

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

# THE DIMMING VIEW ON ‘SUNNY WAYS’

Data show Canadians have an increasingly negative outlook on whether the standard of living will improve, and consider stimulus necessary to keep people and the economy afloat, but lack confidence in the country’s ability to address rising debt levels

OPINION

Chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, a research professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail

So where do you stand? Do you believe that we are ready to remake Canada into a more progressive society with a stronger social safety net and renewed social contract between citizens and their government? Or are you dour about a potential low- or no-growth future, where livelihoods are at risk and the government is burdened by crushing debt?

New data put a spotlight on views about key public policy issues as well as the level of confidence Canadians have in the government finding (or not finding) solutions.

Asked whether future generations will have a standard of living that is higher than, lower than or the same as Canadians have today, the view is decidedly negative. Fifty-six per cent of Canadians believe the standard of living will be lower, while only 12 per cent believe it will be higher. Negative long-term views outstrip positive views by a significant 4 to 1. Back in 2012, the base year of the tracking, Canadians were more than twice as positive about the future under former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper.

Canadians have been more pessimistic under Mr. Trudeau than Mr. Harper for every one of the six waves of research on this measure – and that was before the pandemic. The ironic twist is Canadians were more hopeful about the future under the not-so-cheerful Harper Conservative government than they are under the “sunny ways” of the progressive Trudeau Liberal government.

On the economic front, there are a number of forces to be worried about. In its response to the pandemic, the Liberal government is projecting a deficit of \$343.2-billion for the fiscal year. According to the latest data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the year-on-year percentage change in gross domestic product in Canada will be negative 5.8 per cent in 2020, with a projected increase of 4 per cent in 2021. The total number of hours worked by private sector employees in Canada was down more than 17 per cent, the second worst ranking in the OECD, behind only Britain.

The unevenness of the damage and the potential recovery compounds the economic risks. This pandemic is particularly destructive to some industries and a boost to others, such as online retail platforms such as Amazon. If one happens to be in the hotel, restaurant, arts, culture or recreation sectors, the pandemic is an economic trauma with the only

question being not if there be casualties, but how many.

The current government stimulus is masking the prevalence of “zombie companies,” which survive only because of constant refinancing and economic support. Lost revenues for many at-risk service sectors based on cultural events and entertainment will not be recouped. The hope is that previous consumer behaviour might return to past levels some time in the future. It’s too early to tell how many at-risk enterprises will weather the storm. Once the government stimulus for business scales back, Canadians will see the full economic impact of the pandemic as their favourite restaurants, shops and cultural activities are potentially shuttered forever.

The longer-term concerns about a lower standard of living are rational. Canadians were asked about how they stand on what’s important today and the confidence they have in governments finding solutions. (The

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research did not prompt on any specific government, just governments in general.) Nanos tracks the importance of and confidence in finding solutions on 17 public policy issues, such as balancing the budget, preserving social programs and improving the quality of life for First Nations

living on reserves.

The importance of balancing the budget has declined over the past five years, and the confidence in finding solutions to balance it has also noticeably declined since 2012, with about seven in 10 Canadians saying they lack such confidence. Conversely, confidence in stimulus through infrastructure investment has hit a high since 2012.

The key takeaway is that the current situation is akin to a hostage situation. Many Canadians see stimulus as necessary to keep food on the table and to stimulate the economy, but at the same time have little confidence in Canada’s ability to get out of the pandemic stimulus debt trap.

Asked about improving the quality of life among First Nations living on reserves, the importance Canadians place on this issue has been steadily rising over the past nine years – but the confidence in finding solutions remains unchanged. Back in 2012, 36 per cent of Canadians had some sort of

confidence in finding solutions; fast forward to 2020 and the confidence remains at 35 per cent despite focused government effort.

The positive outliers in the trending relate to health care and social programs. Now, compared with the past, Canadians are more likely to have confidence in finding solutions for these two policy areas, and the importance of them remains strong.

The bright spot is that the pandemic has shone a light on government as a pro-active force, helping Canadians by protecting public health and maintaining the social security net. The one new tracking policy issue, confidence in responding to public-health threats, scored exceptionally high in terms of both importance and confidence in government.

One unexpected outcome of the pandemic and its forced self-isolation and reflection has been the soul-searching of Canadians. Many express a greater appreciation of loved ones, a greater appetite for a simpler life and a re-examination of consumerism.

