

Freedom of religion widely valued in Canada, but the role of faith in modern society still a source of debate

Study investigates intersection between personal and public faith in secular Canadian society

December 4, 2019 – While the majority of adults in this country profess some belief in God or a higher power, a significant segment also wishes to see a more secular nation.

A new study from the Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with [Cardus](#), explores elements of this push-and-pull, finding that a premium placed on freedom of religion exists alongside limitations as to how far that faith should extend in public life.

For example, while Canadians are nearly five times as likely to say that freedom of religion makes Canada a better country (62%) than a worse one (12%), they remain divided over whether the values offered by faith contribute to improving equality and human rights (42% disagree that they do). Further, while a firm majority (58%) say that a faith-based upbringing creates better citizenship characteristics, four-in-ten (42%) disagree.

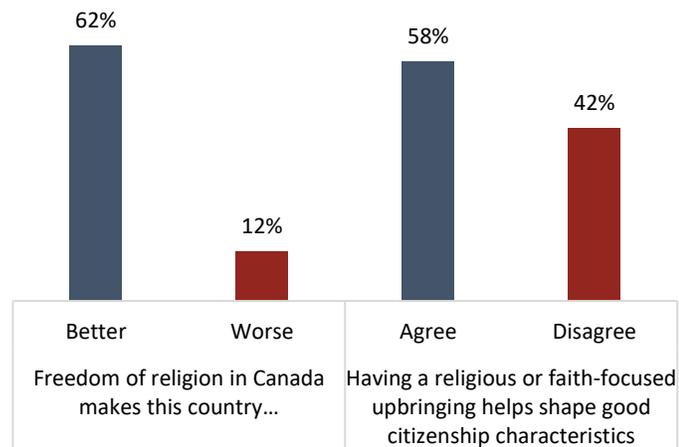
Much of this division is based not on demographics like age, gender, or political persuasion, but on a mindset not immediately evident based on traditional categorizations. The Angus Reid Institute used 17 different variables to categorize Canadians across a Public Faith Index to create three groups: The Public Faith Proponents, the Uncertain and the Public Faith Opponents. Each holds a distinct mindset regarding what role faith should play in public life, and each is comprised of a diverse group of Canadians from all ages, genders and political backgrounds.

This study explores questions about the role of faith in public life as we enter the next decade, using these public faith mindsets as a guide.

More Key Findings:

- Equal numbers of Canadians are found in both the Public Faith Proponents (36%) and Public Faith Opponents (35%) groups, while three-in-ten (30%) make up the Uncertain.

Competing Canadian perspectives on faith



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from October 24 – November 1, 2019 among a representative randomized sample of 2,057 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 Director: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org

- Half of Canadians (49%) feel that faith communities make an impact that is mixed, both good and bad in different instances, while three-in-ten say the influence of these groups is more good than bad overall (31%). Proponents are overwhelmingly positive, while Opponents are less likely to perceive a positive impact.
- One-in-five Canadians (22%) feel that Canadian society 'shuts out' their faith and values, while one-third (33%) feel that room is made for their expression. The biggest group, 37 per cent, do not feel any real impact from broader society with respect to their personal beliefs.

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.*

INDEX:

Part One: Faith in Public Life

- **Freedom of religion a foundational value**
- **Public Faith mindsets are key to understanding dynamics**
- **Do Canadians feel society makes room for their values?**
- **Religious symbols and clothing at work divisive**

Part Two: The value of faith

- **Division over how faith values influence Canadian society**
- **Majority say faith-based upbringing helps citizens**
- **Best way to live?**
- **Are certain faiths more valued than others?**
- **Views of faith different faiths through the Spectrum of Spirituality**

Part One: Faith in Public Life

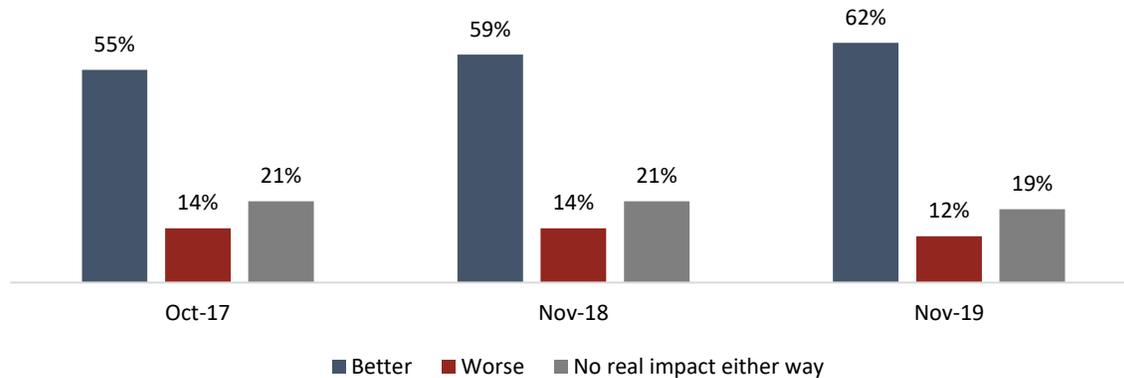
Freedom of religion a foundational value

One item in the Angus Reid Institute's tracking data that is consistent over the past few years is the sentiment that freedom of religion makes Canada a better country. Asked again this year, 62 per cent of Canadians say that this is the case, as opposed to just 12 per cent who say that this freedom actually makes Canada worse off. This represents the largest gap between these two responses in the three years of tracking:

CONTACT:

