

Overpaid or undervalued? Politics divides opinions of federal employees' working conditions & compensation

Past CPC voters three times as likely as past Liberals & New Democrats, to say federal workers overpaid

April 27, 2023 – As the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) strike passes the one-week mark, both sides in the contract dispute are under more pressure to reach an agreement. Union negotiators have reportedly [moved off wage demands](#) that asked for a 13.5 per cent increase in compensation over three years. The federal government has reportedly offered nine per cent over that period.

Public opinion data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds that while Canadians are sympathetic to many demands, a majority also feel that federal employees are fairly (36%) or overly (28%) compensated. Just one-in-five (17%) feel workers are underpaid.

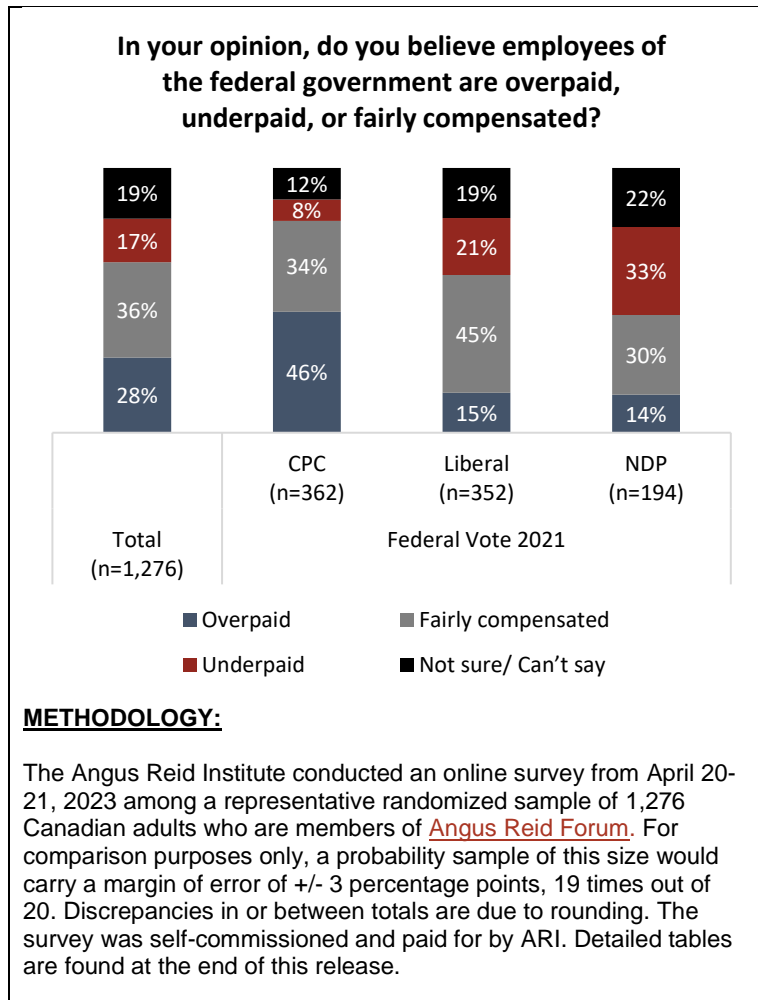
Past Conservative supporters are by far the most likely to feel employees of the federal government are overpaid (46%), while New Democrats (33%) are most likely to say the opposite.

Views of compensation colour opinions of the union's demands. Those who feel employees are underpaid are near-unanimous in their support for the aforementioned 13.5 per cent wage increase (91% support).

One area where Canadians are largely unified is the sentiment that federal employees have better working conditions than workers in other similar private industries. Seven-in-ten (72%) feel government workers have it better when it comes to benefits, job security, pension planning, and other perceived perks.

Majorities of past voters of the NDP, Liberal and CPC believe federal government employees have overall better working conditions than those with similar jobs in the private sector. However, the majority is smaller among those who voted NDP in 2021 (58%) than those who voted CPC (82%) or Liberal (76%).

These data find that union membership is evidently no monolith when it comes to modern politics. Members – both current and past – hold diverging views about PSAC demands and wage levels. They also do not support the party traditionally associated with labour movements – the NDP – at particularly high levels. Among those who are currently union members, one-in-three (34%) voted for the Liberal



CONTACT:

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

Party in 2021. Further, the CPC received more support (28%) than the NDP (26%). Among those who have worked in strictly a public union, either current or past, two-in-five supported the incumbent Liberals (39%), while the same number voted for the Conservatives (24%) and CUPE-endorsed New Democrats (24%).

