

Public Opinion and Communications Research

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Executive Summary

A. Background and Objectives

In 2021, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) commissioned Environics Research to conduct¹ 'The Value and State of Freshwater and Appropriate Responses to Freshwater Issues Survey.' This study assessed Canadians' views on freshwater value, its current state, and appropriate policy responses. Data came from an online survey of 2,001 stratified and weighted Canadians recruited from an opt-in online panel.

Building on this research, AquaAction commissioned this public opinion and communications research in Summer 2025 to update and understand Canadian perceptions of water, as well as those in Michigan where the charity opened their new U.S. office. Michigan respondents were included in select questions of this analysis to also understand cross-border views on shared waterways, reflecting a binational approach to water issues.

This report contains both the replication of select question's from ECCC's 2021 study to understand how Canadian's perception on water have changed over the last four years, and word associations from open-end responses, highlighting how language can either inspire action or obscure urgency.

B. Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was conducted prior to both survey distribution and individual interviews. The research is based on quantitative survey data (n=1,658) across three geographic regions: English Canada, French Canada, and Michigan.

The 27-question survey gathered data from 1,658 individuals recruited through panels run by the global market research firm, Cint, with stratified sampling controlled for population demographics and gender in each region. A strong spectrum of ages was also obtained; respondents spanning a wide age range from 18 to 96 years old, with particularly high participation in the 25-45 age bracket. Distribution included English-language surveys across Canada (n=971) and Michigan (n=498), and French-language surveys (n=189) administered predominantly to Quebec residents, with some francophone respondents

¹ https://publications.gc.ca/site/archived-archived.html?url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublications.gc.ca%2Fcollections%2Fcollection_2021%2Feccc%2FEn4-447-1-2021-eng.pdf



from other Canadian provinces. Michigan respondents did not answer questions specific to Canada's resources.

C. Executive Summary

1. Freshwater as Canada's Premier Natural Resource

Public attitudes continue to mirror 2021 findings: Canadians overwhelmingly rank freshwater as the country's most important natural resource. A majority (52.6%) place it first, far ahead of forests and all other resources. This reflects growing recognition of water's central role in public health and environmental stability.

2. Strong Values, Weak Knowledge

Despite the high value placed on freshwater, Canadians report substantial knowledge gaps. Only one-quarter feel "very informed," while more than one-third feel poorly informed. This limits the public's ability to understand threats, participate in policy discussions, or take meaningful action.

3. Health and Future Generations Drive Public Priorities

Human health consistently emerges as the top priority across all measures of water concern and freshwater applications. Ethical motivations dominate: the leading rationale for water protection is ensuring clean water for future generations, followed by safeguarding health. Economic and aesthetic considerations rank much lower.

4. Moderate Concern and Lack of Urgency

Although concern about water quality is high (70.8%), intensity is low, only 32.4% express strong concern. Similarly, while two-thirds rate current water protection as good or excellent, very few (15.8%) view protections as excellent. This indicates a public that cares about water but does not perceive an urgent crisis.

5. The Concern–Knowledge–Urgency Gap

Findings reveal a triple disconnect: Canadians value water, lack understanding of it, and do not feel urgently threatened by current risks. The 12% who could not identify any personal connection to freshwater illustrate water's "invisibility" in daily life, undermining motivation for action despite strong underlying concern.



6. Shifting Resource Hierarchy Since 2021

The importance of freshwater has intensified over four years, increasing its lead over forests and other resources. This shift likely reflects heightened public exposure to climate-related events, droughts, floods, contamination incidents, and growing awareness of Indigenous water crises.

7. Language and Literacy Matter

Canadians interpret water-related terminology through clear themes of safety, education, and emergency, but show uneven understanding across concepts. Terms like **“water security”** and **“water crisis”** evoke basic needs and urgent threats (clean, safe, access, drought, shortage), while **“water literacy”** is strongly linked to a variety of learning and knowledge-based terms. **“Water tech”** is understood as innovation and treatment solutions. The standout gap is **“watershed,”** where the prominence of “n/a” reveals significant public unfamiliarity with a foundational environmental concept. This vocabulary gap limits public engagement in discussions on freshwater policy, conservation, and systems-based solutions.

8. Implications for Action

Overall, Canadians express strong values around water, health, and intergenerational responsibility but lack the knowledge and urgency needed to mobilize around freshwater threats. Addressing knowledge gaps, using clear and accessible terminology, and framing water issues around health and future generations present high-impact opportunities. Regional differences further suggest the need for localized communication and education strategies.

