

Hockey Heaven: NHL's all-Canadian division a hit with fans, even if it's just supposed to be for one year

Hardcore fans twice as likely to say the North Division makes this season more exciting

March 1, 2021 – Puck drop on the NHL season was three months later than usual this year and that's not the only change. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions between Canada and the United States, all seven Canadian teams are playing only each other this year until the playoffs. More than one month into the 'North Division' experience, hockey fans are evidently enjoying the ramped up rivalries.

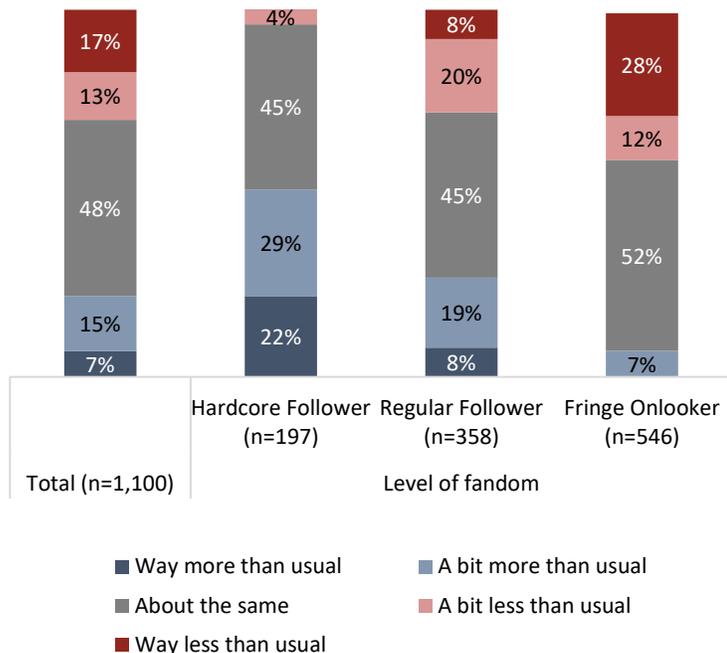
A new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds that those who normally follow hockey most closely are uber engaged this year. Among Hardcore Followers – a group comprised of 12 per cent of Canadians overall – the majority say they are watching more hockey than normal this year and finding this irregular season more exciting than years past.

But while the season kicked off with an [increase in viewership](#) in its first week, a majority also say they'd prefer the North Division experiment remain just that. Among all levels of fans three-in-five (63%) say they hope the NHL goes back to its normal divisional alignment next year, while just under two-in-five (37%) would keep the all-Canadian division going forward. This preference is true even among the Hardcores who are enjoying the season so much.

More Key Findings:

- One-in-three hockey fans (32%) say the season has been more exciting with Canadian teams going head-to-head each night. One-in-five (19%) disagree, while half (49%) say it makes no difference to them

Since the season started, have you been following more or less NHL hockey? (Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from February 11-16, 2021 among a representative randomized sample of 1,601 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.

CONTACT:

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

- Among Hardcore Followers, half (52%) say the all-Canadian division has made hockey more exciting, while half as many (26%) say it has made the game less so
- The Toronto Maple Leafs are the top choice to break Canada's near three-decade drought of winning the Stanley Cup. One-quarter of fans say Toronto is the team to eventually break the streak (26%) while one-in-five choose the Montreal Canadiens (21%). One Canadian team will emerge this year from the North Division to face off against three other division winners from the U.S.-based divisions

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: Who's watching more and who's watching less hockey this year?

- **Hardcore fans enjoying a once in a lifetime season**
- **Younger men are tuned in more than others**
- **Battle Alberta not generating interest?**

Part Two: North Division drives excitement

Part Three: Most would go back to regular divisions after this year

Part Four: Will Canada ever win the Stanley Cup again?

Part One: Who's watching more and who's watching less hockey this year?

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit professional sports – and their fans - hard. Closest to home for most Canadians is the National Hockey League. Last year the NHL was able to finish its playoff tournament in two bubbles cities – Edmonton and Toronto – but the length of the regular season precluded a re-adoption of that plan for this year.

In order to ensure a regular season schedule during a time when travel restrictions are still in place between Canada and the United States, the NHL took a unique step, creating an all-Canadian North Division for this year only. All seven Canadian teams are playing a 56-game regular season schedule in Canada against each other only.

