

## China-Canada relations: in fraught times, there is little consensus on how best to resolve tensions

*Most say human rights should trump trade in guiding Canada's approach to relations with China*

**February 1, 2018** – Amid deteriorating diplomatic relations between Beijing and Ottawa triggered by the arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou, public opinion reflects acute contradictions regarding Canada's economic, social and political ties with China.

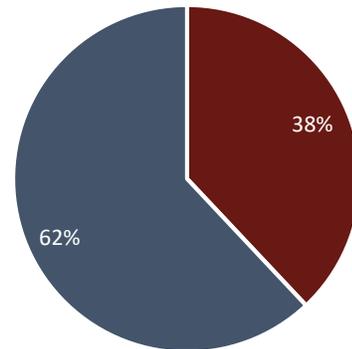
A new survey from the Angus Reid Institute reveals that while a slight majority (52%) of Canadians say they're dissatisfied with the way the Trudeau government has handled the situation, a slight majority (55%) also think their country was right to arrest Meng in the first place.

And while most say China "can't be trusted" on human rights, there is considerable disagreement as to whether the issue is any of this country's business.

Clearer narratives emerge among those who believe human rights and rule of law should be the most important aspect of the China-Canada relationship, and those who say trade and investment should be the priority.

### Thinking about Canada's overall relationship with China, what should be more important to Canada?

- Trade and investment opportunities for Canada
- Human rights and the rule of law



#### METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from January 23 – 28, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 1,700 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 +/- 2.4 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.

#### More Key Findings:

- More than nine-in-ten Canadians (92%) say diplomatic tensions between Canada and China are either "very serious" (34%) or "quite serious" (58%)
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) say China's record on human rights and the rule of law should be a more important consideration than trade and investment opportunities for Canada when assessing the Canada-China relationship
- A plurality (44%) say they would like to see Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his government take a tougher approach to the current conflict.

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**INDEX:**

**Part 1: Awareness and views of government performance**

- **Most see Canada-China tensions as serious**
- **Poor marks for Trudeau government**
- **Views on Canada-China relationship influence opinion**
- **Too tough or not tough enough?**

**Part 2: Conflicted opinion on trade and human rights**

- **Who prefers trade? Who prefers rights?**
- **No trust in China on human rights, but is it Canada's business?**
- **Protect industry, buy local**
- **Disagreements about Huawei arrest, value of Chinese trade**

**Part 3: Canada's Image and Future with China**

**Part 1: Awareness and views of government performance**

**Most see Canada-China tensions as serious**

First, some context.

When RCMP officers arrested Meng Wanzhou at the request of the United States in early December, it set off a diplomatic spat that has [rarely been out of the news](#) since.

China [detained two Canadians](#) in apparent retaliation for Canada's decision to arrest the Huawei CFO, and later held a re-trial for a Canadian who had been convicted of drug trafficking in China, [changing his sentence](#) from 15 years in prison to death.

The conflict also [led to the firing](#) of John McCallum, Canada's ambassador to China, after he had made headlines for saying he thought Meng had "a strong case" against extradition to the U.S. and that it would be "great for Canada" if the U.S. dropped its request.

The U.S. formally requested Meng's extradition on Jan. 28, [charging her and Huawei](#) with 13 counts of bank and wire fraud related to the telecommunications company's dealings with Iran, which the U.S. says violate sanctions against that country.

China maintains that the Huawei CFO has done nothing wrong and has asked the U.S. [to drop its request](#) for her extradition.

Against this backdrop, this poll finds the Canadian public paying close attention to this issue. Diplomatic tensions between Canada and China score a 60 on the ARI Engagement Index, which measures how strongly polling topics are registering with Canadians.