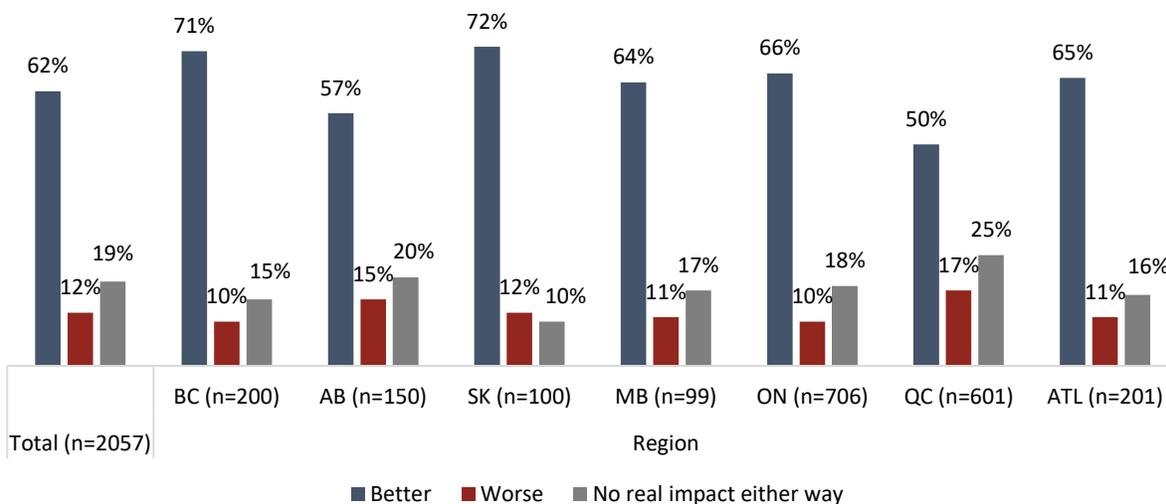
Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Dave Korzinski, Research Associate: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org

In your view, does having “freedom of religion” make Canada a better or worse country?



Canadians across the country are in at least majority agreement that freedom of religion is a worthy pursuit for the country. That said, in Alberta and Quebec there are higher levels of ambivalence and lower levels of positivity:

In your view, does having “freedom of religion” make Canada a better or worse country?



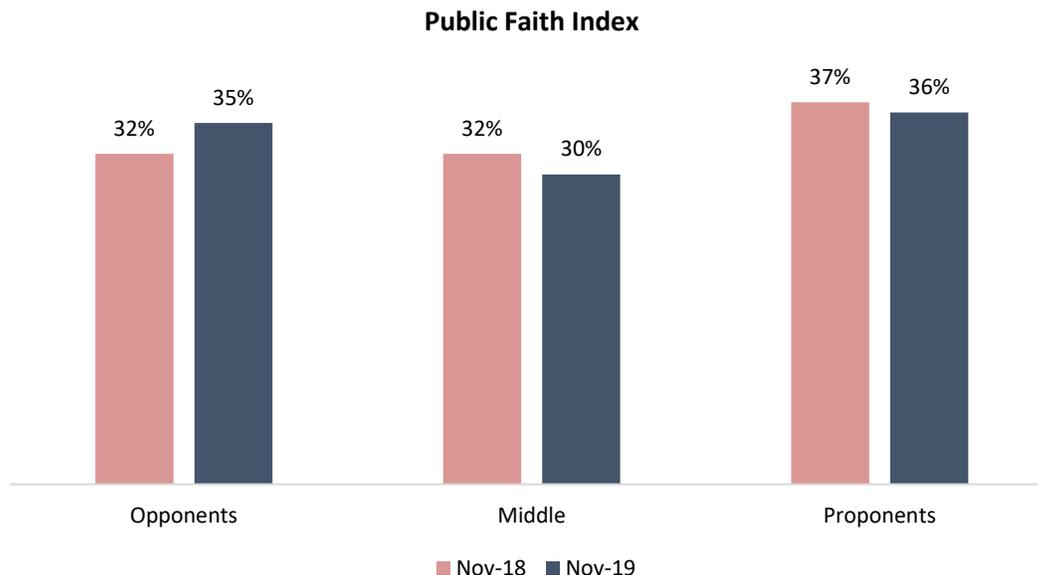
The clearest dividing line on this question, however, is not regional. While there are generational differences (see detailed tables here), the widest disparity is found using the Angus Reid Institute’s Public Faith Index.

Public Faith mindsets key to understanding

This ‘additive index’ was created in order to categorize Canadian views on the role and value of faith in public life. Respondents were asked 17 questions across three broad themes regarding their view of faith and its place in Canadian society.

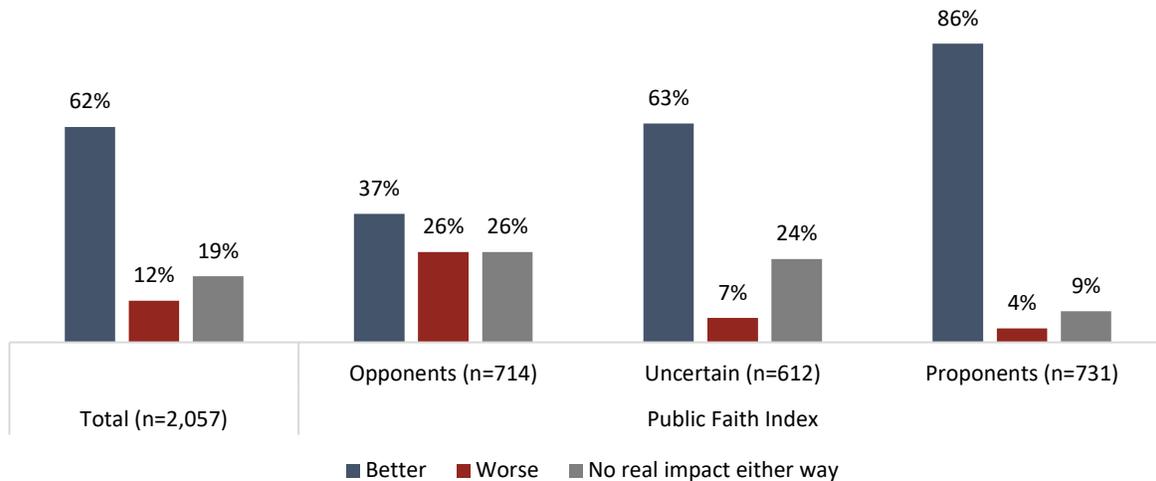
Canadians fall into three categories broadly based on the Index. Just under four-in-ten (36%) are classified as “Public Faith Proponents”. Members of this group hold a supportive posture when it comes to increasing the public’s knowledge of faith and religion and recognizing their importance to society. 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 more on the Public Faith Index, [click here](#).

