

Holiday travel hell: More Canadians blame weather and airlines, than government, for recent chaos

Canadians unconvinced if fining airlines for failed service will help improve future outcomes

January 18, 2023 – The snowstorms that iced many Canadians out of their holiday travel plans, continue to leave airline and railway executives and politicians on the hot seat.

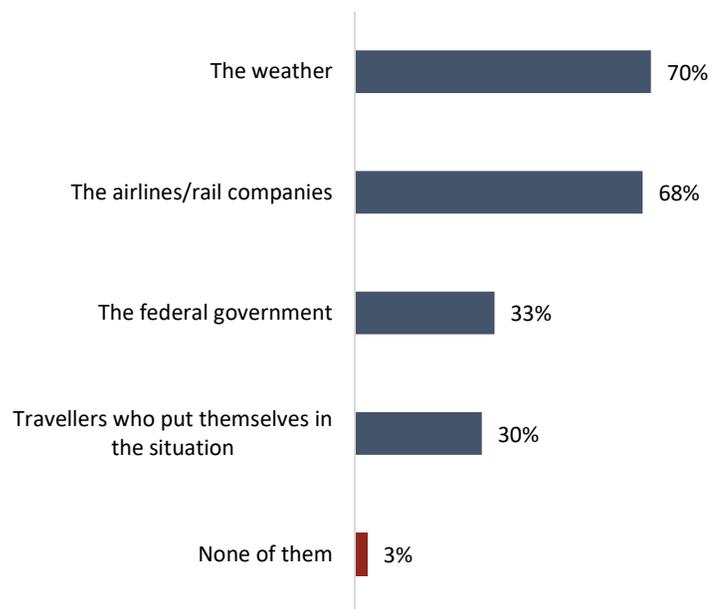
But new data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds Canadians as likely to blame the weather (70%) as the airlines and rail companies (68%) for the holiday travel chaos. One-in-three (33%) point the finger at the federal government.

A similar number (30%) blame the travellers for putting themselves in the situation. Those affected are most likely to blame the weather (54%) for dumping snow on their holiday plans, but they do so at a lower rate than those who avoided the travel snarls completely (71%).

The data also indicate strong desire from Canadians for more government regulation to protect consumers from cancellations (78% say this), but a mixed belief that the regulation already in place will have much effect. Two-in-five (44%) want the Canadian Transportation Agency to levy fines against the airlines who failed to uphold customer rights even if it means the companies raise airfares to cover them. One-third (34%) want the CTA to find other ways to hold airlines accountable for cancellations and delays.

Travel troubles have become an all-too-familiar phenomenon for Canadians. Last summer saw persistent delays and long lines at Canadian airports. To “learn lessons” from the summer, and prepare for the holiday travel season, Transport Minister Omar Alghabra held a summit with airlines and airports [in November](#). Still, two-in-five (39%) believe Transport Canada failed to prepare for the holiday surge in travel. Two-in-five (43%) are more likely to absolve the government ministry and say the December travel mess was out of its control.

Who, or what, do you blame, if anybody, for these holiday travel issues? (All respondents, n=1,611)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from Jan. 6-10, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 1,611 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 +/- 2.5 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.

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More Key Findings:

- Those whose holiday plans were affected by the travel woes say Transport Canada failed to plan for the holiday surge in travel at higher rates (50%) than those who avoided the mess (36%).
- Half (47%) of frequent travellers believe the CTA should levy fines against the airlines even if it means the companies raise ticket prices to cover the fines.
- Three-in-five (61%) Canadians say major airlines and rail lines don't care about their customers. Frequent travellers are more likely to disagree (37%) than others who travel less, but still three-in-five (58%) in that group believe the major travel operators are inconsiderate of their clientele.
- Two-in-five (43%) Canadians are planning to travel more this year as air passenger volumes have recovered, but still lag pre-pandemic numbers.

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.*

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Part One: Holiday travel chaos, who was affected and who or what is to blame?

It was a disappointing holiday travel season for many Canadians. Mid-December snowstorms cancelled and delayed flights at [Pearson Airport in Toronto](#) and the [Vancouver International Airport – Canada's two busiest airports](#). The timing of the cancellations meant many Canadians were delayed or unable to complete holiday travel plans. Others – [including many passengers on Sunwing](#) – were stuck in holiday destinations for days after their intended departure.