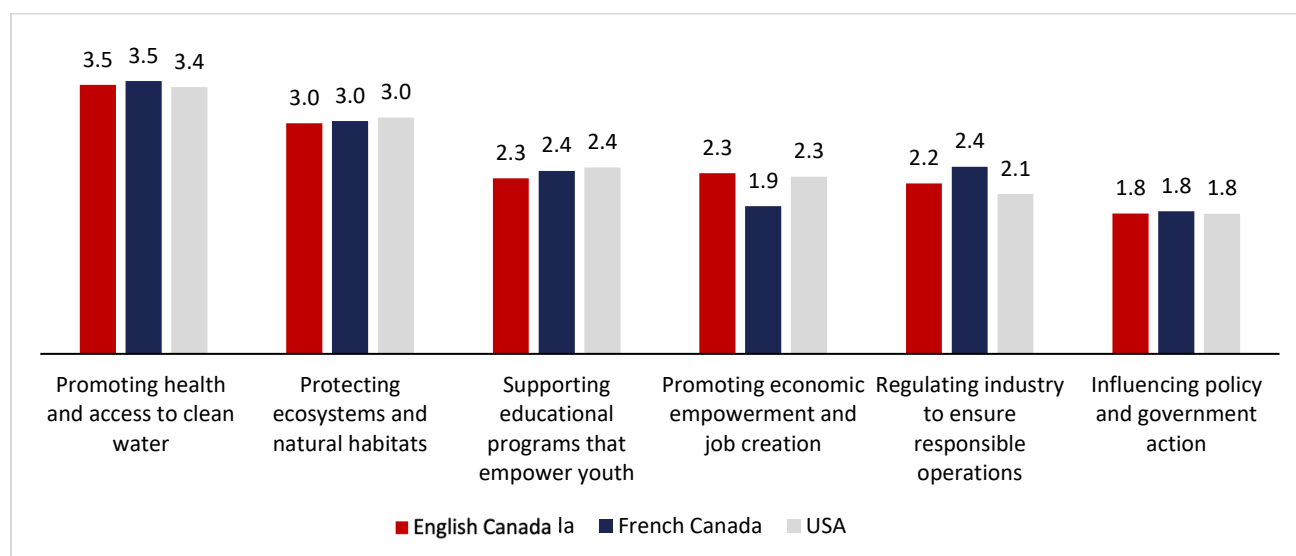
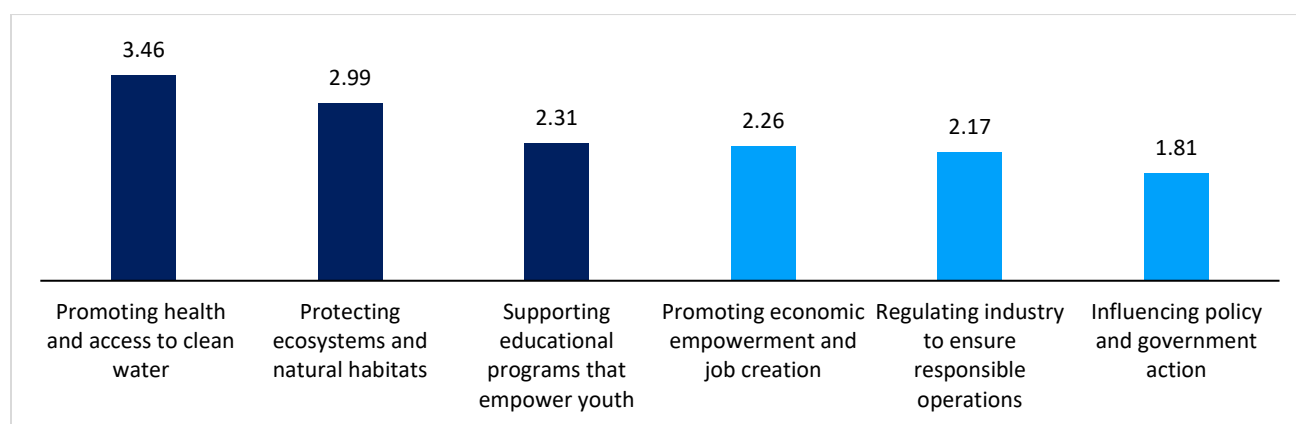


II. Detailed Findings

1. Issue Importance Ranking

Please rank the following issues from most to least important to you

This question asked respondents to rank six different issues related to social and environmental impact. The higher the number, the more frequently it was ranked higher.



