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*An arrivals sign at a Canadian airport. Source: shutterstock.com/Lester Balajadia*

# The Politics of Immigration Arrives in Canada

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## The Politics of Immigration Arrives in Canada

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Immigration policy, once a matter of consensus within Canada, has of late provoked sharp debate. While the decibel level has not risen to that of the United States, Canada's courts, media, and citizens are now asking themselves, as they had not done in recent memory, whether they are letting in too many people.

As in the United States, immigration in Canada has been a crucial element of national identity. However, Canada has seen itself as particularly hospitable to immigrants, known as "new Canadians," who form part of a national "mosaic" in a multicultural society. Immigration has also long been seen as crucial to populating the land mass of the world's second largest country.

Canada has accepted proportionately many more legal immigrants than the United States. And beginning in the 1970s, immigrants, instead of originating from traditional European sources, came ever more from South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>1</sup> Although not without its frictions, the high level of immigration was generally viewed positively as large immigrant communities in such cities as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver flourished alongside Canadians of pre-existing backgrounds.

Canadians could take satisfaction in the fact that their immigration laws were "ruthlessly smart,"<sup>2</sup> as the New York Times termed it, creaming off the most adaptable, highly educated immigrants through an elaborate point system that allowed them to choose those who would most contribute to Canada's economic development, while giving less scope to the "family unification" principle which prevails in the United States.<sup>3</sup> At the same time Canada has had provisions to admit temporary workers, refugees and asylees, and international students.

Canadians have largely escaped the wave of illegal immigration that the United States and Western Europe have faced. Lacking a land border with the developing world as the United States has with Mexico or an easily crossed maritime border as Europe has with North Africa, Canadians, at least until recently, could view illegal immigration as a minor nuisance at most.

### *A Change in The Weather*

But the view that high immigration levels are unreservedly good has begun to change. In the 2021 federal election, former Conservative Máxime Bernier's People's Party of Canada ran on a platform of drastically reducing immigration, which it blamed for stagnant wages and "pressure on our infrastructures, health care systems, and social programs" as well as for soaring housing prices.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. (2022a, October 26). *Immigrant status and period of immigration by place of birth and citizenship: Canada, provinces and territories and census metropolitan areas with parts*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810030201>

2 Tepperman, Jonathan. "Canada's Ruthlessly Smart Immigration Policy." The New York Times, June 28, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/28/opinion/canada-immigration-policy-trump.html>.

3 Government of Canada. "Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS) Tool: Skilled Immigrants (Express Entry)." Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, February 27, 2024. <https://ircc.canada.ca/english/immigrate/skilled/crs-tool.asp>.

4 People's Party of Canada. "Immigration: Reducing Overall Levels and Prioritizing Skilled Immigrants ." People's Party of Canada. Accessed January 11, 2024. <https://www.peoplespartyofcanada.ca/immigration>.

Bernier's party failed to gain any seats in Parliament, and no other party ran on an anti-immigration platform. Nonetheless it gained 4.9% of the vote, and while it had a range of other issues—opposition to “radical gender ideology,” support for oil pipelines, liberalization of gun laws and protecting the values of “Western civilization”—the votes it gained may have been a harbinger of a new immigration politics in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

Recent polling has indicated a change in public attitudes towards immigration. A survey conducted in September 2023 by Nanos Research showed that 53% of Canadians surveyed want fewer immigrants than the Canadian government has projected, while 34% want the numbers to remain the same, 8% would like to see them increase, and 6% are unsure.<sup>6</sup> This marked a shift from only six months earlier when 34% wanted less immigration, while 46% wanted it to stay the same, and 15% were unsure.

An October 2023 poll conducted by the Environics Institute found that 44% of those surveyed agreed with the statement that overall, there is too much immigration to Canada, while 51% disagreed.<sup>7</sup> This marked a major shift from a year earlier when only 27% agreed with that statement while 69% disagreed. That said, there does not appear to be any animus against immigrants themselves: 42% of those surveyed said that immigrants made their communities better, 9% said they make them worse, and 41% said they made no difference either way.

Concerns about immigration seemed to be linked to the economy, specifically the housing market. It should be noted that the Environics poll registered an increase in those believing the Canadian economy was weakening and overall dissatisfaction with “the way things are going.” Among those who said that there was too much immigration, the most common reason given was that it drove up housing prices, followed by that it was a drain on public finances, and that it took jobs from Canadians. Very few respondents cited non-economic reasons such as it being a threat to Canadian values or national security.