The travel chaos was not restricted to Canada's airways. Train service in the busy Windsor to Quebec City corridor was also affected by the snowstorm which hit Ontario and Quebec, leaving hundreds of passengers [stuck on VIA Rail](#) trains for hours with limited food and water. [VIA Rail customers](#), alongside those of [Sunwing](#), complained they received little to no information from the companies as they suffered through extensive delays.

WestJet told the House of Commons committee attempting to sort through the travel mess that it had to cancel [1,600 flights](#) from Dec. 16 to Jan. 8. "In my 22 years at WestJet, this was the most significant

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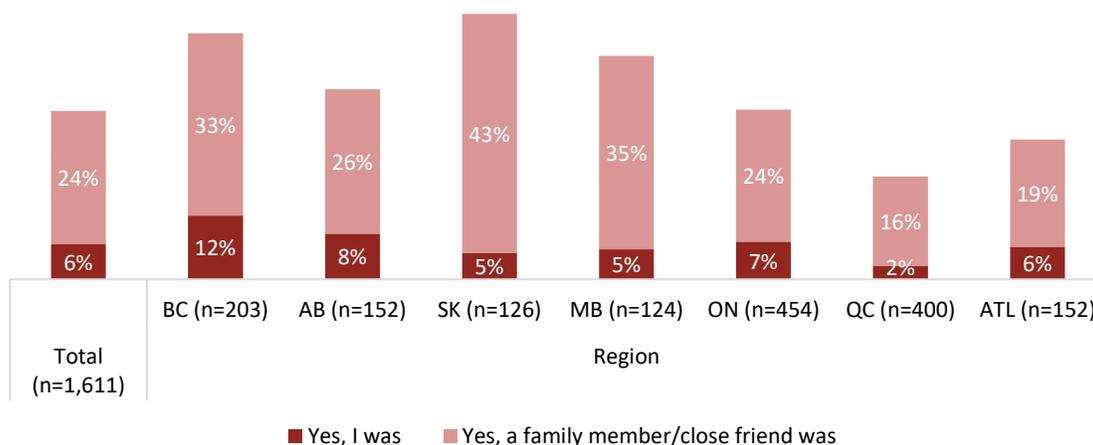
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weather-induced disruption that I have experienced,” WestJet’s vice-president of flight operations [Scott Wilson said](#). Sunwing, meanwhile, has received [7,000 complaints](#) from its customers who were affected by flight cancellations. Air Canada rebooked [107,000 customers](#) over the holiday. On top of cancellations, there were also numerous delays for the flights that did takeoff during the holidays. Pearson Airport expected an average passenger volume of [130,000 per day](#) during the week of Christmas.

One-in-16 (6%) Canadians say they were personally affected by holiday travel issues. One-quarter (24%) say they know a close friend or family member who faced travel difficulties over the holiday season. Canadians in B.C., and the prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba – where travel often requires a connection through a [hub such as Toronto or Vancouver](#) – are more likely than those in other provinces to say they had holiday travel challenges. Notably, on Dec. 29, Sunwing cancelled all operations out of Regina and Saskatoon [until Feb. 3](#) as it continues to sort out the fallout from the holiday travel season.

Quebecers are the least likely to say they had holiday travel delays or cancellations. Previous Angus Reid Institute data found [Quebecers were less likely to report having out-of-province friends or family members](#).

Were you, or anyone you know, affected by these holiday travel issues?



More than anything else, Canadians are most likely to blame the weather (70%) and travel companies for the recent winter woes (68%). One-in-three (33%) point the finger at the federal government; nearly as many blame the travellers themselves (30%).

Women are more likely than men to say the snowstorms deserve blame for the travel chaos. Men blame the federal government at much higher rates than women.