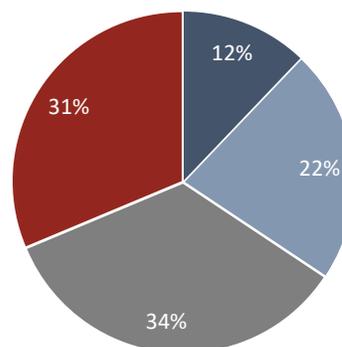
This is a significant change for people in this country, given that so much of the Canadian population engages in following professional hockey. One-in-three say they follow the league closely, while another 34 per cent are Fringe Onlookers – those who check in only occasionally during the regular season or playoffs.

CONTACT:

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

**How closely do you normally follow the NHL?
(All respondents, n=1601)**

- (Hardcore Followers) Very closely – I watch as much as I can
- (Regular Followers) Closely – I try to watch my favourites and stay up to date
- (Fringe Onlookers) Not very closely – I don't watch much, maybe a playoff game
- I don't follow this at all

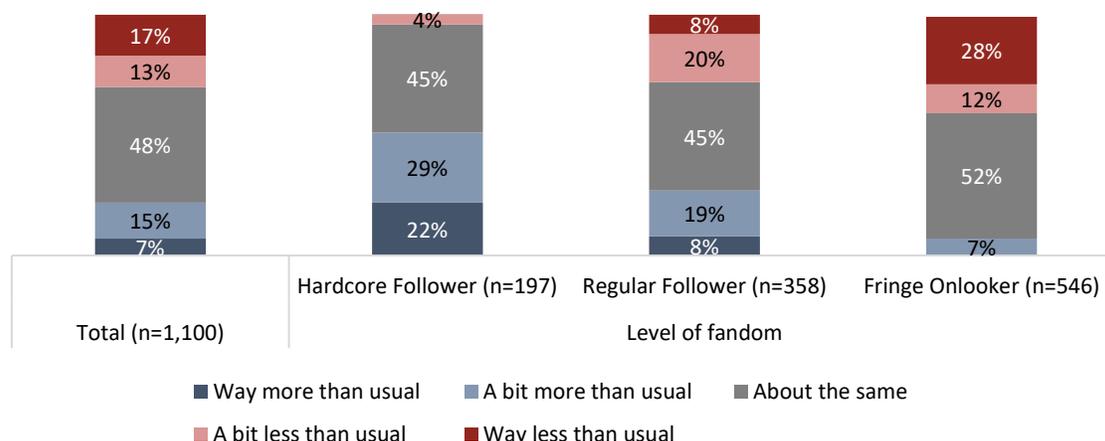


Hardcore fans enjoying a once in a lifetime season

When the puck dropped on the 2021 season on January 13th, viewers were evidently ready and waiting, as [ratings](#) for the first night of Hockey Night in Canada and Sportsnet's Wednesday Night Hockey were both up over last year.

That enthusiasm is also borne out in responses to this study. Among those who follow the league “very closely”, referred to in this report as Hardcore Followers, fully half (51%) say they are watching more hockey this year than normal, while only 4 per cent say they are not paying as much attention this year. Among those who follow the league “closely” – Regular Followers – attention is similar to a normal year. The greatest number of them are watching the same amount, while equal numbers are watching more (27%) of less (28%). Those who check in periodically, Fringe Onlookers, have not been drawn in by the prospect of inter- and intra-provincial rivalries:

**Since the season started on January 13, have you been following more, less or the same amount of NHL hockey?
(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)**

