

Canada and the Culture Wars: In the first of a multi-part series, Canadians weigh in on the nation's divided discourse

Canadians say we're changing how we talk to each other, split over whether it's a good or bad thing

September 11, 2023 – It's a familiar refrain these days: Canadians are having a harder time talking to each other.

A multitude of factors have contributed to what is [a perceived increase](#) in polarization between different groups, generations, and political spheres in this country, and alongside this, an increase in often intense conversations with friends, family, and other Canadians.

Within this environment, the Angus Reid Institute has undertaken a wide-ranging study to better understand the perspectives of Canadians on a host of issues – from gender and identity, to race, Indigenous issues and the legacy of colonization, to free speech and precautions taken to ensure the comfort of those who don't wish to partake in charged debates. These topics have become flashpoints in what has been [labelled](#) as the ["culture wars"](#).

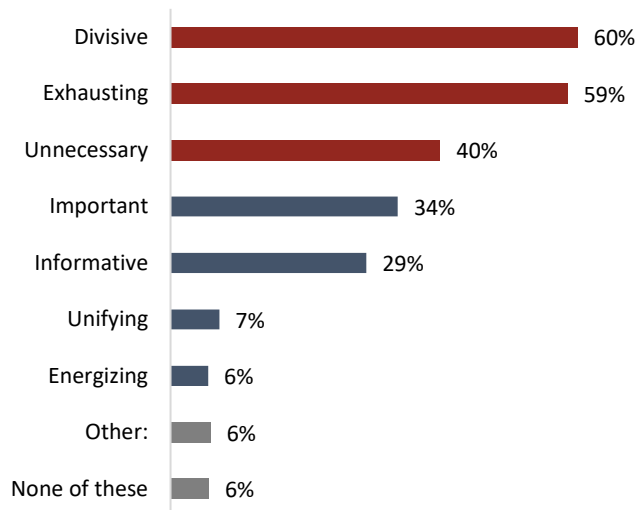
Exploring these contentious grounds can help to answer some questions. Are our conversations really changing? Do we have common interests to build upon? Where do the values of Canadians diverge?

Over the coming weeks, this six-part series will endeavour to help this conversation along and provide insight for Canadians to better understand each other.

Throughout these studies, ARI will utilize a segmentation, derived from responses across the spectrum of these at-times controversial issues, which sorts Canadians into five broad groups that describe their relation to the cultural conversation.

On one extreme, the Zealous Activists are those leading the charge to modernize expression in their own view and draw attention to the experiences of marginalized groups. They tend to see the culture wars as an opportunity to educate and inform, and they're comfortable punishing those who offend. On the other end of the spectrum are the Defiant Objectors. This group sees these conversations as "unnecessary"

Words most associated with the culture wars (Up to three chosen; all respondents, n=3,016)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from July 26-31, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 3,016 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 +/- 1.5 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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and overtly punitive in their aims. They're permissive in their language, and staunch in their unwillingness to consider change on issues like Indigenous reconciliation, recognizing privilege, and other touchpoints of progressive causes. Others take a more mixed view of these issues, or don't hold strong views at all.

This first release will focus on Canadians views of the culture wars, how we talk to each other, as well as conflict mitigation, censorship, and "cancel culture". Depending on where they sit on the spectrum of cultural mindsets, Canadians can view these issues as important, informative, exhausting or even unnecessary.

More Key Findings:

- The top descriptions Canadians offer for the culture wars debates are divisive (60%), exhausting (59%), and unnecessary (40%). That said, those with a more progressive persuasion are far more likely to say these are important and informative conversations.
- Half of Canadians (47%) say the language we use in conversations is changing, becoming more carefully chosen, and that this is a good thing. Another 35 per cent agree that this is happening, but feel it is for the worse. This is a key disagreement from one side of the cultural mindset spectrum to the other.
- Half of Canadians say that this trend of public figures being "cancelled" due to controversial public statements is an important way to ensure people are held accountable (48%), while half say this is suppressing free speech (52%).
- Canadians are generally supportive of the idea of "safe spaces" in school settings and "trigger warnings" more broadly, to ensure that people can avoid reliving past stress, anxiety, or trauma. In both cases, a majority say that these are appropriate to undertake, and fewer than two-in-five disagree.
- Three-in-five Canadians (58%) say it is acceptable for universities to ban speakers who promote offensive views regarding race and gender. One-in-three (34%) disagree.

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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Coming up over the next month

Part One: Defining Canadians' cultural mindsets

What started out almost exclusively as the domain of [American cable news](#) networks has woven its way into the fabric of Canadian political, educational, and societal discourse: the so-called “culture wars”.

The catch-all phrase has become shorthand for divisive discourse around issues such as the dimensions and limits of public speech, and those related to gender, race, climate, capitalism, and the legacies of colonialism. These issues are independent but at times related in cultivating one's own personal philosophy of how to approach societal issues.

To assist in analysis and understanding of these issues, the Angus Reid Institute created a segmentation using responses to 21 different questions across said topics. For a full list of questions utilized, [click here](#).

Respondents were then analyzed and broken into five groups based on the intensity of their views. Thinking in conventional terms, these range from more traditionally conservative positions to more modern progressive ones. That said, there's an element at play here that supersedes ideology or political philosophy. There is a level of frustration evident in those on the extremes of each side that separates them from the more muted supporters that silently buttress each. Further, there are a group that approximate a middle ground for whom neither left nor right holds all the answers.

More will be learned about these groups across subsequent releases – how they view changing gender identities in society, their views on the legacy of colonialism and Indigenous issues, cultural appropriation, and more. For now, let's consider their demographic distribution.

Approximately one-in-five Canadians comprise each of these groups, with the largest being the more centre-left leaning Quiet Accommodators. They champion progressive values but in a less forceful form.