Health and Clean Water is a Top Priority Binationally

Promoting health and access to clean water emerges as the clear top priority, with an average rank of 2.54 and over one-third of respondents (35.2%) ranking it #1 across all groups. This is followed by protecting ecosystems and natural habitats (average rank 3.01,



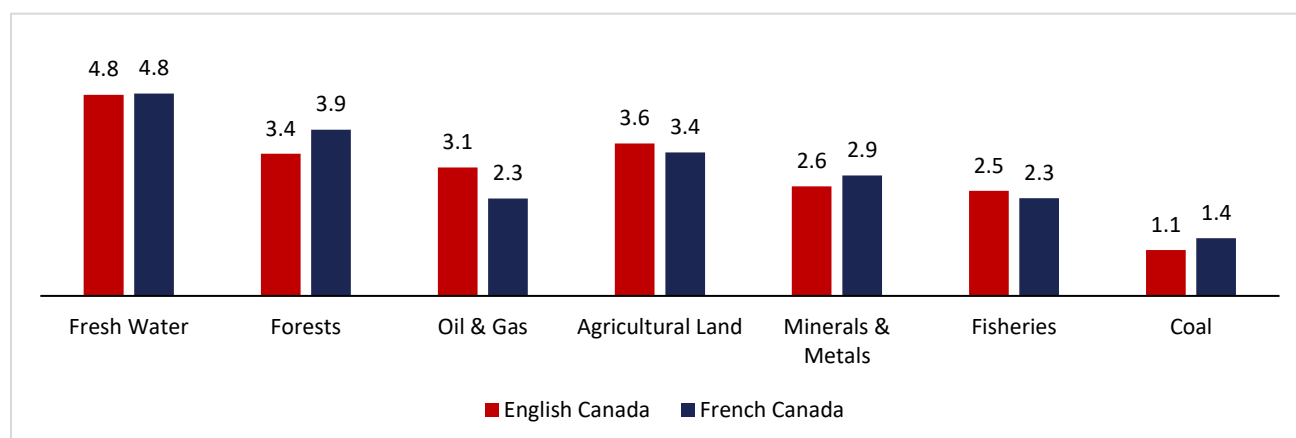
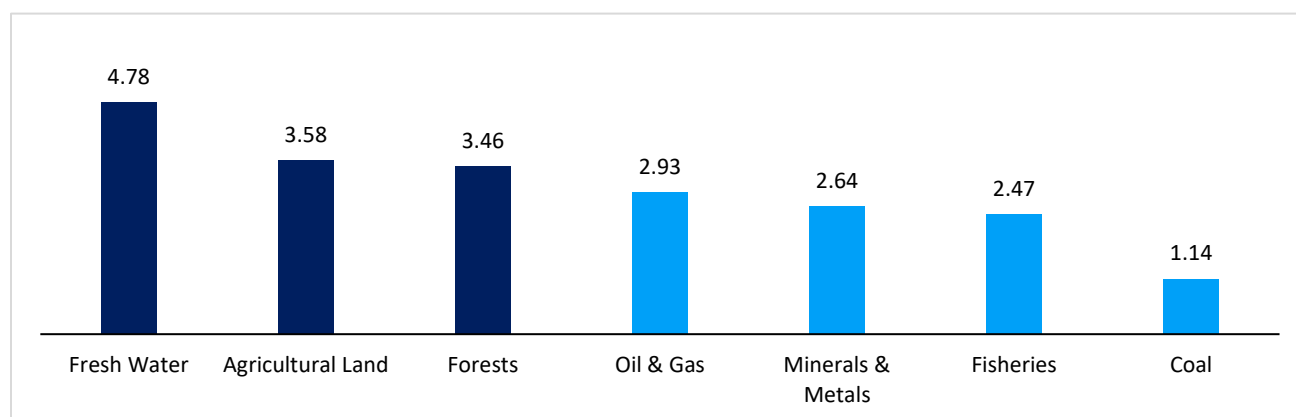
23.2% ranked #1). Policy and government action ranks lowest with an average of 4.19, with nearly 30% ranking it last. The consistency across all three groups on water and health priorities is notable, suggesting this is a universal concern regardless of geography. French Canadian respondents show particularly strong support for youth education programs (15.9% ranked #1 vs 10.6% in English Canada).

