on their expression of their own values (35%).

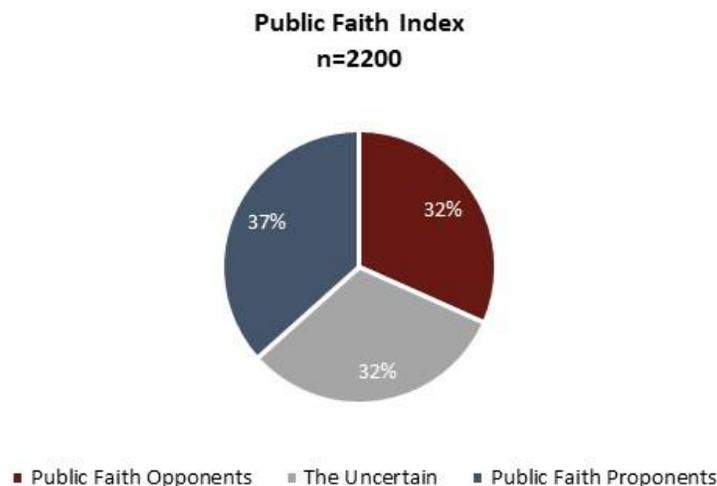
Part 2: Three perspectives on faith in public life

The Angus Reid Institute also created a Public Faith Index and concluded that Canadians can be grouped into three broad categories based on their responses to 17 questions.

Four-in-ten, named the “Public Faith Proponents” (37%), hold a supportive posture when it comes to increasing the public's knowledge of faith and religion and recognizing their importance to society, while one-third (32%) feel the opposite and are categorized as “Public Faith Opponents”. This group generally feels religion should have a reduced role in politics and government. Another third (32%) take the middle position in this debate, with a more mixed view, and are labeled as the Uncertain.

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Dave Korzinski, Research Associate: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org



These groups were created using an “additive index”, which incorporated responses to 17 separate survey questions, dealing with various aspects of faith and religion in public life. Each question’s response was given a score, on a standardized 10-point scale, where responses that were more positive or encouraging regarding the role of faith in public life were worth more, and more hesitant or outright negative responses, were given fewer points. Each respondent was then assigned a score based on the totality of their responses. Researchers separated groups along the Index roughly into thirds, based on their scores. For a detailed look at the questions asked and the scores provided, [please click here](#).

How Canadians see faith in society

While relatively few Canadians believe that faith is contributing to their country in a negative way, the three groups are divided in their levels of ambivalence and positivity. For example, Public Faith Opponents are likely to lean toward ‘more bad than good’ (30%) or ‘a mix of good and bad’ (50%), while Proponents are substantially more likely to choose ‘very good’ (25%), or ‘more good than bad’ (48%) than the two other groups:

Opinions regarding Contribution of Faith to life in Canada				
	Total (2200)	Public Faith Index		
		Public Faith Opponents (694)	The Uncertain (696)	Public Faith Proponents (810)
How would you describe the overall contribution religious and faith communities are making to Canada and Canadian society today?				
Very good	10%	1%	3%	25%
More good than bad	27%	5%	24%	48%
A mix of good and bad	46%	50%	65%	26%
More bad than good	12%	30%	8%	1%
Very bad	5%	15%	1%	-

Similar distributions are noted on questions of values and character. Six-in-ten Canadians (60%) say that religious and faith communities offer strength to Canadian values, including equality and human rights, and two-thirds (65%) believe that faith-based upbringings can help to shape better citizens.

These responses, however, are highly variable between the three sub-groups. Those with an inclination toward more faith in the public square are near unanimous in agreement with these statements, while those opposed are almost as likely to disagree:

Opinions regarding Contribution of Faith to life in Canada				
	Total (2200)	Public Faith Index		
		Public Faith Opponents (694)	The Uncertain (696)	Public Faith Proponents (810)
Religious and faith communities strengthen Canadian values such as equality and human rights:				
Agree strongly	20%	2%	7%	47%
Agree moderately	40%	17%	56%	46%
Disagree moderately	26%	42%	31%	6%
Disagree strongly	14%	39%	6%	-
Having a religious or faith-focused upbringing helps shape good citizenship characteristics:				
Agree strongly	24%	5%	13%	50%
Agree moderately	41%	28%	53%	41%
Disagree moderately	20%	33%	24%	7%
Disagree strongly	15%	35%	10%	1%