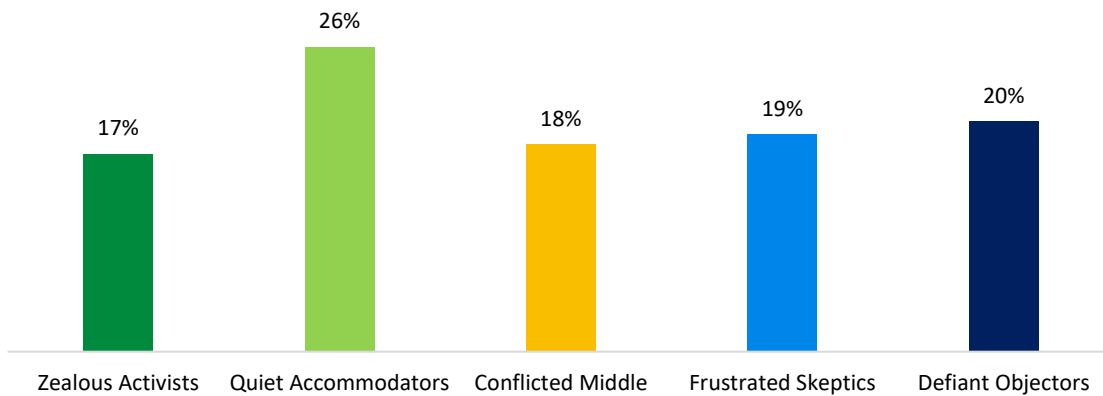
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**Canadian Culture Mindsets
(All respondents, n=3,016)**



For a summary of some of the defining demographics of these groups, see the Infographic below. For more detail, [click here](#).

Canadian Culture Mindsets

How Canadians feel about the controversial conversations of our time



Zealous Activists (17% of population)

- Seek to modernize expression around a progressive view of social & cultural issues
- See the Culture Wars as producing informative and important conversations
- Say that Cancel Culture is about accountability, not suppression
- More likely to be female than male, in particular, women U35 (35%)
- Among those who identify as non-binary, proportion rises to 60 per cent
- 44% of past NDP voters, 22% of past Liberals, 2% of past CPC

Quiet Accommodators (26% of population)

- Tend to agree with Zealous Activists, but view issues with much less intensity
- Equally likely to view Culture Wars as important (49%) and exhausting (46%)
- At least two-thirds support both Safe Spaces and Trigger Warnings
- Largest group in Quebec (31%), at least 20% in all regions of Canada
- Three-in-ten women (28%) and one-quarter of men (24%) in this group
- 39% of past Liberals, 28% of past NDP voters, 10% of past CPC



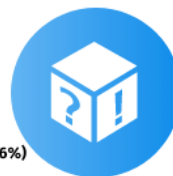
Conflicted Middle (18% of population)



- Half see Culture Wars negatively, one-in-three view it as productive
- Divided as to whether Cancel Culture is suppression (56%) or accountability (44%)
- Equally likely to be men (17%) or women (19%) but tend to be older
- Largest group are in Quebec (24%), smallest in Saskatchewan (8%)
- 23% of past Liberals voters, 15% of past CPC, 13% of past NDP
- Occupy a middle ground on nearly all issues involving gender, race, identity, etc.

Frustrated Skeptics (19% of population)

- Tend to agree with Defiant Objectors, but view issues with much less intensity
- Unlikely to see productive purpose in Culture Wars, tend to feel exhausted by them
- Divided close to evenly in support and opposition of Safe Spaces and Trigger Warnings
- Largest group in Saskatchewan (24%) and Alberta (21%)
- Men over 54 divided evenly between Frustrated Skeptics (25%), Quiet Accommodators (26%)
- 27% of past CPC, 14% of past Liberal voters, 12% of past CPC



Defiant Objectors (20% of population)



- Unanimously say that Cancel Culture is a way to suppress freedom of speech
- Most likely to say the Culture Wars are divisive, unnecessary, and exhausting
- 84% say society is becoming more careful with language and that's a bad thing
- Nine-in-ten opposed to Trigger Warnings or censoring on campus speakers
- Twice as likely to be male (27%) than female (13%)
- Largest group in Alberta (29%), Saskatchewan (30%), Manitoba (24%)
- 74% of past PPC voters, 47% of past CPC voters, 3% of past NDP and Liberal voters

[Click here for a larger version of the above image](#)

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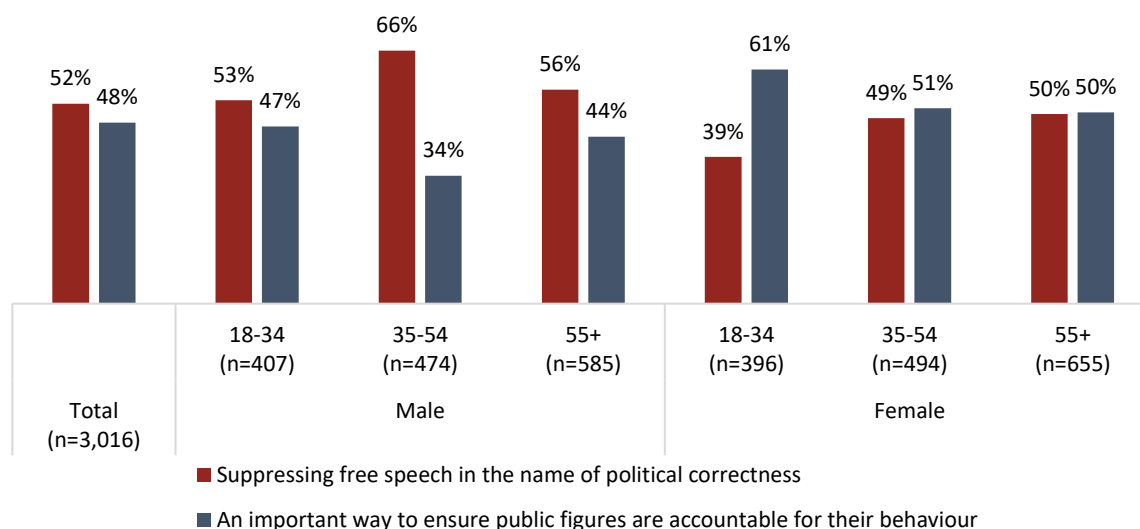
Part Two: Is “cancel culture” about suppression or accountability?

In 2019, Don Cherry lost his long-time position as an intermission NHL commentator after he referred to minority Canadians as “[you people](#)” in on-air remarks, as he [insinuated new immigrants did not pay proper respect to veterans by wearing a poppy ahead of Remembrance Day](#). He refused to apologize and his segment, Coach’s Corner, was cancelled. Though that was the last straw, it was hardly the first time the former NHL coach of the year had made controversial comments; previous intermission segments were categorized as [“xenophobic” and “sexist”](#).

Cherry is perhaps the most prominent Canadian example of a public figure who was “cancelled” for inappropriate beliefs or remarks, but he is one of many celebrities, politicians, and sports figures who have faced career-altering consequences for controversial speech.