2. Canada's Resources Ranking

The analysis in this selection includes only English Canadian and French Canadian respondents, as these groups have direct stake in Canada's resources. USA respondents are excluded from this section.

In your view, please rank the following of Canada's resources from most to least important.

This question examines how Canadians value different Canadian natural resources.





Water is Rated by Canadians as Most Important

Among Canadian respondents (n=1,160), freshwater is overwhelmingly recognized as Canada's most important natural resource, with over half of all respondents (52.6%) ranking it first and more than three-quarters (77.2%) placing it within their top three choices for an average score of 4.7. Forests rank second with 11.0% ranking it first, followed by oil & gas at 13.6%. Agricultural land garners 9.6% of first-place rankings. Coal is consistently ranked as the least important resource, with only 2.5% of respondents ranking it first.

The clear hierarchy among Canadians places renewable and essential resources (water, forests, agricultural land) above extractive industries (oil & gas, coal), with freshwater standing alone as the paramount resource.

ECCC Comparison: Canadian Concern for Freshwater Intensifies over Four-Year Period

Between 2021 and 2025, freshwater strengthened its position as Canada's most valued natural resource. The proportion of Canadians ranking freshwater as their most important resource increased from 46% in 2021 to 52.6% in 2025 between the two studies, a 6.6 percentage point gain. This upward trend extended to overall prioritization, with 77.2% of Canadians in 2025 placing freshwater within their top three most important resources, compared to 72% in 2021, representing a 5.2 percentage point increase.

Between 2021 and 2025, freshwater strengthened its position as Canada's most valued natural resource, increasing from 46% to 52.6% in first-place rankings and from 72% to 77.2% in top-three mentions. This occurred alongside significant declines in forest prioritization, which dropped from 17% to 11.0% for first-place rankings and from 68% to 54.2% in top-three mentions. Oil & gas showed modest decline from 17% to 13.6% in first-place rankings, while agricultural land remained relatively stable at approximately 10%.

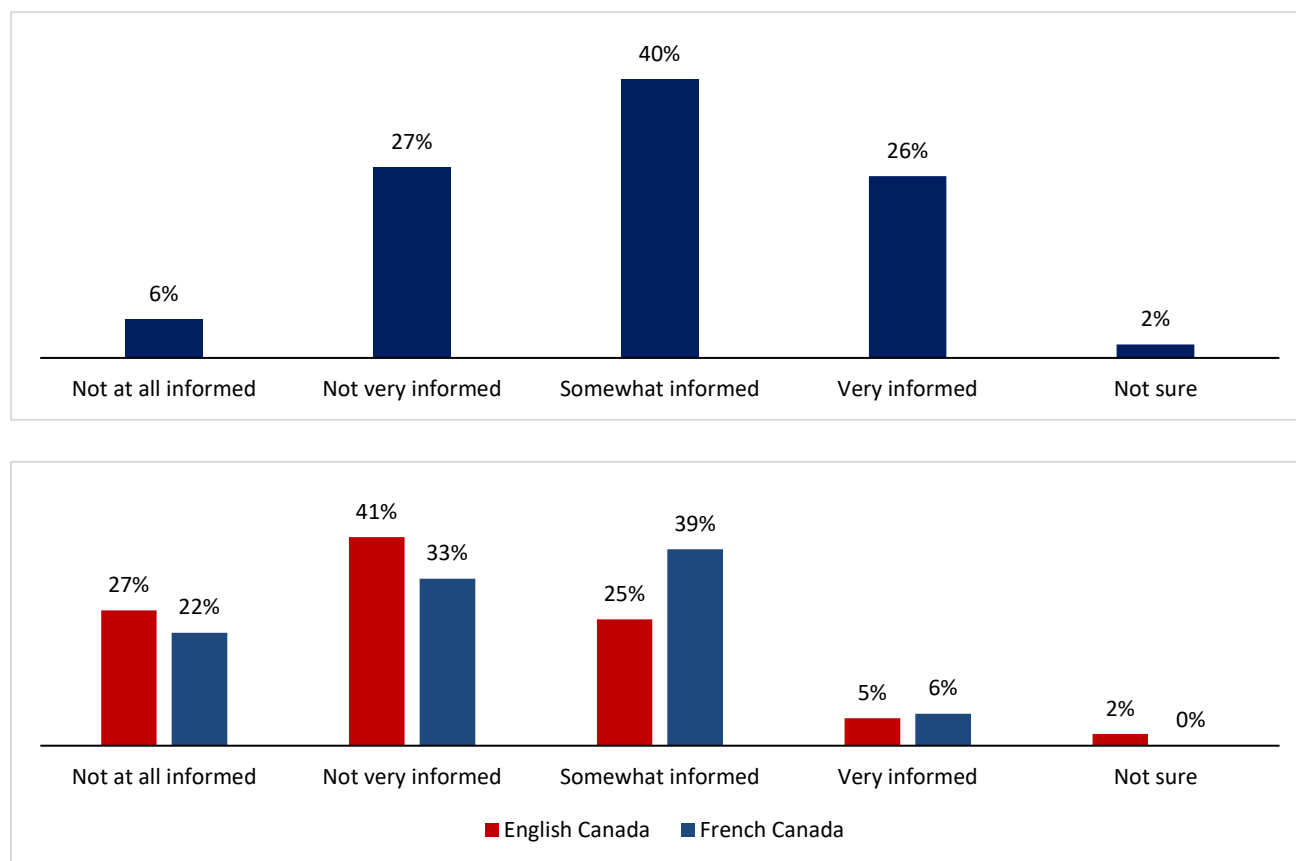
The growing prioritization of freshwater suggests heightened Canadian concern with water sources, potentially reflecting increased awareness of climate change impacts, droughts, and freshwater ecosystem vulnerabilities. The report comparison captures a sharpening hierarchy in resource values, with freshwater emerging as an increasingly dominant national priority.