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Who, or what, do you blame, if anybody, for these holiday travel issues?							
	Total (n=1,611)	Male			Female		
		18-34 (n=226)	35-54 (n=265)	55+ (n=296)	18-34 (n=220)	35-54 (n=274)	55+ (n=327)
The weather	70%	62%	58%	67%	74%	77%	76%
The airlines/rail companies	68%	62%	68%	74%	64%	69%	66%
The federal government	33%	38%	46%	35%	21%	33%	24%
Travellers who put themselves in the situation	30%	27%	32%	36%	26%	23%	31%
None of them	3%	4%	4%	1%	5%	2%	3%

Those affected are most likely to blame the weather (54%), but they do so at lower rates than those who didn't have holiday travel plans waylaid by the cross-country chaos (71%). Those who were embroiled in the travel mess are also the least likely to place the blame at the feet of the airlines and rail companies, though more than two-in-five do (46%, [see detailed tables](#)).

While those affected were no more likely to blame the federal government than those who weren't, there is a significant political divide. Half (53%) of those who voted Conservative in 2021 say the federal government deserves blame for the holiday travel issues. One-in-eight (14%) past Liberal voters, one-in-five (21%) past NDP voters, and one-quarter (25%) of past BQ voters agree:

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Who, or what, do you blame, if anybody, for these holiday travel issues?					
	Total (n=1,611)	2021 Federal Vote			
		CPC (n=457)	Liberal (n=444)	NDP (n=243)	BQ (n=101)
The weather	70%	64%	74%	75%	75%
The airlines/rail companies	68%	66%	70%	69%	71%
The federal government	33%	53%	14%	21%	25%
Travellers who put themselves in the situation	30%	26%	31%	32%	32%
None of them	3%	1%	3%	2%	5%

The House of Commons Transport, Infrastructure and Communities committee is hearing from key figures including airline and rail executives, and Transport Minister Omar Alghabra, as it sorts out the chaos. However, the holiday travel turmoil followed a rough summer travel season, when Canadian airlines and airports were [some of the worst in the world](#) at getting passengers to their destinations on time. Following those issues, Alghabra held a November summit to discuss the “[lessons](#)” of the summer travel season with airlines and airports. [“We cannot go back to what we saw last summer.”](#) he said at the time.

With all this in the background, Canadians are nearly as likely to blame Transport Canada for failing to anticipate the holiday travel surge (39%) as they are to believe the issues were outside of the government ministry’s control (43%).

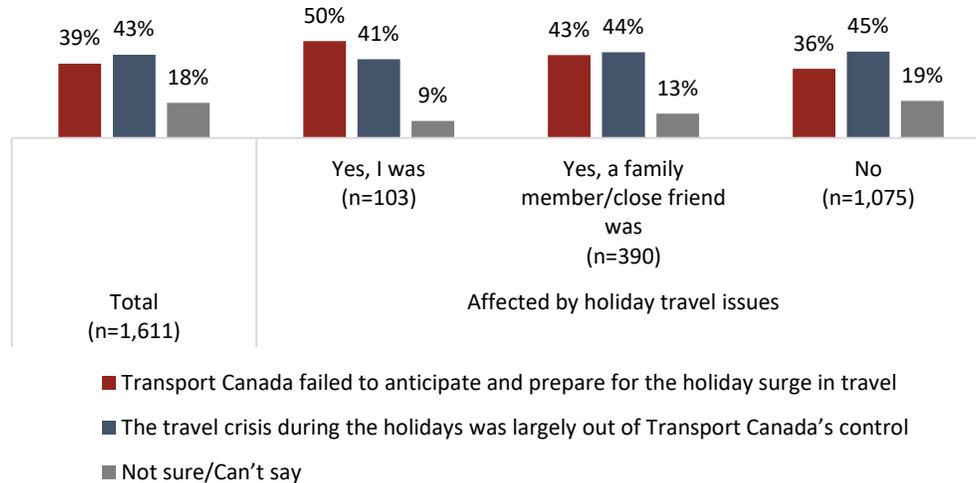
There is also a sharp political divide on this question. More than half (55%) of those who voted Conservative in the 2021 federal election believe Transport Canada failed Canadians. Three-in-five (59%) past Liberal voters disagree. Though the minority opinion among past Liberal (22%), NDP (34%) and Bloc Québécois (33%) voters, significant segments of each group say Transport Canada did not prepare enough for the holiday travel season ([see detailed tables](#)).