Half (52%) of Canadians believe this trend of the “cancellation” of public figures and celebrities is “suppressing free speech in the name of political correctness.” Half (48%) disagree, and instead say it is “an important way to ensure public figures are accountable for their behaviour.” Men are much more likely to believe the former, including two-thirds (66%) of men aged 35- to 54-years-old who believe cancel culture is limiting free speech. Women are more split, except women under 35, of whom three-in-five (61%) say cancelling keeps public figures accountable:

What's your own overall view of this trend - public figures being "cancelled"?



Approaching three-in-five in Alberta (57%) and Saskatchewan (59%) believe cancelling celebrities is more about suppressing free speech than accountability, the most in the country. However, those who believe celebrities being cancelled is more about accountability peaks at half in Ontario (50%, [see detailed tables](#)).

The sense that cancel culture is about policing free speech is highest among those who voted Conservative in 2021. Past NDP voters, meanwhile, are the most likely to believe cancelling public figures is about holding them accountable ([see detailed tables](#)).

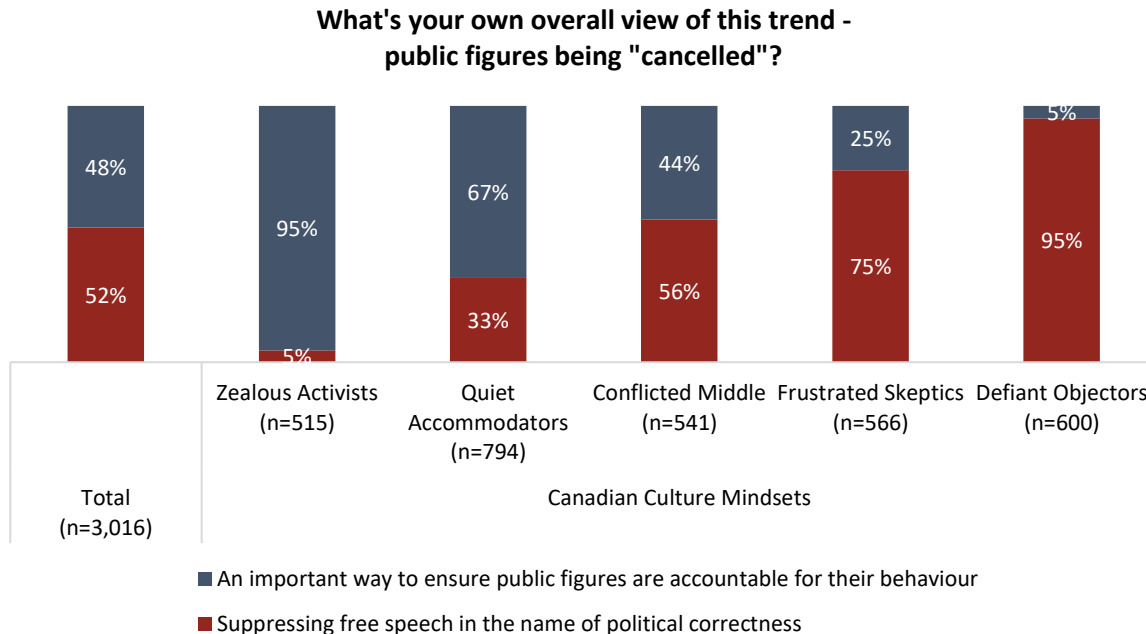
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Defiant Objectors and Zealous Activists find themselves on opposite ends of the issue. The Conflicted Middle lean towards believing cancel culture suppresses free speech (56%):

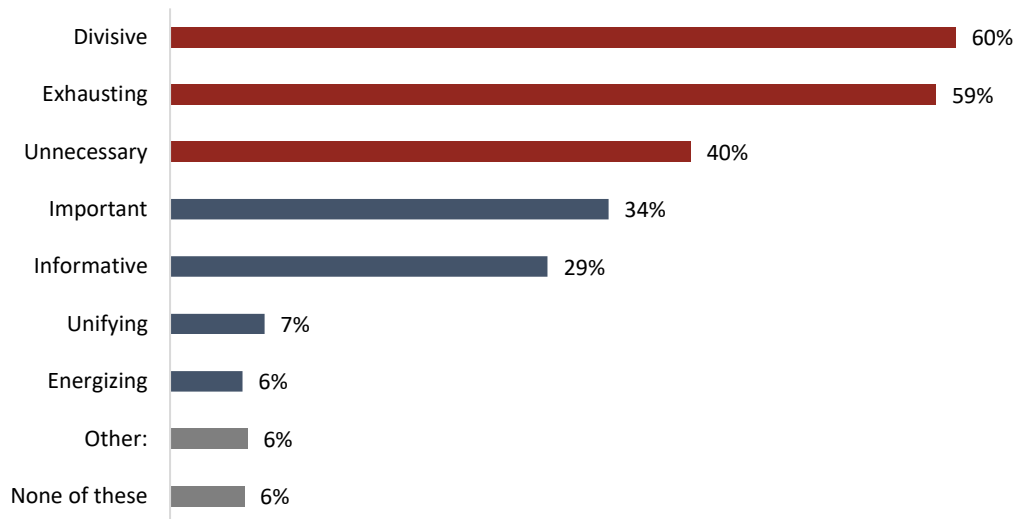


Part Three: Culture wars seen as exhausting, divisive

The culture wars are being fought on many fronts. There are skirmishes over issues of free speech, self-censorship and safe spaces, as well as the environment, issues around gender and race, and the legacy of colonialism.

Taken together, Canadians were asked what words came to mind when they think about the multifront culture wars. Majorities find the battles “divisive” (60%) and “exhausting” (59%), while two-in-five (40%) describe them as “unnecessary”. However, there are others who believe the culture wars have value. One-third (34%) say they are “important” and another three-in-ten (29%) describe them as “informative”:

**Words most associated with the culture wars
(Up to three chosen; all respondents, n=3,016)**



One-third say these conversations are important, informative – who are they?

