

China, Canada and Challenging Diplomacy: Two-in-three Canadians believe Beijing did attempt election interference

Majority of Liberal voters agree China likely tried to interfere; most say gov't needs to take a harder line

March 1, 2023 – The latest allegations to strain an [already challenged](#) diplomatic relationship between Ottawa and Beijing have a majority of Canadians of the belief the Chinese government did indeed attempt to interfere in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections, while demanding a stronger response from the federal government on the issue.

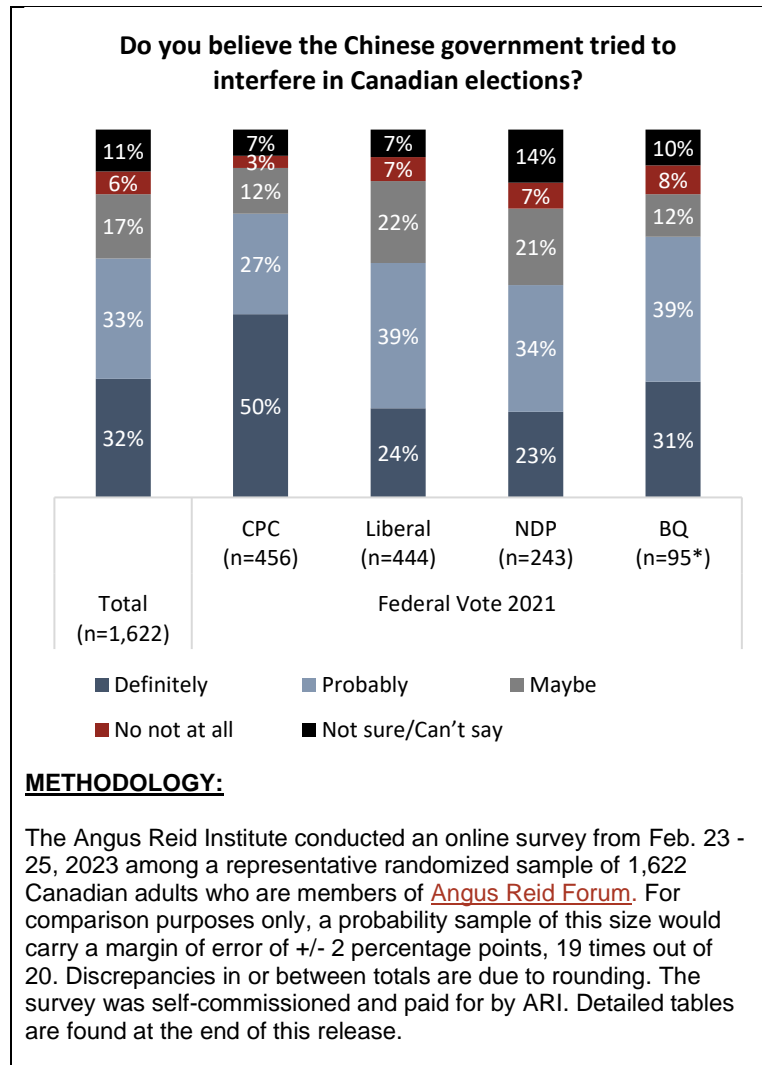
These are the latest findings of a new public opinion survey from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute.

Amid allegations Beijing [attempted to influence](#) the outcomes of both the 2019 and 2021 elections to ensure the federal Liberal Party formed a minority government over the opposition Conservatives, two-thirds of adult Canadians express belief that Beijing “definitely” (32%) or “probably” (33%) tried to meddle.

Majorities across the political spectrum are of this view, while half of Canadians say this attempted interference represents a serious threat to democracy (53%).

Past Conservative Party voters are most likely to view the Chinese government’s attempts as successful, with a plurality (42%) saying they “feel the election was stolen” in 2021. It should be noted however, that the allegations of interference involve fewer seats than could have [swayed the result in parliament](#).

What is less equivocal, however, is the view the federal government is not doing enough to safeguard Canada’s security and defence. Two-thirds (64%), including majorities of past Conservative (88%) and Liberal (52%) voters alike, say Ottawa needs to put additional focus on this area.



