

Perceptions of Canadians: A sense of belonging, confidence and trust



by Grant Schellenberg

This article is an adaptation of 2003 *General Social Survey on Social Engagement, Cycle 17: An Overview of Findings* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-598), which is available free of charge from the Statistics Canada Web site: www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-598-XIE/free.htm.

Over a lifetime, Canadians engage in many types of civic and social activities. They donate their time and money to charity, become members of organizations, vote in elections and engage in other political activities; they attend religious services; and they establish social networks with friends, neighbours, co-workers and acquaintances.

These activities play an essential role in the health and vitality of Canada. For example, according to the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, Canadians gave more than \$5 billion in financial support to charitable and non-profit institutions in 2000, and over one-quarter of all adults had done some volunteer work over the previous year.¹

Civic and social engagement has certainly been pushed to centre-stage by widespread interest in 'social capital.' Although there is ongoing debate about how to define and measure social capital, a common theme is that "...how we associate with each other, and on what terms, has enormous implications for our well-being".² Robert Putnam, a leading figure in this field,³ draws on American data to argue that various forms of social engagement

CST What you should know about this study

The 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) on Social Engagement surveyed about 25,000 Canadians aged 15 and older living in private households in the 10 provinces. It was developed to explore the measurement of social capital and develop a better understanding of how social networks and norms of trust and reciprocity contribute positively to individual and social outcomes. It was designed to collect information on a wide range of activities, such as social contacts with family, friends and neighbours; involvement in organizations, political activities and volunteer work; and the informal care they provide or receive. It also explores the values and attitudes and the level of trust in people and in public institutions. Overall, the survey provides comprehensive information on the many ways that Canadians engage in civic and social life.

Three aspects of social capital are explored in this article: *sense of belonging*, *confidence in institutions* and *trust*.

have declined markedly since the 1970s. He further claims that this is not without consequence as there are strong correlations between social capital and various indicators of well-being, such as child welfare, educational performance, violent crime, health and tax evasion.

This article provides a broad snapshot of the outlooks and activities of Canadians in 2003 in three areas: a sense of belonging to Canada, to their province, and to

their community; confidence in public institutions such as the health care system and the federal parliament; and trust in others. Having a strong sense of belonging is an outcome of strong social networks, which in turn broadens feelings of solidarity.⁴ Confidence in public institutions is thought to be essential for a healthy democracy. Trust in others is vital for effective co-operation, communication and positive relationships.

Over 8 in 10 Canadians feel a strong sense of belonging to Canada

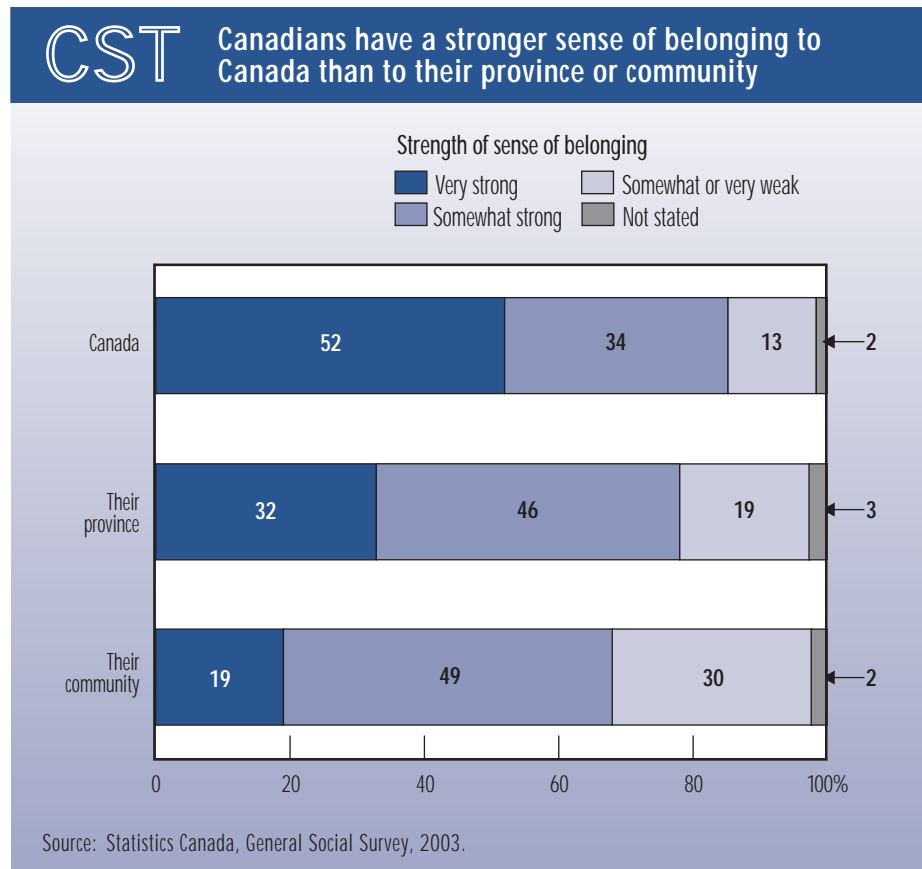
Social networks can create a sense of belonging as interaction between people builds community and a sense of connectedness. Interaction builds trust between strangers, which may lead to shared values and expectations, thereby broadening the individual's identity and feelings of solidarity with others.⁵ Thus, feelings of belonging may be an indicator of our connectedness to each other.