The feeling of exhaustion over the ongoing culture wars is common among all Canadian Culture Mindsets. However, Zealous Activists are much more likely to feel the discussions have value. Seven-in-ten (69%) in that group describe the culture wars discourse as important, while half (50%) say they are informative. Quiet Accommodators are more likely to feel they are divisive (52%), but nearly as many also describe the culture wars as important (49%). Defiant Objectors are the most likely (75%) to feel there is no need for culture wars debate they find “divisive” (83%) and “exhausting” (77%):

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Words most associated with the culture wars (Up to three chosen, top five words selected overall shown)						
	Total (n=3,016)	Canadian Culture Mindsets				
		Zealous Activists (n=515)	Quiet Accommodators (n=794)	Conflicted Middle (n=541)	Frustrated Skeptics (n=566)	Defiant Objectors (n=600)
Divisive	60%	43%	52%	56%	68%	83%
Exhausting	59%	44%	46%	57%	73%	77%
Unnecessary	40%	13%	23%	33%	58%	75%
Important	34%	69%	49%	30%	12%	8%
Informative	29%	50%	41%	32%	14%	7%

Though among all demographics the most common descriptors are “divisive” and “exhausting”, women are more likely than men to find these discussions worthwhile. Approaching two-in-five women of all ages describe them as important, while women over the age of 54 are the most likely (37%) to find them informative:

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Words most associated with the culture wars (Up to three chosen, top five words selected overall shown)							
	Total (n=3,016)	Male			Female		
		18-34 (n=407)	35-54 (n=474)	55+ (n=585)	18-34 (n=396)	35-54 (n=494)	55+ (n=655)
Divisive	60%	60%	70%	68%	47%	57%	58%
Exhausting	59%	63%	64%	61%	54%	57%	55%
Unnecessary	40%	40%	49%	55%	25%	32%	36%
Important	34%	31%	25%	28%	43%	38%	38%
Informative	29%	22%	23%	25%	32%	32%	37%

At least half of all past voters describe the culture wars as divisive. However, among past voters of the NDP and Liberal Party, there are more who believe they are “important” and “informative” than “unnecessary”:

Words most associated with the culture wars (Up to three chosen, top five words selected overall shown)						
	Total (n=3,016)	Federal Vote 2021				
		CPC (n=815)	Liberal (n=794)	NDP (n=437)	BQ (n=179)	PPC (n=111)
Divisive	60%	76%	57%	55%	51%	81%
Exhausting	59%	74%	55%	54%	38%	74%
Unnecessary	40%	62%	30%	23%	27%	71%
Important	34%	17%	45%	52%	29%	13%
Informative	29%	14%	40%	37%	34%	10%

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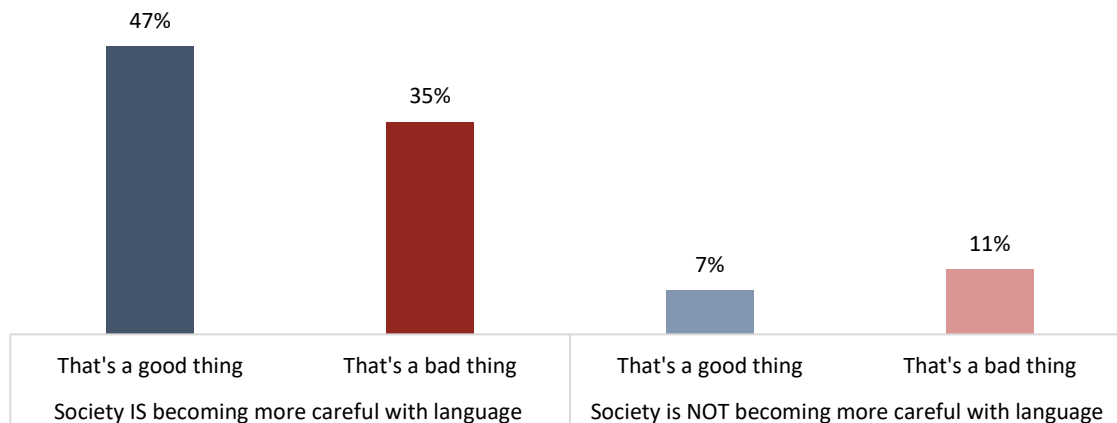
Part Four: We're changing the way we communicate, for better or worse?

Language is constantly evolving over time. In recent years, common turns of phrase uttered by previous generations without second thought have come under the microscope. For example, even as recently as five years ago, the term “master bedroom” to describe the largest bedroom in a house was ubiquitous in real estate listings. However, in 2020, the Canadian Real Estate Association eliminated the term “master bedroom”, because of [its “perceivable connection to slavery”](#), replacing it with “primary bedroom.”

While just one example in [a world of evolving terms](#), the change in real estate is emblematic of the ongoing cultural shift Canadians are experiencing. Indeed, most Canadians (82%) believe society is becoming more careful with language. Among that group, more believe it's a good thing (47%) than a bad one (35%).

There is also nearly one-in-five (18%) who dispute that society is becoming more cautious with its words. That group is split between believing that's a good thing (7%) or a bad one (11%):

**When you think about people being more careful with what they say and how they say it to avoid offending people around them, would you say...
(All respondents, n=3,016)**



Generational and gender divisions

All demographics believe society is becoming more cautious with language at a majority level, but there is a difference in opinions between genders whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. Men, including half of those aged 35- to 54-years-old, are more likely to say it's the latter. At least half of women of all ages believe society's growing caution with language is a positive development:

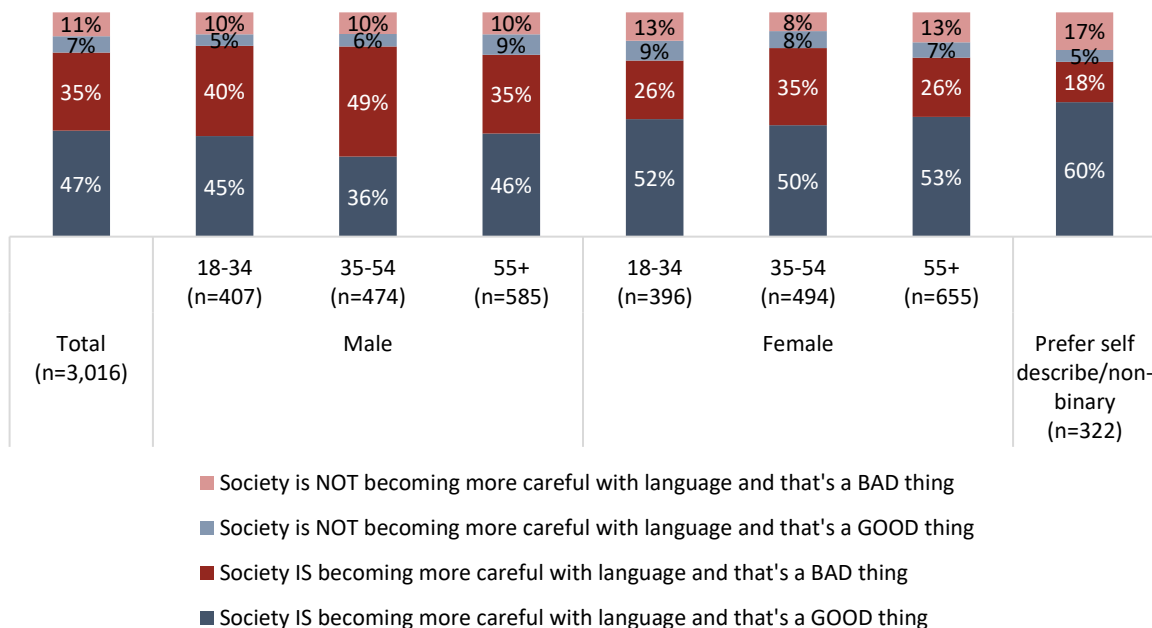
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When you think about people being more careful with what they say and how they say it to avoid offending people around them, would you say...