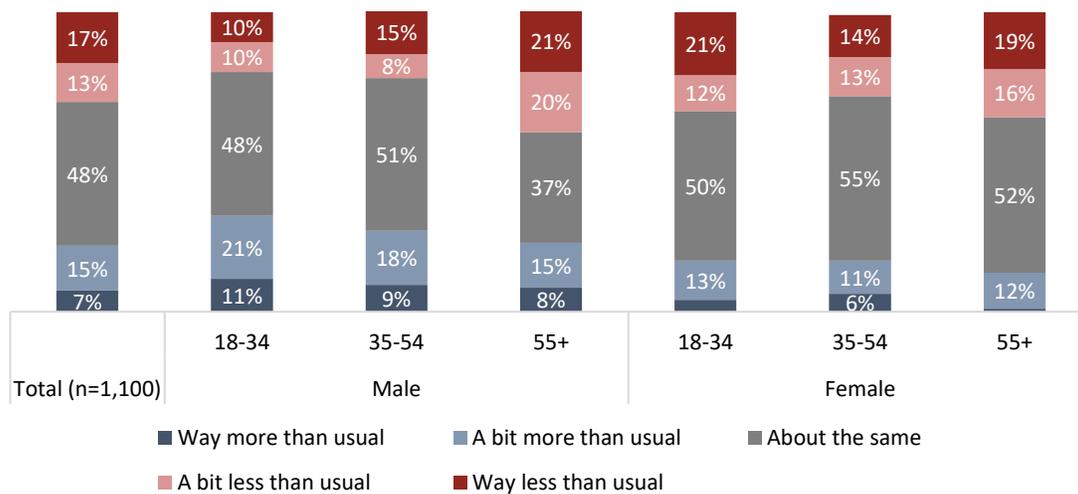


CONTACT:

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

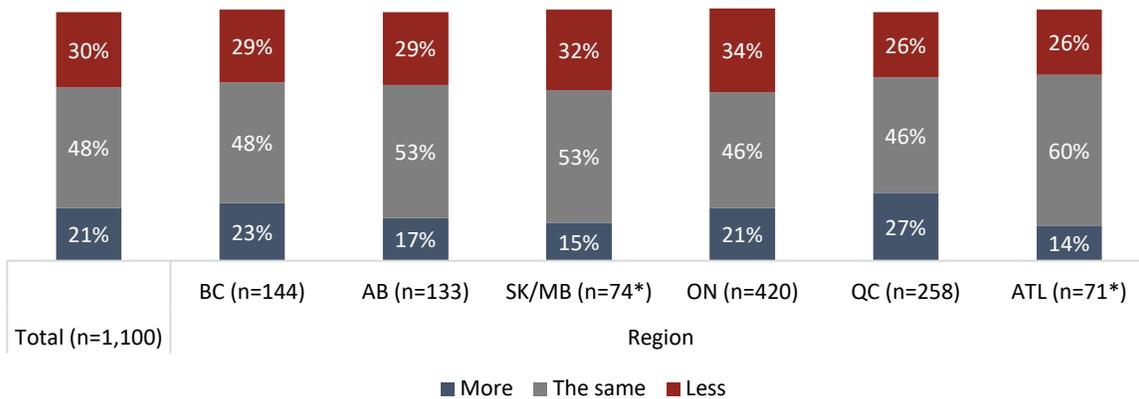
One important win for the NHL's broadcasting partners, in addition to securing and improving the attention of its most passionate fans in Canada, is the uptick in attention from the key demographic of men between the ages of 18 and 54. Among both groups, there has been a considerable increase in attention paid to regular season games. Young men, between the ages of 18 and 34, are most likely to say that they are both paying way more and a little more attention than they normally would be:

**Since the season started on January 13, have you been following more, less or the same amount of NHL hockey?
(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)**



Regionally, however, the prospect of watching the Battle of Alberta 10 times (or more) in 2021 has not made Albertans any more likely to tune in thus far. Fans in that province are more likely to say that they are watching less (29%) than more (17%) hockey this year. Quebec is the province where fans are most likely to say they are following along with more frequency:

Since the season started on January 13, have you been following more, less or the same amount of NHL hockey?
(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)