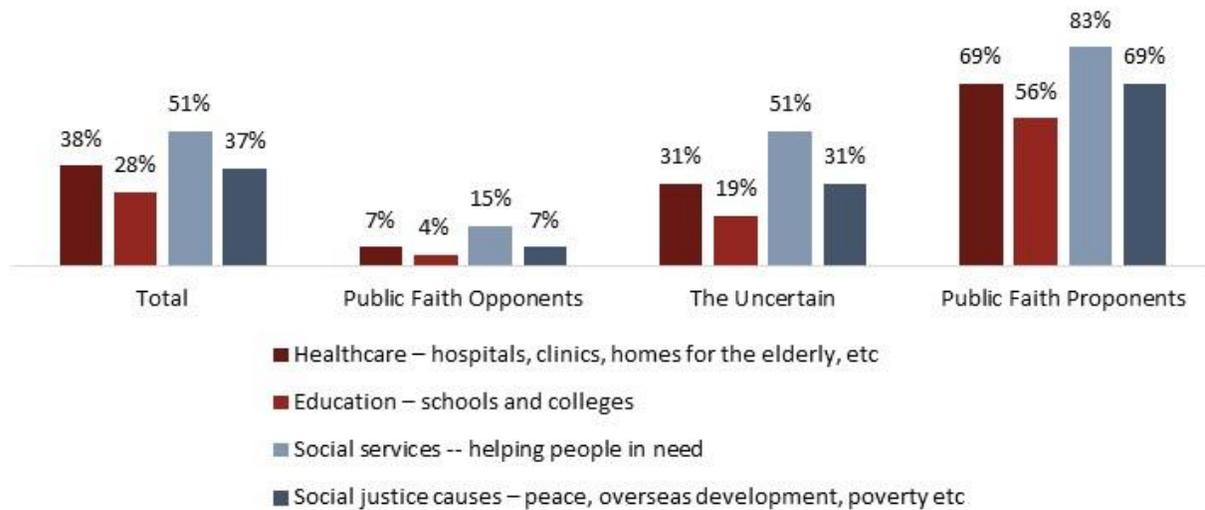
These divisions continue when looking at more concrete examples of how religious communities affect different areas of society. As previously mentioned, the area where Canadians are most likely to say religion has played a positive role is within the social services – helping people in need through community programs and outreach.

Canadians are less likely to say that the influence and actions of faith-based groups have been positive within healthcare, education and social justice causes, though Public Faith Proponents are significantly more encouraged by what they have seen. Notably, on each question, the number of respondents in each group who choose “a mix of good and bad” is higher than those who say faith communities have had a negative impact ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

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Percentage who say the role of faith in each of these areas is "positive" or "very positive"