The education perspective

Canadians who hold at least an undergraduate degree from a university are much more likely (58%) than those who stopped their education in high school (41%) or college (44%) to believe it's a good thing society is becoming more cautious with language. Those with high school or college educations are near evenly split between believing society's re-evaluation of the words it uses is positive or negative:

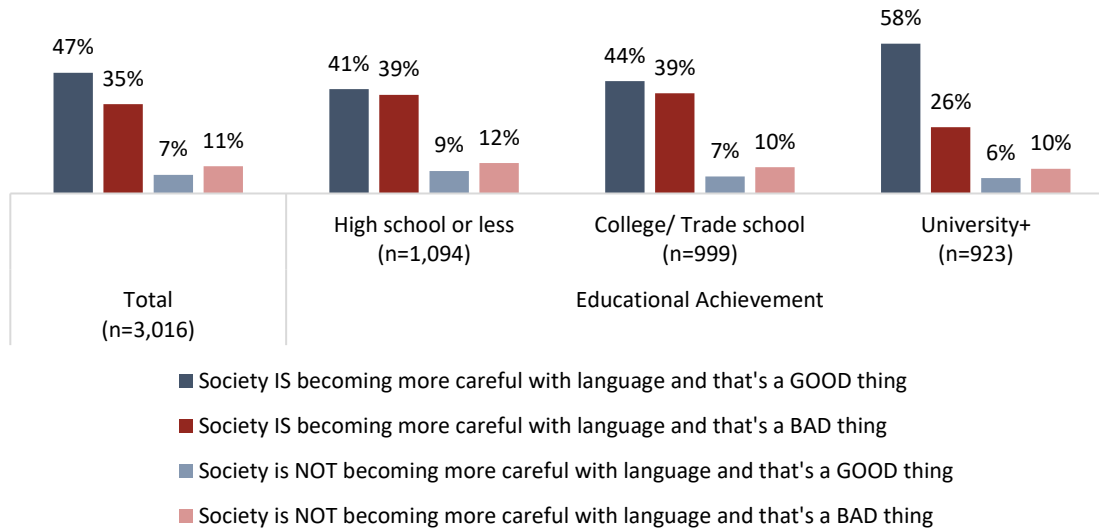
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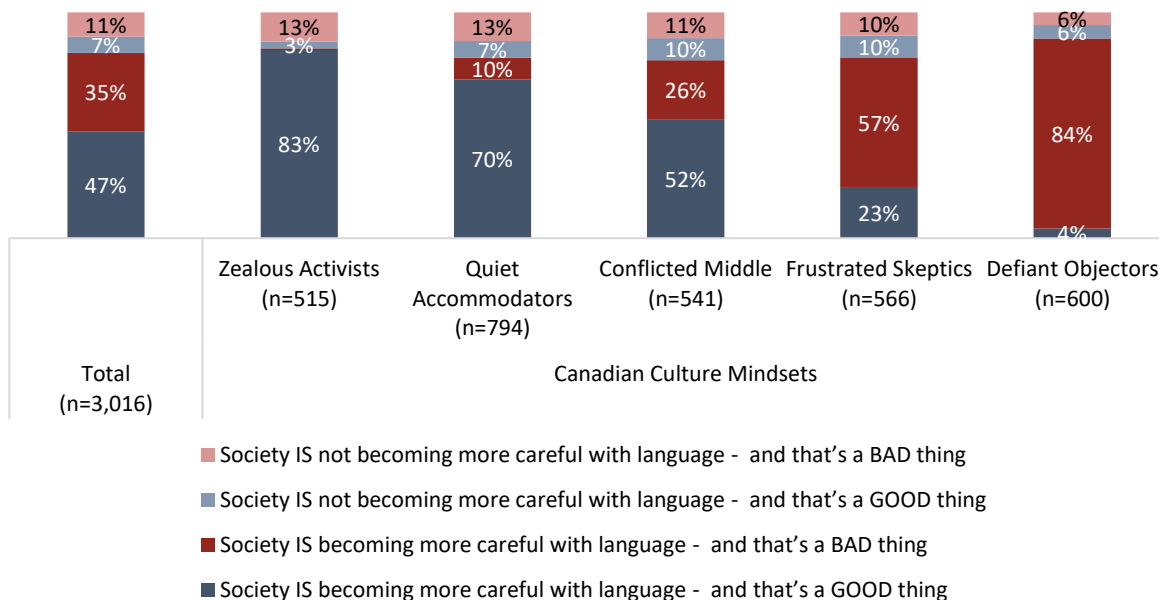


Perceptions and politics

There is agreement across the political spectrum that society is becoming more wary with words. Those who voted for right-leaning parties in 2021 are more inclined to believe this is a bad thing, while those who supported left-leaning parties say it is a good thing at majority levels. Those who voted for the Bloc Québécois in 2021 find themselves in between ([see detailed tables](#)).

Among Canadian Culture Mindsets, there is also widespread agreement that society is becoming more careful with language. But there is delineation as to whether this is a good thing – 83 per cent of Zealous Activists say this – or a bad thing – the belief of 84 per cent of Defiant Objectors:

When you think about people being more careful with what they say and how they say it to avoid offending people around them, would you say...



Part Five: Self-censorship, actual censorship, and safe spaces

How many Canadians actually “hold their tongue”?

