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Measuring Intergroup Relations in Canada during and after the Pandemic¹

Jack Jedwab²

Evaluating the state of relations between various groups or communities can be an important facet in understanding a society's degree of polarization. When thinking about polarization, what often comes to mind is societal division or fragmentation, which can take numerous forms. That which follows will look at polarization as seen through the lens of intergroup relations. Often characterized by divisions between groups on the basis of their ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, and other cultural, social, or political identifiers, intergroup conflicts pit those identified with the majority group against those identified as minority group members. Such conflict(s) may also arise from real or perceived discrimination, feelings of disempowerment, and/or social and economic disadvantage(s). Intergroup conflict is frequently attributed to misperception, misunderstanding, and/or prejudices, and can be exacerbated when group identifiers feel threatened.

There are situational or contextual considerations that need to be taken into account when assessing intergroup conflict. Periods of high anxiety or uncertainty (e.g., economic recession) risk aggravating intergroup tension. Indeed, a serious domestic or global event can serve as a catalyst for channeling resentment between groups. Across history, times of crisis have resulted in the targeting or blaming of vulnerable groups.

During the global pandemic (2020–2022), relations between groups and the potential for intergroup conflict became the object of greater public attention. That which follows will look at how Canadians assessed the state of relations between selected groups over the course of the pandemic and its aftermath, including the impact of recent international tensions. To do so, we analyze the results of four national surveys on the state of relations between selected communities in Canada conducted by the firm Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies.³

Framing and Measuring Intergroup Relations

Societal polarization can take multiple and varying forms. In the United States and Europe, the 21st century has witnessed an importance rise in populism, which has seen considerable polarization along ideological lines. Esteemed American scholar Robert Putnam has contended that the United States has become an “extremely polarized and fragmented nation.”⁴ For their part, Graves and Smith contend that Canada is potentially rife

¹ A version of this article was presented as part of the conference “Our Whole Society: Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization” held at Martin Luther University College, Waterloo ON, May 7–9, 2023.

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³ Methodological Note: The four surveys used in this essay were conducted via web panel between September 2021 and October 2023 with sample sizes ranging from 1500 and 1632 Canadians. A margin of error cannot be associated with a non-probability sample in a panel survey for comparison purposes. A probability sample of 1500 respondents would have a margin of error of $\pm 2.5\%$, 19 times out of 20.

⁴ Robert D. Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

for heightened partisan polarization that is a characteristic of the American-style populism.⁵ Dalton concludes that levels of polarization appear linked to short-term factors such as citizens' declining confidence in the economy and increasing concerns about immigration.⁶ Putnam has previously expressed concern about challenges to social capital and solidarity arising from immigration.⁷

Intergroup tensions risk being exacerbated where there is a high level of polarization, as observed in several immigrant-receiving societies in North America and Europe. The manner in which the state of intergroup relations often gets measured is generally via bilateral relations. This 'bilateralism,' if framed, sees groups cast in broad categories (immigrants and non-immigrants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and racialized/visible minorities and others). The generalizations do not always account for a group's internal diversity and rather focus on their shared group identification. In other words, it may minimize the in-group's cultural, economic, social, and political diversity.

By consequence, when developing survey questions to enable better comprehension of issues such as the measurement of intergroup relations, the choice of methods, concept, and the terms selected for question formulation are critical in how survey respondents sort things out. In effect, very different conclusions around the degree of concern over selected intergroup relationships may depend on whether the survey respondent is asked to rate or rank order their relative level of concern. In the case of rating, the respondent assigns a score to various items. With multiple options, different people or groups can be seen in equally positive or negative ways (they can have both a favorable view of both Christians and non-Christians). In the case of ranking, the respondent is being asked to put things in order, usually by preference (hence they may prioritize the needs of Christians over non-Christians or vice-versa).

Another example: in the case of a rank-ordered questionnaire, relations between immigrants and non-immigrants may seem to be a relatively low source of concern or priority compared with other relationships. This can further depend on the type and number of relationships appearing on the list that the respondent is being asked to rank. Hence, immigrant-non-immigrant relations may be a source of concern while not ranking high on the list at a particular point in time. Below, we'll compare and contrast the results of surveys that respectively rate and rank intergroup relations in this case at the earlier part of the pandemic (2021) and in its aftermath (2023).