Those who faced delays and cancellations as they tried to travel during the holiday season say Transport Canada failed to properly plan for the holiday travel surge at higher rates (50%) than those who avoided the travel mess (36%):

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Which would you say is closer to your view:



While airlines must compensate travellers for cancellations and delays, some believe that does not go far enough. [An advocate for air passengers called](#) for the federal government to require airlines to automatically compensate passengers for disrupted flights, instead of the current system which requires passengers to make a claim. The federal NDP [echoed that call](#).

Four-in-five (78%) Canadians believe there should be more government regulation to protect travel customers in the event of cancellations. A strong majority across all demographics believe this ([see detailed tables](#)).

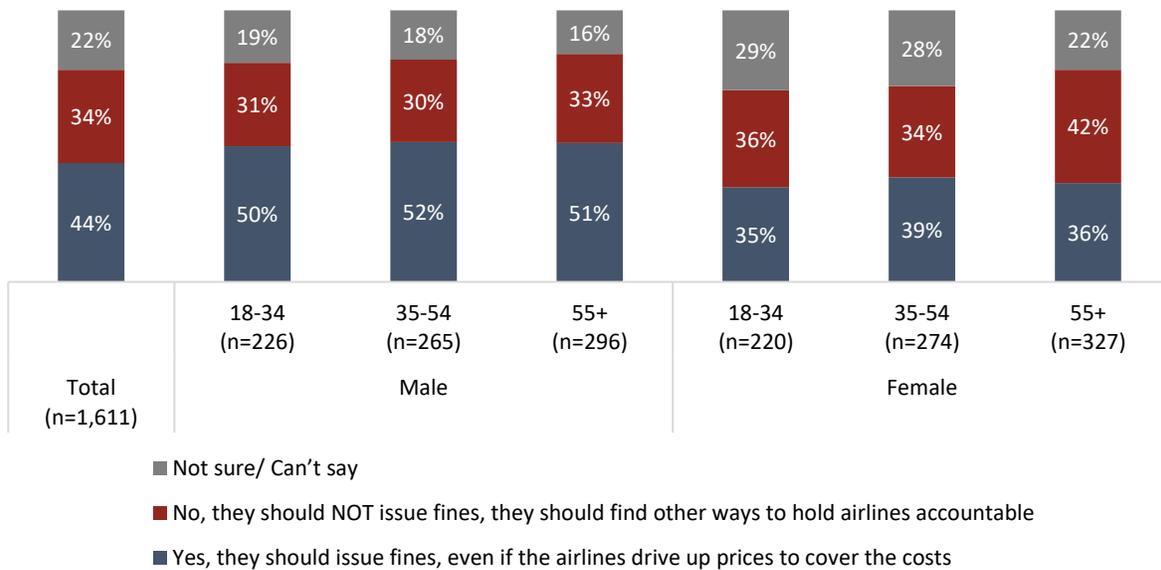
The Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), a government regulator which oversees airlines, [can fine airlines up to \\$25,000 per passenger](#) in the event the agency believes the airline violated air passenger protection rights. Those rights include providing a refund or alternate travel arrangements in the event of a cancellation, [even if the cancellation was outside of the airline's control](#). However, there is [concern that passengers will end up footing the bill eventually](#) if the CTA were to issue heavy fines, as airlines might [raise prices in response](#). In the past five years, [only one carrier](#) has been fined by the CTA for provided inadequate compensation to passengers.

More than two-in-five (44%) Canadians believe the CTA should issue the fines even if it means increased prices for consumers. One-third (34%) believe airlines should be held accountable in some other way. Men are more supportive of heavy fines than women, who are more likely to believe the airlines should be punished in another way:

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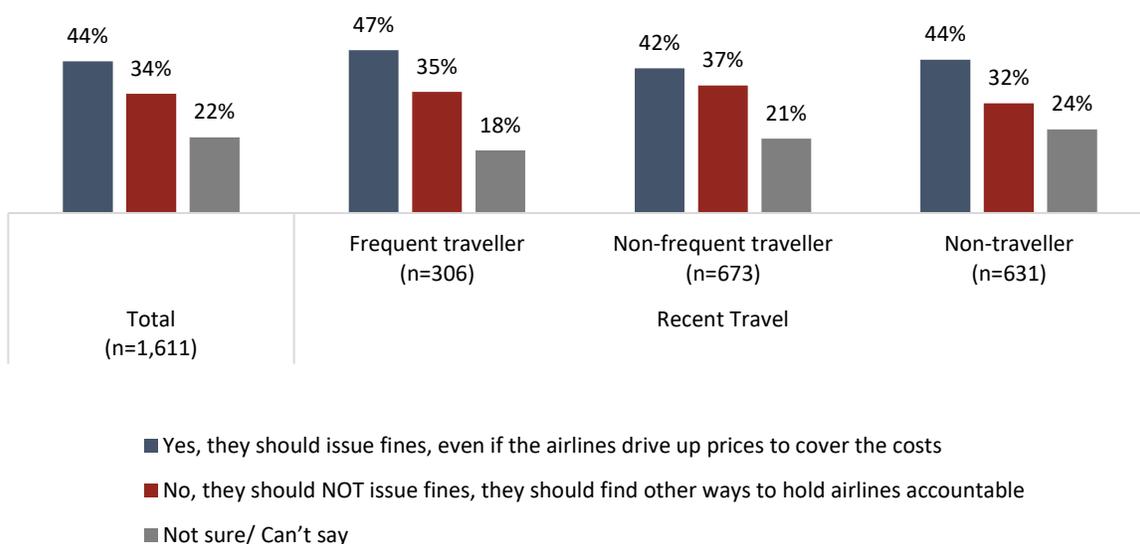
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In your opinion, should the CTA be fining airlines in these situations?



Half of frequent travellers (47%) believe the CTA should issue heavy fines to airlines, even if it means increased ticket prices. Two-in-five (42%) of Canadians who travel less frequently agree:

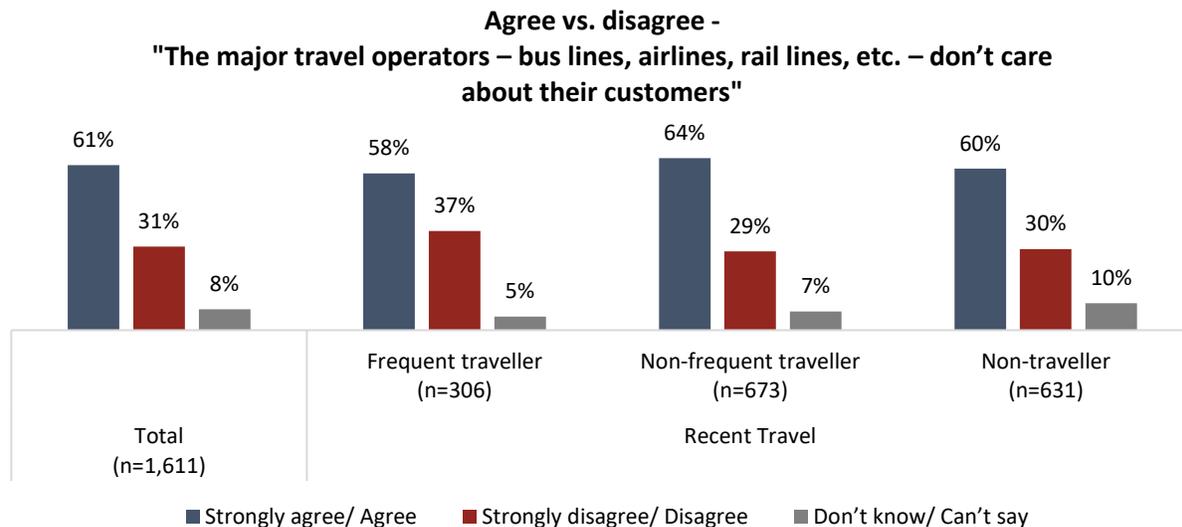
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Three-in-five believe airlines, rail lines don't care about their customers