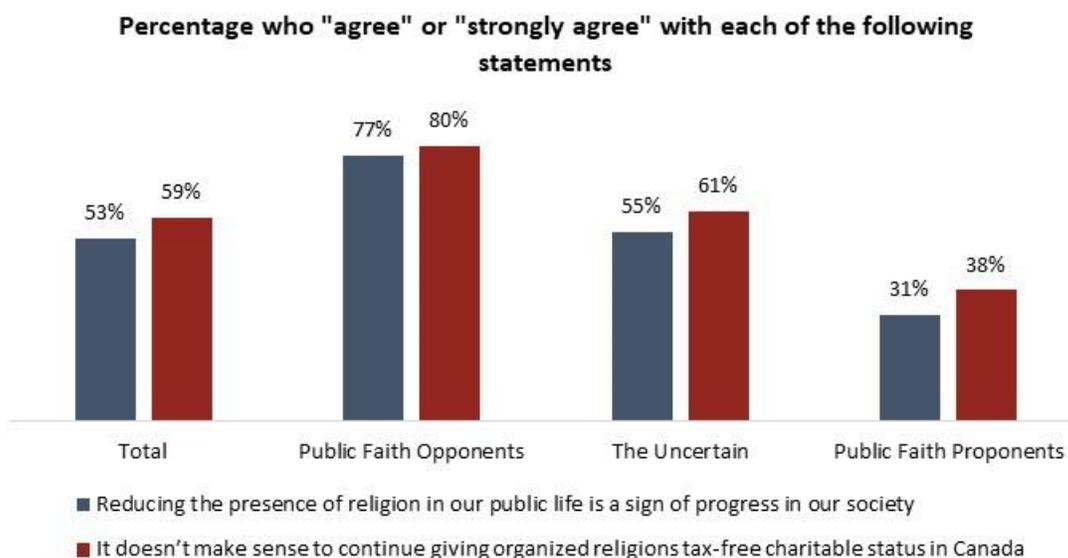


As a whole, Canadians lean in the direction of less influence for faith communities – 56 per cent say that this should be the case, while 44 per cent would like to see more influence. This question is a significant indicator of where someone may fall on the Public Faith Index. Notably, there is a significant source of disagreement between the groups as to whether or not religion *has* as much relevance as it *should have*, as seen in the following responses:

[Related: Faith and Immigration: New Canadians rely on religious communities for material, spiritual support](#)

Opinions regarding the Role and Relevance of Faith in Canada				
	Total (2200)	Public Faith Index		
		Public Faith Opponents (694)	The Uncertain (696)	Public Faith Proponents (810)
In your view, should religious and faith communities have:				
A major influence	11%	1%	6%	24%
Some influence	33%	10%	35%	52%
Not much	28%	28%	39%	20%
No influence at all	27%	61%	20%	5%
To what extent do you think religious communities and faith groups are relevant to addressing these types of social issues and challenges today?				
More relevant than ever	14%	3%	5%	30%
As relevant as ever	37%	14%	45%	49%
Becoming less relevant	35%	47%	42%	20%
No longer relevant as all	14%	36%	7%	1%

Thus, divisions exist over whether a decrease in the presence of religion in public life is a sign of social progress. Half (53%) believe it is, but this view jumps to three-quarters among Public Faith Opponents and drops to less than one-third (31%) among Proponents. Similar divisions apply to the policy of giving tax-free charitable status to organized religions:



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A [recent report](#) from Pew Research ranks Canada as a world leader in religious freedom. As noted previously, Canadians are not *entirely* certain that this is a good thing. That said, the bulk of those who take the negative position on this question are situated within the Opponent group.

Notably, the proportion of each of these three groups that say Canadian society does not make room for their own values is consistent – between 21 and 26 per cent. This segment feels it is being ‘shut out’. Proponents are, however, much more likely to say that they feel Canadian society makes room for their faith and values.

Opinions regarding Freedom and Respect for Faith in Canada				
	Total (2200)	Public Faith Index		
		Public Faith Opponents (694)	The Uncertain (696)	Public Faith Proponents (810)
In your view, does having “freedom of religion” make Canada a better or worse country?				
Better	59%	31%	53%	87%
Worse	14%	29%	12%	3%
No real impact either way	21%	28%	28%	8%
Not sure/Can’t say	7%	12%	7%	2%
Overall, do you feel Canadian society today tends to make room for or shuts out your own personal values and faith?				
Makes room for	32%	16%	25%	52%
Shuts out	23%	26%	21%	22%
No real impact either way	35%	40%	44%	22%
Not sure/Can’t say	10%	18%	11%	4%

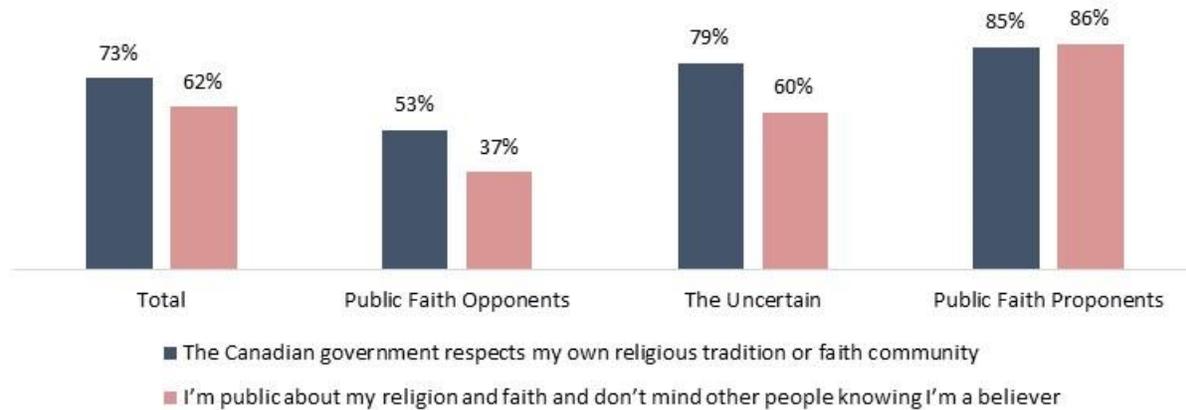
Looking at this at a broader level, three-quarters of Canadians say that they feel the federal government is respectful of their religious community and traditions. This sentiment is much lower among those who do not believe there is as much of a place for faith in public life.