Rating Concerns over Intergroup Relations in Canada

A September 2021 Leger-ACS survey revealed that Canadians held most negative views (which can be regarded as a proxy for higher concern) around relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians as well as relations between Muslims and non-Muslims with 39% and 38% respectively viewing those relationships as negative. They were less likely to describe as negative the relations between Jews and non-Jews, Chinese and non-Chinese, and Black and non-Black Canadians, with roughly one in four holding a

⁵ Frank Graves and Jeff Smith, "Northern Populism: Causes and Consequences of the New Ordered Outlook," *The School of Public Policy Publications* (28 Jul 2020).

⁶ Russell J. Dalton, "Modeling Ideological Polarization in Democratic Party Systems," *Electoral Studies* 72 (August 2021).

⁷ Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007).

negative view. As indicated previously, the rating of concerns provides useful insights into which relationships constitute a greater source of concern. It does present a reduced gap across the relationships when it comes to establishing a level of concern.

Table 1 - Do you have a very positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or very negative view of the selected relationships in Canada? ⁸

September 10 and 12, 2021	TOTAL POSITIVE	Very positive	Somewhat positive	TOTAL NEGATIVE	Somewhat Negative	Very Negative
Indigenous and non-Indigenous	61%	15%	46%	39%	31%	8%
Muslims and non-Muslims	62%	14%	48%	38%	30%	8%
Jews and non-Jews	76%	18%	58%	24%	19%	5%
Chinese and non-Chinese	73%	18%	55%	27%	22%	5%
Black and non-Black	75%	19%	56%	25%	21%	4%

In a follow up survey conducted towards the end of 2021 we asked whether, since the outset of the pandemic, relations between selected groups had worsened, stayed the same, or improved? In the table below the results are displayed across the regions of the country. With few exceptions, the survey reveals that it is relations between Asians and non-Asians that Canadians felt had worsened since the start of the pandemic. It is worth noting that some 43% of survey respondents identifying as Chinese felt that relations between Asian and non-Asian in Canada had worsened since the pandemic. For their part, persons identifying as Jewish (23%) were more likely to believe that relations had worsened.

Table 2 - Since the start of the pandemic, do you think that relations between the following groups in Canada have gotten worse? ⁹

Relations between... have gotten worse	Canada	BC	AB	Prairies	ON	QC	Atl.
Asian and non-Asian	25%	34%	31%	22%	24%	23%	17%
Immigrants and non-Immigrants	20%	23%	24%	20%	19%	17%	17%
Indigenous and non-Indigenous	15%	19%	21%	15%	15%	11%	9%
Black and non-Black	13%	17%	17%	9%	14%	11%	9%
Christians and non-Christians	13%	17%	18%	20%	12%	9%	15%
Jews and non-Jews	13%	16%	16%	10%	12%	14%	11%
Muslims and non-Muslims	13%	16%	20%	8%	13%	13%	13%

Further evidence of the evolving state of intergroup tension and the degree to which it can be event-driven is seen in a Leger survey conducted in October 2023 in the aftermath of the heinous attacks in Israel by Hamas terrorists on October 7th and Israel's military response. As the table below reveals, there has been a marked shift in Canadians' perceptions of which intergroup relationships are the dominant areas of concern in contrast to what they were most preoccupied with during the pandemic. In effect, the main concern is relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the level of concern regarding relations between Jews and non-Jews has also appeared to have risen relative to where it stood during the pandemic.

⁸ Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, September 10–12, 2021

⁹ Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies between December 3–5, 2021.

Table 3 - Very and somewhat worried (net worried) about selected relationships of groups within Canada.¹⁰

Net Worried about Relations between....	Total	Atl.	QC	ON	MB/SK	AB	BC
Muslims and non-Muslims	50%	48%	49%	51%	47%	47%	53%
Immigrants and non-Immigrants	45%	48%	40%	46%	48%	45%	49%
Jews and non-Jews	39%	37%	33%	41%	36%	43%	40%
Indigenous and non-Indigenous	36%	35%	29%	37%	42%	37%	42%
Black Canadians and others	31%	25%	25%	35%	24%	29%	34%
Asian and non-Asian	27%	33%	20%	27%	19%	29%	39%
Christians and non-Christians	25%	26%	15%	27%	25%	27%	35%

Ranking Concerns over Intergroup Relations

The table below asks Canadians to rank in order the relationships/divisions which they think will entail the biggest challenges facing the country in the decades ahead. The wording of the question and the range of options presented to respondents (notably the addition of socio-economic conflicts) make it non-comparable to the results of the surveys above. Yet, the results provide some key insights into how ranking priorities and modifying options can generate very different conclusions about the state of intergroup relations. We observe that context is critical, as the survey was conducted in the aftermath of the pandemic and with the emergence of a severe economic downturn and thereby demonstrates how economic and ideological conflicts can appear more pressing than intercultural ones depending on circumstances.