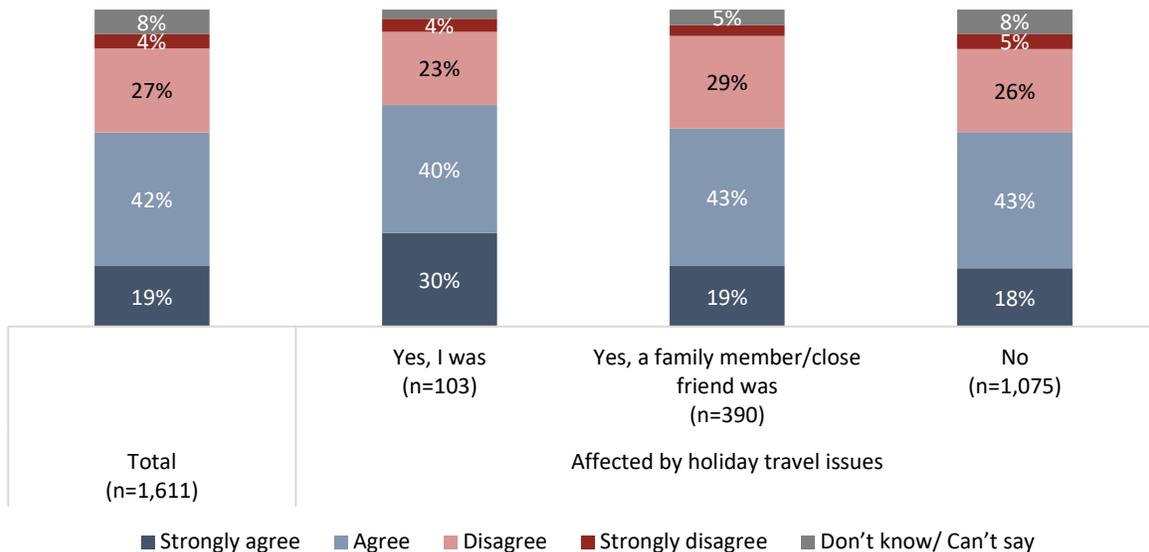
In the wake of a year filled with delays, cancellations and customers stranded, a majority (61%) of Canadians feel like travel operators do not care about their customers. Older Canadians are more likely to disagree, but still more than half of women (54%) and men (57%) over the age of 54 say bus lines, airlines and rail lines do not care about their customers ([see detailed tables](#)).

Canadians who travel frequently are more likely to believe the air, bus and rail companies care about them, at 37 per cent. Still, three-in-five (58%) of frequent travellers believe the opposite:



Perhaps those who dealt with delays and cancellations during the holiday season are feeling a bit burned by the travel operators. Seven-in-ten affected by holiday season travel issues (70%) agree, including 30 per cent strongly, that bus lines, airlines and rail lines do not care about their customers. Three-in-five (61%) who avoided scars from travel over the holidays say the same:

**Agree vs. disagree -
"The major travel operators – bus lines, airlines, rail lines, etc. – don't care
about their customers"**



Canadians want more airline competition

Canada's airways have long been dominated by two major players – WestJet and Air Canada. Others – Flair and Lynx – have tried to undercut the market as lower cost options. There are also smaller regional or more holiday-focused – Sunwing, Air Transat – companies in the mix. Overall, however, Canadians often have to choose between the two major airlines when it comes to booking travel.

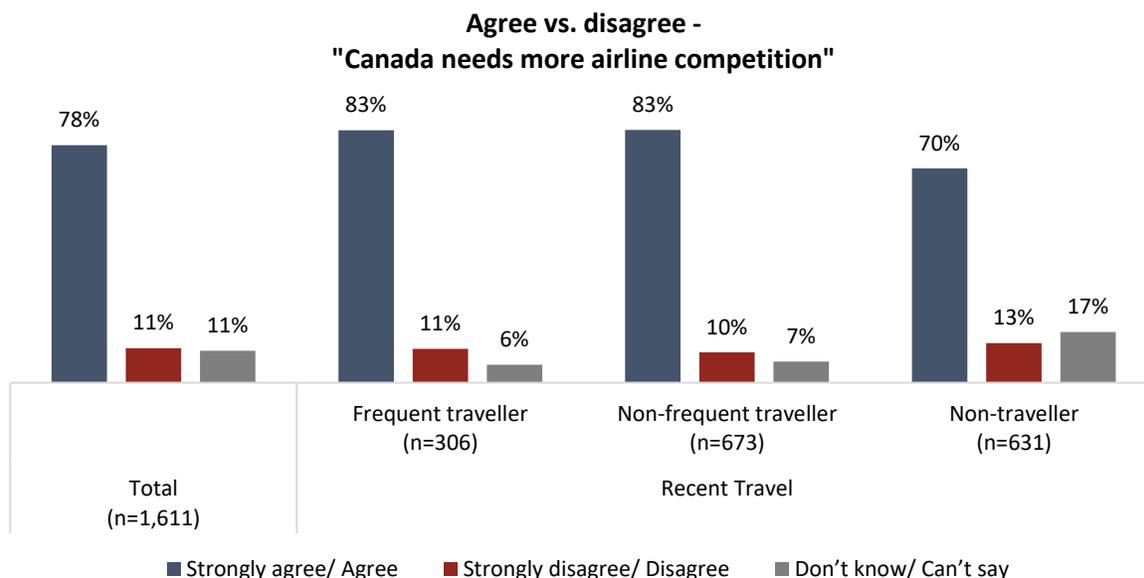
After a holiday season filled with travel problems, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh [called](#) for more competition in the airline industry, saying the lack of competition makes flights less affordable for Canadians. The CTA [requires](#) companies that operate domestic routes in Canada to be majority-owned and controlled by Canadians, which prevents foreign businesses from entering the market.