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: Perceptions of government jobs

The strike by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) is into its second week. The union which represents more than 150,000 federal government employees who walked off the job have been negotiating for a new contract with the government since June 2021. While there has been progress between the two sides on negotiations since the strike was initiated, one of the major points of contention [continue to be wages](#) as the union looks for salary increases that will help offset two years of high inflation, while the federal government looks to keep labour costs under control.

[The federal government says](#) the majority of the striking workers earn between \$50,000 and \$75,000 annually. PSAC initially demanded a wage increase totalling 13.5 per cent over three years, while the federal government is offering nine per cent over that same period, [according to the union](#).

Overpaid or underpaid?

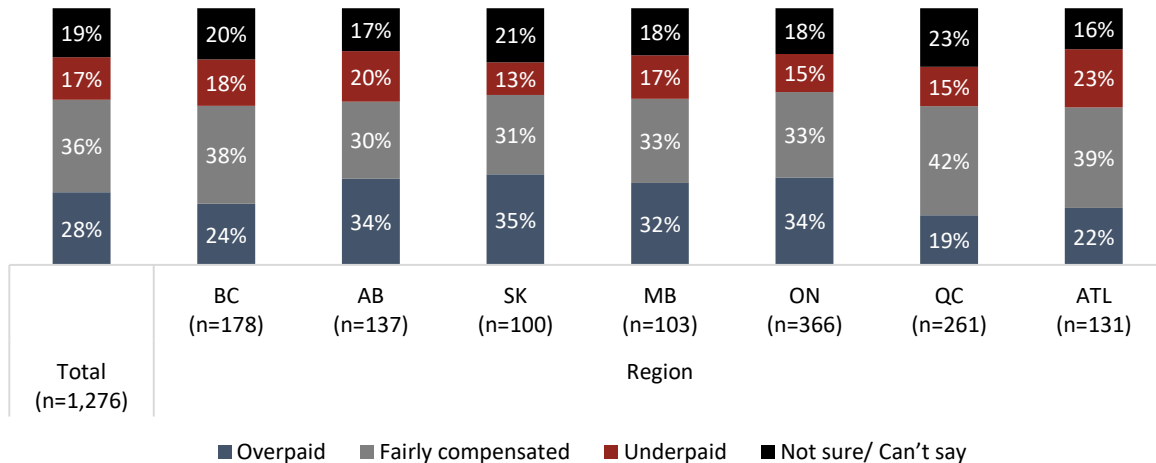
There is some division between Canadians on whether federal government employees are underpaid or overpaid in general. The largest group – one-third (36%) – feel federal government workers are fairly compensated. Three-in-ten (28%) say they are overpaid, while slightly more than half that say they are not earning enough (17%).

This view varies across the country. One-third in Alberta (34%), Saskatchewan (35%) Manitoba (32%) and Ontario (34%) believe federal government employees are overpaid. However, nearly as many in each of those provinces believe the workers to be fairly compensated. That is also the plurality belief in B.C. (38%), Quebec (42%) and Atlantic Canada (39%):

CONTACT:

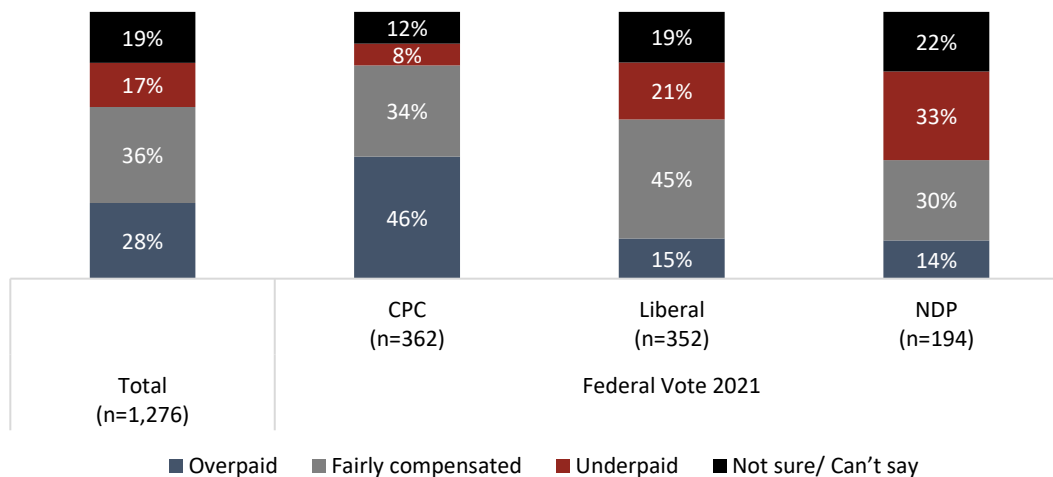
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Dave Korzinski, Research Director: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org

In your opinion, do you believe employees of the federal government are overpaid, underpaid, or fairly compensated?