In an environment of evolving linguistic standards, there are evidently many Canadians who watch what they say. Only one-in-seven (14%) say they speak freely regardless of who is present. A near equal group (13%) say they are keeping some thoughts to themselves multiple times a day, while 15 per cent find this to be a daily occurrence. One-quarter (23%) “hold their tongue” a few times each week. The largest group – 35 per cent – say only rarely do they think better of something they were about to say and leave it unsaid:

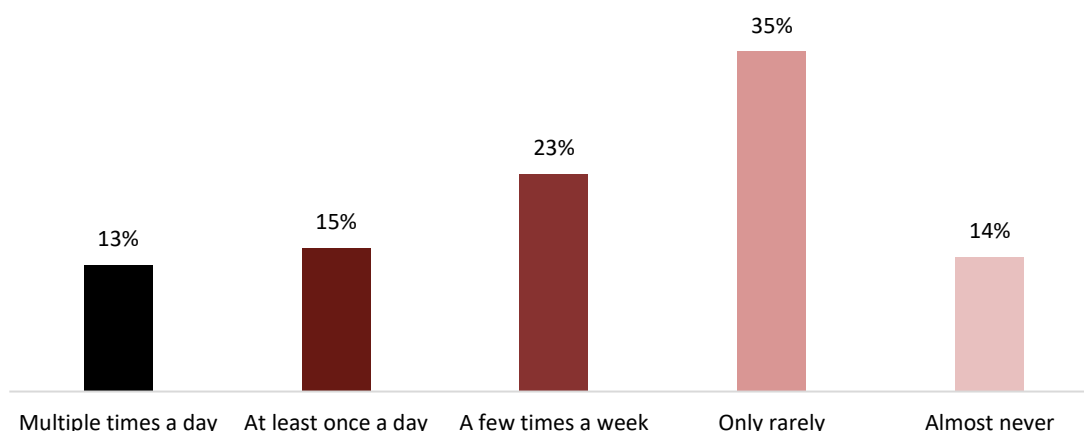
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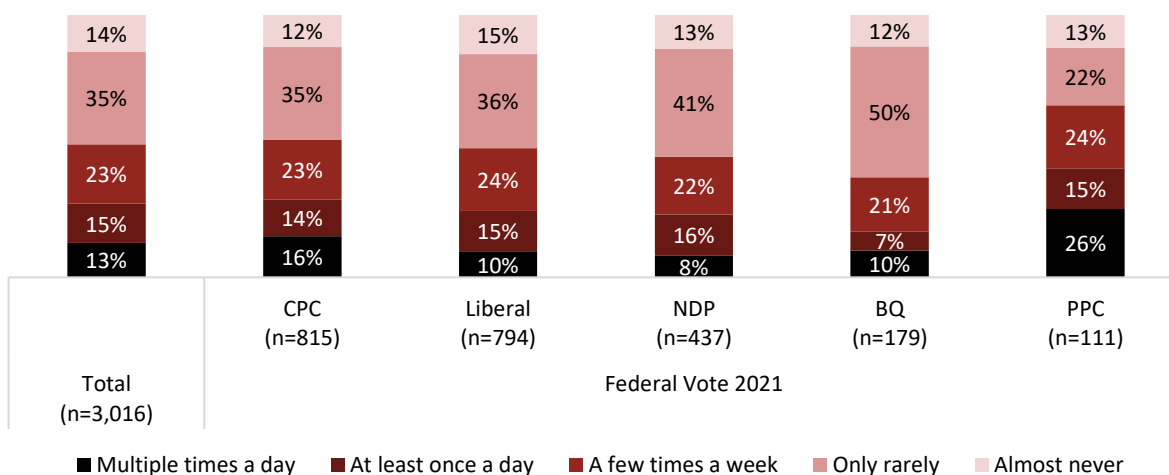
**Thinking about your day-to-day life, how often, if at all, would you say you “hold your tongue”?
(All respondents, n=3,016)**



Older Canadians are much less likely to filter what they say than younger ones. At least half of men (54%) and women (58%) older than 54 say they rarely or never “hold their tongue”. Meanwhile, approaching two-in-five (37%) men under 35 say they keep thoughts to themselves at least daily ([see detailed tables](#)).

At least half of past voters for the four largest Canadian political parties say they rarely or never hold back what they have to say. Those who voted for the People’s Party of Canada in 2021 are much more likely than others to say they regularly refrain from sharing their thoughts – two-thirds (65%) say this happens at least once a week:

Thinking about your day-to-day life, how often, if at all, would you say you “hold your tongue” ?



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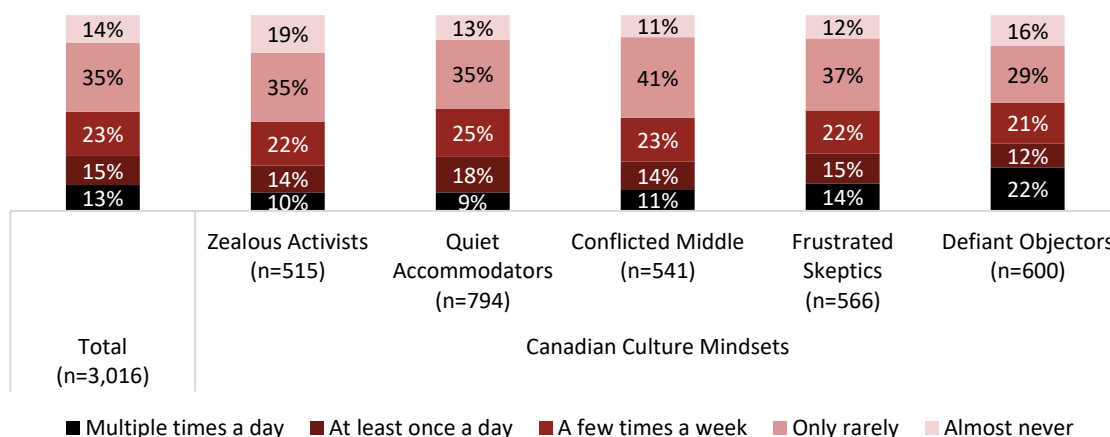
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The Defiant Objectors are the most likely to report often holding their tongue; 55 per cent say this is a weekly occurrence, including one-in-five (22%) who say they have to keep thoughts to themselves multiple times a day. At least half of all other groups among the Canadian Culture Mindsets say holding their tongue happens at least once a week – except Zealous Activists, who are the most likely to say they rarely or never hold their tongue (54%):

Thinking about your day-to-day life, how often, if at all, would you say you “hold your tongue”?



Campus Life: Views on avoiding uncomfortable topics at schools

University campuses have always been prominent arenas when it comes to debating wider societal trends. However, provocative speakers and the proliferation of “trigger warnings” – advanced notice that material contains content such as depictions of sexual assault or self-harm that may trigger a traumatic reaction – have ignited a battle over whether there should be limits to speech on campus.