Note that the Index proportions are largely unchanged from last year.



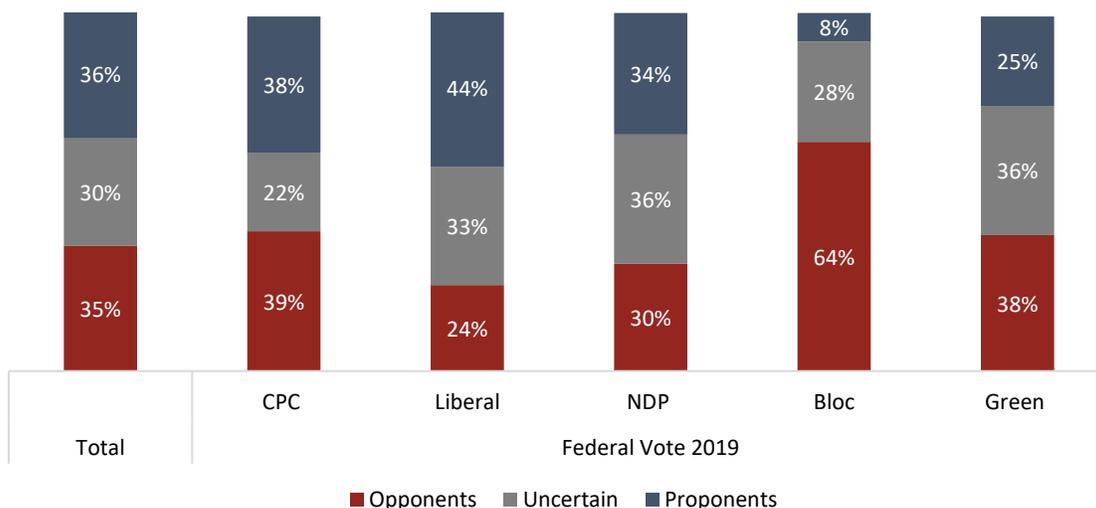
Using this categorization for analysis, it is clear that those who see less historical contribution to the country by faith groups, and who would like to see faith have less of a role in government and public life, are far more likely to say that freedom of religion has a negative impact on society. These Public Faith Opponents are less than half as likely to be positive about the impact of freedom of religion than Public Faith Proponents:

In your view, does having “freedom of religion” make Canada a better or worse country?



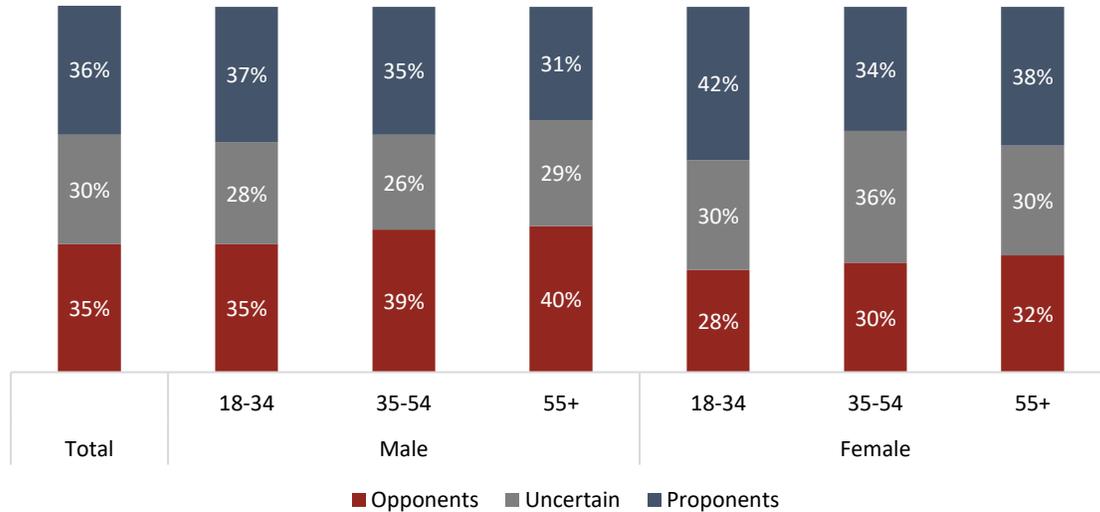
While one might assume that certain political ideologies would fit into certain classifications, this does not appear to be the case. Each portion of the Index is made up of a relatively diverse political group, although past Bloc voters do represent an outlier, as seen in the graph below:

Public Faith Index by 2019 federal vote



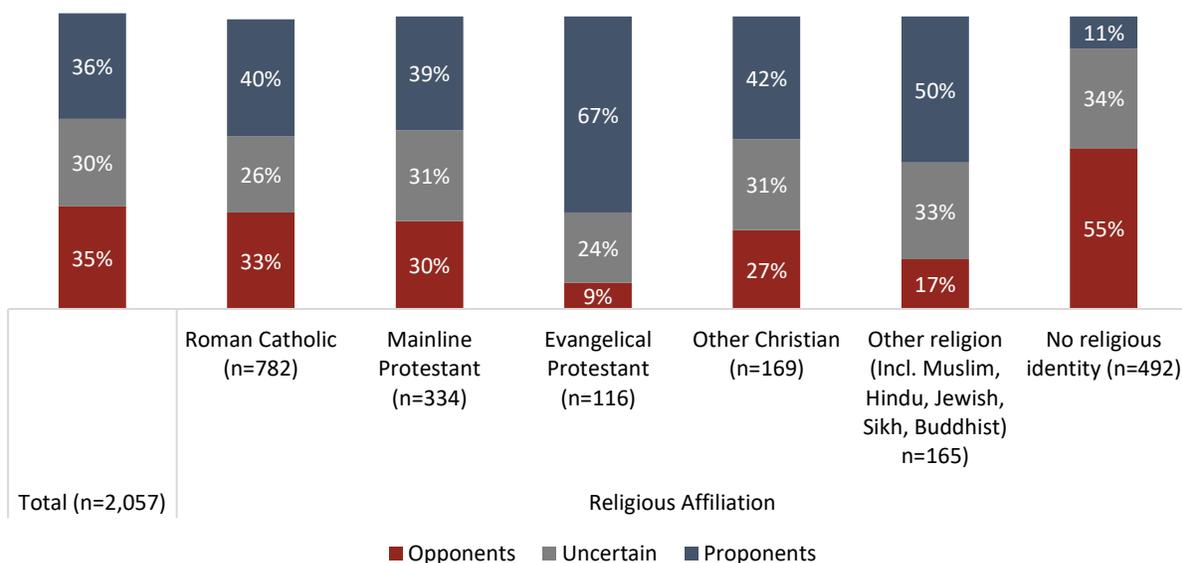
Further, the Public Faith Index is comprised of people from all age and gender combinations. While older men show a slight inclination toward being Opponents, and younger women conversely, toward being Proponents, each Index group is well represented among each of these societal segments. Thus, this Index is useful in understanding the mindsets in Canadian society that may not be necessarily defined by simple demographic analysis.