3. Water Attitudes and Awareness

Note: Questions Q20-Q25 analyze only English Canadian and French Canadian respondents (n=1,160), as these groups have the most direct stake in Canada's freshwater. USA respondents are excluded from this section.

How informed do you feel about the state of freshwater in Canada?



Three-Quarters of Canadians Report Gaps in Freshwater Knowledge

Only about one-quarter (26%) of Canadians feel very informed about freshwater in Canada, while one-third (33%) feel not very or not at all informed. The largest group (40%) feels "somewhat informed," indicating moderate but not confident knowledge. This suggests significant opportunity for water education and literacy programs. The consistency between English Canada and French Canada indicates this knowledge gap is universal across Canadian regions rather than specific to one group.



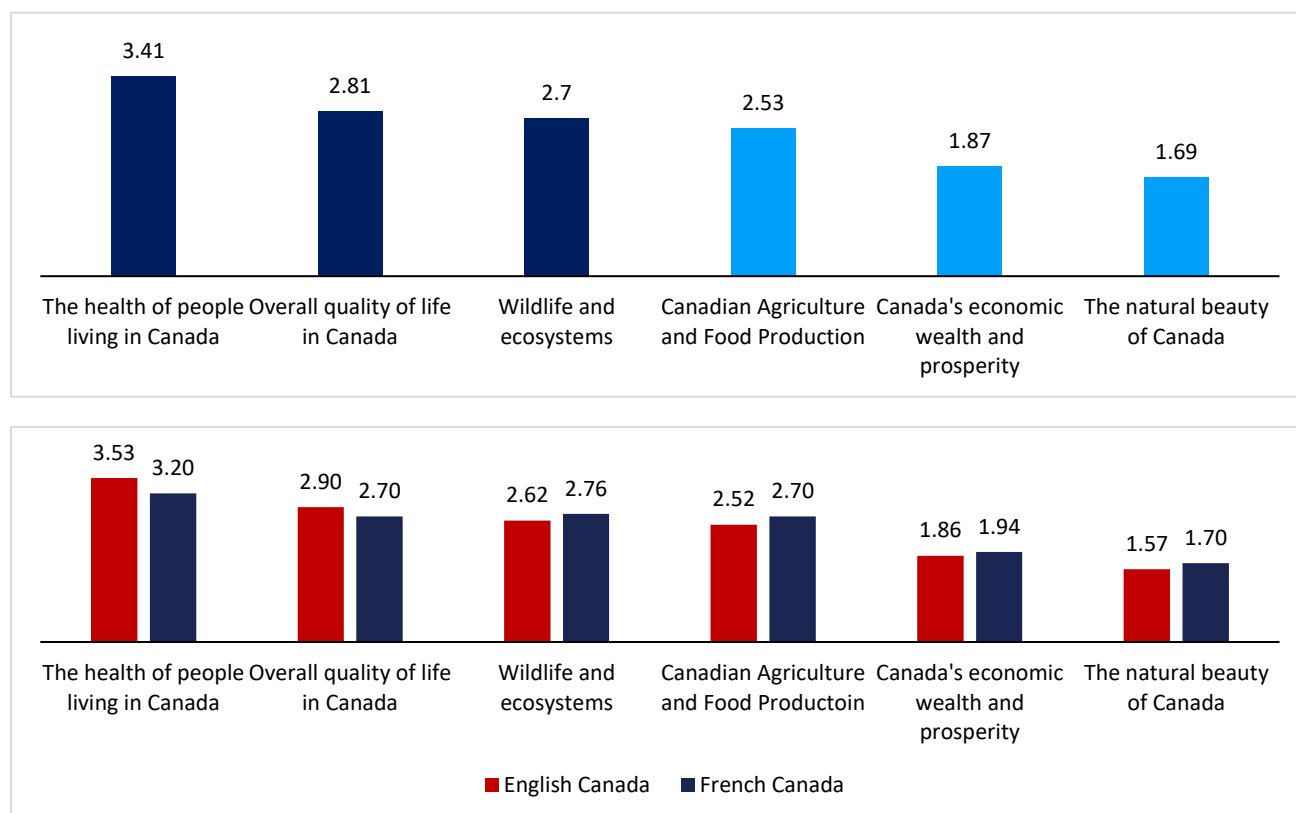
ECCC Comparison: Top-Tier Freshwater Knowledge Shows Minimal Growth Despite Rising Concern