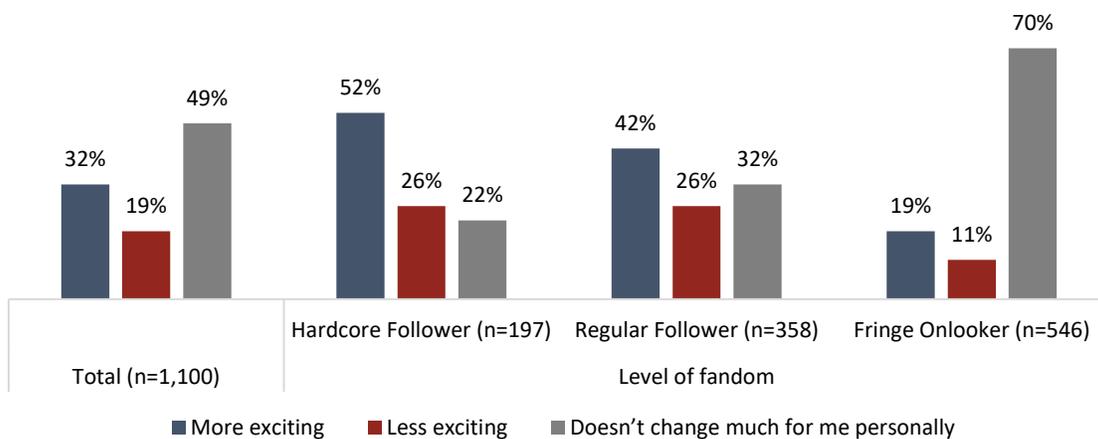


**small sample size, interpret with caution*

Part Two: North Division drives excitement

After the first month of the season, all three groups of fans are more likely to say that these games are more exciting than the regular schedule, with more passionate fans increasingly likely to hold that view:

Would you say that for this season, that change, having all seven Canadian teams in one division, makes the season...?
(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)



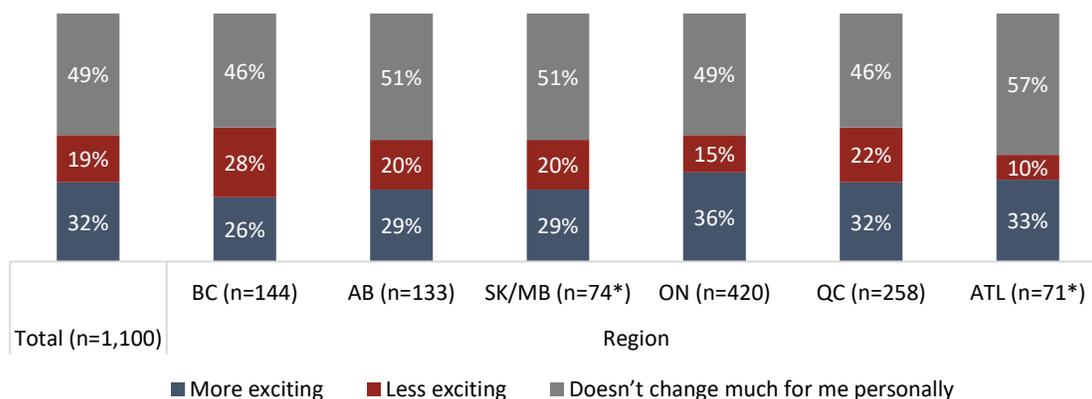
Regionally, it is Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada that voice the most enthusiasm about the current set up. Notably divided are British Columbians, whose Vancouver Canucks have struggled mightily against Canadian teams so far:

CONTACT:

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

Would you say that for this season, that change, having all seven Canadian teams in one division, makes the season...?

(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)

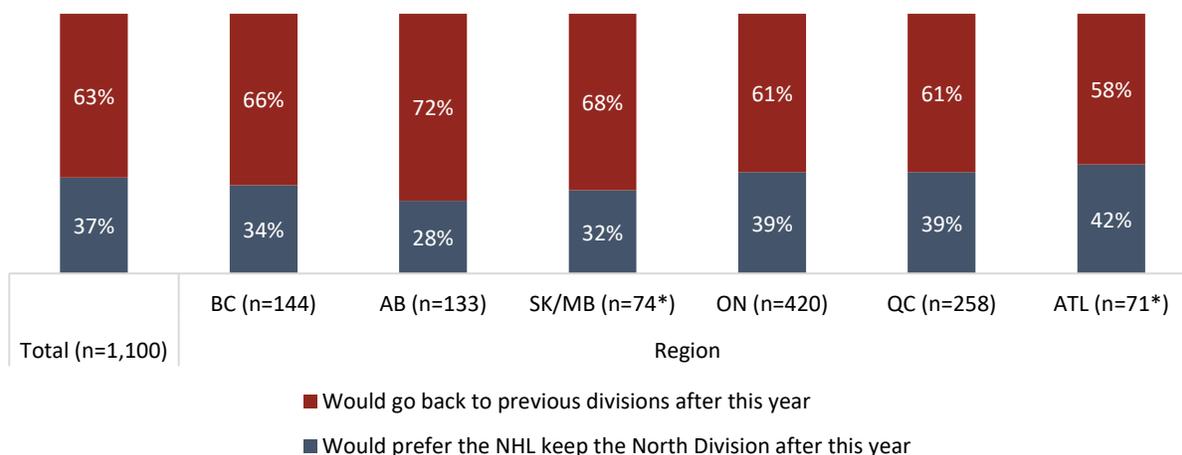


Part Three: Most would go back to regular divisions after this year

While this season appears that it will be a fun one for Canadian hockey fans, there is little appetite to continue an all-Canadian division in perpetuity. A firm majority of fans across the country say that a return to the regular divisional alignment is the right move for the league post-COVID. Slightly more than one-in-three (37%) say that they would keep the divisional formation when travel between Canada and the U.S. is re-enabled:

Would you prefer the NHL adopt a North Division, or return to its regular format, where the seven teams are spread out into their previous four divisions?