Public Faith Index by Age and Gender



When it comes to the diversity of mindsets in Canada regarding the role of faith in public life, there is perhaps no better exemplification than looking at the Index by religious affiliation. Each faith group is well represented across the Index, though Evangelical Protestants are least likely to Oppose faith in the public square and non-religious Canadians are most likely:

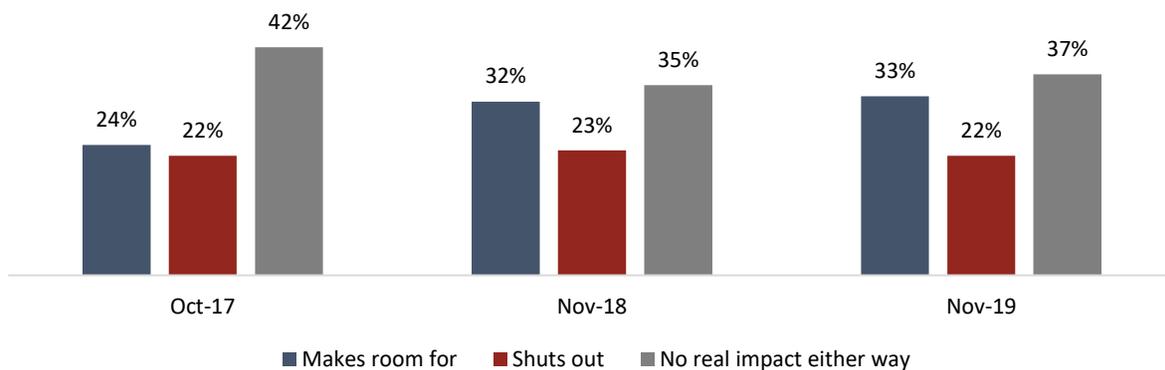
Public Faith Index by Religious Group
(Each group is weighted to representative size within CDN population)



Do Canadians feel society makes room for their values?

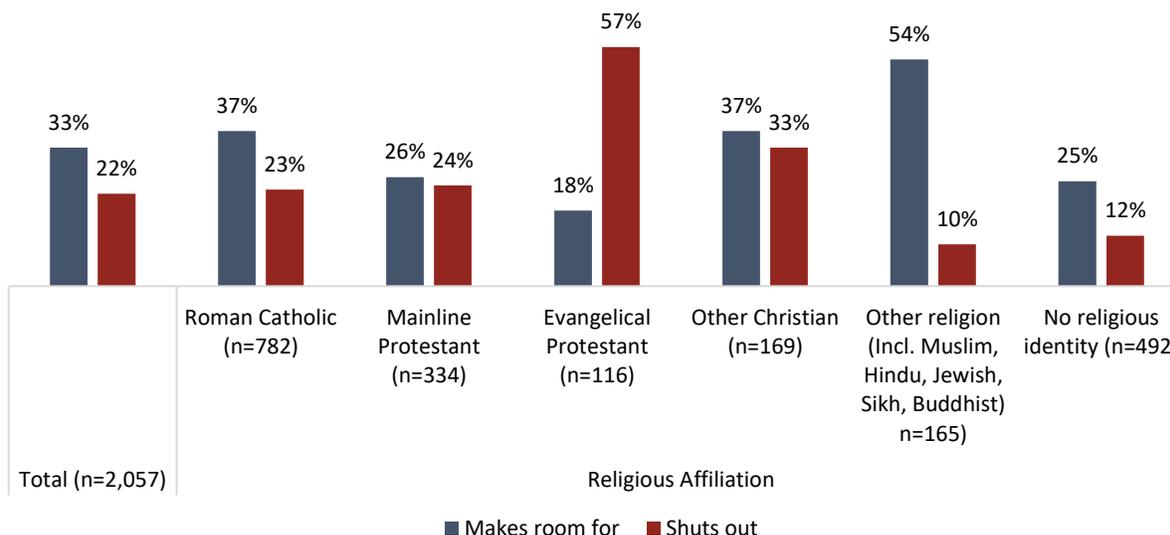
Over the last three years, the Angus Reid Institute has consistently found that around one-in-four Canadians feel that their personal faith and values are shut out from Canadian society. The largest group in each year said that they don't feel either accepted or rejected, while one-in-three say that society makes room for their faith:

Overall, do you feel Canadian society today tends to make room for or shuts out your own personal values and faith?