Canadians' self-assessed knowledge about freshwater issues remained relatively stable between 2021 and 2025, with approximately six in ten Canadians considering themselves at least somewhat informed in both periods (59% in 2021, 66% in 2025). However, those rating themselves as highly informed increased notably, with the combined "very/extremely informed" category rising from 20% in 2021 to 26% in 2025.

Roughly one-third of Canadians in both surveys reported feeling uninformed about freshwater issues (37% in 2021, 40% in 2025), indicating persistent knowledge gaps among a substantial minority. The consistency of these findings suggests that while public awareness of freshwater issues has grown modestly, significant opportunities remain for education and outreach to improve Canadians' understanding of freshwater challenges and protection efforts.

Rank the importance of Canada's freshwater to each of the following:

This question explores how Canadians perceive the importance of freshwater across domains.





Importance of Values to Canada's Freshwater

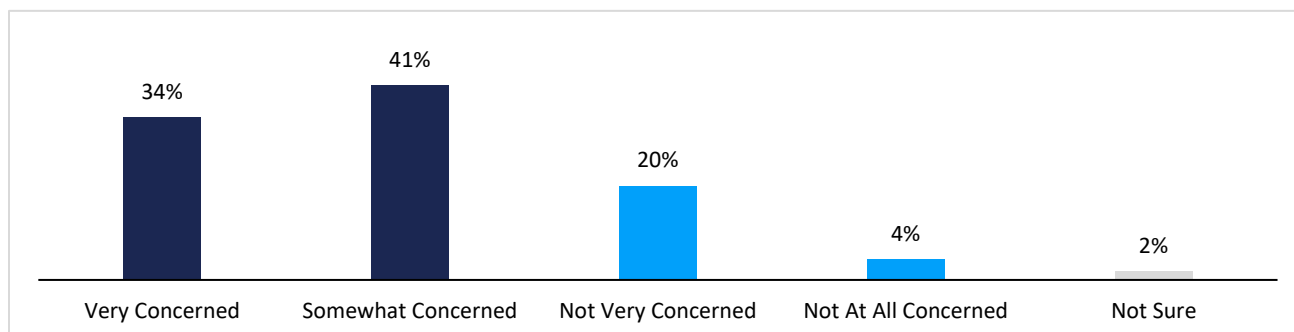
Among Canadian respondents, the health of people living in Canada is clearly viewed as the most important application of freshwater, with over one-third (36.6%) ranking it first and an average rank of 3.41 and 72.7% placing it within their top three priorities. English Canadian respondents place particularly strong emphasis on human health (37.1% ranked #1), followed closely by overall quality of life in Canada (20.5% first, 57.0% top three), wildlife and ecosystems (18.3% first, 53.5% top three), and Canadian agriculture and food production (9.4% first, 51.5% top three). Natural beauty and economic prosperity rank lowest, suggesting that Canadians prioritize immediate human and environmental needs over aesthetic or economic considerations. The pattern is consistent between English Canada and French Canada, indicating universal agreement among Canadians on freshwater's primary importance for human health.