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More Key Findings:

- Seven-in-ten (69%) Canadians believe “the federal government is afraid to stand up to China.” Nine-in-ten (91%) past CPC voters, three-in-five (62%) past NDP voters and more than two-in-five (46%) past Liberal voters agree.
- Canadians are split as to whether they are worried about the economic consequences of standing up to China (46%) or not (46%). This concern is highest among residents in Quebec (51%), Ontario (48%) and Atlantic Canada (48%).
- One-third (32%) of past Liberal voters believe the allegations of interference from Beijing in Canada’s elections are “overblown.” However, more (43%) of those who voted Liberal in 2021 believe the allegations to be a serious threat to Canada’s democracy.

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: The ‘spy balloon’ and allegations of election interference

It has already been an eventful year for Canada-China relations. On Jan. 28, a Chinese spy balloon was spotted over Alaska. It eventually flew over the Yukon and B.C. before its course took it across the United States, where it was [eventually downed](#) off the coast of South Carolina.

Recent weeks have also brought explosive allegations that China’s government in Beijing made attempts to influence Canadian elections in 2019 and 2021. [Global News](#) reported that in the 2019 election, officials with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service believe [at least 11 Toronto-area candidates](#) were supported by Beijing, including sitting Liberal MP Han Dong, who CSIS officials [believe received help to win the Liberal nomination](#) from the Chinese consulate. Dong has [denied the accusations](#).

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As well, in 2021, [CSIS reports viewed by the Globe and Mail](#) allege Beijing attempted to influence that election with the goal of bringing back a Liberal minority government and defeating Conservative politicians viewed as unfriendly to China.

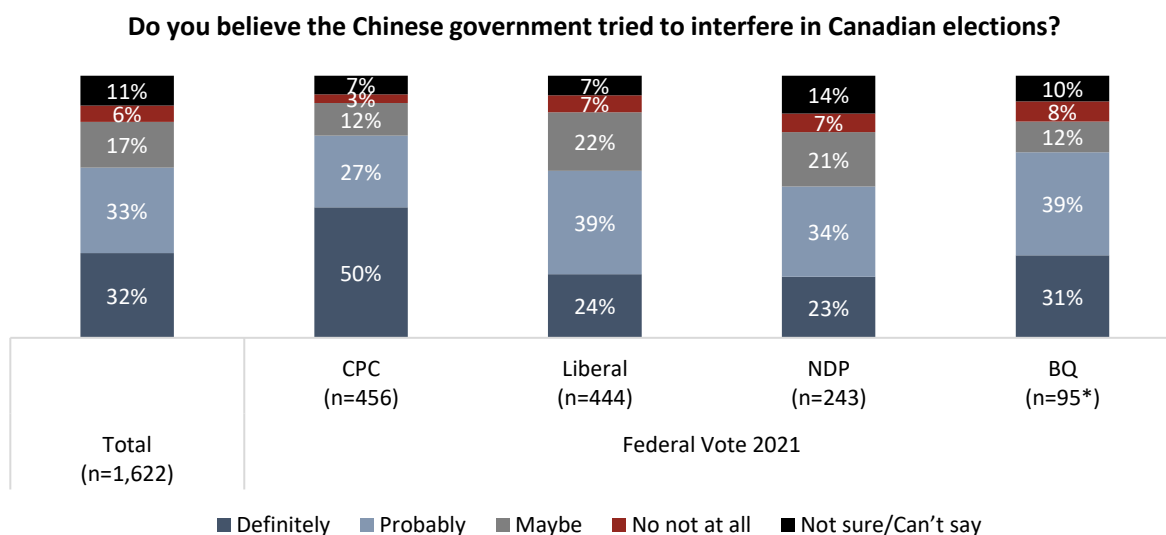
Though the details are new, the broad accusations are not. In December, [the Globe and Mail reported](#) that government was warned in 2020 of “subtle but effective interference networks” employed by China during the 2019 federal election. In June last year, former Conservative party leader Erin O’Toole alleged interference from China [cost his party seats](#) in the 2021 election. In response, a CSIS official told a House of Commons committee [in November](#) that there was “activity of foreign interference” but it did not meet “the threshold of impacting the overall election integrity.”

Half of Canadians (52%) say they have been following coverage of allegations of interference by Beijing in Canadian federal elections closely, while two-thirds say the spy balloon story is one they have been tracking ([see detailed tables](#)).

