

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

As lockdowns drag on and stress levels increase, Canadians turn to soul-searching

Three months into a health disaster unlike any they've ever seen, people are still struggling with their mental health and personal finances. But polls show they're also reassessing their priorities, reflecting on past views – and even finding hope for the future

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail.

‘Where were you?’ This is a common question asked after a seismic event: when humans landed on the moon; the assassination of president John F. Kennedy; Paul Henderson’s goal during the Canada-Russia 1972 Summit hockey series; the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

For the novel coronavirus, the indubitable answer will be, ‘I was home.’

Compared with many other shared cataclysmic experiences, the pandemic has a time frame that is notable for its length. In Canada, people were sent home in March; they are still at home in June. Because of this, the way people have been affected has evolved, as they experience both physical and mental-health effects and were potentially hurt economically. This is leading to some fundamental soul-searching among Canadians, according to the latest Globe and Mail/Nanos research.

At the outset, Canadians were focused on the health effects of the pandemic. Let’s call this the first wave. The proportion of Canadians who, without prompting, identified COVID-19 as a top national issue of concern rocketed from zero in January to more than 50 per cent by early May.

Compounding the physical threat has been the impact on mental health. According to research by Nanos for the Mental Health Commission of Canada, Canadians are more than twice as likely to say that they feel stressed ‘regularly’ or ‘all the time’ during the pandemic compared with before. The stress is fuelled by a toxic cocktail of emotions, ranging from fears of contracting the virus and the effects of prolonged isolation, to concerns about financial or job security, and feelings of uncertainty about the future.

The mental-health effects are a scar that will not heal quickly. As people overcome one pandemic, the threat of possible future outbreaks will always be on the horizon.

And if the health issues aren’t bad enough, the potential reconfiguration of our economy represents a second wave of concerns. The economic data are outright gloomy.

According to Statistics Canada, domestic real GDP dropped 7.2 per cent in March, while the unemployment rate in May hit 13.7 per cent. Both are a far cry from the prepandemic positive GDP and record-low unemployment levels.

The forward-looking Bloomberg Nanos Canadian Confidence Index, which tracks consumer confidence every week, shows that Canadians are twice as likely to say that their personal finances are worse off than better off compared with a year ago. A paltry 15 per cent say they believe the economy will get stronger in the next six months, compared with 69 per cent who think the economy will get weaker. On the economic front, the negative sentiment quotient indicates there are more than four negative Canadians for every positively inclined Canadian on the economic front.

Setting aside the one-two punch of health and economic insecurity, among the most interesting public opinion findings relates to how many Canadians are soul-searching. As a country, we may be on the cusp of a moment in time where our priorities fundamentally shift.

Self-isolation has led to self-re-



People pass boarded-up stores in downtown Montreal on June 3. Canada’s unemployment rate reached 13.7 per cent last month, according to Statistics Canada. PAUL CHIASSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

lection. When asked to share the most important effects of the pandemic on Canadians personally, respondents pointed to a greater appreciation for friends and family (33 per cent), followed by an interest in returning to a simpler life (24 per cent), and less interest in buying and having material possessions (14 per cent).

If this holds true, the COVID-19 pandemic will effectively shatter a societal paradigm, where the hallmark was consumerism fuelled by social media-enabled self-indulgence. Less of a focus on the self, a yearning for a simpler life and a retreat from consumerism would be watershed changes.

In new research for The Globe and Mail, a Nanos study found that only 12 per cent of Canadians say they think we will return to our prepandemic ways of life. Even though Canadians are concerned about the negative impact of the pandemic, they are two-and-a-half times more likely to think that the impact on them personally will be positive because of a greater appreciation for life and the important things in their life. Also, Canadians are much more likely to think that their country has a brighter future after the pandemic is over.

If the old personal status quo – consumerism and individualism – of Canadians is dead, what does that mean for government and our society?

After decades of cynicism, pessimism and anger directed at government by many Canadians, a belief in Ottawa has been revived in the past two months. Research in May suggests that after a period of negativity, positive views of the federal government have remained steady during the pandemic. Back in April, 2019, only 26 per cent of Canadians used words such as ‘satisfaction’ or ‘optimism’ to describe the federal government. Those positive views have almost doubled from April, hitting 51 per cent of Canadians, while views of anger and pessimism are on the decline. Programs such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit help position the government as being positively proactive.

What’s uncertain is the future. Once the stimulus spigot is turned off, will Canadians still have positive views of the federal government? If the economy goes through a fundamental restructuring where lost jobs are not replaced, will there be a lost generation of Canadians who are permanent economic victims of the pandemic?

Even with these uncertainties, what is clear is that the personal soul-searching of Canadians will eventually turn into soul-searching for a country.