### *The Chattering Classes Weigh In*

Even as the general public seems to be turning more skeptical regarding immigration, a debate is taking place among opinion makers. The Macdonald-Laurier Institute has called for “a grownup conversation on immigration,” arguing that “the sheer number of new arrivals... is increasingly used as a substitute for Canadian labour, driving down wages” and highlighting the impact on “crowded schools, transit, hospitals or other crumbling infrastructure.”<sup>8</sup>

And the conservative-oriented National Post has peppered its op-ed pages with articles with such titles as “Canada’s immigration surge cancels out housing promises,” “Trudeau frittered away a good immigration

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5 Heard, Andrew. “Canadian Election Results by Party 1867 to 2021.” Canadian Election Results: 1867–2021. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/1867-present.html>.

6 Nanos Research. “Canadians Prefer That Canada Accepts Fewer Immigrants and International Students than What Is Projected for 2023 (Globe/Nanos).” Nanos Research, September 11, 2023. <https://nanos.co/canadians-prefer-that-canada-accepts-fewer-immigrants-and-international-students-than-what-is-projected-for-2023-globe-nanos/>.

7 Environics Institute. “Public Opinion about Immigration & Refugees.” Environics Institute, September 2023. <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/public-opinion-about-immigration-refugees>.

8 Belouizdad, Skander. “It’s Time for a Grown-up Conversation on Immigration: Aaron Wudrick in the Hub: Macdonald-Laurier Institute.” Macdonald, January 10, 2024. <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/time-for-grown-up-conversation-on-immigration/>.

policy for the sake of Liberal votes,” and “Canadians go full European on immigration skepticism.”<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, there are also voices which defend an expansive immigration policy, notably the Century Initiative, a group which calls for steps to increase Canada’s population from its current 40.8 million to 100 million by 2100, arguing that this is necessary given that “our workforce is shrinking” and that “if we stay the course, Canada’s annual GDP growth will decline, along with our influence on the world stage.”<sup>10</sup>

The Toronto-based group’s leadership has included such eminences as co-founder Dominic Barton, former Canadian Ambassador to China and global CEO of McKinsey & Co., Mark Wiseman, head of investment bank Lazard’s Canadian office and former head of the Canada Pension Plan, and Goldy Hyder, Business Council of Canada President.

One may thus ask whether the new immigration debate reflects a fracture between what Globe and Mail analyst John Ibbitson has called the “Laurentian consensus” (roughly equivalent to what Americans would call the “eastern establishment”) and an emerging, sharp-edged conservative populism.<sup>11</sup> But it is not yet clear to what degree immigration is turning into an enduring political issue.

### ***Politicians Position Themselves***

Emerging discontent is the natural fuel for any opposition party, but the immigration issue is tricky in a country where 23% of the population was born abroad.<sup>12</sup> Key battlegrounds in the next election (which is no more than two years away and could come sooner) include the vast suburbs surrounding Toronto and Vancouver, which have large immigrant populations. As polling indicates, Canadians are averse to crude immigrant bashing.

Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre has sought to link immigration to the price of housing.<sup>13</sup> He has criticized the Trudeau government for increasing immigration levels while not addressing housing, thus worsening the shortage, saying that “we need to make a link between the number of homes built and the number of people we invite as new Canadians.” However, he has shied away from specifics such as whether he would actually reduce immigration levels.

Analysts suggest that factors other than immigration such as land use zoning, permitting delays, the cost of raw materials, and interest rates are the real drivers of high prices.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Justin Trudeau’s gov-

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9 Kheiriddin, Tasha. “Liberals Blind as Aggressive Immigration Damages Economy | National ...” National Post, January 16, 2024. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/tasha-kheiriddin-liberals-blind-as-aggressive-immigration-damages-economy>.

10 “Century Initiative.” Century Initiative. Accessed March 11, 2024. <https://www.centuryinitiative.ca/>.

11 Ibbitson, John. “The Collapse of the Laurentian Consensus.” Literary Review of Canada, January 25, 2024. <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2012/01/the-collapse-of-the-laurentian-consensus/>.

12 Government of Canada, The Daily. “Immigrants Make up the Largest Share of the Population in over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians.” Statistics Canada, October 26, 2022. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>.