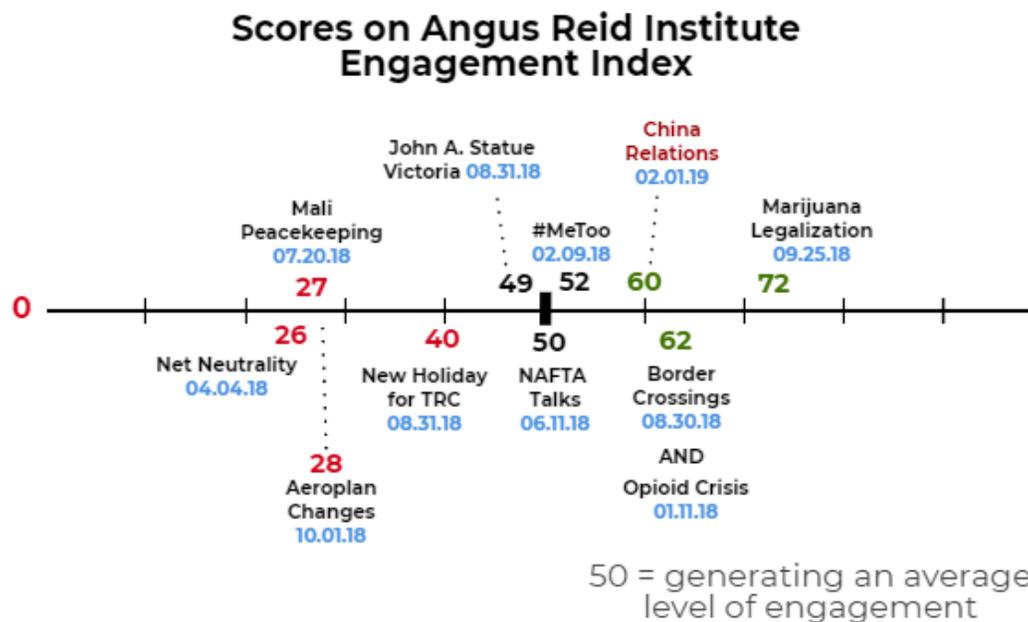
An "average" topic would score a 50 on the index. The 60 recorded for this story suggests that Canadians are paying slightly closer attention to this issue than they were to high-profile [tensions with Saudi Arabia](#) in November (which scored a 58) and the [NAFTA trade negotiations](#) in October (a 59).

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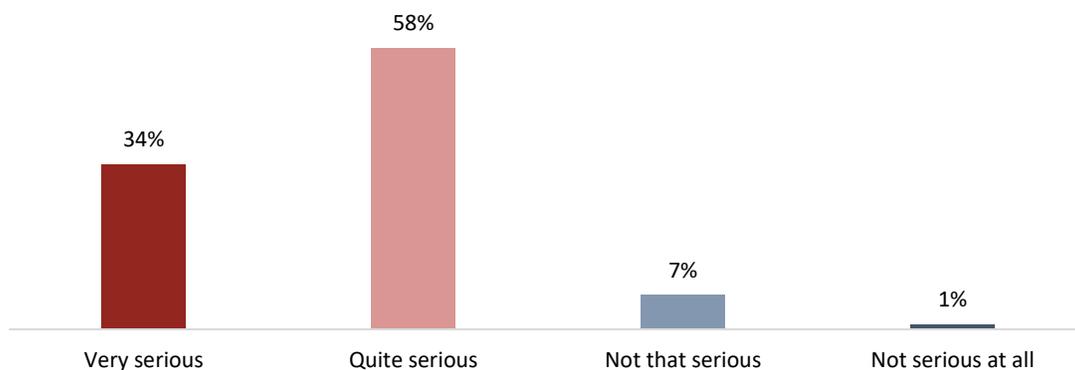
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How this story compares to other polling topics can be seen in the graphic that follows. For greater detail on the construction of the ARI Engagement Index, see notes on methodology at the end of this report.



Moreover, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the relatively high amount of attention they are paying to this issue, Canadians overwhelmingly view the situation as a serious one. More than nine-in-ten respondents (92%) say tensions between Canada and China are either “very serious” or “quite serious,” as seen in the graph that follows.

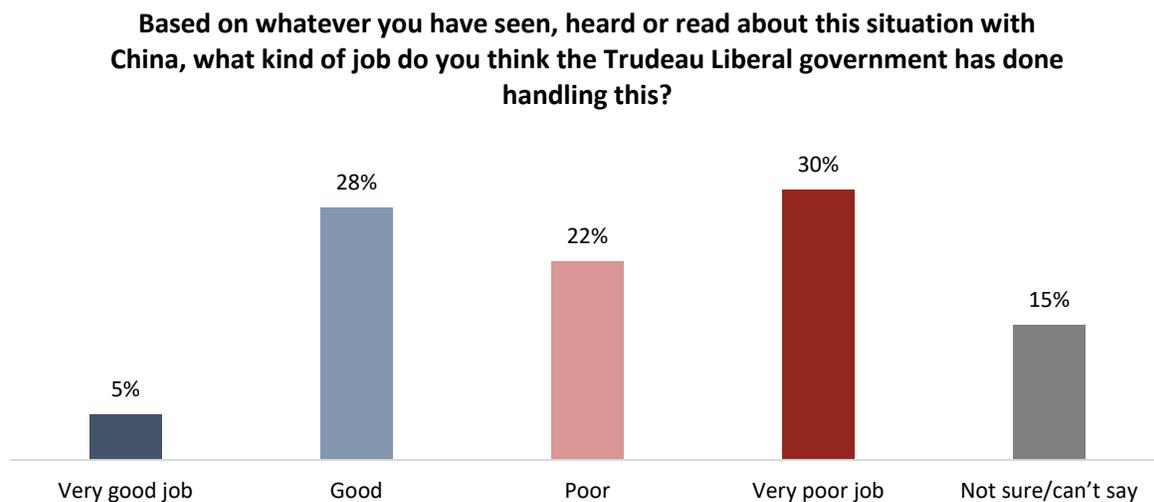
**Based on whatever you've seen or heard about this current tension between Canada and China, would you describe this situation as:**