Canadians lean towards believing universities should play a role in fostering a “safe space” for students on campus, as well as not platforming speakers who hold offensive views. Three-in-five (58%) say universities “should prohibit speakers who promote offensive views about race or gender.” A similar number (57%) believe trigger warnings are a positive development which keep people from reliving past trauma. Half (52%) say there should be safe spaces on campus so students can “avoid conversations that make them uncomfortable”.

Canadians are more protective of the written word than they are of speech on campus, it seems. Only one-in-five (18%) feel it is acceptable to republish classic literature with passages deemed offensive by today’s standards omitted or changed.

The Defiant Objectors reject prohibiting speakers (86% oppose), safe spaces (78% oppose), and trigger warnings (65% oppose) at the highest levels. Frustrated Skeptics are split when it comes to those three issues but find common ground with the Defiant Objectors in opposing censoring new editions of classic literature. At the other end of the spectrum, nearly all Zealous Activists believe speakers who have offensive views on race and gender should not be allowed to speak on campus (91%), and support

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trigger warnings (88%) and safe spaces (77%). They are also the most likely to feel it's fine to censor classic literature (31%), though half (53%) remain opposed:

Percentage who agree with the following statements						
	Total (n=3,016)	Canadian Culture Mindsets				
		Zealous Activists (n=515)	Quiet Accommodators (n=794)	Conflicted Middle (n=541)	Frustrated Skeptics (n=566)	Defiant Objectors (n=600)
University campuses should prohibit speakers who promote offensive views about race or gender	58%	91%	77%	67%	43%	9%
"Trigger warnings" are a good way to keep people from reliving past stress, anxiety, or trauma	57%	88%	73%	62%	42%	17%
Students should be allowed to have 'safe spaces' where they can avoid conversations that make them uncomfortable	52%	77%	67%	52%	44%	15%
It's okay that classic literature is republished with offensive words censored or changed	18%	31%	23%	18%	9%	7%

University speakers

Universities have become flashpoints of free speech debates in recent years as students [have protested](#) and [successfully halted](#) controversial speakers from appearing on campus, while others have argued such actions [violate the spirit of inquiry and discussion in academia](#). In Alberta, the provincial government has gone as far as to require post-secondary universities to [report to the government annually](#) about their efforts to "protect free speech" at their schools.

Opinions are split regionally on whether those with offensive views about race or gender should be banned from speaking on campus. Those in Alberta (43%), alongside those in Saskatchewan (44%), are the most likely to believe universities should not prohibit speakers with offensive views. Elsewhere in the country, more than half in each region believe universities should not host speeches from those with offensive racial and gender views:

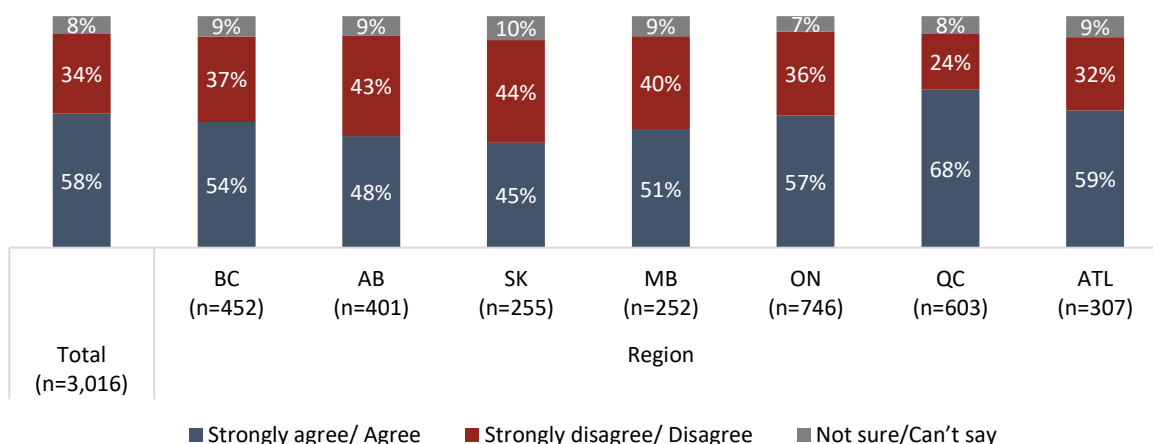
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**Agree vs. disagree -
"University campuses should prohibit speakers who promote offensive views
about race or gender"**



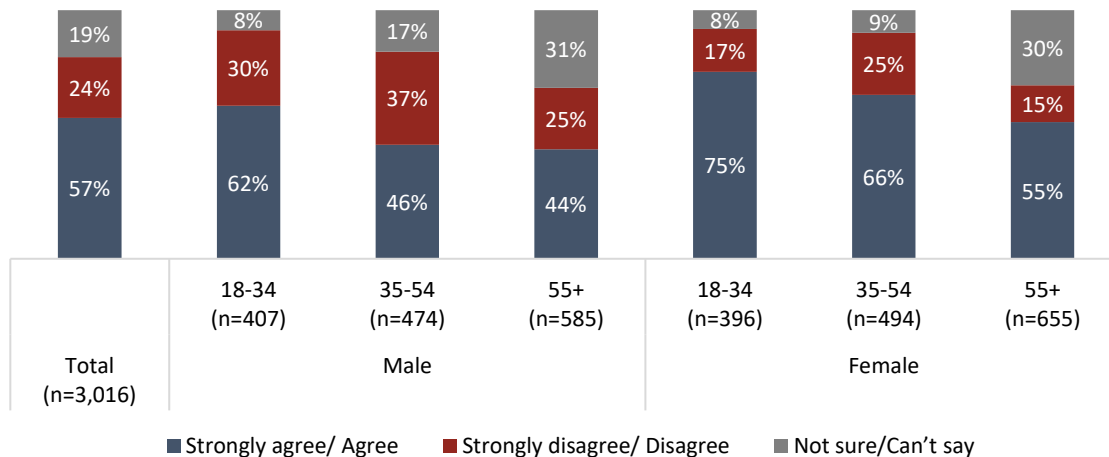
Approaching three-quarters of those who voted Liberal (72%), NDP (72%) and Bloc (74%) in the 2021 election believe universities should not platform speakers with offensive views. More than half (56%) of past CPC voters, and 80 per cent of those who voted PPC, disagree ([see detailed tables](#)).

Trigger warnings

The place of trigger warnings on campus has been another point of debate. The Canadian Association of University Teachers [came out against them](#), calling trigger warnings “inimical to the academic enterprise because they foreclose the process of inquiry, encourage censorship, and empower the inappropriate surveillance of the classroom.”