Importantly, those most likely to express comfort displaying their own faith in public are also much more likely to believe that it is appropriate to have faith play a role in the public square.

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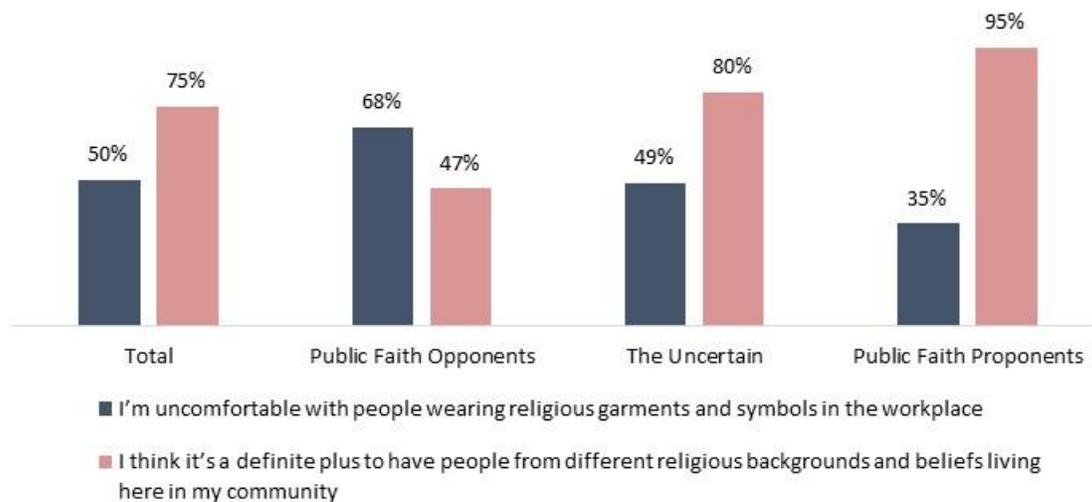
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Percentage who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each of the following statements



Other drivers of Canadians' position on the Public Faith Index include their comfort with religious attire and symbols in the workplace, and their broader beliefs about diversity. Their responses to each of these questions help to further sketch Canadian willingness to create space for religion in their day-to-day lives, and further, in the public sphere:

Percentage who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each of the following statements



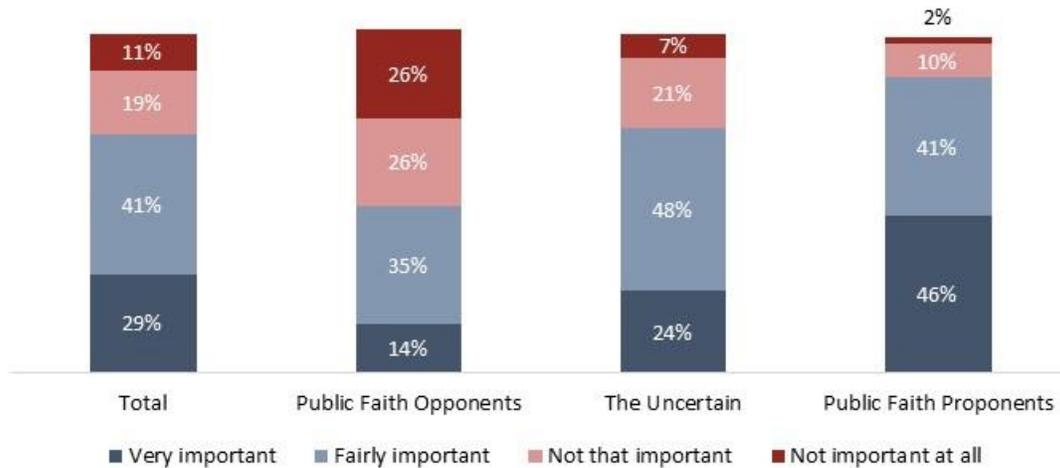
Religious education for leadership?