### **Poor marks for Trudeau government**

With so many Canadians paying attention to this unfolding drama and believing it to be significant, it's worth contemplating how people perceive the federal government's response to the situation.

Asked whether they feel Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his government have done a good job or a bad one, more than half (52%) choose the latter. Indeed, three-in-ten (30%) say the government has handled this conflict with China *very poorly*:

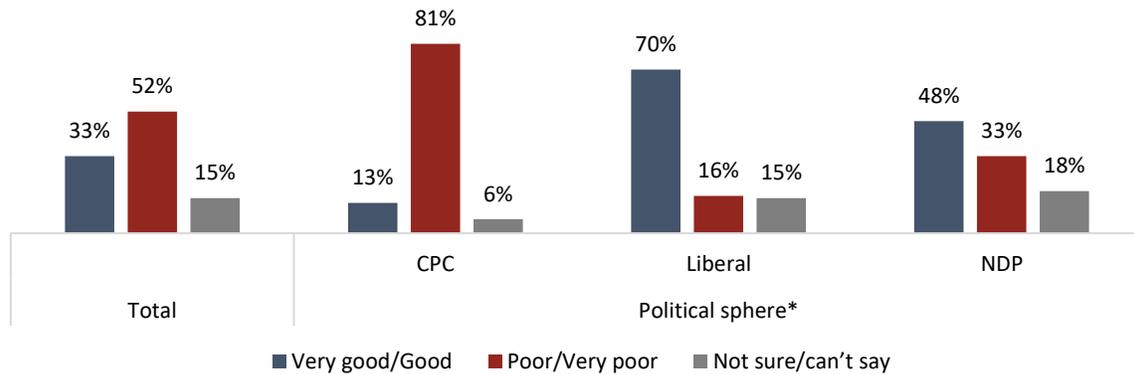


As might be expected, political partisanship has much to do with opinion on the federal government's performance on this file.

ARI researchers asked respondents about their willingness to vote for each of the main federal parties in a future election under their respective current leaders. Those who say they would definitely vote for or "certainly consider" a party can be considered members of that party's "sphere."

Those in the sphere of the Conservative Party overwhelmingly believe the Trudeau government has done a poor job, while those in the sphere of Trudeau's Liberal Party believe the government has done a good job by a margin almost as wide:

**Based on whatever you have seen, heard or read about this situation with China, what kind of job do you think the Trudeau Liberal government has done handling this?**



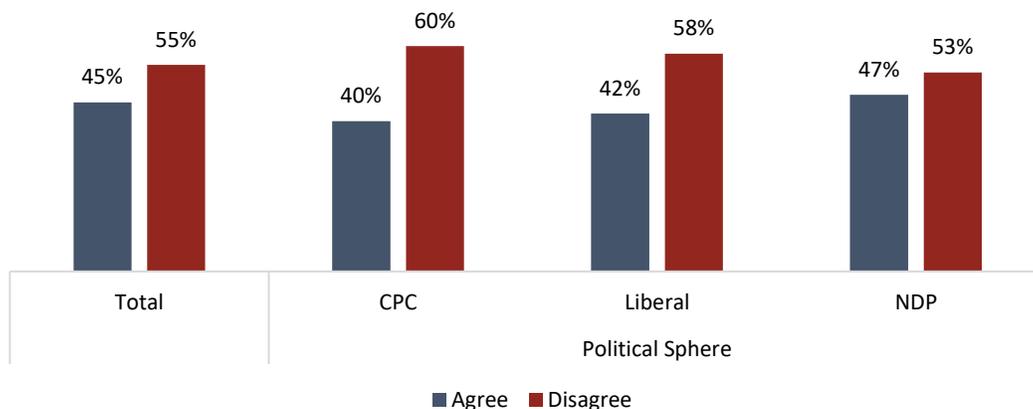
\*see notes on methodology

Despite their poor grading of the government on this issue, more than half of Canadians are inclined to say that arresting Meng was the correct decision. Some 55 per cent of Canadians disagree with the statement “Canada should have resisted the U.S. request and not arrested that Chinese telecom executive in the first place.”