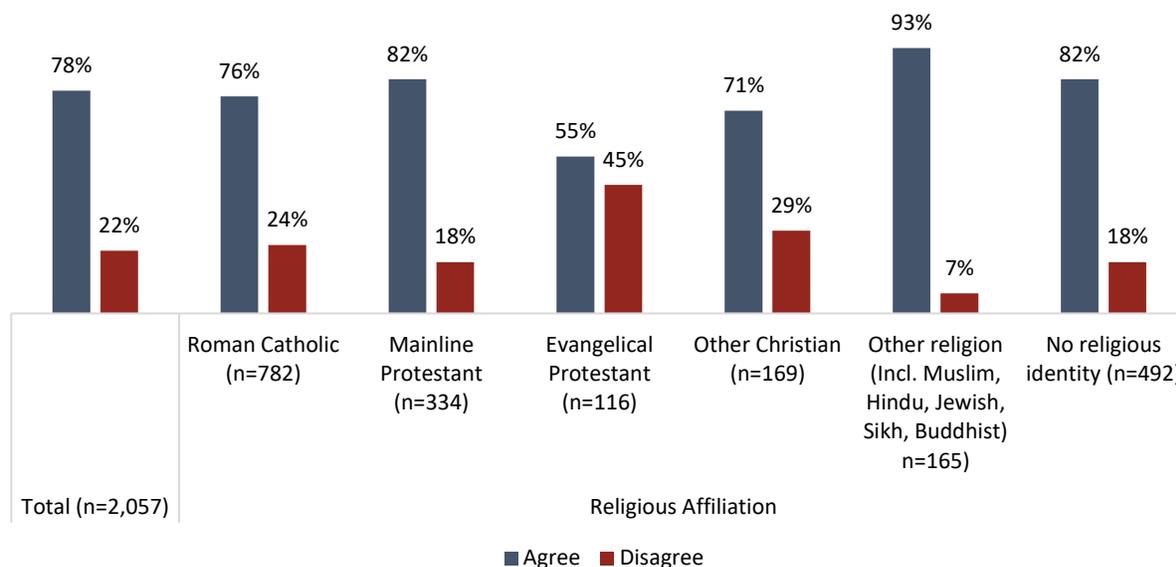
Feelings of inclusion or exclusion are varied across different religious groups. Evangelical Protestants feel the most shut out, while the smallest religious groups collectively feel the most accepted:

**Overall, do you feel Canadian society today tends to make room for or shuts out your own personal values and faith?
(Each group is weighted to representative size within CDN population)**



Responses are considerably more positive overall when Canadians assess whether they feel the federal government respects their religious tradition. One-in-five remain critical of the reception they receive, but 78 per cent say they feel respected:

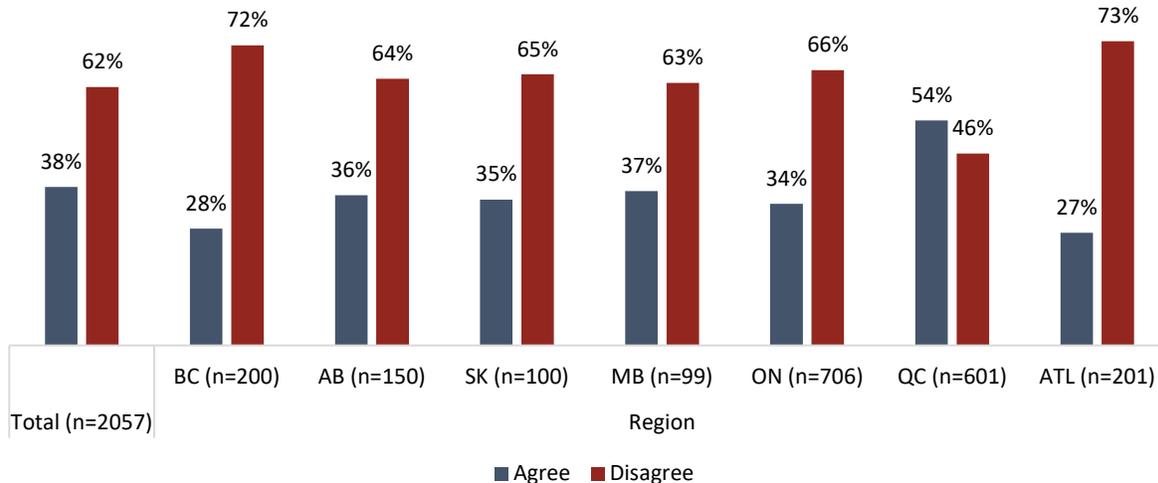
Agree vs Disagree "The Canadian government respects my own religious tradition or faith community"
(Each group is weighted to representative size within CDN population)



Religious symbols and clothing at work divisive

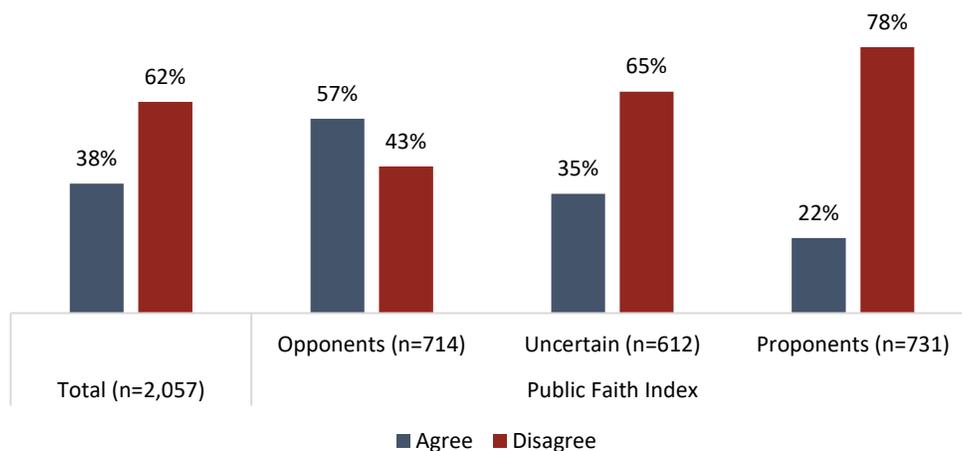
One ongoing debate in Canadian society is the appropriateness of religious symbols in public life. This conversation has been particularly relevant in Quebec after the [passage of Bill-21](#), which bans public employees from wearing religious symbols. Asked whether they feel comfortable with people wearing religious garments and symbols in the workplace, six-in-ten Canadians overall (62%), and at least 63 per cent in every region other than Quebec, say that they do. Four-in-ten (38%) disagree, led by just over half of residents in Quebec (54%):

