



Under Pressure: How Immigration Is Becoming a Political Fault Line in Canada

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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

Introduction

As we witness the first few weeks of the Carney government, we see that much of the political focus is inevitably on Trump, tariffs, and trade. These are urgent and consequential issues, but they risk obscuring deeper and more enduring challenges at home. Governing effectively requires more than patching immediate leaks—it demands a clear understanding of the transformative period we are living through.

Prime Minister Mark Carney secured a mandate by persuading enough Canadians that he could navigate the immediate threat posed by Trump. But a more thoughtful reading of the moment recognizes that while Trump represents an imminent challenge, he is not a permanent one. The Biden presidency offers a cautionary tale: decline comes fast through the inexorable passage of time. Moreover, Trump's presidency will be hastened by the probable reckoning of the 2026 midterms. Trump will shape the near future, but he will not define it.

Beneath the noise surrounding Trump lies a set of domestic fault lines that are reshaping the Canadian landscape—fault lines that demand more sustained attention from our leaders. As part of Pollara's 40th anniversary retrospective, we will explore these emerging divisions. We begin with one of the most politically charged and socially consequential issues facing the country: immigration.

A Political Fault Line Around the World

Across advanced democracies and emerging economies alike, immigration has shifted from being a largely technocratic policy discussion to a deeply polarizing political issue. While many governments continue to promote immigration to address aging populations, labour shortages, and economic competitiveness, public opinion is increasingly moving in the opposite direction—driven by anxieties about culture, economic security, and social cohesion.

In the United States, immigration remains one of the most divisive national issues. The southern border has become a symbolic and literal fault line, with Republicans under Donald Trump's continued influence framing immigration as a threat to national identity, economic security, and law and order. Even as the U.S. economy remains heavily reliant on immigrant labour,¹ public support has shifted² toward tighter border controls and reduced immigration, especially among working-class voters. Democrats, for their part, remain internally divided, caught between humanitarian imperatives and growing voter unease.

Europe has experienced an even more dramatic shift. The refugee crisis of 2015 served as a turning point, catalyzing a surge of right-wing populism. Parties such as *Alternative für Germany* (AfD), France's *Rassemblement National*, and the Sweden Democrats have gained momentum by explicitly opposing immigration—particularly from Muslim-majority countries—and framing it as a threat to Western values and social stability. Even historically pro-immigration states like Germany³ and Sweden⁴ have introduced stricter policies and emphasized integration over multiculturalism.

These policies are not the exclusive purview of right-wing parties. Denmark's governing Social Democrats have expressed⁵ a vision for zero asylum seekers while pursuing third-country processing agreements, enforcing "anti-ghetto" legislation⁶ to dismantle "parallel" ethnic enclaves, and offering financial incentives for voluntary repatriation.⁷ Denmark's centre-left coalition sought deportations to Rwanda⁸ even before the U.K.'s Tories.

¹ Kevin Appleby, "The Importance of Immigrant Labor to the US Economy," *Center for Migration Studies* online, September 2, 2024, <https://cmsny.org/importance-of-immigrant-labor-to-us-economy/>.

² Jeffrey M. Jones, "Sharply More Americans Want to Curb Immigration to U.S.," *Gallup* online, July 12, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/647123/sharply-americans-curb-immigration.aspx>.

³ "Germany 2024: A New Era for Immigration – Balancing Asylum and Skilled Worker Policies," *govassist.com*, March 25, 2024, <https://govassist.com/blog/germany-2024-a-new-era-for-immigration-balancing-asylum-and-skilled-worker-policies>.

⁴ Holly Ellyatt, "Sweden told people to open their hearts to immigrants 10 years ago. Its U-turn has been dramatic," *CNBC.com*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/10/07/swedens-immigration-stance-has-changed-radically-over-the-last-decade.html>.

⁵ Katya Adler, "The country where the left (not the far right) made hardline immigration laws," *BBC.com*, June 4, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1mgkd93r4yo>.

⁶ Daniel Boffey, "Denmark accused of racism after anti-ghetto law adapted for Ukrainians," *The Guardian* online, May 2, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/02/denmark-accused-racism-anti-ghetto-law-ukraine-refugees>.

⁷ "About Repatriation 2025 – Information for refugees, immigrants and persons with dual citizenship about voluntary return," *DRC Danish Refugee Council* online, 2025, <https://asyl.drc.ngo/media/f22doid4/om-repatriering-2025-engelsk.pdf>.