The pandemic will spur that same re-examination of the role of government. The ability of government to be a force for good will be tempered by an economic reality grounded in the debt burden assumed to weather the pandemic.

More serious is the view held by only about one in 10 Canadians that the next generation will have a higher standard of living. If a healthy society is about creating an environment for people to thrive and achieve, then this measure is the canary in the coal mine undermining the social contract between any government and the people.

If one were to sum up more than 30 years of listening to Canadians, the one piece of advice people would have for any elected official would be, “Don’t mess things up.”

Our best moments as a nation are ones where we have been able to embrace pragmatism and the peaceful reconciliation of seemingly contradictory and many times diametrically opposing forces.

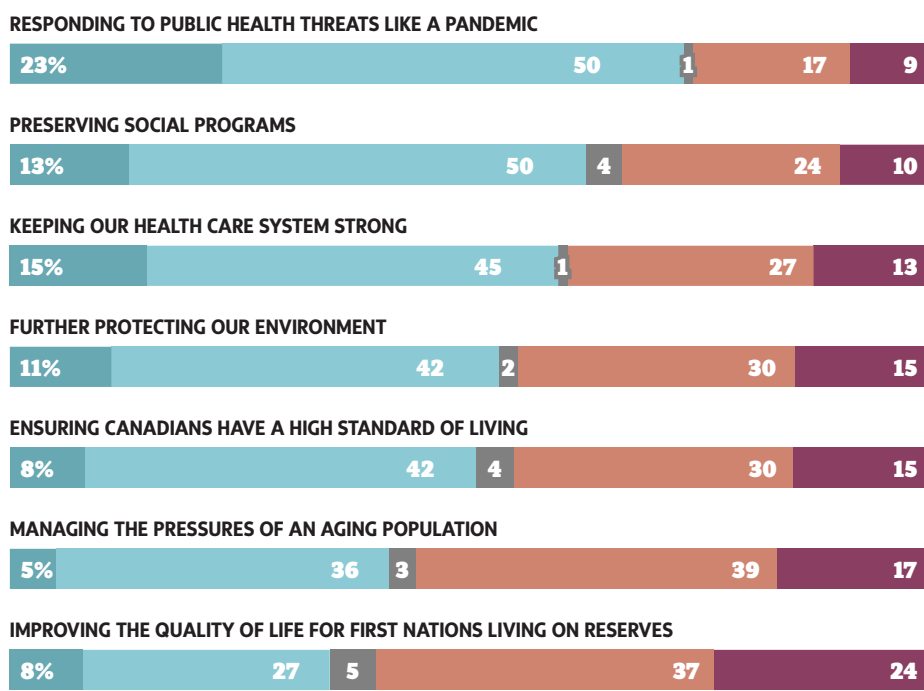
Advancing an ambitious positive agenda needs to be tempered in economic reality. However, fear-mongering about the economic future and the debt-driven poisoned chalice passed to future generations belies the real and current need to help Canadians get through the pandemic. This should be a lesson for politicians of all stripes.

This column was based on multiple research studies completed by Nanos Research. They were all national random surveys of Canadians composed 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 nanos.co.

## Confidence in the Nation

### CONFIDENCE IN NATION’S ABILITY TO FIND SOLUTIONS (2020)

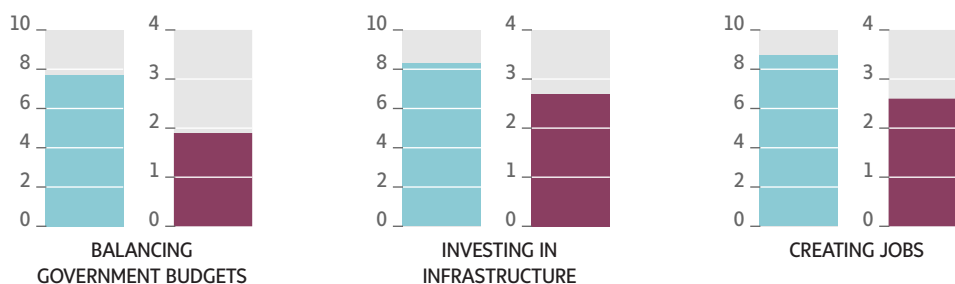
● Confident ● Somewhat confident ● Unsure ● Somewhat not confident ● Not confident



\*Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

### IMPORTANCE OF ECONOMIC ISSUES (2020)

● Importance (out of 10) ● Confidence in nation’s ability to find solutions (out of 4)



MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

# Papal power play: Francis’s new text sets sights on Trump

MICHAEL W. HIGGINS

OPINION

Interim president of St. Mark’s and Corpus Christi Colleges at the University of British Columbia and a senior fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto

Talk about bad timing. The recent encyclical by Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, had a far from auspicious launch. It appeared at the same time as he sacked his Prefect for the Causes of Saints, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, following allegations of financial skulduggery.