Agree vs Disagree "I'm uncomfortable with people wearing religious garments and symbols in the workplace"



Opinions over this issue diverge widely across the Public Faith Index. Four-in-five Public Faith Proponents (78%) feel comfortable seeing religious attire in the workplace, as do most of the Uncertain (65%). Opponents however, lean the other way:

Agree vs Disagree "I'm uncomfortable with people wearing religious garments and symbols in the workplace"



Part Two: The value of faith

Division over how faith values influence Canadian society

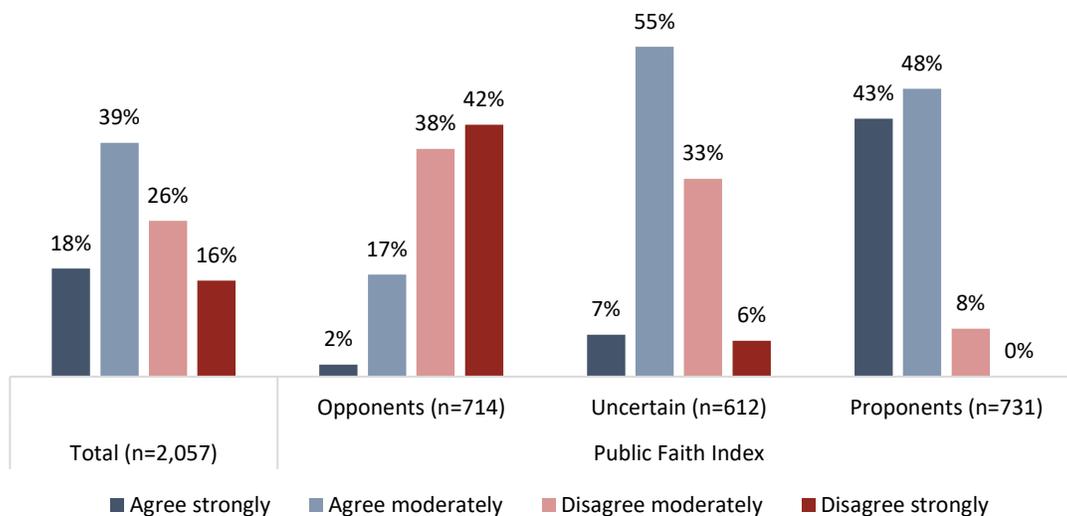
If, indeed, some religious Canadians are feeling shut out by society, it is likely at least partially attributable to Canada's more recently codified tradition of secularism. While the Charter of Rights and Freedoms entrenched religious freedom in Canada when it was established in 1982, it also represented an official

recognition of multiculturalism, which would require a secular foundation in order to address diverse groups in Canada.

These parallel realities help to explain the division in Canadian society over the potential of faith communities to inform Canadian values. Asked whether they felt religious and faith communities strengthen Canadian values, a slight majority (57%) agree but a considerable minority (43%) do not believe this is the case.

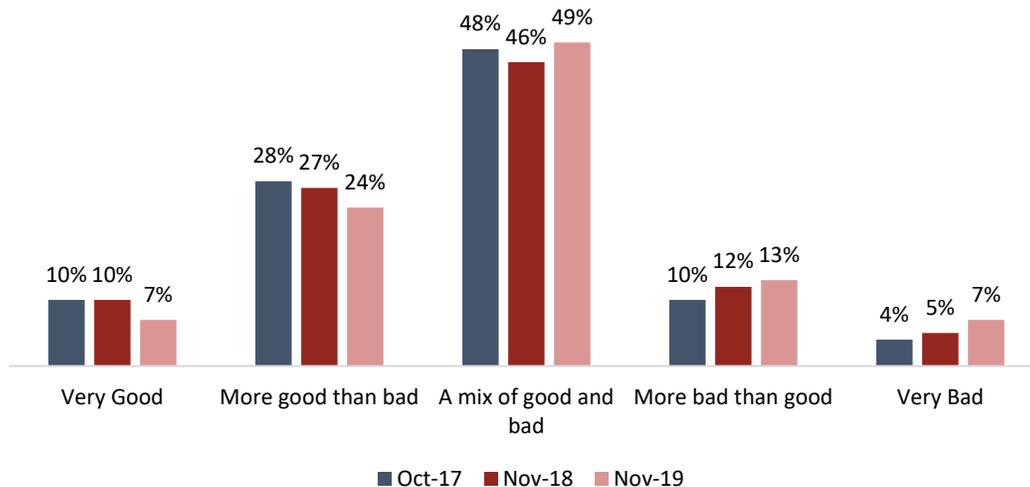
Notably, Public Faith Opponents are far more likely to say that they do not believe faith communities have a role to play here, while Proponents overwhelmingly feel that they do:

Religious and faith communities strengthen Canadian values such as equality and human rights



Uncertainty continues to define Canadian views when considering more tangible public contributions. Just as with the question of values, Canadians hold varying perspectives on what role faith communities play. For the last three years, approximately one-in-three Canadians have said that they believe these groups make a positive contribution to Canada. Meanwhile, half continue to say that they believe the impact is a mix of both good and bad:

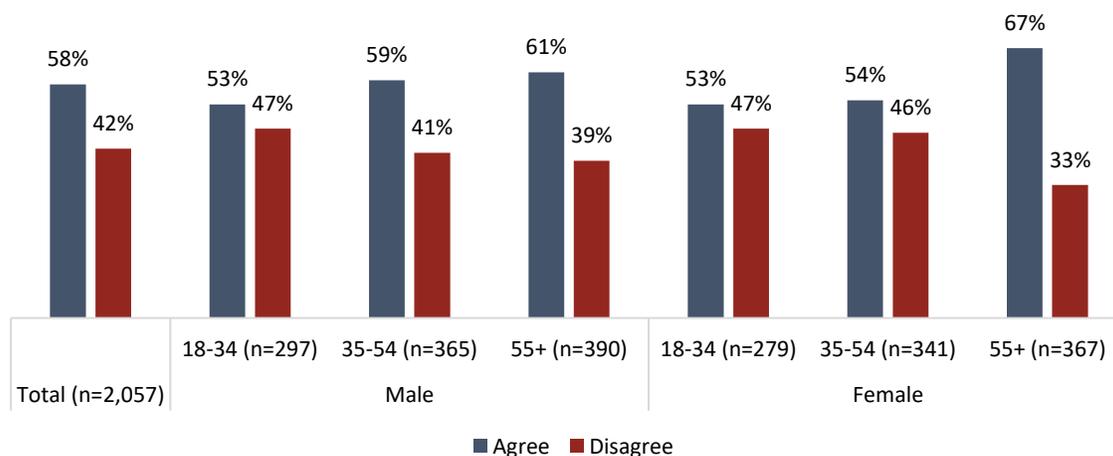
How would you describe the overall contribution religious and faith communities are making to Canada and Canadian society today?