Two-thirds believe Beijing likely attempted election interference

As details emerge, Canadians are more likely to believe there was an attempt by China to interfere with recent Canadian elections than not. Two-thirds (65%) believe that was “definitely” (32%) or “probably” (33%) the case. Few (6%) reject the concept outright.

Those who voted for the alleged aggrieved party in the 2021 election – the CPC – are more convinced there has been attempts at election interference by China than those who voted Liberal or NDP. However, majorities of past Liberal (64%) and NDP (58%) voters say Beijing likely tried to influence recent elections:



**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

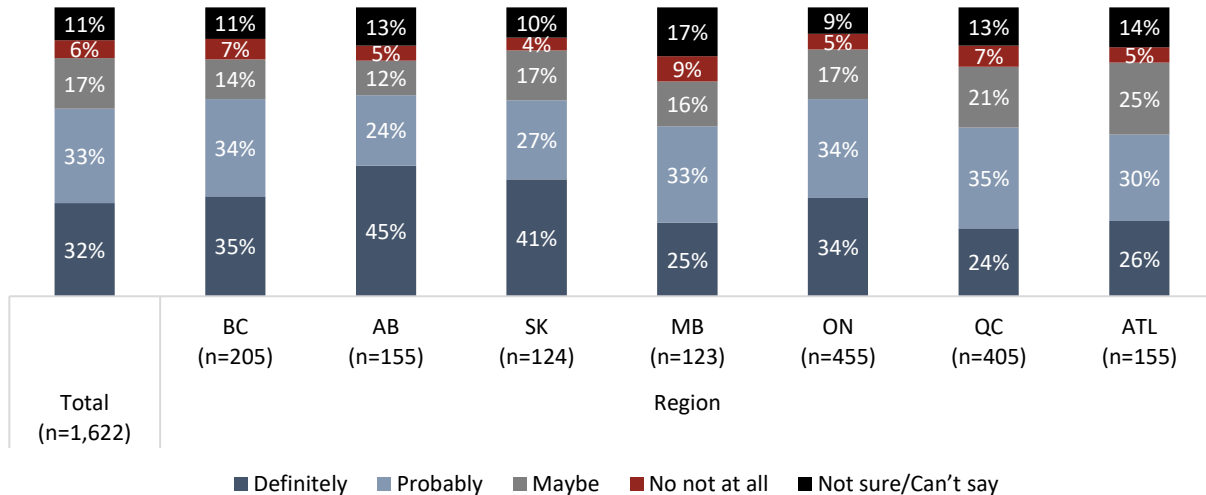
Those in B.C. (68%) and Ontario (68%) – [two](#) of the [provinces](#) where the alleged interference supposedly took place – are among the most likely to believe there “probably” or “definitely” were attempts to interfere with recent Canadian elections by Beijing. Residents of Alberta (70%) and Saskatchewan (68%) – two

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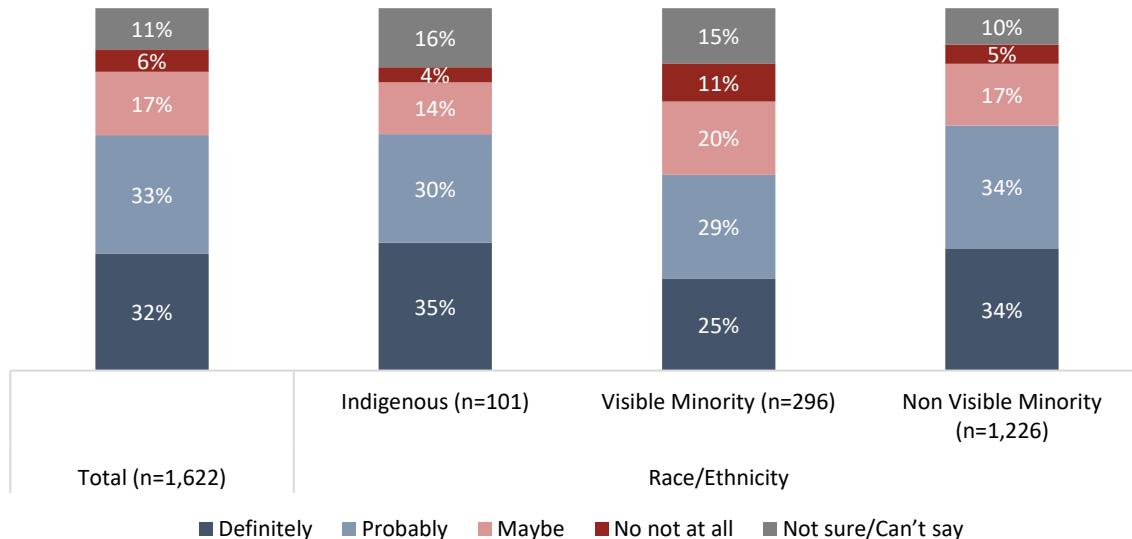
provinces that are typically Conservative strongholds – are also more likely than other provinces to believe the Chinese government tried to interfere in Canadian elections:

Do you believe the Chinese government tried to interfere in Canadian elections?



Canadians who identify as a visible minority are most likely to push back on the idea that China has interfered (31% do so) but a majority among this group still say it probably or definitely took place:

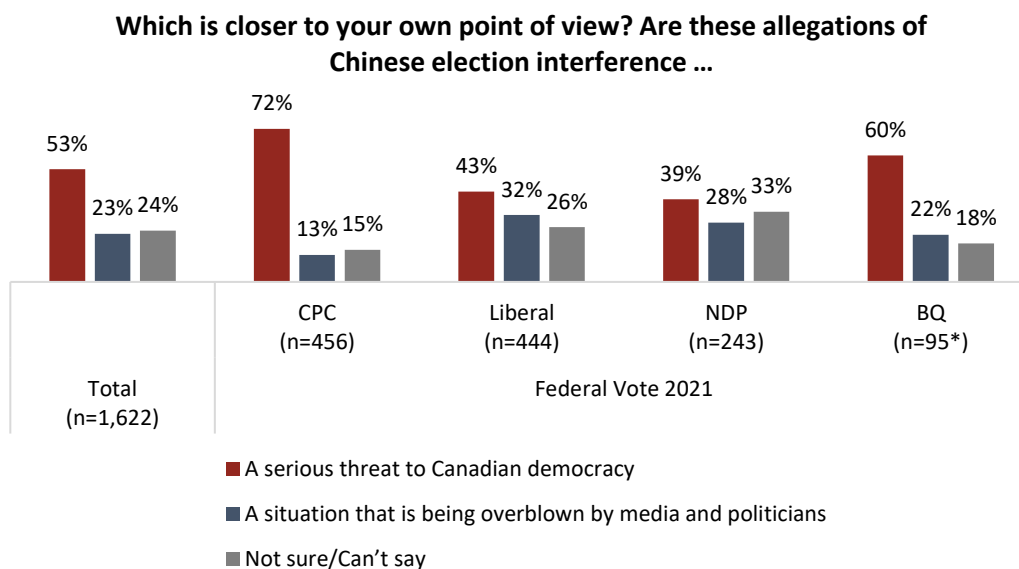
Do you believe the Chinese government tried to interfere in Canadian elections?



Half say potential interference ‘a serious threat’ to Canada’s democracy

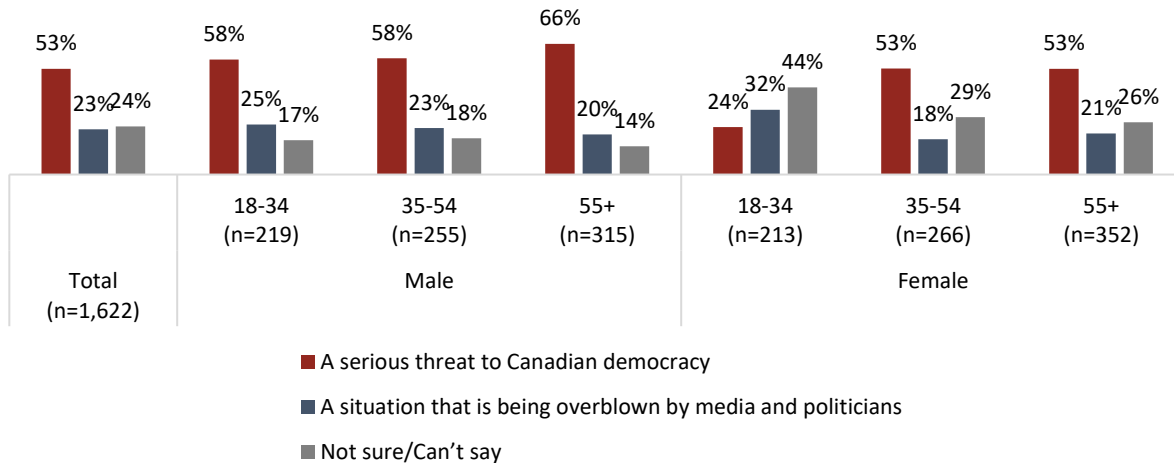
The allegations that Chinese election interference represents a threat to Canadians’ security and democracy are not new. Innumerable [examples](#) of this line of reasoning have been [published](#) in recent years, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated in November of last year that China has been playing “[aggressive games](#)” in its attempts to undermine elections in Canada.