13 Taylor, Stephanie. “Poilievre Says Liberal Immigration Target Driven by Trudeau ‘ideology’ but Doesn’t Say If Conservatives Might Lower Number.” National Post, August 1, 2023. <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/poilievre-says-liberal-immigration-target-driven-by-trudeaus-ideology-but-doesnt-say-if-conservatives-might-lower-number>.

14 Armstrong, Peter. “Bank of Canada Says Housing Affordability Is about Boosting Supply, Not Lowering Interest Rates.” CBC News, February 7, 2024. [https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/armstrong-housing-bank-of-canada-macklem-1.7106867?cmp=newsletter\\_CBC+News+Morning+Brief\\_10927\\_1390150](https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/armstrong-housing-bank-of-canada-macklem-1.7106867?cmp=newsletter_CBC+News+Morning+Brief_10927_1390150).

ernment appears to have sensed some vulnerability despite the fact that historically his Liberal Party has supported immigration, and Canada's current regime was largely created under Liberal Prime Ministers Lester Pearson and Pierre-Elliott Trudeau. And as a matter of policy, the Trudeau government believes that immigration is crucial to Canada's growth over the long term.<sup>15</sup>

After immigration processing had ceased during the pandemic, the government announced high future immigration levels for permanent residents: 465,000 for 2023, 485,000 for 2024, and 500,000 for 2025. However, it has now announced that instead of any further increase, the 2026 level will remain at 500,000. It has also indicated that it may reduce the number of visas granted for temporary workers, which was over 605,000 in 2022.<sup>16</sup> These workers fill labor gaps, and are concentrated in areas such as food services, retail, and waste management.

Ottawa has also announced a cap of 360,000 for student visas to be issued in 2024, which should result in a 35% reduction compared with 2023.<sup>17</sup> The decision is linked to the fact that "(s)ome institutions have significantly increased their intakes to drive revenues" which has put "pressure on housing, health care and other services." This decision comes amidst media reporting that these visas are being abused, with many students enrolling in dubious institutions with the ultimate goal of becoming permanent residents.<sup>18</sup>

The New Democratic Party, a social democratic grouping which provides necessary parliamentary support to Trudeau's minority government, is currently led by the son of Sikh immigrants from India. It takes a "welcoming" view of new Canadians;<sup>19</sup> it claims that the Conservatives "seek to inflame and divide our communities" on this issue and criticizes its Liberal partners for not doing enough to work through backlogs in immigration processing.

The priority of the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois is the maximum devolution of authority for immigration to Quebec, which by agreement with the federal government already administers its own immigration screening system, with the aim of maximizing the entry of francophone immigrants. However, in May 2023, it rejected proposed platform language that stated the lack of full immigration powers "represents an obstacle to social cohesion," as many activists felt this implied hostility to immigrants.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, immigration always raises sensitivities in Quebec. Provincial Premier François Legault has

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15 Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "An Immigration Plan to Grow the Economy ." Canada.ca, November 1, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/11/an-immigration-plan-to-grow-the-economy.html>.

16 Osman, Laura. "Minister Promises Changes to Temporary Visas, but No 'Draconian Measures.'" CTV News, November 2, 2023. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/minister-promises-changes-to-temporary-visas-but-no-draconian-measures-1.6628913>.

17 Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Canada to Stabilize Growth and Decrease Number of New International Student Permits Issued to Approximately 360,000 for 2024." Canada.ca, January 24, 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2024/01/canada-to-stabilize-growth-and-decrease-number-of-new-international-student-permits-issued-to-approximately-360000-for-2024.html>.

18 Lone, Wa. "Why Is Canada Capping Foreign Students and Who Will Be Affected?" Reuters, January 31, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/why-is-canada-capping-foreign-students-who-will-be-impacted-2024-01-22/>.

19 Canada's NDP. "Building Stronger, More Vibrant Communities." Canada's NDP. Accessed February 11, 2024. <https://www.ndp.ca/communities>.