⁸ David Mac Dougall, "Denmark election: Parties on left and right back controversial plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda," *euronews.com*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/10/denmark-election-parties-on-left-and-right-back-controversial-plan-to-send-asylum-seekers->.

The U.K.'s Brexit was driven in large part by immigration concerns and highlighted the extent to which the issue can upend political orders. More recently, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has adopted an immigration policy⁹ that marks a clear departure from previous administrations. He has proposed a new Border Security Command¹⁰ to disrupt smuggling operations and reduce illegal crossings. Starmer also pledged to streamline the asylum system, eliminate the application backlog, and end reliance on hotels for housing claimants. While he maintains the post-Brexit points-based immigration system, he supports reforms to make it more responsive to labour market needs, especially in shortage sectors.

Australia¹¹ and New Zealand¹² offer a more cautious approach, using points-based systems to attract skilled migrants. However, rising concerns over housing,¹³ infrastructure strain,¹⁴ and visa abuse¹⁵ have recently prompted both countries to scale back immigration targets—part of a broader effort to align economic needs with domestic capacity and public sentiment.

In Asia, responses vary. Japan¹⁶ has begun admitting more foreign workers to address demographic decline, though public wariness persists. This shift comes after decades where Japan kept its borders tighter than almost any other country; in 2022, Japan accepted just 202 refugees¹⁷ compared to Canada's world-leading 47,600,¹⁸ despite a population over three times as large. South Korea and Taiwan face similar pressures¹⁹ and have made limited moves to open their labour markets, with little progress on integration. Meanwhile, Gulf States like the UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to rely heavily on migrant labour without offering permanent status or citizenship,²⁰ underscoring a clear divide between economic utility and national belonging.

Across all these regions, a set of interrelated themes consistently emerges. First is economic insecurity—a pervasive concern among citizens that immigration increases competition for jobs, housing, and public services at a time when many already feel financially strained. Second is cultural anxiety, particularly in societies with strong linguistic or ethnic majorities, where immigration is seen as a potential threat to national identity, social cohesion, and traditional values. Third, and perhaps most destabilizing, is the widening gap between political elites and the general public: while policymakers and business leaders often view immigration as a strategic tool for economic growth and demographic renewal, many citizens experience it as a source of disruption, fueling mistrust in institutions and resentment toward perceived top-down agendas.

⁹ Keir Starmer, "Prime Minister unveils new plan to end years of uncontrolled migration," Press release, May 11, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-unveils-new-plan-to-end-years-of-uncontrolled-migration>.

¹⁰ Border Control, "Delivering Border Security," Policy paper, December 10, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-border-security-statement/delivering-border-security>.

¹¹ "What is Australia's points system for immigration?," *ielts.idp.com*, <https://ielts.idp.com/prepare/article-what-is-australias-points-system-for-immigration>.

¹² "Skilled migrant category pathway to residence," *New Zealand Immigration* online, <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/live/resident-visas-to-live-in-new-zealand/skilled-residence-pathways-in-new-zealand/skilled-migrant-category-pathway-to-residence/>.

¹³ "The wider wellbeing effects of immigration," *New Zealand Productivity Commission* (2021).

¹⁴ Ross Waugh, "Infrastructure Demand Rises as Immigration Grows Affecting Rentals and Inflation," *inframanage.com*, May 9, 2024, <https://inframanage.com/infrastructure-demand-rises-as-immigration-grows-affecting-rentals-and-inflation/>.

¹⁵ "News archive," *Australian Government – Department of Home Affairs* online, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/news-media/archive/article?itemId=1125>.

¹⁶ Becca Faber, "Improved Immigration: Japan's Solution to Its Population Crisis," *Harvard International Review* online, October 30, 2024, <https://hir.harvard.edu/improved-immigration-japan/>.

¹⁷ "Japan Events of 2023," *hwr.org*, <https://www.hwr.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/japan#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20Justice%20Ministry,Kabul%20and%20their%20family%20members>.

¹⁸ "UNHCR calls for concerted action as forced displacement hits new record in 2022," *unhcr.ca*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.ca/news/unhcr-calls-for-concerted-action-as-forced-displacement-hits-new-record-in-2022/>.

¹⁹ "Strengthening Active Labour Market Policies in Korea," *OECD* (2024).

²⁰ Françoise De Bel-Air, "As the Gulf Region Seeks a Pivot, Reforms to Its Oft-Criticized Immigration Policies Remain a Work in Progress," *Migration Policy Institute* online, December 5, 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/gulf-region-gcc-migration-kafala-reforms>.