The relevance of openness to faith in public society weighs on key public policy discussions. Indeed, some proposals that may seem divisive appear to be widely supported. For example, seven-in-ten Canadians (70%) would like to see their government decision-makers be knowledgeable about the basic tenets of the world's major religions. Public Faith Opponents are divided, while others are overwhelmingly supportive of such an idea.

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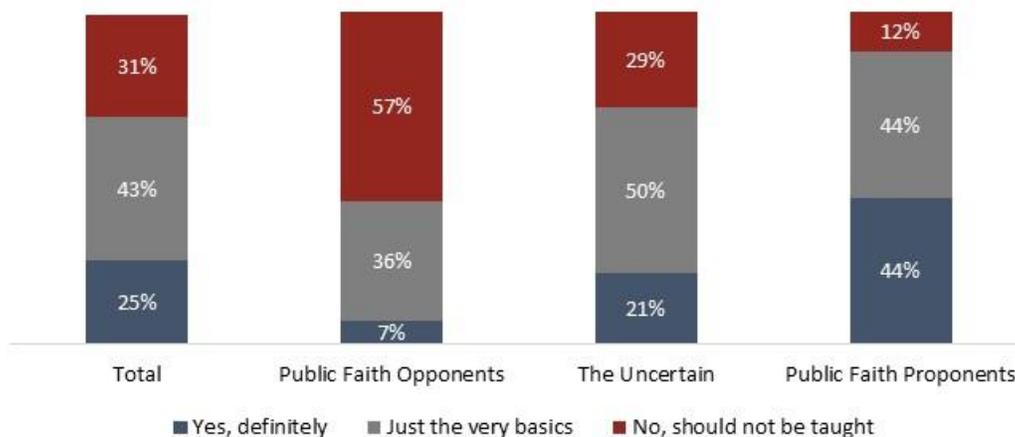
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How important is it for government decision makers to be personally knowledgeable about the basic beliefs of the world's major religions?



A similar level of support is evident when it comes to Canadian public high school curriculum. Just under seven-in-ten (68%) say that at least the basics of the world's major religions should be taught at this level. More than half of the Opponent group disagrees (57%), but those more amenable to faith in public life show significant support for this proposal.

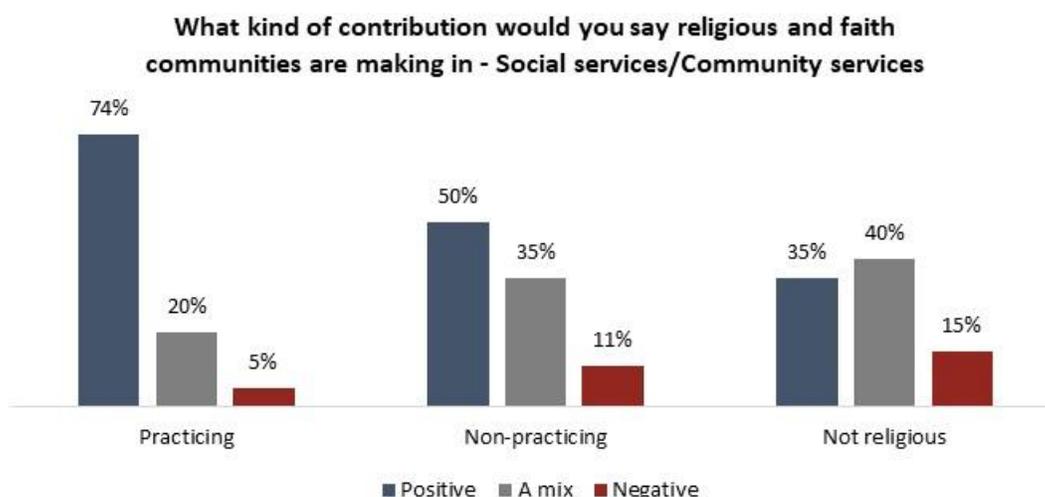
Do you think the basic beliefs of the world's major religions should be taught in Canadian public high schools?