Overall, 85% of Canadians described their sense of belonging to Canada as somewhat or very strong whereas 13% professed somewhat or very weak feelings of belonging. The majority of Canadians also felt a somewhat or very strong sense of belonging to their province and their local community, although such views were less prevalent than belonging to Canada.

The vast majority of individuals in all age groups felt a somewhat or very strong sense of belonging to Canada. However, 'very strong' feelings of belonging were more prevalent among seniors than among people under age 30. This difference may indicate that young people have always been less likely than older individuals to feel a strong sense of belonging to Canada. Alternatively, it may mean that today's young people are less likely than young people of previous generations to feel a sense of belonging and will continue to feel a weak sense of belonging as they get older. It is not possible to determine which of these interpretations is correct with data from a single point in time.

Outside Quebec, provincial differences in somewhat or very strong feelings of belonging to Canada were quite modest, ranging from 87% in British Columbia to 95% in Prince Edward Island. In Quebec, however, 74% described their sense of belonging to Canada as somewhat or very strong.

Within Quebec, feelings of belonging to Canada differed along



linguistic lines, with individuals who spoke French in the home less likely to describe their sense of belonging to Canada as very strong (29%) than those who spoke English in the home (66%). Nonetheless, the majority of Quebec residents who spoke French in the home described their sense of belonging to Canada in positive terms (70% somewhat or very strong). Outside Quebec, feelings of belonging to Canada did not vary much between individuals who spoke French or English in the home.

Immigration is a central feature of Canada's demographic landscape, and in 2001, immigrants represented 18% of the population of Canada — higher than it has been in 70 years. The vast majority described their sense of belonging to Canada as somewhat or very strong. This was the case for 84% of immigrants who arrived in Canada since 1990. However, these immigrants were somewhat less likely than earlier arrivals to feel this way, possibly

because their shorter tenure in Canada had provided them with less opportunity to cultivate a strong sense of attachment.⁶ Strong feelings of national belonging were prevalent among immigrants who arrived in Canada before 1980 (91%), reflecting the fact that most were aged 50 or older in 2003.

Newfoundlanders feel strongest sense of belonging to their province

The majority of Canadians (78%) described their sense of belonging to their province as somewhat or very strong. These feelings were most prevalent among older age groups.

Very strong feelings of provincial belonging were most prevalent in Newfoundland (53%) and Prince Edward Island (46%) and least prevalent in Ontario and British Columbia (29%). Nonetheless, the majority of people in all 10 provinces felt a somewhat or very strong sense of provincial belonging. Overall,

	% who have a somewhat or very strong sense of belonging to...		
	Canada	Their province	Their community
Total	85	78	68
Men	85	78	67
Women	86	78	69
Age group			
Under 30	80	72	64
30-49	85	76	67
50-64	87	82	71
65 and older	92	86	74
Immigration status			
Canadian-born	85	79	68
Immigrated before 1980	91	78	68
Immigrated 1980-1989	88	72	64
Immigration 1990-2003	84	72	65
Province of residence			
Newfoundland and Labrador	89	90	82
Prince Edward Island	95	89	78
Nova Scotia	93	85	75
New Brunswick	92	82	76
Quebec	74	82	69
Ontario	89	75	66
Manitoba	91	78	68
Saskatchewan	89	78	73
Alberta	88	78	63
British Columbia	87	75	68
Province of residence and language used at home			
Quebec			
French	70	84	69
English	95	70	67
Other	91	75	66