The Canadian Case

These same dynamics are becoming increasingly visible in Canada. Once praised globally as a model for successful immigration,²¹ the country has been slow to respond to mounting signs of strain. Economic pressures—including the rising cost of living,²² a deepening housing crisis,²³ and overburdened infrastructure—are reshaping public attitudes.²⁴ Cultural unease, particularly in Quebec and parts of Western Canada, is also growing. At the heart of this shift is a widening gap between federal immigration policy and the everyday realities of Canadians—a gap that poses growing political risks for leaders who fail to acknowledge or address public concerns.

Over the past five years, Canada's immigration policy has evolved in response to these pressures. In 2022 and 2023, the federal government pursued aggressive immigration levels. These targets were almost entirely responsible²⁵ for expanding the size of Canada's population by over 930,000 and 1.27 million people a year, respectively, well above historical immigration levels. However, by 2023, public unease triggered a series of policy recalibrations. The government introduced²⁶ caps on study permits and tightened work permit rules. By 2025, overall immigration targets were reduced,²⁷ with a sharpened focus on attracting skilled workers in sectors facing acute shortages. Regional programs were also expanded to direct newcomers to less-populated areas. Together, these changes represent a clear pivot from rapid expansion to a more selective, regionally balanced, and sustainability-oriented immigration strategy.

In this context, Canada's recent turn toward skepticism is not an outlier but part of a broader international pattern. Canada is now grappling with the same forces that have reshaped immigration politics elsewhere. Our findings—highlighting rising discontent in Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec—underscore this shift. Immigration, once seen as a pillar of national strength and vitality, is increasingly viewed through the lens of government failure, cultural erosion, and economic insecurity.

²¹ Colin R. Singer, "Canada's Cutting-Edge Immigration System A Role Model For Others, OECD Report Says," *immigration.ca*, August 14, 2019, <https://immigration.ca/canadas-cutting-edge-immigration-system-a-role-model-for-others-oecd-report-says/>.

²² David Olive, "Our cost-of-living crisis: In just three years rent and groceries are up nearly 40 per cent. There are solutions," *Toronto Star* online, September 8, 2024, https://www.thestar.com/business/opinion/our-cost-of-living-crisis-in-just-three-years-rent-and-groceries-are-up-nearly/article_8ed6a480-e789-11ee-ac88-fbb27d23a241.html.

²³ "What's going on with Canada's housing supply?," *TD Stories* online, April 9, 2024, <https://stories.td.com/ca/en/article/canada-housing-supply>.

²⁴ Darren Major, "Replacing Canada's crumbling water, road infrastructure would cost more than \$300B: Statistics Canada," *CBC.ca*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/cost-to-replace-canada-water-road-infrastructure-1.7358394>.

²⁵ Don Kerr, "Canada's population growth is exploding. Here's why," *thehub.ca*, April 26, 2024, <https://thehub.ca/2024/04/26/don-kerr-population-growth-is-exploding-heres-why/>.

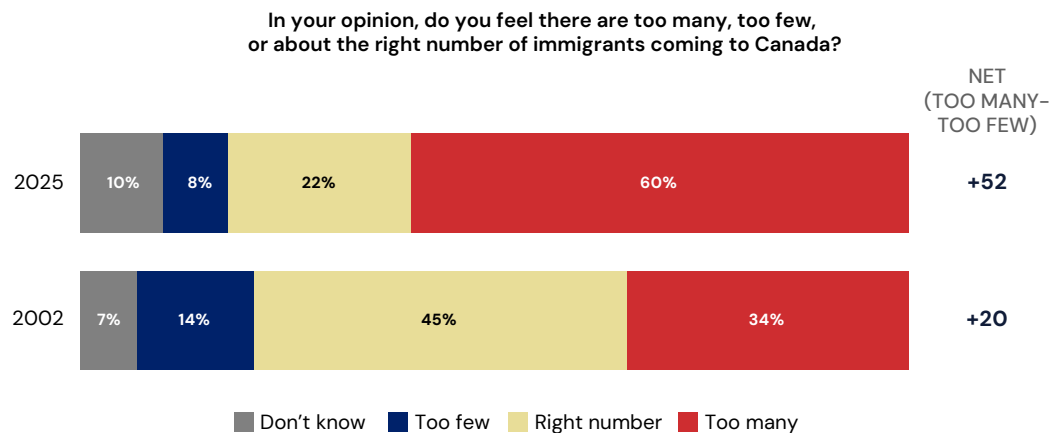
²⁶ "Canada's immigration levels," *Government of Canada* online, November 4, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/mandate/corporate-initiatives/levels.html>.