When announcing the charges against Meng, Acting [U.S. Attorney General Matthew Whittaker said](#) his country is “deeply grateful to the government of Canada for its assistance and steadfast commitment to the rule of law”.

Those most likely to support the Conservative Party are most inclined to say that Canada made the right choice, though more than half of each party’s sphere disagrees with the statement:

**Canada should have resisted the US request and not arrested that Chinese telecom executive in the first place**



## Views on Canada-China relationship influence opinion

Another key driver of opinion on this issue is Canadians' views on a face-off question about this country's overall approach to relations with China.

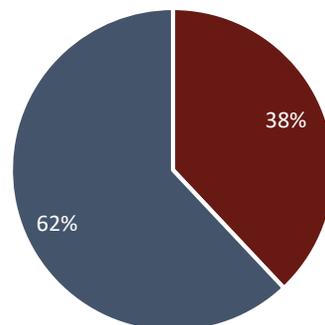
China is Canada's third-largest trading partner, after the United States and the European Union. In 2017, total trade in goods and services between the two countries was worth nearly \$70 billion.

The Trudeau government had expressed past interest in expanding this already sizeable economic relationship, but has also been critical of the Chinese government's track record on human rights. Last year, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations reported that the state of human rights in China had deteriorated since 2013.

Asked whether human rights or trade opportunities should take greater precedence in Canada's approach to its relationship with China, slightly more than six-in-ten Canadians (62%) say they are inclined to place greater emphasis on the former.

Respondents were asked to choose the side that most closely matches their opinion, even if neither option perfectly reflected it.

### Thinking about Canada's overall relationship with China, what should be more important to Canada?



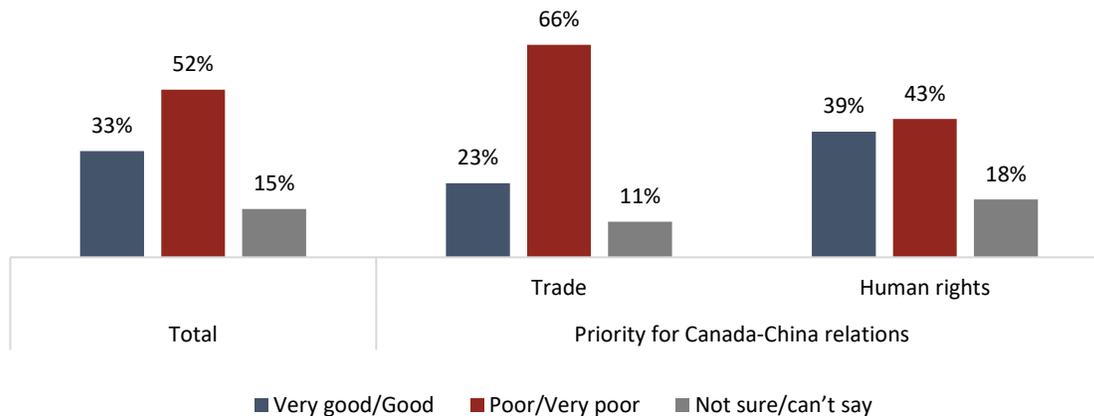
■ Trade and investment opportunities for Canada    ■ Human rights and the rule of law

Where one places oneself on this divide correlates with one's position on the government's handling of the current dispute over the arrest of Meng Wanzhou. Those who favour human rights are divided, while those favouring trade mostly view the government's performance as poor:

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**Based on whatever you have seen, heard or read about this situation with China, what kind of job do you think the Trudeau Liberal government has done handling this?**