One-quarter (23%) say that media and politicians have been overplaying the potential threat, while more than twice as many (53%) say they consider Chinese election interference to be a credible and serious threat to democracy. Past Liberal and NDP voters lean toward considering the threat serious, but are much more divided than past CPC and Bloc voters:



Men of all ages are more likely than women to say that this is a serious threat that must be addressed:

Which is closer to your own point of view? Are these allegations of Chinese election interference ...



Was the election ‘stolen’?

The allegations of Chinese interference in the last two federal elections have some Canadians questioning the very integrity of the votes. This sentiment has been expressed by Canadians prior to many of these allegations coming to light. In February last year, Angus Reid Institute data found one-third (34%) believed free and fair elections were getting weaker in Canada, outnumbering those who instead believe that that part of democracy was growing stronger (23%).

Related: Politics and disengagement: Two-in-five say there’s “no room” for compromise in Canada; most say their interests are ignored

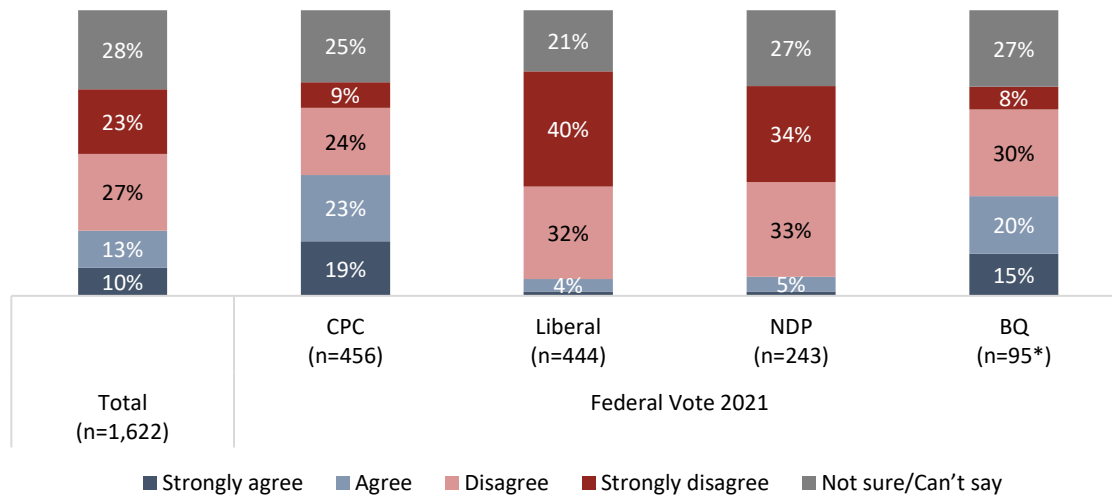
One-quarter (23%) of Canadians believe the 2021 federal election was “stolen” because of Chinese interference.” More than twice as many Canadians, however, disagree (49%). The belief the election was illegitimate is stronger among past Conservative voters, who are more likely to agree (42%) than disagree (33%) that the election was “stolen.”

It’s worth noting that after the votes were counted in the 2021 election, the Conservatives trailed the Liberals by 36 seats. CSIS is alleging Chinese interference in [at most half a dozen seats in Vancouver and Toronto](#).

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Agree vs. disagree - "The 2021 election was 'stolen' because of Chinese interference"



Part Two: Canada's response

Most Canadians want stronger federal response

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, whose party is currently supporting the Liberal minority government through a supply-and-confidence agreement, [called for a non-partisan public inquiry](#) into the alleged election interference by China. So far, [Trudeau has ruled out a public inquiry](#) and welcomed the current examinations by House of Commons committees.