(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)

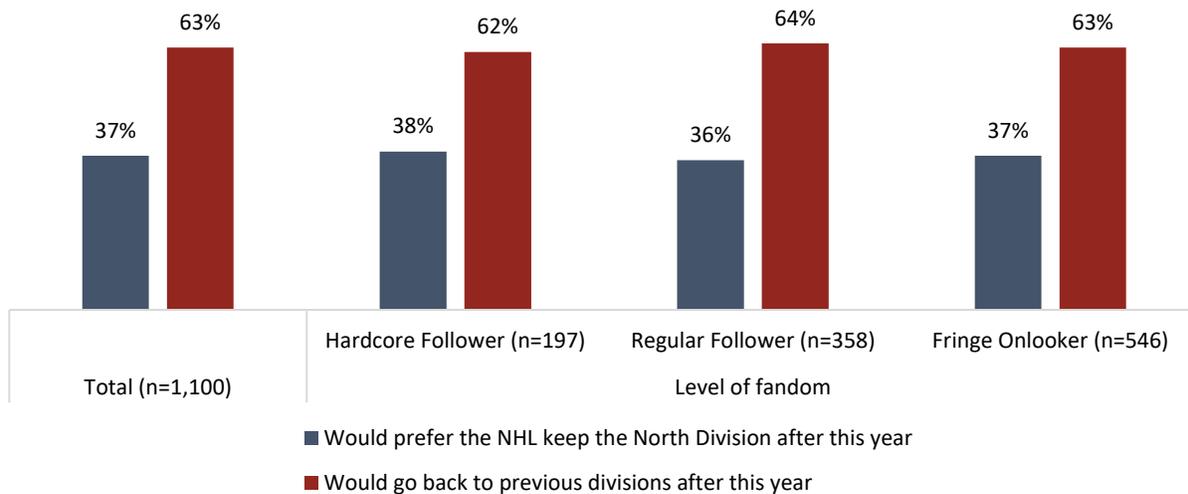


Even those fans who are enjoying the season most so far are inclined to preserve their favourite rivalries by reducing the number of times a year they see those teams. For its part, the NHL has signalled that this will indeed be a one year configuration, assuming that next year travel restrictions are lifted:

CONTACT:

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

Would you prefer the NHL adopt a North Division, or return to its regular format, where the seven teams are spread out into their previous four divisions? (Among those that pay any attention to the NHL normally)



Part Four: Will Canada ever win the cup again?

In 1893, Canada’s Governor General Lord Frederick Stanley, having become enamoured with hockey since leaving Britain under appointment by Queen Victoria I, gave Canada one of its national treasures when he gifted to the best amateur hockey team in Canada the Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup. That trophy would later be renamed the Stanley Cup. Little did Lord Stanley know that the Cup would go on to spend very little time in Canada after 1993.

As Canada approaches 30 years since a team on this side of the border won the Stanley Cup, a handful of Canadians say this nation is cursed and will never win one again (5%).