²⁷ "2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan," *Government of Canada* online, October 24, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/10/20252027-immigration-levels-plan.html>.

New Polling on Canadian Attitudes Towards Immigration

Pollara has been tracking Canadian attitudes toward immigration for decades, and to commemorate our 40th anniversary, we revisited this critical issue in a new national study. In a recent survey of 2,500 Canadian adults conducted from April 10 to 16, 2025, the most striking finding is the sharp increase in the number of Canadians who believe immigration levels are too high. When we first posed this question in 2002, only 34 percent held that view. Today, that figure has risen to 60 percent—a substantial 26-point jump that reflects a significant and lasting shift in public sentiment.

Figure 1 - Attitudes towards Immigration Levels

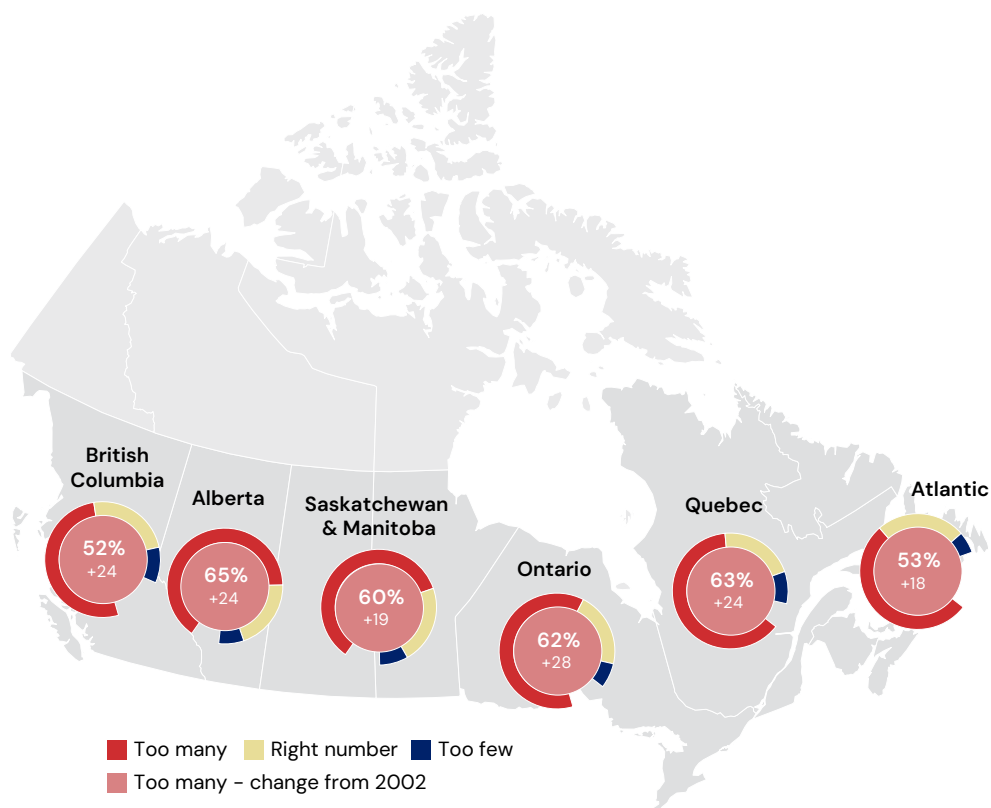


Base: All respondents (n=2,502)

Alberta stands out as the most critical province, with 65 percent of its residents saying immigration levels are excessive. Quebec (63 percent) and Ontario (62 percent) also show high levels of concern, reinforcing a regional pattern that now poses significant political and policy challenges for the federal government.

Figure 2 – Regional Variations towards Immigration Levels

In your opinion, do you feel there are too many, too few, or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?