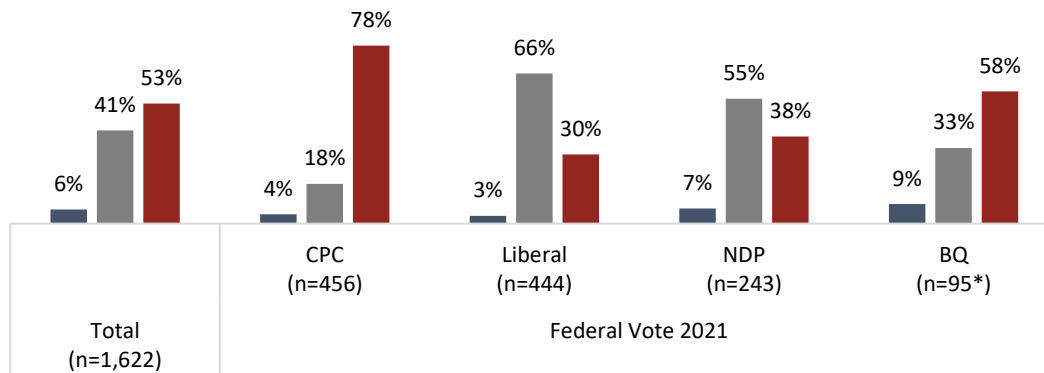
More broadly, Canadians would like to see a stronger response to China from the Liberal government. Relations between the two governments have been strained in recent years, particularly after the detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor by Chinese authorities in response to the arrest of Meng Wanzhou by Canada at the request of the United States. Trudeau and Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke at a G20 meeting in November, where Xi accused Trudeau of leaking details from their previous conversation to the media. The two had a [reportedly testy exchange](#) in public view.

Past Liberal and NDP voters are most likely to say that the government has responded adequately to recent security and election concerns, while past CPC and Bloc Québécois voters disagree, and would like the government to take a more aggressive approach:

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Thinking about these recent events, do you feel the federal government response led by Justin Trudeau has been too strong, about right or not strong enough?



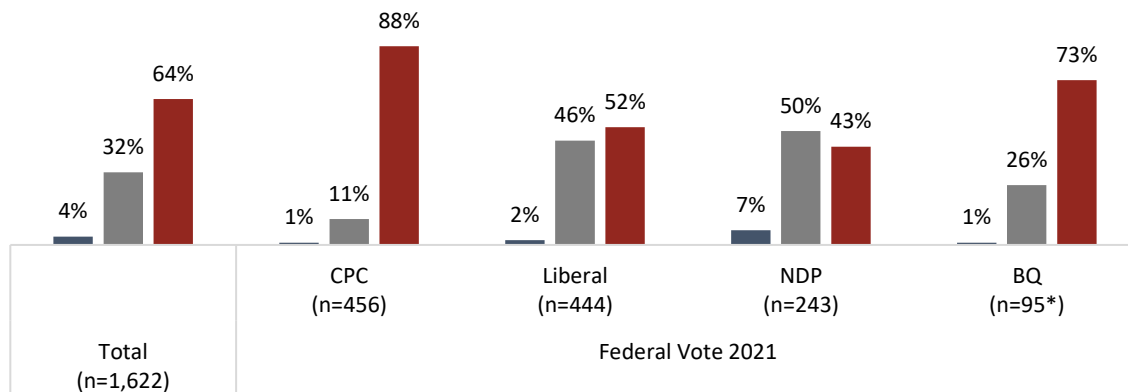
- Too strong – Canada should focus instead on a more cordial relationship with China
- About right
- Not strong enough – Canada needs to need to take further action

**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

Majority want more focus on national security, defense

With recent examples of alleged interference fresh in the headlines, and the ever-present [concern of Russian aggression](#) to add to it, Canadians have national security and defense top of mind. Two-thirds (64%), including majorities of past Conservative (88%) and Liberal (52%) voters alike, say that the federal government should put additional focus on this area:

And thinking more broadly now about Canada’s own national security and defense, do you think the federal government puts...