	% who have a somewhat or very strong sense of belonging to...		
	Canada	Their province	Their community
Rest of Canada			
French	91	80	74
English	89	77	68
Other	86	76	66
Educational attainment of persons aged 25 to 54			
Less than high school completion	82	78	69
High school diploma or some postsecondary	86	77	66
College diploma	86	78	67
University degree	86	73	64
Household income of persons aged 25 to 54			
Less than \$20,000	85	71	59
\$20,000-\$39,999	84	77	65
\$40,000-\$59,999	83	78	65
\$60,000-\$79,999	85	79	69
\$80,000 or more	88	76	67
Size of community			
Rural and small town areas	85	82	76
Census agglomerations with less than 50,000 people	87	82	74
Census agglomerations with 50,000 or more people	87	79	71
Census metropolitan areas with less than 1 million people	87	77	66
Census metropolitan areas with 1 million people or more	83	75	63
Number of institutions respondents have confidence in			
3 or fewer	79	67	57
4 or 5	85	75	64
6 or 7	87	81	71
8 or 9	89	87	77

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

French-speaking Quebec residents reported similar feelings to those of residents of other provinces; however, English-speaking Quebec residents were less likely than their French-speaking counterparts to have strong feelings of belonging to their province.

Feelings of belonging to a province were also associated with whether or not an individual had been born there. Specifically, 34% of Canadians

residing in their province of birth said they had a very strong sense of provincial belonging, while this was the case for 26% of those who were not born in their current province of residence.

Sense of belonging to one's community increases with years spent there

The majority of Canadians assessed their sense of belonging to their local

community in positive terms, with 68% describing this as somewhat or very strong. Again, older people reported stronger feelings of belonging to their community than did young people.

Feelings of community belonging were more prevalent among individuals who had lived in their area for longer periods. For example, individuals who had lived in their community for five years or more

were about twice as likely to feel a 'very strong' sense of belonging as those who had been there for less than three years.

Finally, when individuals who had resided in their area for five years or more were considered, those in rural areas and smaller towns⁷ were more likely than those in large cities to describe their sense of community belonging as somewhat or very strong.