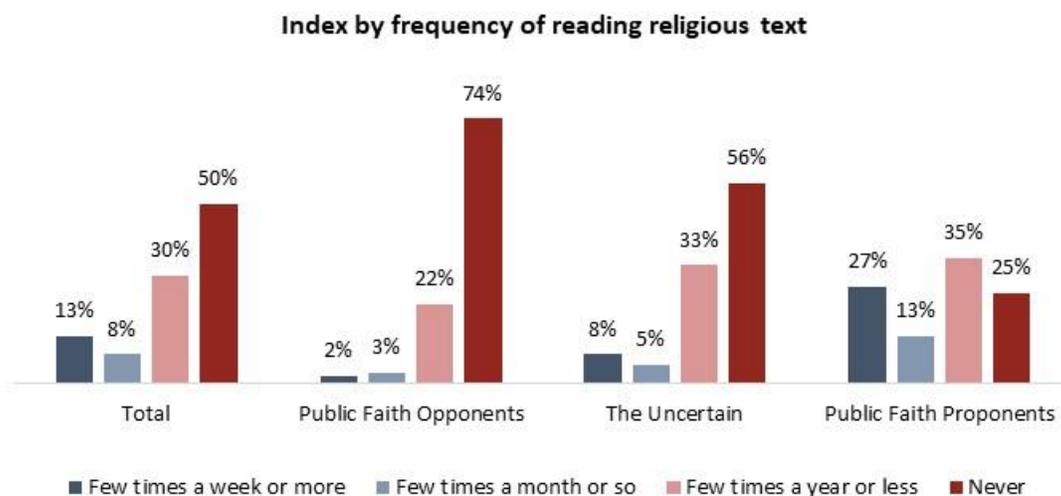
Who is in each segment?

While the conventional wisdom might be that the Proponents would be heavily represented by older, deeply religious and more conservative-minded Canadians, that does not appear to be the case.

This is partially due to the positive views of religion's contributions to Canadian society found among some non-religious respondents, as well as to an absence of strongly *negative* opinions on questions of faith in Canada today. For example, one-third of non-religious Canadians have a positive view of religious and faith communities' contributions to social services, while a plurality take a neutral stance:



Further, consider that among those who are categorized in the Proponent group, one-quarter have never read a religious text, and another 35 per cent say that they do so at most a few times a year:

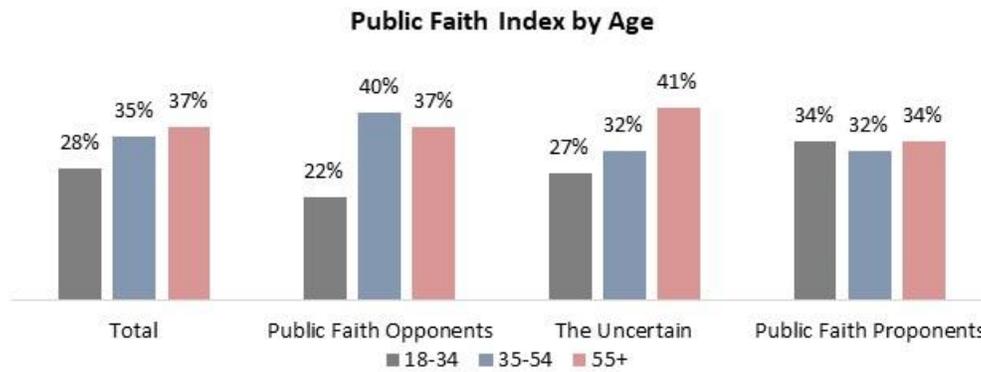


The three groups also vary in terms of their demographic make-up. For example, compared to their regular distribution in the population, younger people (28% of population) are more likely to voice an