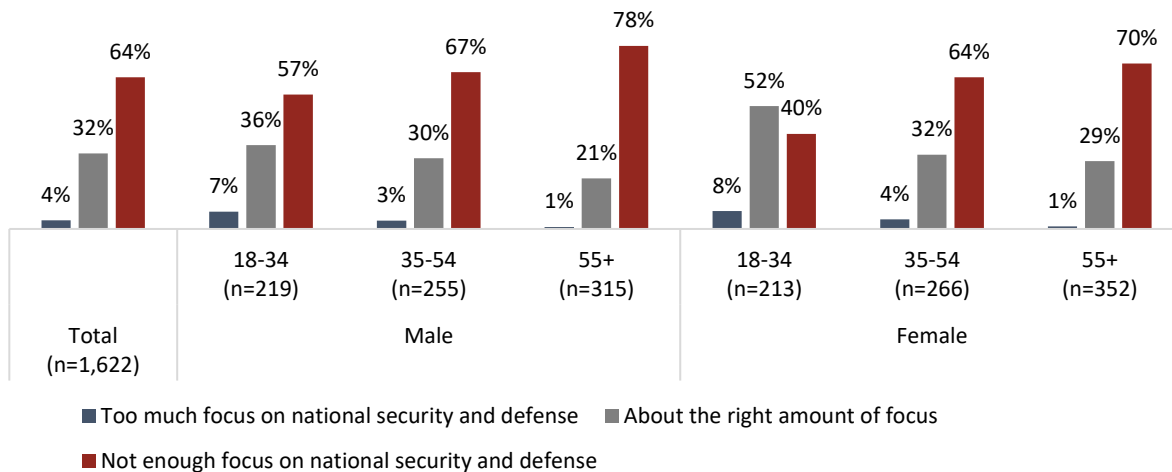


- Too much focus on national security and defense
- About the right amount of focus
- Not enough focus on national security and defense

**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

This sentiment is offered by a majority of all age and gender groups, with the exception of women aged 18- to 34-years-old who are most likely to say they “don’t know”:

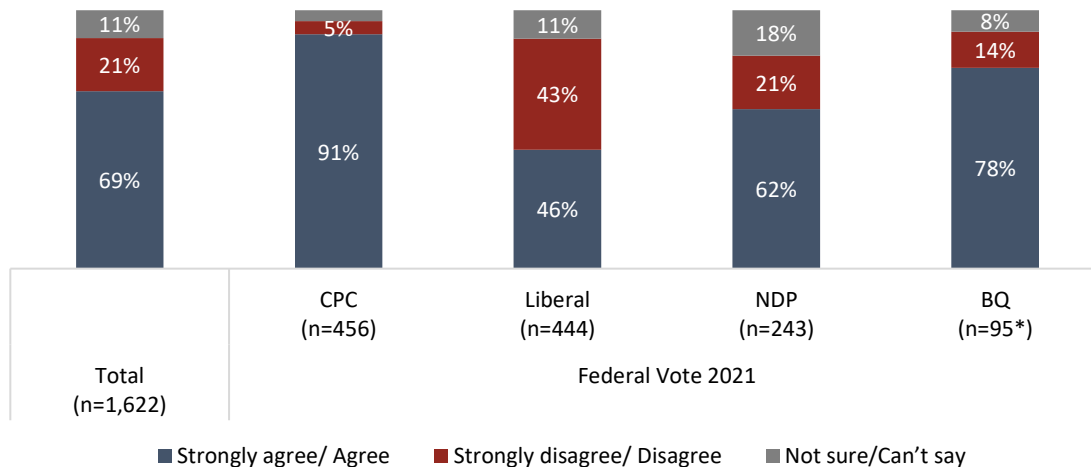
And thinking more broadly now about Canada’s own national security and defense, do you think the federal government puts...