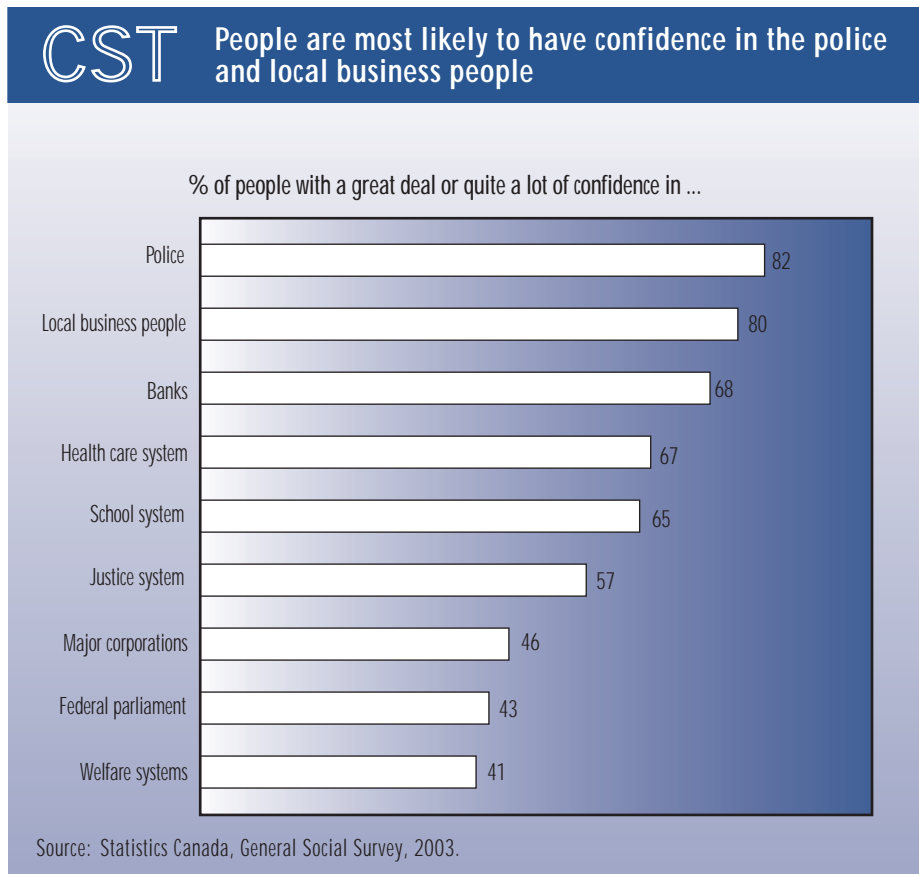
Confidence in institutions

Public institutions, such as the health care system, the education system and the federal parliament, play an important role in shaping the lives of Canadians. Institutions often are considered the basic pillars of society, so if people begin to lose confidence in them, there may be cause for concern. Observers argue that in a global and increasingly impersonal modern world, confidence in institutions has become even more important.⁸

General Social Survey (GSS) respondents were asked about the level of confidence they have in various institutions.⁹ Canadians provided their most favourable assessments of the police, with 82% of respondents saying they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police. Local business people and merchants also ranked high, with 80% of Canadians feeling confident in this group.

About two-thirds of Canadians said they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the health care system and the school system, while smaller proportions said they have confidence in the justice system (57%). The welfare system and the federal parliament were at the bottom of the list of public institutions in which Canadians said they have confidence, although significant proportions of respondents were unable to answer or declined to answer these questions.

There were considerable inter-provincial variations in the extent to which individuals have confidence in



public institutions. People in Quebec were consistently more likely than those in other provinces to have high levels of confidence in public institutions. Confidence in the federal parliament and the justice system was less prevalent in the Western provinces than elsewhere.

Individuals residing in households with higher incomes were somewhat more likely than others to say they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the police and the justice system and somewhat less likely to say they felt that way with the welfare system than people with lower household income.

There was a relationship between the number of types of institutions individuals felt confidence in and the likelihood of having a strong sense of belonging towards Canada, their province and their local community. For example, 87% of individuals who felt confidence in eight or nine institutions had a strong sense of belonging to their province, while

67% of those who had confidence in three or fewer institutions felt that way.¹⁰

Just over one-half of Canadians trust others

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the meaning and measurement of trust within countries. Economists, for example, have tried to determine if economic growth is associated with the level of trust that people have in one another. Trust is fundamental to the functioning of our interdependent society. People count on other drivers to share the roadways and obey traffic laws, they trust those who hold and invest their money, they rely on the teenager down the street to baby-sit their children and they depend on their Internet service provider to deliver e-mail to the correct people. These are just a few examples of how people trust others in their everyday lives. When trust dwindles, people are less likely to

Selected public institutions

	Police	Health care system	Education system	Welfare system	Federal Parliament	Justice system
% of 25- to 54-year-olds who have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence						
Household income						
Total	83	65	68	39	41	58
Less than \$20,000	79	65	66	46	45	54
\$20,000 to \$39,999	83	65	70	44	41	58
\$40,000 to \$59,999	87	67	72	42	44	61
\$60,000 to \$79,999	88	68	72	40	42	59
\$80,000 or more	89	70	70	39	43	64

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

Measures of trust in individuals

Wallet or purse would be returned¹ with its contents if found

	People can be trusted	by someone living nearby	by a stranger
% of population aged 15 and older			
Total	53	79	37
Men	54	79	36
Women	51	78	37
Age group			
Under 30	50	75	31
30 to 49	54	81	40
50 to 64	57	82	40
65 and older	49	74	32
Province of residence			
Newfoundland and Labrador	62	91	49
Prince Edward Island	67	93	58
Nova Scotia	60	88	49
New Brunswick	54	89	46
Quebec	34	77	23
Ontario	56	78	39
Manitoba	60	80	38
Saskatchewan	65	83	45
Alberta	60	78	42
British Columbia	62	77	41
Educational attainment			
Less than high school	41	74	26
High school	53	79	36
College certificate or diploma	55	82	40
University degree	67	85	47