In addition, various Catholic critics took umbrage at the connotations of male exclusivity in the Italian word *fratelli* (meaning “brothers,” although arguably the term is often used in its universalist sense rather than gender-specific meaning), resulting in one impassioned critique by a young British Catholic journalist, Liz Dodd, who found it “heart-rending that the Pope, in a letter with the potential to gut modern constructs of human ecology, would fold ... all the Church’s remarkable women into an amorphous, assumptive

maleness. Again.”

She has a point and it speaks to the frustrating tone-deafness to translation that one finds repeatedly in papal documents. But it would be a shame of seismic proportions to allow anger at semantic usage to eclipse the prophetic power of this deeply personal summons to social solidarity.

If Franklin D. Roosevelt’s observation that “the Presidency is not merely an administrative office ... It is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership” is valid, it can be convincingly argued that the papacy is not merely a doctrinal office, but a place for moral leadership. With this encyclical, Pope Francis can rightly assume that mantle.

Following on his encyclical on the environment or our common home, *Laudato Si*, a work widely praised by scientists, activists and politicians irrespective their religious convictions, *Fratelli Tutti* builds on the spiritual and anthropological legacy of the Pope’s namesake, St. Francis of Assisi.

In fact, he travelled to the walled town of Assisi on the feast of the saint and signed and released his document in this revered Umbrian town on a hill.

The Pope makes clear his indebtedness to the Italian friar

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whose openness to Islam, whose love of peace, whose solidarity with the Earth and all its inhabitants, and whose personal repudiation of wealth to live as the *poverello* remain as abiding models of behaviour and right thinking for *this* Francis, Peter’s successor in Rome.

A substantial document in content and length, *Fratelli Tutti* makes a compelling case for shared human meaning around communal values, social and economic equity, cultural sensitivity and genuine forms of democratic governance – in many ways boilerplate Catholic social teaching that builds upon the work of his immediate predecessors going back to John XXIII in 1963 – but this document is more personal in tone, more pastoral in focus and driven by a moral urgency in the face of unprecedented

global challenges.

The dark eminence of the encyclical is U.S. President Donald Trump. He remains throughout unnamed – in fact, in keeping with papal convention no names are mentioned, no political or religious bodies specifically identified – but his presence is palpable. Pope Francis is the Trump anti-type.

Francis observes that in many countries “hyperbole, extremism and polarization have become political tools. Employing a strategy of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism ...” In this, Mr. Trump is the consummate master.

When the Pope writes of a “myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism” on the rise, Mr. Trump’s record is indisputable. When Francis writes of those who build “a culture of walls, who in the heart, walls on the land ... they end up as slaves within the very walls they have built,” he has the star of *The Apprentice* in mind.

When the pontiff deplores the ascendancy of verbal violence, when “defamation and slander become commonplace,” he knows who the wizard of vitriol is, the one given to a “frenzy of texting.” And when an isolation-

ist and self-absorbed politics would undermine multilateral agreements and international institutions such as the United Nations, diminishing the “family of nations” as a consequence, the philistine on the Potomac comes to mind.

For sure, there are many political leaders who would fall under the Pope’s rubric of lament – such as Rodrigo Duterte, Nicolas Maduro, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, Xi Jinping – but only Mr. Trump manages to be top of the class in each category. His philosophy of personal and political success is unabashedly Manichean: there are, as his father Fred taught him, only killers and zeros, and “the Donald” has spoken openly of there being only losers and winners.

When Pope Francis speaks of the exercise of “political love,” of practising “a lofty form of charity that ennobles his or her political activity,” it is impossible to see the Trumpian modus operandi.

Encyclicals are not conceived as political documents per se. They speak in lofty terms, more exhortative than practical. But *Fratelli Tutti* breaks the mould, and calls for a new boldness and reckoning in a moment of dark horizons.