### **Too tough or not tough enough?**

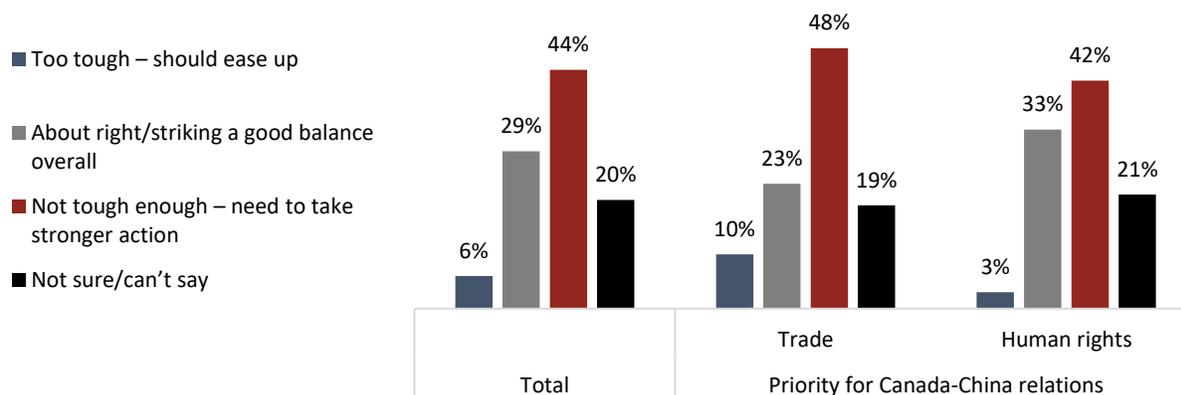
Given that Canadians are generally dissatisfied with their government's handling of relations with China, it's worth asking how they might prefer to see the situation handled.

As mentioned, most Canadians would not have liked to see their government ignore the U.S. extradition request and let Meng Wanzhou go free – something China would have liked, but that would have violated a treaty between the U.S. and Canada.

Indeed, relatively few Canadians think the government has been “too tough” in its response to this situation. Only 6 per cent say this, compared to almost half (44%) who say they would prefer to see the Trudeau government take stronger action against China.

The preference for a tougher approach is fairly consistent regardless of one's perspective on the important of trade versus human rights:

**More specifically, in dealing with China over these recent issues, would you say the Trudeau Liberal government has been ...**



**Part 2: Conflicted opinion on trade and human rights**

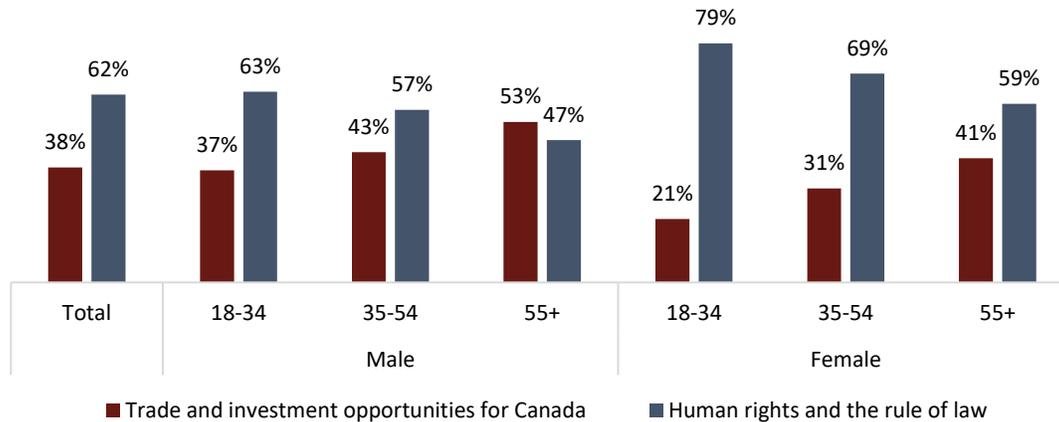
The difficulties of global economic co-operation have been on full display at the federal level recently. Canada has been under scrutiny for a number of relationships – from [mining in Mali](#), to the [Saudi Arms deal](#). Another contentious issue has been Canada’s growing economic relationship with China. While the government has noted that it wants to [open up trade further](#) with the Asian economic giant, concerns about human rights under that nation’s communist leadership persist. Recently departed Ambassador to China John McCallum noted that Canada was prepared to stall Chinese trade negotiations [due to ongoing abuses](#).

**Who prefers trade? Who prefers rights?**

As noted in section one, Canadians show an inclination toward human rights (62%) rather than trade and investment opportunities (38%) when it comes to the Canada-China relationship. There are notable differences of opinion between those two groups, and some interesting demographic factors.