Measures of trust in individuals

Wallet or purse would be returned¹ with its contents if found

	People can be trusted	by someone living nearby	by a stranger
% of population aged 15 and older			
Household income			
Less than \$20,000	43	70	32
\$20,000 to \$39,999	48	79	35
\$40,000 to \$59,999	53	83	37
\$60,000 to \$79,999	59	85	40
\$80,000 or more	66	89	47
Immigration status			
Canadian-born	53	81	37
Immigrated before 1980	57	76	36
Immigrated 1980-89	46	68	32
Immigrated 1990-2003	52	69	33
Size of community			
Rural and small town areas	54	88	40
Census agglomerations with less than 50,000 people	50	81	38
Census agglomerations with 50,000 or more people	57	81	39
Census metropolitan areas with less than 1 million people	56	79	39
Census metropolitan areas with 1 million people or more	49	73	32

1. Very or somewhat likely.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003.

take risks, they demand more protection against possible inappropriate deeds of others and they may make provisions for the possibility of something going wrong.¹¹

One way the GSS tries to discern whether people trust others is by asking them if they would say that most people can be trusted or if they feel that they cannot be too careful in dealing with people. Overall, 53% of Canadians said that people could be trusted while 43% said that one could not be too careful in dealing with people.¹² Women and men had comparable views in this respect, as did individuals in different age groups.

People with higher levels of educational attainment and those residing in households with higher incomes were more likely than others to say that people could be trusted. There were no clear differences across immigration status groups.

Provincially, a relatively small share of Quebec residents (35%) said that people could be trusted, compared with over 60% of the people in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and the western provinces. Compared with people in other provinces, those in Quebec were less likely to trust other people but were more likely to have confidence in institutions.

To further gauge the level of trust people had in others, the GSS asked two hypothetical questions on whether the respondent would expect to have a lost wallet or purse containing \$200 returned if it was found by a complete stranger or by someone living close by. Most people (55%) said that the return of their wallet or purse by a complete stranger would be not at all likely, while 37% said it would be somewhat or very likely.¹³ People were more optimistic about having their wallet or purse returned by someone living near them. In this case, only 15% of respondents said that its return was not at all likely, while 79% said it was likely.¹⁴

Atlantic province residents were most trusting when measured in this way, with at least 46% saying it would be somewhat or very likely that their wallet or purse would be returned if found by a stranger, and 88% believing it would be returned if found by someone living nearby. People in Canada's largest urban centres were less likely than those in smaller centres to expect their wallet or purse to be returned.

Summary

There is great interest in the social and civic activities in which Canadians are engaged. This is driven by the implications that social engagements and social networks may have for outcomes in areas such as public health, economic growth, innovation, educational achievement and community development.¹⁵ Although the examination of these linkages is beyond the scope of this article, the GSS did find that there was a link between strong feelings of belonging, trust in others, confidence in public institutions and higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction.



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1. Hall, M., L. McKeown and K. Roberts. 2001. *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 71-542-XPE).
2. Woolcock, M. Spring 2001. "The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes." *Isuma* 2, 1: 11-17.
3. Putnam, R. Spring 2001. "Social capital: Measurement and consequences." *Isuma* 2, 1: 41-51.
4. Putnam, R. 1995. "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6, 1: 65-78.

5. Ibid.; Beem, C. 1999. *The Necessity of Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
6. The smaller share of recent immigrants who described their sense of belong to Canada as 'very strong' was not attributable to the younger age profile among this group compared with Canadian-born persons.
7. Rural and small town areas are areas outside the commuting zone of census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and census agglomerations (CAs). CMAs and CAs are large urban areas (known as urban cores) together with adjacent urban and rural areas that have a high degree of social and economic integration with the urban cores. A CMA has an urban core population of at least 100,000 and a CA has an urban core population of between 10,000 and 100,000, based on the previous census.
8. Newton, K. and P. Norris. 1999. *Confidence in public institutions: Faith, culture or performance?* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 3, Atlanta. <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris.shorenstein.ksg/acrobat/newton.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2004).
9. Specifically, they were asked whether they have a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence, or no confidence at all. Respondents answered based on their own understanding of the term 'confidence'.
10. Respondents who had been unable or unwilling to answer five or more of the nine questions pertaining to confidence in institutions were excluded from these calculations.
11. Tschannen-Moran, M. and W.K. Hoy. Winter 2000. "A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning and measurement of trust." *Review of Education Research* 70, 4: 547-593.
12. Just under 5% of respondents were either unable or unwilling to answer the question.
13. The remaining 9% of respondents were either unable or unwilling to answer the question.
14. Seven percent of respondents were unable or unwilling to answer the question.
15. Woolcock. 2001.