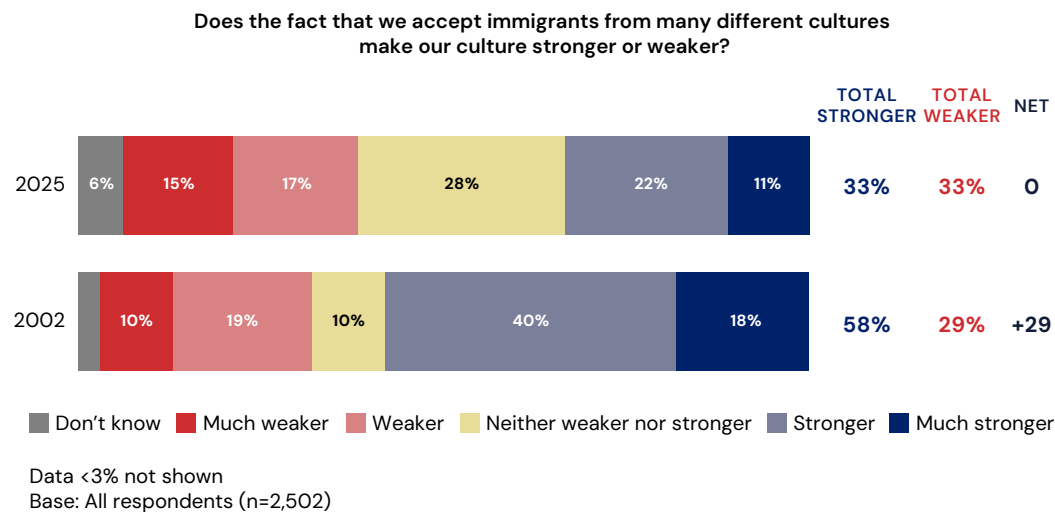


Base: All respondents (n=2,502)

A. Cultural Anxiety and Fractured Identity

The study finds a growing unease about the cultural implications of immigration. In 2002, most Canadians (58 percent) believed immigration enriched the national culture. By 2025, this consensus has eroded: just 33 percent of Canadians now hold the same view.

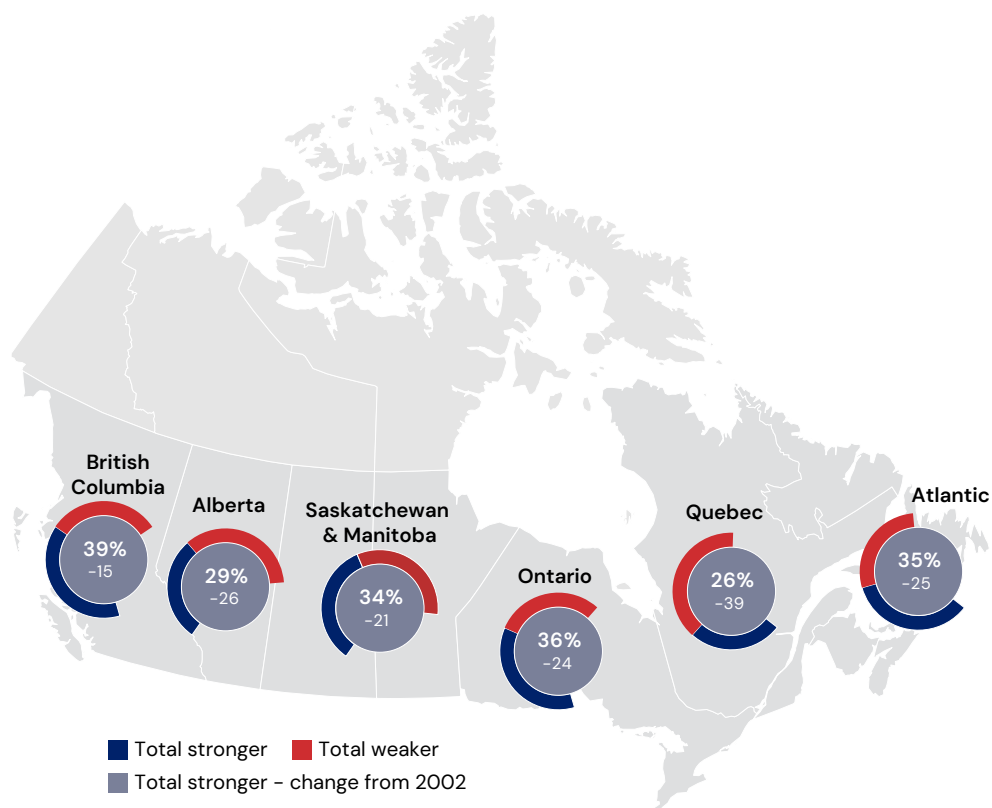
Figure 3 – Perceived Cultural Impact of Immigration



When examining the perceived cultural impact of immigration, the divide across regions is particularly striking in Quebec and Alberta. Just 26 percent of Quebecers think accepting immigrants from different cultures makes our culture stronger while 39 percent, the most of any province, think this weakens our culture. Alberta follows (29 percent strengthens / 35 percent weakens) pointing to a notable undercurrent of skepticism towards multiculturalism. In contrast, more British Columbians (38 percent strengthens / 31 percent weakens) and Atlantic Canadians (35 percent strengthens / 28 percent weakens) express more favourable, if still cautious, assessments of immigration’s cultural contributions.