Politics appear to be a significant driver of opinion on the perception of compensation for federal government employees. Approaching half (46%) of past Conservative voters say federal workers are overpaid. Meanwhile, nearly as many past Liberal voters (45%) say instead the workers are fairly compensated. Those who voted NDP in 2021 are nearly as likely to believe federal government employees are underpaid (33%) as fairly compensated (30%):

In your opinion, do you believe employees of the federal government are overpaid, underpaid, or fairly compensated?



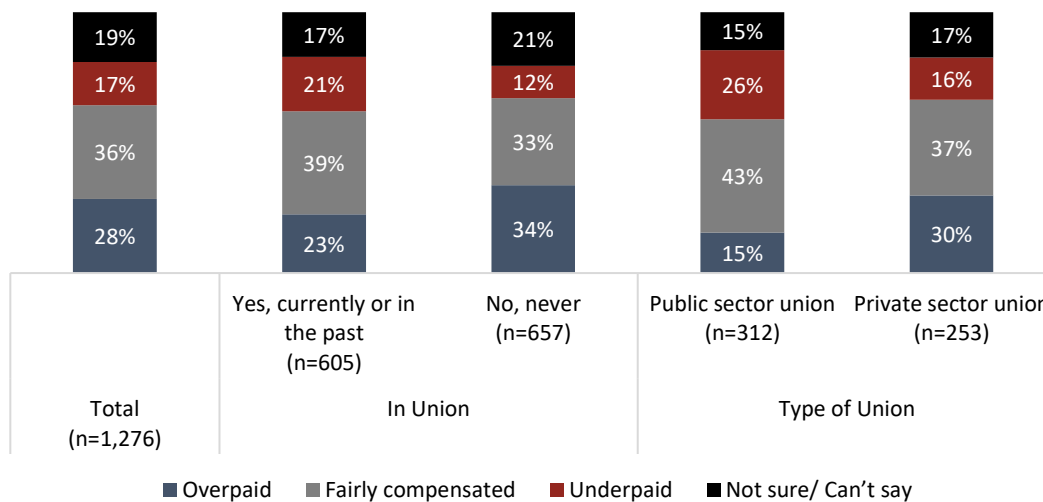
Current or former union members are less likely (23%) than those who have never been a member (34%) to say federal employees overpaid. However, there is disagreement between government and private sector union members on this matter. Government union members (15%) are half as likely as private

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

sector union members (30%) to say federal workers are overpaid and more likely to believe instead they are undercompensated (26%):

In your opinion, do you believe employees of the federal government are overpaid, underpaid, or fairly compensated?



Canadians **are more likely to support** some of the union contract demands than others. They are more likely to back wage premiums for night shifts and overtime and the right to work from home but are more divided over the annual salary increase.

Related: Deal or No Deal? Most Canadians support union demands for wage premiums, but more divided over higher pay

There is evidently more support for the union demands among those who believe federal government workers are underpaid in general. As well, those who believe federal workers are already fairly compensated support the federal government conceding wage premiums for night shifts (70%) and the right to work from home (54%) at majority levels:

Percentage who support union demands					
	Total (n=1,276)	Federal government employees are...			
		Overpaid (n=362)	Fairly compensated (n=459)	Underpaid (n=211)	Not sure/ Can't say (n=244)
Wage premiums of an extra \$2.50/ hour for night shifts and overtime	65%	40%	70%	90%	68%
The right to work from home	55%	33%	54%	81%	64%
A 4.5% annual wage increase for three years	48%	17%	49%	91%	54%
More annual paid family-related leave	44%	20%	44%	77%	51%
Annual stipend for employees who speak Indigenous languages in the workplace	37%	20%	40%	55%	42%

Overall job conditions?

There is much more agreement among Canadians on the overall working conditions – including things such as benefits – for federal workers. Most Canadians (72%) believe federal employees enjoy better overall conditions than those who work similar jobs in the private sector. Nearly half (45%) say public servants have it “much better.” Fewer than one-in-ten (8%) describe the conditions of a federal job as worse than a similar private sector one.

This belief is more or less consistent by region ([see detailed tables](#)).