20 Bergeron, Émilie. "Bloc Congress Rejects Proposals Linking Immigration to Social Cohesion." The Gazette, May 20, 2023. <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/bloc-congress-rejects-proposals-linking-immigration-to-social-cohesion>.

rejected the Century Initiative's vision of a Canadian population of 100 million by 2100, saying that this would result in "the decline of the French language" in Quebec or "a significant drop in Quebec's political weight in Canada."<sup>21</sup> As it stands, Quebec only processes 50,000 applications for immigration per year, far fewer than its relative size within Canada would justify.<sup>22</sup>

### **Canada Encounters Illegal Immigration**

Geography largely but not entirely spares Canada from the illegal immigration issue which has risen to the top of the political agenda in the United States. One recent concern which apparently has been resolved has been a loophole affecting the US-Canada Safe Third Country Agreement, which allows each country to return to the other illegal entrants crossing the border and applying for asylum.

Initially, this only applied to persons entering at official border posts. Significant numbers, at first mainly Haitians fearing that their Temporary Protected Status in the United States might be revoked, were entering Canada through a border crossing in Vermont called Roxham Road, which was not designated as an official border post, and then seeking asylum. However, the agreement has since been modified to allow the return of asylum seekers who cross the US-Canadian border between official points of entry.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, persons who enter Canada by air may also apply for asylum. In many cases they need a Canadian visa before boarding their aircraft, which theoretically at least screens out those who would claim to be traveling for business or pleasure with the actual the intention of seeking asylum. However, there has been a surge in the number of persons arriving at airports with visas who have sought asylum, possibly as a result of the easing of visa criteria in an effort to work through Canada's post-pandemic backlog of applications.<sup>24</sup>

In 2016, Canada dropped its visa requirement for Mexican citizens. This has resulted in a stream of Mexicans flying to Canada and applying for asylum, sometimes with the goal of then entering the United States where a large undocumented Mexican population exists. This led US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas to raise his concerns on this subject with his Canadian counterpart in April of 2023,<sup>25</sup> and in February of 2024 the Canadian government announced that it was now requiring Mexicans seeking to enter Canada to obtain a Canadian visa unless they either had a valid visa for entry into the United States or had held a Canadian visa during the last ten years.<sup>26</sup>

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21 The Canadian Press. "Plan to Boost Canada's Population through Immigration Threatens Quebec, Premier Says." CTV News, May 9, 2023. <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/plan-to-boost-canada-s-population-through-immigration-threatens-quebec-premier-says-1.6391514>.

22 Authier, Philip. "Quebec Sets Immigration Levels, Introduces French Requirements ." *The Gazette*, November 1, 2023. <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/quebec-opts-for-status-quo-on-immigration-levels-50000-a-year>.

23 Huntley, Katharine. "The Safe Third Country Agreement Closes Roxham Road Border Crossing Point." WCAX 3, March 25, 2023. <https://www.wcax.com/2023/03/25/safe-third-country-agreement-closes-roxham-road-border-crossing-point/>.

24 Heisler, Jay. "Canada Sees Surge in Asylum-Seekers." *Voice of America*, November 1, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/canada-sees-surge-in-asylum-seekers-/7337894.html>.

25 Ling, Philip. "U.S. Asks Canada to Reimpose Visa Requirements for Mexico to Stem Surge of Crossings at Northern Border." *CBC News*, April 30, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/us-canada-ask-mexico-visas-northern-border-1.6827072>.

26 "Canada Reimposes Visa Requirements for Mexicans as Asylum Claims Surge." *BBC News*, February 29, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68430462>.

***The Issue Here to Stay?***

With migration a worldwide concern, it is not surprising that it would enter Canada's political debate. Although illegal immigration is becoming an issue, for the most part discussion has centered around the appropriate level of legal immigration to permit. Thus, the debate has not yet become anywhere nearly as rancorous as it has in the United States and Europe. Still, the Trudeau government has seen that this issue is sufficiently salient as to require some trimming around the edges of immigration levels while the Conservative opposition prefers to frame the immigration question as a consequence of alleged failures in economic, especially housing policy.

The rise of immigration politics seems related to Canada's current economic doldrums.<sup>27</sup> Should its recovery strengthen and should solutions be found to problems affecting the housing market, we may see the immigration debate drop down from its current intensity. But it has been joined in a way not seen before. While it may be conducted in a relatively low key, typically Canadian fashion (especially given the large immigrant community which all political parties need to cultivate), it is not likely to go away.

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27 Shakil, Ismail. "Canada's Muted Economic Growth Keeps Early 2024 Rate Cut Bets Alive." Reuters, December 22, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/canadas-economy-stalled-again-october-likely-up-01-november-2023-12-22/>.



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