Seven-in-ten say Canada is afraid to stand up to China

Underlying much of this sentiment – that the government needs to take a harder line against Chinese interference – is that many Canadians feel their government is afraid to stand up to the global economic powerhouse that is China. Exports to China continue to drop – now a multi-year trend – and some suggest that the government’s new Indo-Pacific strategy designed to target markets in Asia will anger China further, potentially diminishing the relationship further:

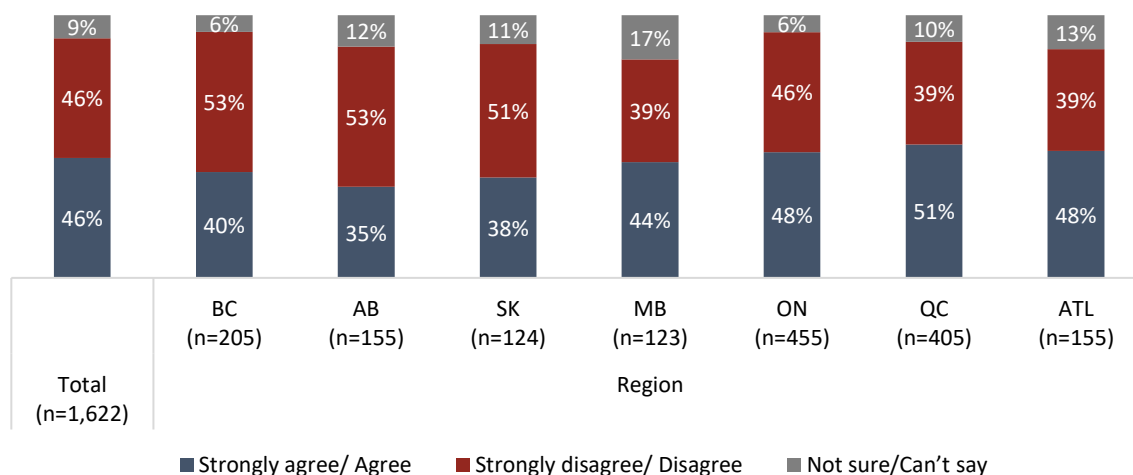
Agree vs. disagree -
"The federal government is afraid to stand up to China"



**Smaller sample size, interpret with caution*

The economic consequences of angering the Beijing regime are a source of consternation for any federal government in Canada. China remains Canada's second largest national trading partner and 46 per cent of Canadians worry about the economic fallout from any direct opposition to Chinese interests. Those in Quebec (51%), Atlantic Canada (48%) and Ontario (48%) are more worried about this than those in other provinces. Ontario imported nearly \$50 billion worth of goods from China in 2021, and Quebec more than \$12 billion. Both provinces trail British Columbia when it comes to goods exported to China, however.

Agree vs. disagree -
"I'm worried about the economic consequences of standing up to China"



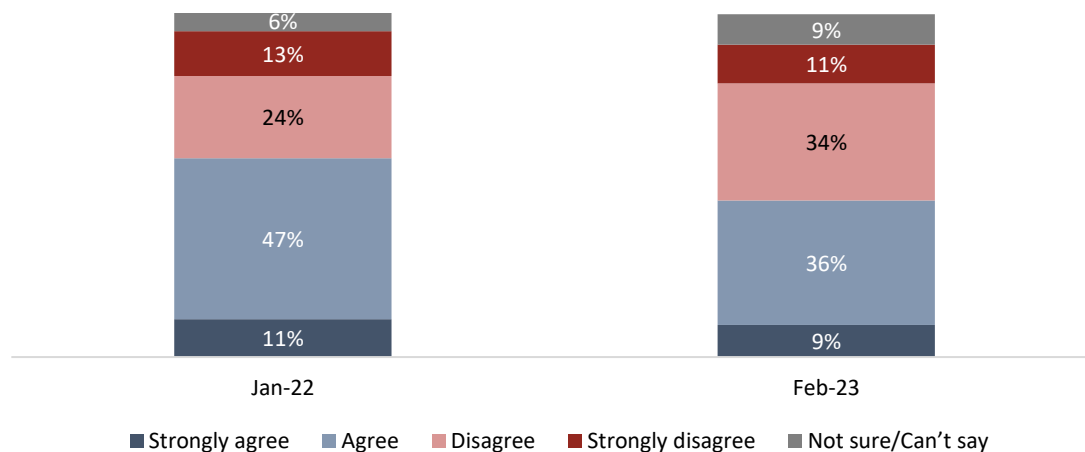
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Worry over economic consequences of standing up to China declines

The trend, however, suggests that Canadians are perhaps less worried about standing up to China now than they were last year. The Angus Reid Institute notes a 12-point drop in the percentage of the population voicing this concern between January of last year and now:

**Agree vs. disagree -
"I'm worried about the economic consequences of standing up to China"**



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

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