Four-in-five (78%) Canadians agree with Singh, including an overwhelming majority of past CPC (84%), Liberal (78%), NDP (75%) and Bloc Québécois voters (74%, [see detailed tables](#)).

Those who travel more regularly are more likely to believe there needs to be more airlines competing in Canada's skies than those who have not travelled at all since March 2022:

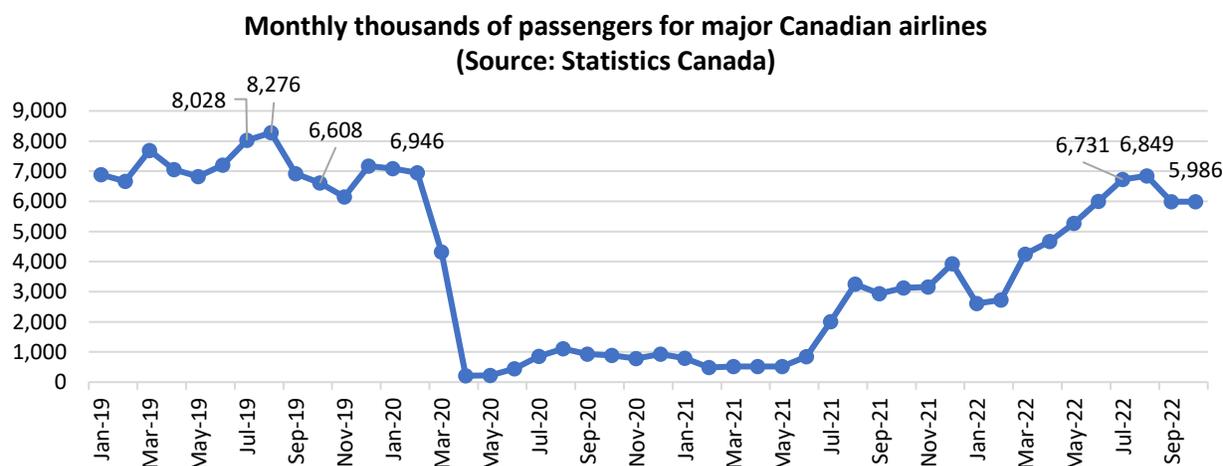
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Part Two: 2023 outlook, Canadians looking to travel more

Since March 2022, COVID-19 restrictions have been a thing of the past and Canadians have started travelling more in response. In July, Canadian airlines carried 6.7 million passengers, a number not seen [since Feb. 2020](#). Still, the volume of traffic was below comparable seasonal traffic seen in 2019, suggesting there could be more volume headaches ahead for the nation's airlines and airports.