ECCC Comparison: Four-Year Stability Reveals Deep-Rooted View That Water Is Essential, Not Optional

These 2025 findings align closely with Environment and Climate Change Canada's 2021 results, which similarly identified health of people (87% net important), wildlife and ecosystems (85%), agriculture and food production (85%), and overall quality of life (83%) as the most important values associated with freshwater. Both studies reveal that Canadians consistently prioritize freshwater's role in supporting human health, environmental integrity, and food security above economic or recreational considerations. This sustained emphasis suggests a deeply entrenched public perspective that views freshwater as fundamentally vital to survival and well-being rather than primarily as an economic resource.

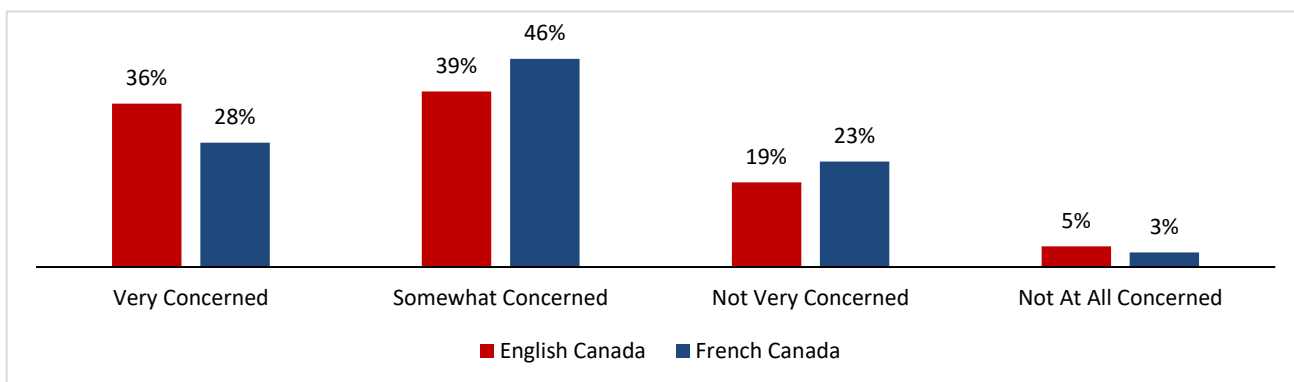


How concerned are you personally about the quality of freshwater in Canada?



The level of concern about freshwater quality shows that 74.4% of Canadian respondents express at least some concern:

Aggregate Results (n=1,160):



Canadian's Recognize Water Quality as an Issue

Three-quarters of English Canadians (74.4%) express concern about freshwater quality, with over one-third very concerned. Canadian respondents show a more balanced split between "somewhat" (38.8%) and "very" concerned (36.1%), while French Canadians lean more heavily toward "somewhat concerned" (46.0%) with fewer expressing the highest level of concern (27.5%). Both groups show low rates of complete lack of concern (under 5%), indicating widespread recognition of water quality as an issue.

ECCC Comparison: Concern About Quality of Freshwater in Canada

Concern about freshwater quality in Canada remained consistently high between 2021 and 2025, with three-quarters (75%) of Canadians expressing at least some level of concern in both survey periods. This stability suggests that freshwater quality concerns are deeply embedded in Canadian public consciousness and have persisted across different survey methodologies and time periods.