All demographics are more likely to believe trigger warnings are a good way to keep people from reliving past trauma than not, however, women are much more likely to support the warnings than men:

**Agree vs. disagree -
"'Trigger warnings' are a good way to keep people from reliving past stress,
anxiety, or trauma"**



Safe spaces

In 2021, a Quebec government committee declared that university classrooms in that province are not safe spaces and trigger warnings should not be used. The committee was created in response to concerns from university professors who worried of potential confrontations with students over controversial material in their classrooms, as well as specific incident where a University of Ottawa professor was suspended for using the N-word during a class lecture.

Half (48%) in Quebec disagree that students should be allowed safe spaces to avoid uncomfortable conversations, the most in the country. In B.C. (58%), Atlantic Canada (57%) and Ontario (56%), majorities believe safe spaces belong on campus:

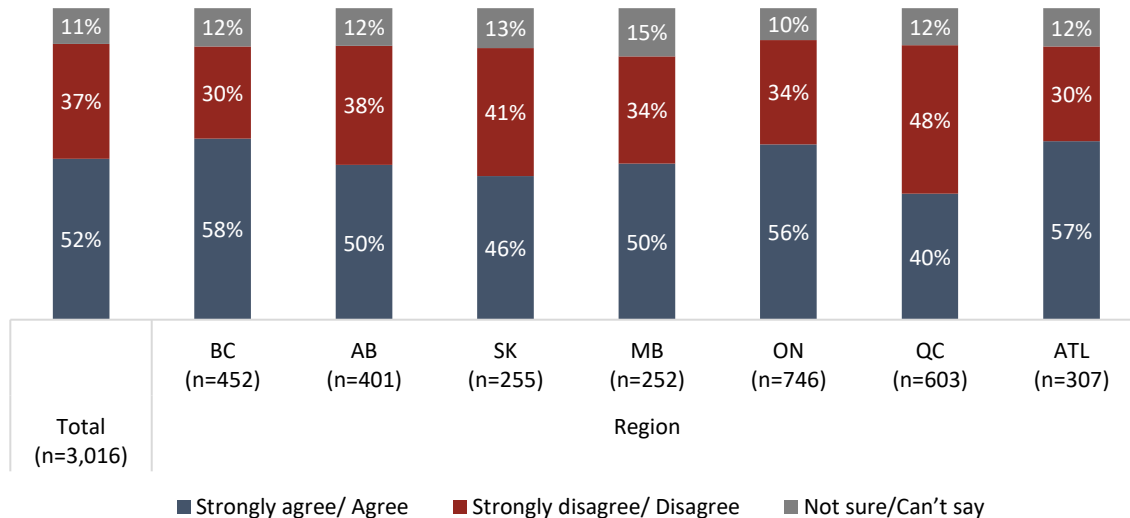
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**Agree vs. disagree -
"Students should be allowed to have 'safe spaces' where they can avoid
conversations that make them uncomfortable"**



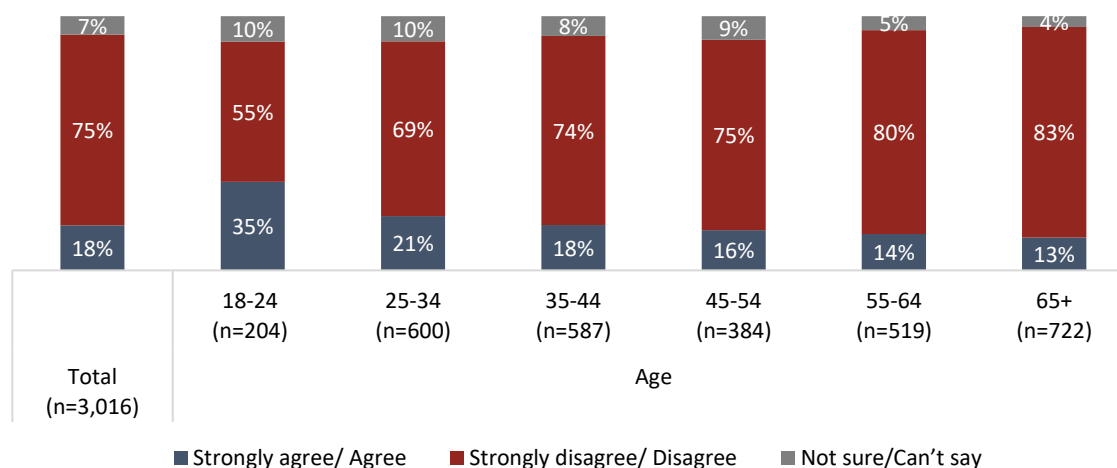
Censoring classic literature

There was an uproar [earlier this year](#) when the British publisher of Roald Dahl announced it would be altering language related to weight, mental health, gender and race in new editions of the classic children's books. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Augustus Gloop would be referred to as "enormous" rather than "enormously fat". Witches in new editions of *Witches* are described as working as "top scientist or running a business" rather than a "cashier in a supermarket or typing letters for a businessman".

Three-quarters (75%) of Canadians oppose rewriting classic literature to remove offensive language. One-in-five (18%) are okay with it, including three-in-ten (31%) of Zealous Activists ([see detailed tables](#)).

There is a clear delineation on this matter by age. Though a majority of all age groups oppose republishing classic literature with censored language, 35 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds find this acceptable:

Agree vs. disagree -
"It's okay that classic literature is republished with offensive words
censored or changed"



Coming up over the next month

This report is the first part in a series on **Canada and the Culture Wars**. Over the coming weeks, the Angus Reid Institute will be releasing studies looking at other key issues and questions being debated in the culture wars.

These studies will put a spotlight on:

Gender Identity – including topics such as gender fluidity and gender neutral language

Transgender Issues – how do Canadians say they would react if their child showed an affinity for a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth?

Climate and the Economy – how should Canada move forward in energy development? Do Canadians support or oppose a wealth tax?

Colonialism and Indigenous Issues – addressing topics such as the legacy of Canada's colonial history and residential schools

Race and Ethnicity – including topics such as privilege, cultural appropriation, equity, discrimination and racism

While each report will examine how Canadians feel about the topic, ARI will also explore where we find common ground. Next in this series will be a wide-ranging discussion of gender and identity.

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

For detailed results by Canadian Culture Mindsets, [click here](#).

For questions asked and scoring for the Canadian Culture Mindsets index, [click here](#).

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