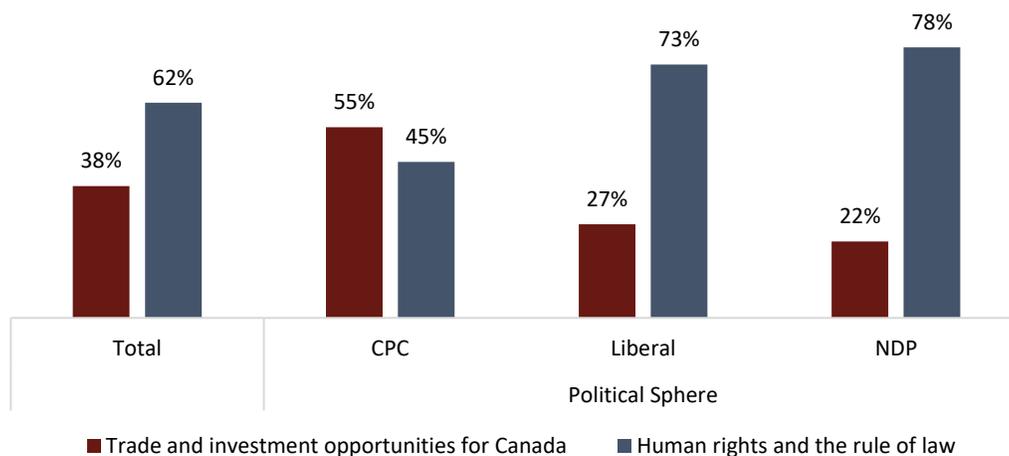
The preference for human rights is held by a majority of male and female age groups, but older men are divided:

**Thinking about Canada’s overall relationship with China, what should be more important to Canada:**



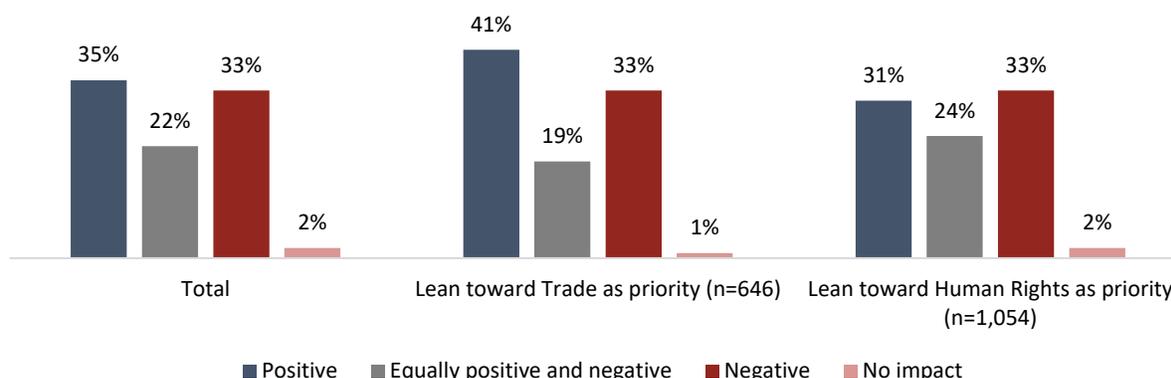
Those in the Conservative sphere are slightly more inclined to prioritize trade and investment opportunities when it comes to Sino-Canadian relations. Majorities of the Liberal and NDP universes say human rights and the rule of law should take precedence, though, notably, significant segments among them prioritize trade.

**Thinking about Canada’s overall relationship with China, what should be more important to Canada:**



When it comes to the impact of Chinese-Canadian trade on the Canadian economy, one-in-three in each group say that the relationship is a net negative for Canada, while those who lean toward trade as the top priority are slightly more positive about its impact. Overall, Canadians are equally likely to say the relationship is positive (35%) and negative (33%):

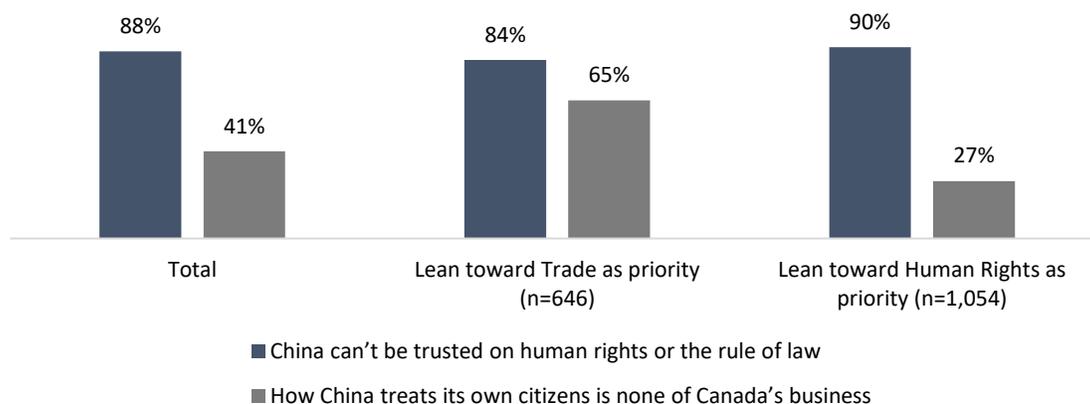
**Overall, what kind of impact would you say the Canada – China trade relationship has on the Canadian economy as a whole**