For the last few decades of the twentieth century, relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada appeared to be the dominant concern of Canadians with respect to what might be described as an existential challenge to national identity. When either rating or ranking the state of intergroup relations, pollsters would devote disproportionate attention to the degree to which Canadians were preoccupied by relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada. But, as revealed in the table, that no longer appears to be the dominant concern—at least for Canadians residing outside of Quebec.

As revealed in the table below, many Quebecers still believe that relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada are a primary concern outside of Quebec when thinking about the future. Indeed, they get ranked higher than ideological and economic conflicts combined. Outside of Quebec, the bigger concerns when Canadians are asked to look ahead are about those ideological and economic/class conflicts. But, we observe that on the Prairies and in Atlantic Canada the largest plurality of respondents rank indigenous and non-indigenous relations as the prevailing future challenge—unlike Quebec, which situates it well below the other parts of the country and considers gender relations a considerably more important area to address in future. It is worth noting that, given the list, immigrant and non-immigrant and religious and secular relations don't make it high on the list of future concerns. Again, however, this should not be understood to mean that there is little concern about the relations.

¹⁰ Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, October 27–29, 2023.

Table 4 - Please rank the following in terms of what you think is the biggest challenge for Canada in the forthcoming decades.¹¹

Relations between...	Canada	BC	AB	Prairies	ON	QC	Atl.
Ideological Conflict (i.e., Right vs Left)	21.8%	27.0%	30.3%	20.2%	23.5%	12.8%	18.5%
Rich and Poor	20.2%	25.0%	19.4%	16.7%	21.2%	17.1%	20.2%
Indigenous and Non-Indigenous	14.2%	13.2%	13.2%	27.1%	14.9%	8.3%	21.8%
Quebec and the Rest of Canada	12.1%	5.4%	4.8%	5.9%	6.2%	32.2%	9.7%
Visible Minorities/Racialized Groups and White Persons	11.6%	12.9%	14.0%	13.3%	12.8%	6.7%	12.1%
Men and Women	9.6%	2.7%	10.3%	8.4%	9.8%	14.7%	4.8%
Immigrants and Non-Immigrants	6.7%	9.7%	3.9%	4.2%	7.1%	6.4%	5.6%
Religious vs Secular	3.9%	4.3%	3.9%	4.2%	4.5%	1.7%	6.4%

Conclusion

The degree of concern or importance attached to various types of intergroup relations can evolve over time depending on what's driving public sentiment—and specifically how and by whom it is being driven. The manner in which concerns are prioritized therefore can be very much event-driven.

At the front of the pandemic, surveys highlighted ongoing concerns around relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians. Yet, as we observed above over the course of the pandemic, it was relations between Asians and non-Asians followed by immigrants and non-immigrants that were seen as worsening. This raises questions as to whether, during periods of uncertainty, simmering tensions may rise to the surface as they get exacerbated by external forces. The increased concern over relations between Asians and non-Asians is likely connected to rising prejudice directed at Chinese persons in the country, who were frequently the object of unacceptable scapegoating during the pandemic. Far more research is needed to provide insight into the factors that Canadians believe underlie tensions in intergroup relations.

Ranking potential concerns over intergroup relations may offer a different perspective on what Canadians deem to be most pressing. As mentioned, however, the data sets used for ranking do not lend themselves to comparisons with rating intergroup relations. Optimally, undertaking both rating and ranking will likely offer a more complete view of the state of relations.

This essay began with a discussion about the framing of intergroup relations in bilateral ways. Group and community formation and identification is common in multicultural and plural democracies. Such societies are increasingly characterized by dual and multiple identities, and hence the 'us' and 'them' insufficiently account for the ability to identify with several groups and the intersecting and cross-cutting identities that make for greater complexity when examining intergroup relations. This represents yet another important area for further research.

Arising from the data presented above, it should not be assumed that, because a particular bilateral relationship is not as high a concern at a given point in time, that it implies that the possible source of friction(s) has been addressed. Often the underlying factors that foment intergroup tensions can be drawn to the surface by domestic or international incidents or events, as demonstrated above. Policy-makers in Canada and

¹¹ Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 20–March 3, 2023.

elsewhere need to work to identify and address issues that can serve as catalysts in aggravating intergroup tensions. Ideally, they need to act prior to the emergence of a crisis to determine how best to address the underlying or root causes of potential conflicts.