Majority say faith-based upbringing helps citizens

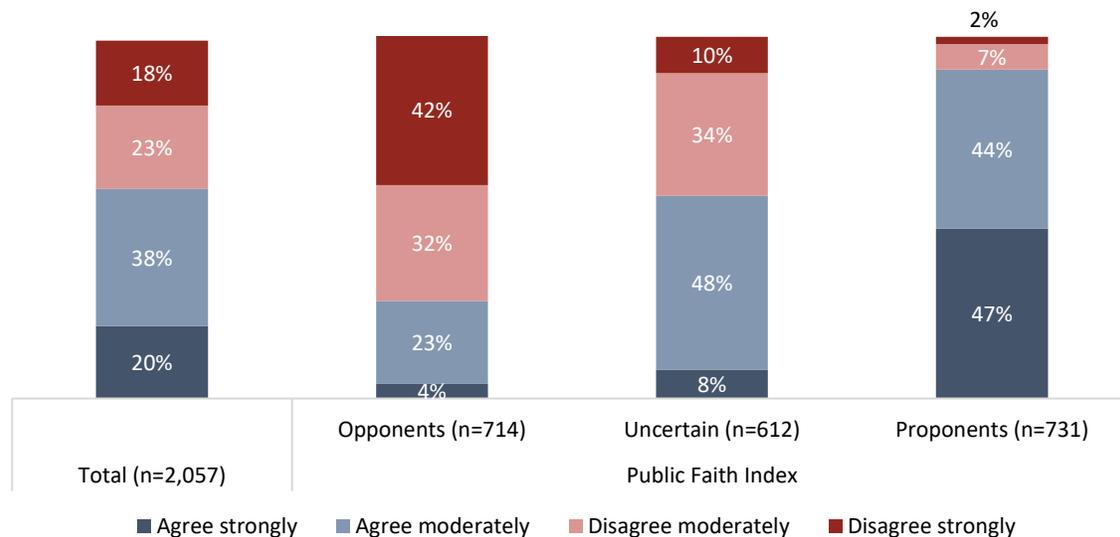
Faith communities may have a mixed contribution to Canadian society in the minds of many, but a firm majority believe that the values that a religious upbringing offers can help to create good citizens. Six-in-ten (58%), led by men and women 55 years of age and older, say that they feel faith-focused childhood is beneficial, while four-in-ten disagree (42%):

Agree vs Disagree "Having a religious or faith-focused upbringing helps shape good citizenship characteristics"



The primary point of division, again, appears to be whether or not one sees a role for faith in the public square. Those who lean that way, Public Faith Proponents, are near-unanimous that the characteristics offered by religion are valuable, while three-quarters of Public Faith Opponents (74%) disagree:

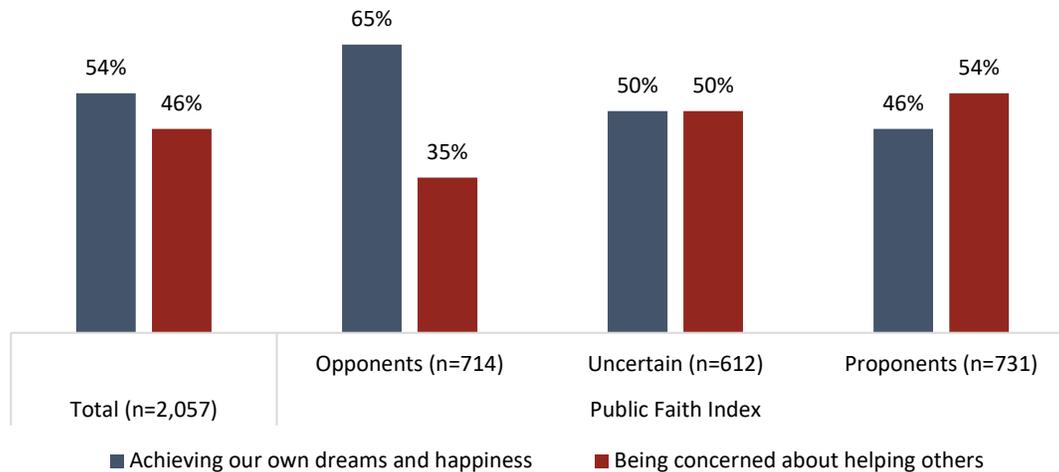
Agree vs Disagree "Having a religious or faith-focused upbringing helps shape good citizenship characteristics"



Best way to live?

The divide over values extends to the more existential question of life's purpose. Canadians were asked to select one of the following statements to represent "the best way to live life": "Achieving one's own happiness and dreams" or "being more concerned about helping others." Close to an equal number choose each option. That said, those who are more opposed to faith in public life tend to look inwards on this question, toward their own satisfaction, while Public Faith Proponents, though divided, lean slightly toward focusing on others:

What is the best way to live life? Should we be MORE focused on:



Are certain faiths more valued than others?

There are different levels of enthusiasm for different religious groups in Canada, which help to explain elements of the disagreements over the value of faith. Consider, for example, Canadian opinions of Catholicism. Close to three-in-ten (28%) feel the presence of Catholics in Canada benefits the country as a whole, while nearly the same number (24%) say that Canada is worse off because of Catholicism's influence.