**No trust in China on human rights, but is it Canada’s business?**

These two camps are united on a number of issues when it comes to China and divided on others. The biggest source of unity between the two groups appears to be a lack of trust. Nine-in-ten human rights proponents say China cannot be trusted to ensure the rights of their people and fairness in the law, while 84 per cent of trade proponents agree. Where they differ is on whether or not this is any of Canada’s business. Two-thirds of those who choose trade say that Canada should stay out of it, while only one-quarter of those who choose rights agree:

**Percentage who agree with each statement**



**Protect sensitive industries, buy local**

Canadians are of the opinion that there is action to be taken both at the household level and within the government when it comes to China. Interestingly, the group of Canadians who prioritize trade over human rights are protective of sensitive industries within this country. Perhaps due to the elevated level of awareness of the case involving Huawei, two-thirds within that group (66%) say Canada should prohibit Chinese investment in industries like finance and telecommunications. Seven-in-ten Canadians say this overall (70%).

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Canadian telecom networks have faced questions recently as to whether they will follow suit and not use Huawei technology when developing their 5G wireless networks, as the United States, Australia, Great Britain and New Zealand have already done.

**Related: Canadians would discourage Chinese investment in Military/Defence, Healthcare**

At the household level, a similar number of Canadians, two-thirds (66%), say that Canadian consumers should try to avoid buying products made in China.

Percentage who Agree with the following statements:			
	Total (1700)	Priority for Chinese-Canadian Relations	
		Trade (646)	Human rights (1054)
Canada should prohibit Chinese investment in sensitive industries such as finance and telecommunications	70%	66%	72%
Canadian consumers should try to avoid buying things made in China	66%	59%	70%

**Disagreements about Huawei arrest, value of Chinese trade**

Seven-in-ten Canadians who choose trade over rights in terms of the priority for Canada-China relations (72%) say trade and investment between Canada and China is simply too valuable to risk being on the wrong side of them. Among those who would choose human rights as their primary concern, just under half say this (46%).

This divide is smaller, but still evident when considering if arresting Meng Wanzhou was the right move once the United States requested it. As noted in section one, more than half of Canadians say that Canadian officials made the right decision, however 52 per cent of trade proponents say that Canada should have resisted the U.S. request:

Percentage who Agree with the following statements:			
	Total (1700)	Priority for Chinese-Canadian Relations	
		Trade (646)	Human rights (1054)
Trade and investment between Canada and China is simply too valuable for us to be on the wrong side of them	56%	72%	46%
Canada should have resisted the US request and not arrested that Chinese telecom executive in the first place	45%	52%	40%

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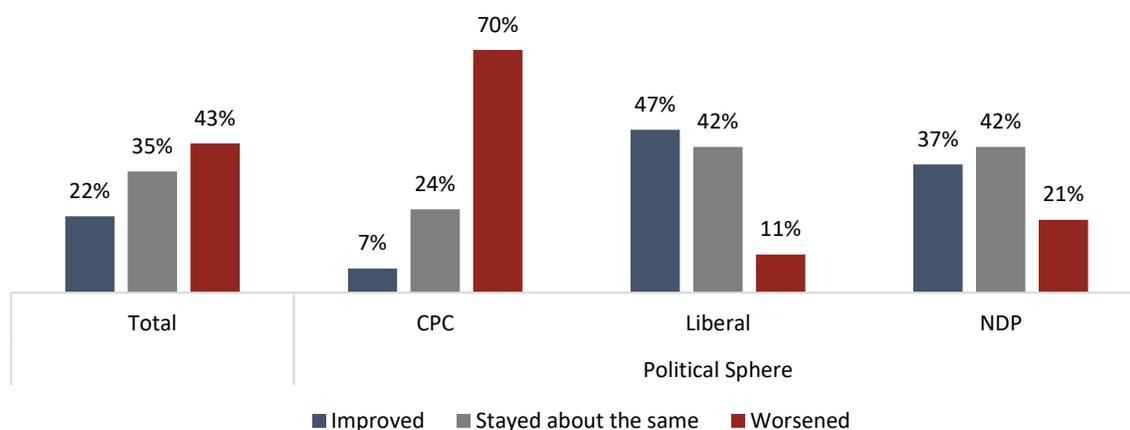
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**Part 3: Canada's Image and Future with China**

Canada's place on the world stage was a key issue during the 2015 election campaign. Asked to consider the last few years and this country's international presence, Canadians are divided along partisan lines.