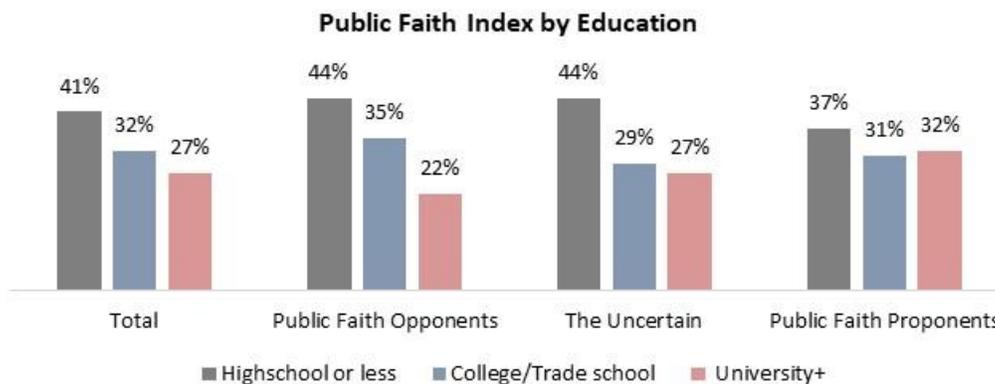
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openness to aspects of faith in the public square (they make up 34% of Proponents). The generation most likely to be overrepresented among Public Faith Opponents is Generation X, roughly those between the ages of 35 and 54:

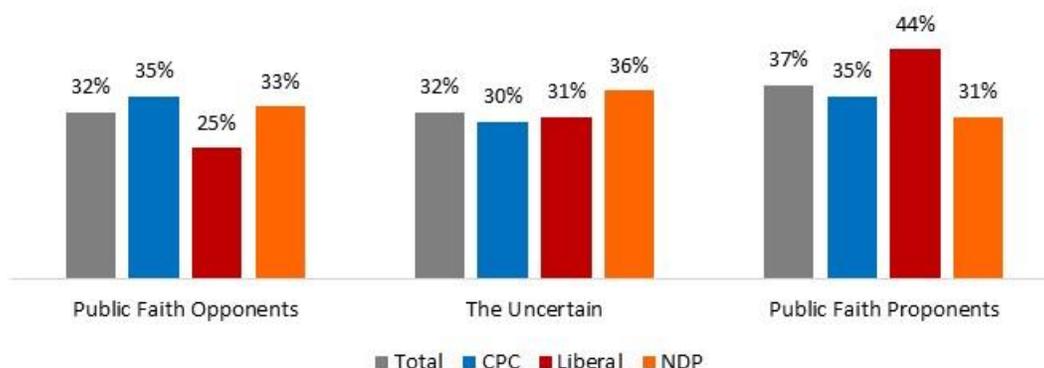


Proponents also skew toward a higher level of education overall. One-third are university educated (32%), compared to 22 per cent of Opponents and 27 per cent of the Uncertain.



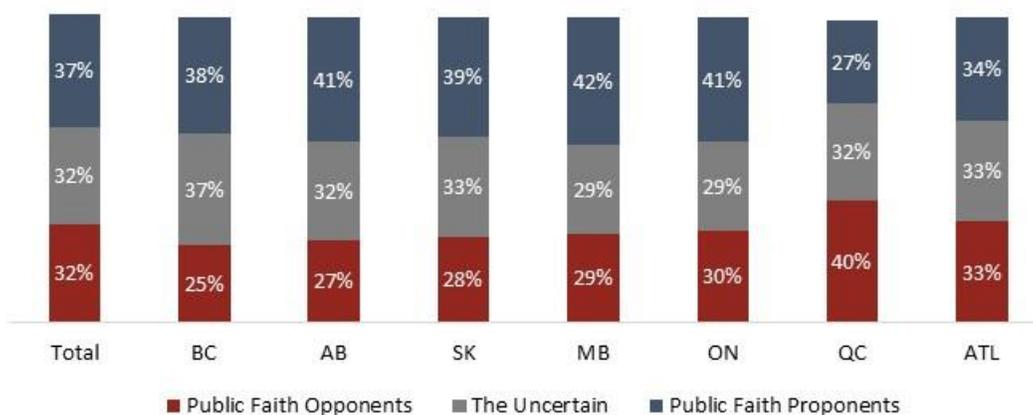
While the groups are divided roughly into thirds, past Liberal Party voters are much more likely to be Proponents, while the other two major federal parties' supporters are distributed close to evenly in terms of their view of faith in the public square:

Index by Political Affiliation



One piece of conventional wisdom that does hold up in these data is the likelihood of Quebec residents to see a lesser role for faith in the public square than residents of other regions. While Manitoba, Alberta and Ontario contain the highest proportions of proponents, four-in-ten Quebecers are found in the Opponent group. This is something the Angus Reid Institute has [noted previously](#), particularly in terms of religious symbols and attire in public life:

Public Faith Index by Region



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](#).
For detailed results by the Public Faith Index, [click here](#).

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