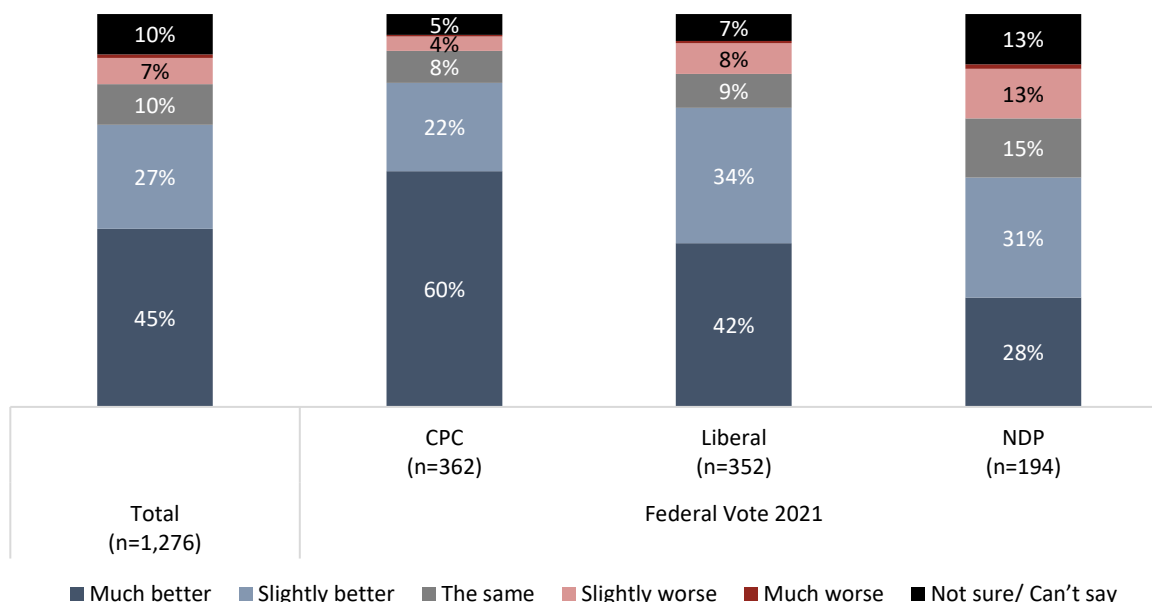
Seven-in-ten (70%) who belong to a government union say federal employees have it better than private sector ones, though they are three-times as likely as current or former private sector union members to believe that federal employees have it worse (13% to 4%, [see detailed tables](#))

There are also significant amounts of agreement on this matter among past voters of the three largest political parties in Canada. Majorities of all past voters believe federal employees have it better than those with similar private sector jobs. However, the majority is smaller among past NDP voters (58%) than those who voted CPC (82%) or Liberal (76%):

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And when it comes to overall conditions of working for the federal government do you think federal employees have it better, worse, or about the same as those with similar jobs in the private sector?



Part Two: The changing politics of unions

Unions have become less prevalent in the workplace in Canada in the last 40 years. In 1981, 38 per cent of Canadian workers were union members at their main job. This has declined to 29 per cent in 2022, the most recent year data is available [from Statistics Canada](#). Still, they represent key segments of the working population, especially government employees such as teachers, nurses, and of course, the employees from federal government departments like the Canada Revenue Agency, Canada Border Services Agency, and Veteran Affairs Canada who are currently on strike.

Union members, whether current or past, are more traditionally associated politically with the New Democratic Party – indeed, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) – [endorsed](#) Jagmeet Singh and the NDP in the 2021 federal election and recently stated [“we kind of are the NDP”](#). Nonetheless, public unions are not necessarily the stronghold they may once have been thought.

The NDP is Our Party!

A short history of the NDP and Labour Movement

[Credit: CUPE website](#)

Consider that among those who currently belong to a union, the largest group supported the Liberal Party in their constituency (34%) and more supported the Conservative Party (28%) than the NDP (26%) in the 2021 federal election. Among those whose experience – whether past or present – was with a government union, the NDP tied with the Conservatives (24% each) in 2021, and the Liberals received 39

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per cent. Private sector workers, meanwhile, showed a clear preference for the CPC (34%), while splitting votes close-to-evenly between the Liberals and New Democrats.

Federal vote 2021 by union membership (Among those who voted in the 2021 federal election)							
	Total (n=1,077)	In Union				Type of Union	
		Yes (n=512)	Currently (n=222)	In the past (n=290)	No, never (n=557)	Public sector union (n=281)	Private sector union (n=204)
Conservative Party of Canada	34%	28%	28%	29%	38%	24%	34%
Liberal Party of Canada	33%	33%	34%	31%	33%	39%	26%
New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP)	18%	24%	26%	22%	13%	24%	23%
Bloc Québécois	7%	7%	6%	8%	7%	8%	7%
Green Party of Canada	3%	3%	1%	5%	2%	3%	2%
People's Party of Canada	5%	4%	5%	4%	6%	2%	7%
Other Party	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%

What this portends for the future is unknown, but what it suggests is a disconnect between the political loyalty of union members and the parties that claim to best represent them. A forthcoming study from the Angus Reid Institute will examine this relationship and the political and social elements that may be driving a disconnect.

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

For detailed results by union membership and whether respondents think federal government employees are overpaid, underpaid or fairly compensated, [click here](#).

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