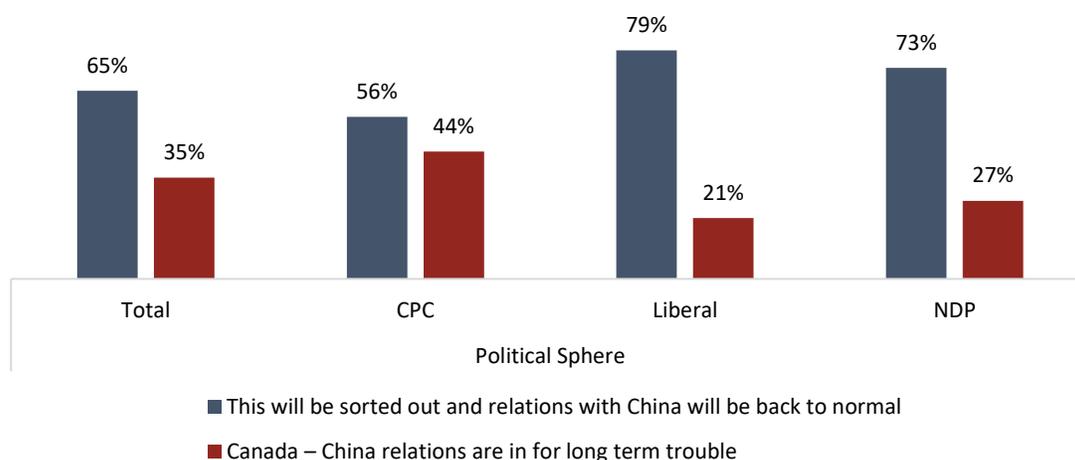
Those in the Liberal and NDP spheres are inclined to say Canada's image has either improved or stayed the same, while seven-in-ten Conservative leaners say it was worsened. Overall, Canadians are twice as likely to say Canada's image has worsened as to say it has improved:

**Would you say Canada's overall international image or reputation has improved or worsened over the past few years?**



That said, when Canadians consider the fallout from this dispute with China, a majority across all political persuasions agree these tensions represent a short-term setback and believe relations with China will normalize.

**Looking ahead to the future, what do you expect to happen with the Canada – China relationship?**



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## **Notes on Methodology**

1) Since early 2015, the Angus Reid Institute has been asking Canadians a standardized question about how closely they are following the topics of ARI polls. To facilitate easy comparisons across disparate topics, ARI researchers have developed an Engagement Index based on respondents' answers.

For each issue, respondents are asked to say whether they are "following it in the news and discussing it with friends and family," "seeing some media coverage and having the odd conversation," "just scanning the headlines," or not seeing or hearing anything about the issue.

The index is based on the average response to this question over the years, with greater weight given to the highest level of engagement on the scale, and lesser weight given to the "having the odd conversation" and "just scanning headlines" responses. An "average" issue scores a 50 on the index, with scores higher than 50 representing above-average engagement and scores lower than 50 representing below-average engagement.

On this particular topic of Canada-China relations, roughly three-in-ten (28%) say they are "following it in the news and discussing it with friends and family." Another 43 per cent are "seeing some media coverage and having the odd conversation." One-in-four (24%) are "just scanning the headlines," and just 6 per cent haven't seen or heard anything about this story.

Responses on this topic equate to a score of 60 on the ARI Engagement Index, which is the highest score recorded so far in 2019, as well as the highest recorded since [ARI's poll on marijuana legalization](#) released in September, which scored a 72 and tied for the fifth-highest score of all time.

2) Rather than rely on respondents' potentially faded memories regarding their vote in the 2015 federal election, ARI researchers constructed a measure of political partisanship based on willingness to vote for the main federal parties in a future election under their current leaders.

The question specifically asked respondents how likely they would be to vote for "The Liberal Party led by Justin Trudeau," "The Conservative Party led by Andrew Scheer," and "The New Democratic Party led by Jagmeet Singh" in a future election. The response options were "definitely support" the party and leader in question, "certainly consider" them, "maybe consider" them, and "definitely not even consider" them.

Respondents choosing either of the first two options (definitely support or certainly consider) are considered to be a party's "sphere." They represent potential supporters of that party, not necessarily decided voters.

It should be noted that the categories are not mutually exclusive. Respondents were asked to give an opinion on each of the main parties and had the option to say they would "certainly consider" each one. Thus, many respondents may appear in the spheres of multiple parties.

*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](#).***

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*For detailed results by political sphere and priority for Canada-China relations, [click here](#).*

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