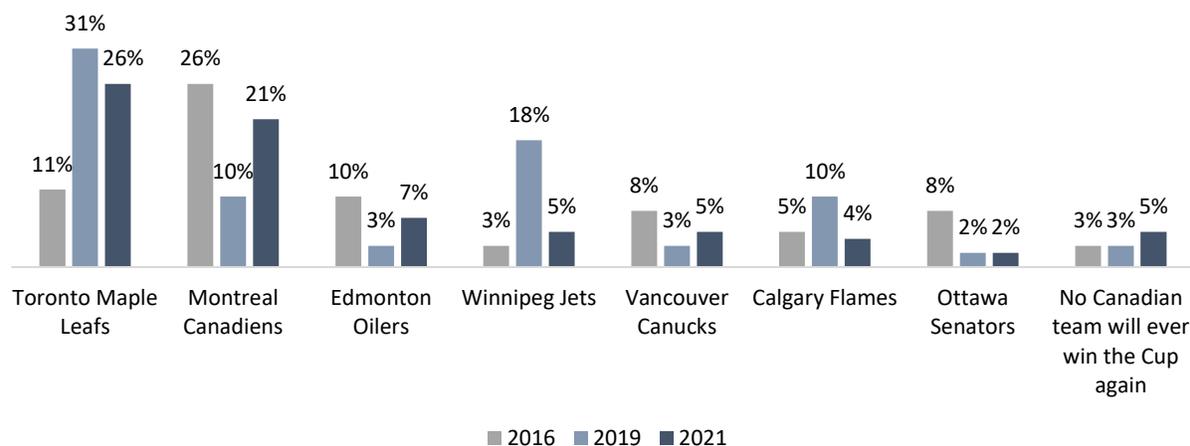
Others pin their hopes on a team once widely dismissed as a national embarrassment (although to be fair, this is a distinction almost all Canadian teams have faced at one point or another). Owing to their strong start and elite talent including Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner, the Toronto Maple Leafs are the top choice among Canadians (26%) to break the streak and bring the Cup home. The Montreal Canadiens are chosen next by one-in-five (21%). The last place Ottawa Senators are seen as Canada’s best bet by just two per cent of fans.

CONTACT:

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

Which of the 7 Canadian teams do you think will be the first one to break this streak and win the Cup?

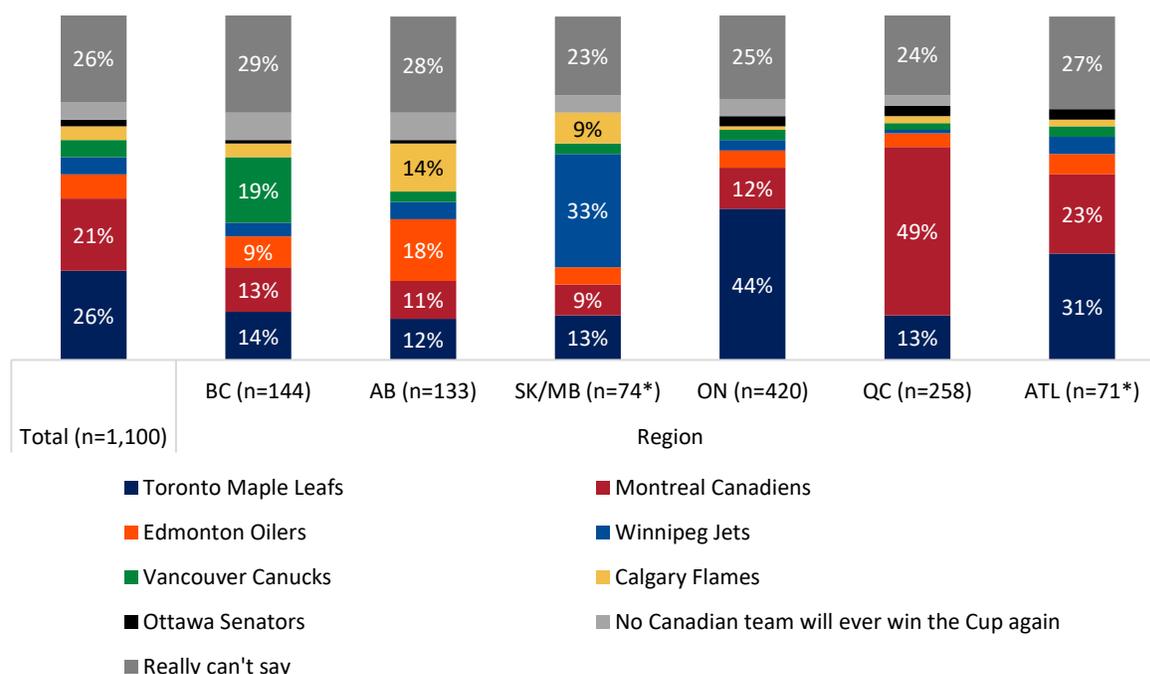
(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL)



Canadians differ greatly on this question based on their geographic location. In British Columbia, the Vancouver Canucks are the top choice but chosen by just one-in-five (19%) while the Jets, Leafs and Canadiens also do well close to home:

Which of the 7 Canadian teams do you think will be the first one to break this streak and win the Cup?

(Among those that pay any attention to the NHL)



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

CONTACT:

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