Figure 4 - Perceived Impact of Immigration - A Regional View

Does the fact that we accept immigrants from many different cultures
make our culture stronger or weaker?



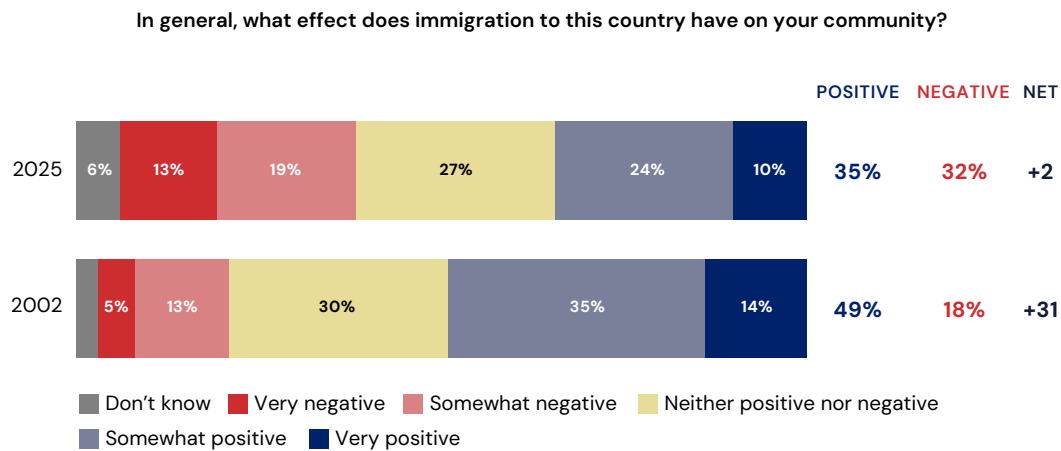
Base: All respondents (n=2,502)

B. Signs of Erosion

Economic concerns around immigration are more pronounced than ever. In 2002, 40 percent of Canadians believed immigration increased unemployment. Today, a majority of Canadians (52 percent) share the same view. Once again, we see interesting regional differences with Albertans (56 percent) being the most worried. Also, Canadians with college or high school education (55 percent) are particularly concerned about the impact of immigration on unemployment.

In the same vein, the overall impression about immigration has soured. When asked “In general, what effect does immigration to this country have on your community?”, almost half of Canadians (49 percent) back in 2002 felt positively. Twenty-three years later, only about one-third (35 percent) feel the same way.

Figure 5—Overall perception of immigration



Data <3% not shown
Base: All respondents (n=2,502)

Key Takeaways

This erosion of trust in immigration carries direct and growing consequences for the Carney government, which must now navigate a political landscape where support for immigration can no longer be assumed as a default consensus. For years, Canada's pro-immigration stance was widely seen as a point of national pride—an expression of openness, pragmatism, and multicultural identity. But that consensus is beginning to fracture.²⁸ Rising economic pressures, strained public services, and growing cultural anxiety have altered the public mood. What was once a source of political unity is now becoming a point of division.

The Carney government's electoral focus on the external threat posed by Donald Trump—while understandable and effective in mobilizing voters—has come at the cost of deeper engagement with emerging domestic tensions. The Trump issue remains real and immediate, particularly in the realms of trade, national security, and global democratic stability. But as the old saying goes, "This too shall pass." The danger lies in mistaking a temporary crisis for a permanent framework of governance.

If the Carney government continues to anchor its leadership narrative around the threat posed by Donald Trump—while downplaying or neglecting pressing domestic concerns—it risks losing its grip on an increasingly restless electorate. Issues such as immigration, affordability, and cultural identity are no longer peripheral; they have become central to how many Canadians assess the performance and priorities of their government. A strategy focused too heavily on external dangers, however real, may soon appear tone-deaf or evasive in the face of mounting challenges at home.

²⁸ Aiden Muscovitch, "The Week in Polling: Liberal ridings want Trudeau gone, Canadians have given up on homeownership, Canada's immigration consensus cracks," *thehub.ca*, October 26, 2024, <https://thehub.ca/2024/10/26/the-week-in-polling-liberal-ridings-want-trudeau-gone-canadians-have-given-up-on-homeownership-canadas-immigration-consensus-cracks/>.

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