Looking at this as a net score, that is, the number of Canadians saying a faith group benefits minus damages Canadian society, Protestantism and Judaism score most highly, while Evangelical Christianity and Islam score most poorly:

CONTACT:

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

In your view, would you say the overall presence of each of these in Canadian public life is benefitting or damaging Canada and Canadian society?				
	Impact on Canadian society			
	Benefitting	No real impact	Damaging	Net score (Benefit minus damage)
Catholicism	28%	38%	24%	+4
Protestantism	26%	45%	12%	+14
Judaism	24%	44%	12%	+12
Evangelical Christianity	19%	33%	32%	-13
Hinduism	19%	47%	13%	+6
Sikhism	17%	40%	19%	-2
Atheism	17%	50%	17%	0
Islam	13%	27%	41%	-28

Views of different faiths through the Spectrum of Spirituality

Another important measure of religiosity in Canadian society is not based on the role of faith in public life, so much as it is based on one's own personal commitment to faith. The Angus Reid Institute created the Spectrum of Spirituality in 2017 ([read more here](#)) based on responses to a series of questions about personal belief and faith practice. Briefly:

- The **Religiously Committed**, as their name implies, are deeply faithful individuals who attend religious services regularly and get involved in their faith in other ways as well. They tend to be certain that God or some other higher power exists, and they pray to this entity and feel its presence frequently. This segment includes more women than men, and more people ages 55 and older than people in any other age group.
- The **Privately Faithful** are also strong believers in God or a higher power, and most of them also pray regularly. Unlike the Religiously Committed, however, the Privately Faithful are just that: Private. The vast majority of them attend religious services less than once a month, and hardly any of them read sacred texts regularly. Like the Religiously Committed, this group skews older and more female than the general population.
- The **Spiritually Uncertain** are distinguished by their lack of conviction on matters of faith. While the vast majority do not rule out the possibility that God or a higher power exists, only one-in-eight (13%) say they definitely believe in such a being. Two-thirds of them pray, but only one-in-ten do so once a month or more. They hardly ever attend religious services. This group includes more young people than the two more religious segments and includes equal numbers of men and women.

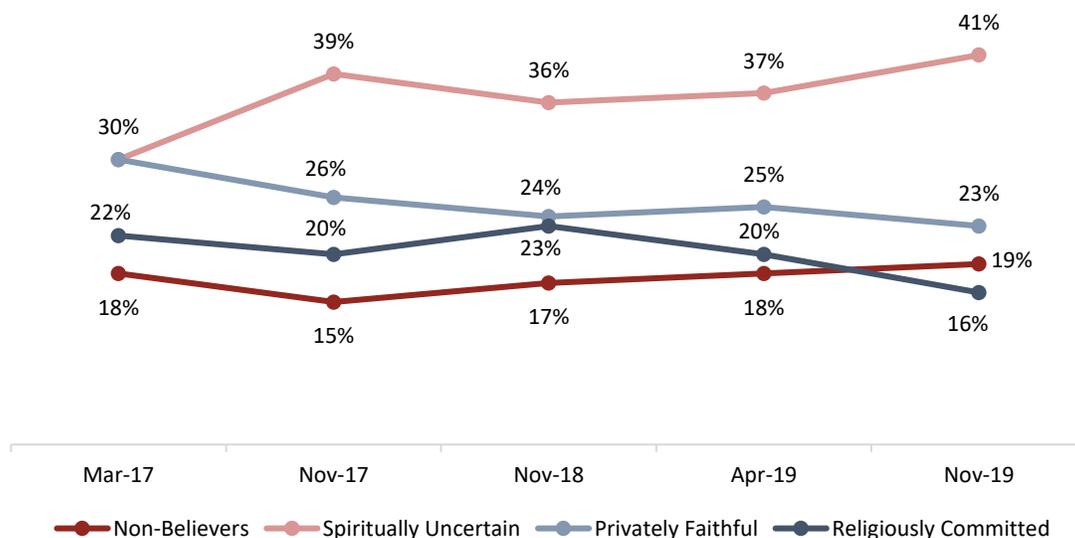
CONTACT:

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

- The **Non-Believers** are those Canadians who doubt or outright reject the existence of God or a higher power and deny having any personal feelings of faith or spirituality. As might be expected, nearly all of these Canadians do not attend services, pray, or read sacred texts with any regularity. The Non-Believers are the most heavily male segment (63%), and they are the group that contains the fewest respondents in the 55-plus age group.

What is notable in 2019 is the slight movement downward among those who are Religiously Committed and coincident upward bump for those who are Spiritually Uncertain. While one data point does not necessarily portend a trend, it is worth noting as faith evolves in Canada:

Spectrum of Spirituality over time



The Spectrum of Spirituality is a relevant tool in order to further understand which faiths are viewed as either benefiting or damaging Canadian society. Those who are Religiously Committed are the most respectful and appreciative of other religious groups, offering a net positive score in most cases, though they offer a net negative score for Sikhism (-1) and Islam (-23). They are also particularly negative about Atheism (-39).

As religiosity declines, appreciation for other groups correspondingly declines to the point where Non-Believers feel that no other group is of net benefit to society other than Atheists.

CONTACT:

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

Would you say the overall presence of each of these in Canadian public life is benefitting or damaging Canada and Canadian society? Net score shown = those saying benefit minus those saying damage					
	Spectrum of Spirituality				
	Total (n=2,057)	Non-Believers (n=394)	Spiritually Uncertain (n=843)	Privately Faithful (n=482)	Religiously Committed (n=338)
Protestantism	14%	-16%	8%	25%	53%
Judaism	12%	-7%	10%	19%	34%
Hinduism	6%	-2%	7%	9%	6%
Catholicism	4%	-34%	-5%	22%	46%
Atheism	0%	29%	9%	-11%	-39%
Sikhism	-2%	-10%	-1%	2%	-1%
Evangelical Christianity	-13%	-46%	-22%	-1%	33%
Islam	-28%	-31%	-30%	-26%	-23%

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

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

CONTACT:

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