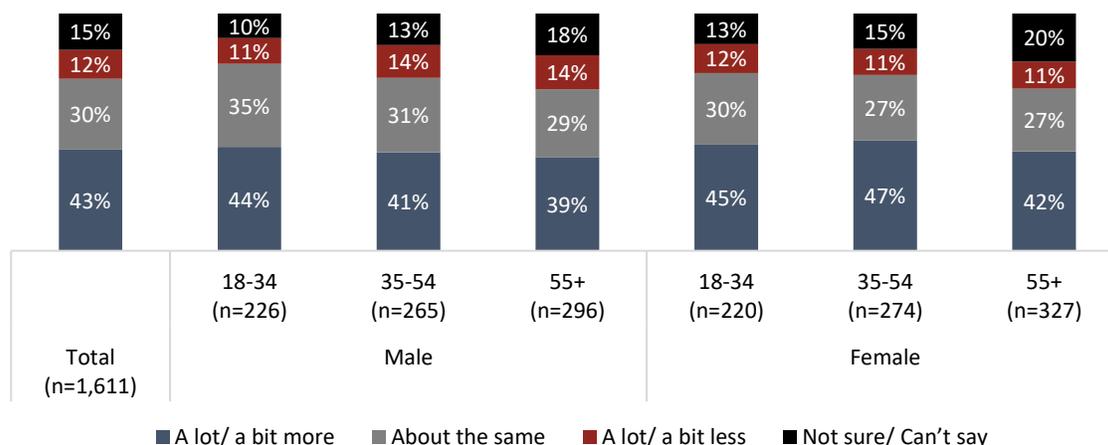


Indeed, two-in-five (43%) Canadians say they plan to travel more in 2023. Three-in-ten (30%) are planning to take a similar number of trips as they did in 2022, while one-in-eight (12%) are planning to travel less. This travel enthusiasm is higher among women than men, and younger Canadians than older ones:

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In 2023, are you planning to travel outside of your province or internationally to other countries, including the United States, more, the same, or less than last year?

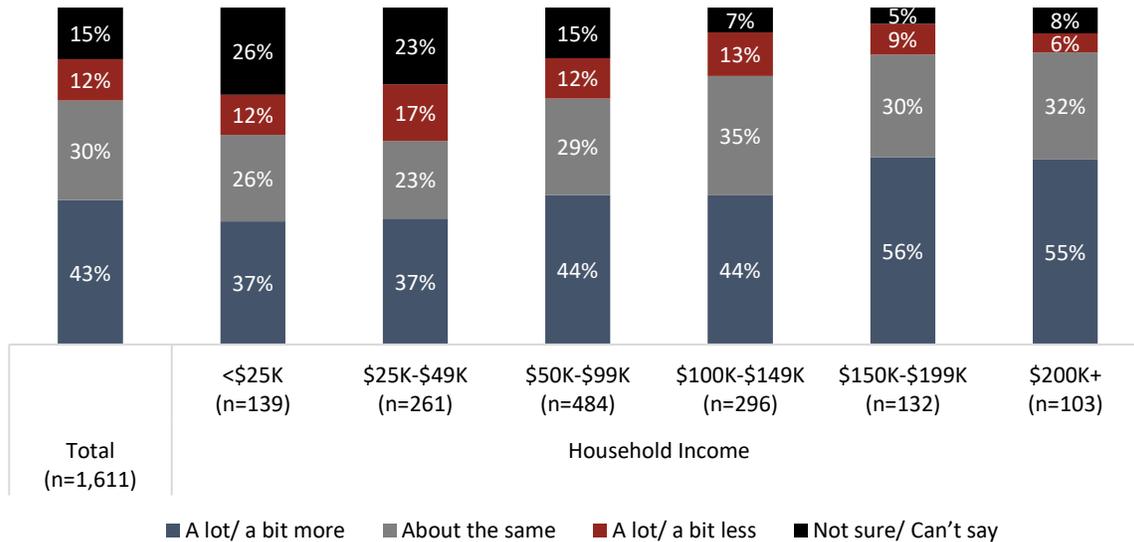


As inflation continues to drive up the cost of living, travel and vacations are often left on the cutting room floor by Canadians trimming their budget. In December, two-in-five (37%) of Canadians [told ARI](#) that they had cancelled or scaled back planned travel in recent months to save money.

Related: [Holiday hurt: Inflation realities deflate Christmas shopping plans, two-in-five cut back on charitable giving](#)

Still, a plurality across all income levels say they are planning to travel more in 2023. Those in households earning \$150,000 or more annually are much more likely than lower income households to say they are planning on taking more trips in the next 12 months:

In 2023, are you planning to travel outside of your province or internationally to other countries, including the United States, more, the same, or less than last year?



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

For detailed results by frequency of travel and whether or not the respondent was affected by the holiday travel issues, [click here](#).