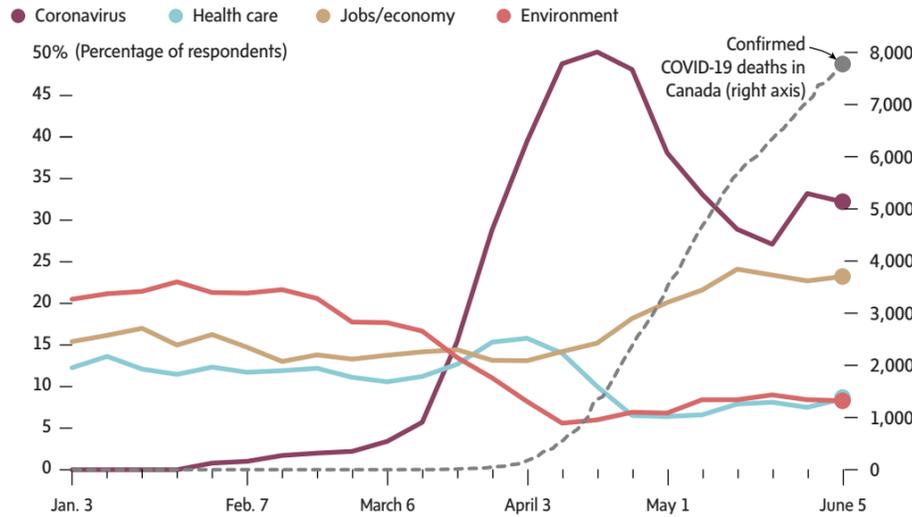
The pandemic may be that moment in time where the foundation for transformation is set. The views of Canadians on issues ranging from the environment to deficits and the social safety net may very well change.

In 10 years, the answer for many Canadians on where they were during the pandemic may be, ‘I was at home, but when I came out of it, I gave myself a shake and realized that I needed to change.’

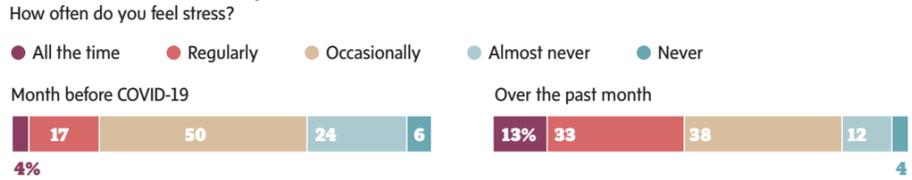
In that sense, the health and economic insecurity created by the pandemic might have triggered not only soul-searching, but a wake-up call.

Canadians and COVID-19

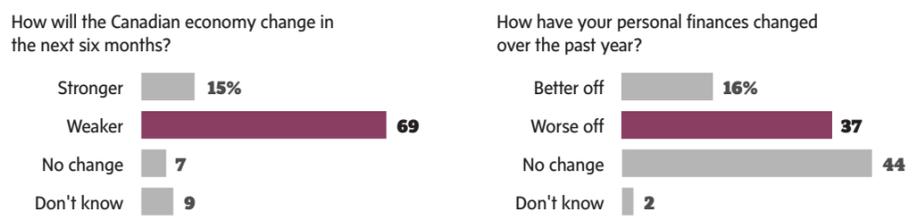
MOST IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUE, ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS



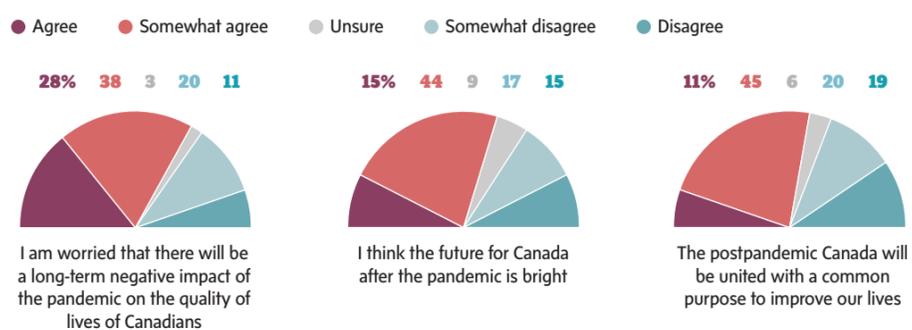
FEELINGS OF STRESS, BEFORE AND DURING OUTBREAK



CONSUMER CONFIDENCE



OPINIONS ON THE FUTURE OF CANADA



Note: Charts may not add up to 100 due to rounding. MURAT YÜKSELIR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH; JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

This column was based on multiple research studies completed by Nanos Research. They were all national random surveys of Canadians comprised of at least 1,000 individuals. Random studies of 1,000 are accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The reports with full methodologies and their technical notes are posted at www.nanos.co.