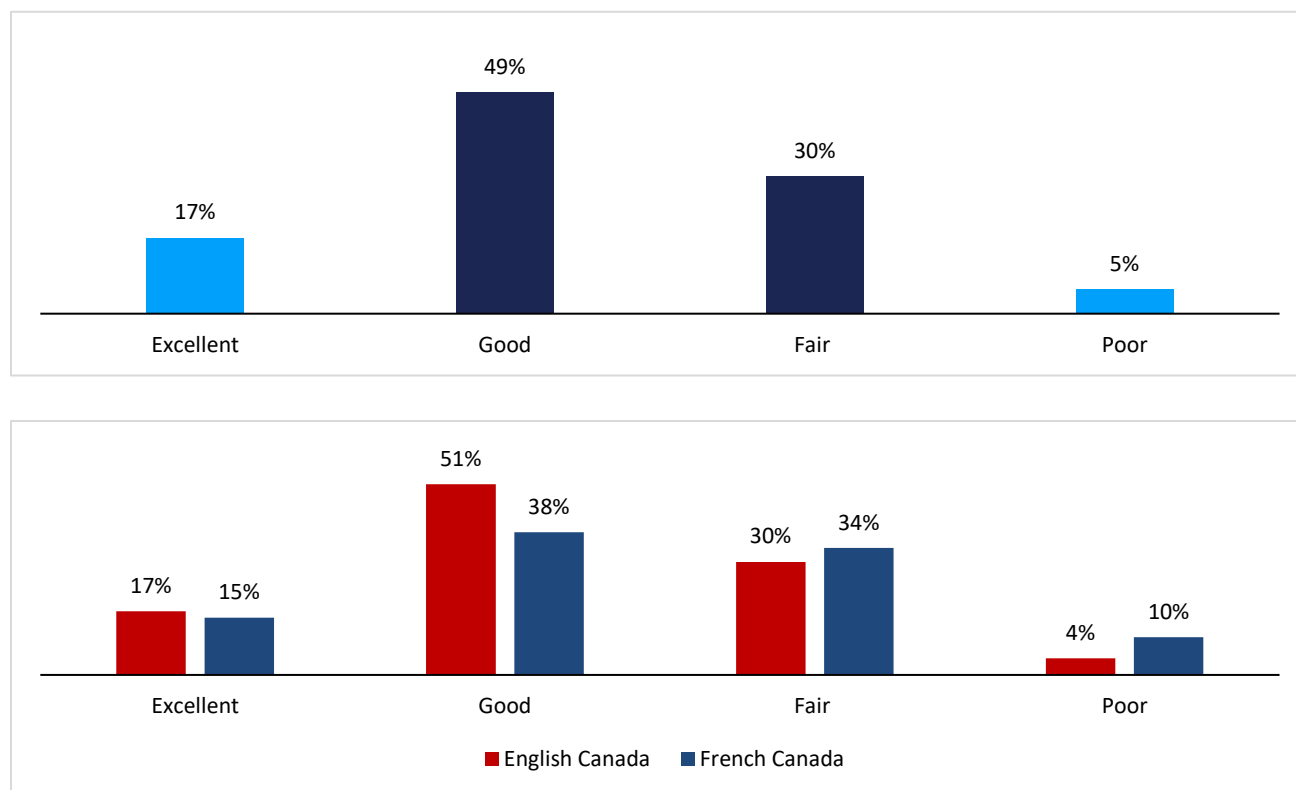


Both studies reveal a similar distribution of concern intensity, with approximately one-third of Canadians expressing high levels of concern (30% "very concerned" in 2021, 34% in 2025) and roughly two-fifths expressing moderate concern (45% "somewhat concerned" in 2021, 41% in 2025). Notably, only a small minority in both periods—approximately one-quarter of Canadians—express little to no concern about freshwater quality.

These findings underscore that concern about freshwater quality is not a transient issue but rather represents an enduring priority for most Canadians. The consistency across survey waves suggests that water quality remains a salient public concern regardless of shifting news cycles or political contexts, reflecting Canadians' recognition of freshwater as a critical resource requiring ongoing attention and protection.

In Canada, freshwater protection involves various players and levels of government. Overall, how would you rate the protection of fresh water in Canada?

Aggregate Results:





Moderate Satisfaction with Freshwater Protection

Overall sentiment among Canadians is moderately positive, with nearly half rating protection as "good" and about two-thirds rating it good or excellent. However, there's minimal enthusiasm, with only 16.7% rating protection as "excellent." English Canadian respondents are more positive (67.9% good/excellent) than French Canadians. French Canadians are notably more critical with the highest "poor" rating (10.1% vs 4.4%) and lowest "good" rating (38.1% vs 50.9%), suggesting greater dissatisfaction with current water protection efforts in that community.

ECCC Comparison: While Perceptions of Freshwater Protection Have Improved, There Lies Room For Growth

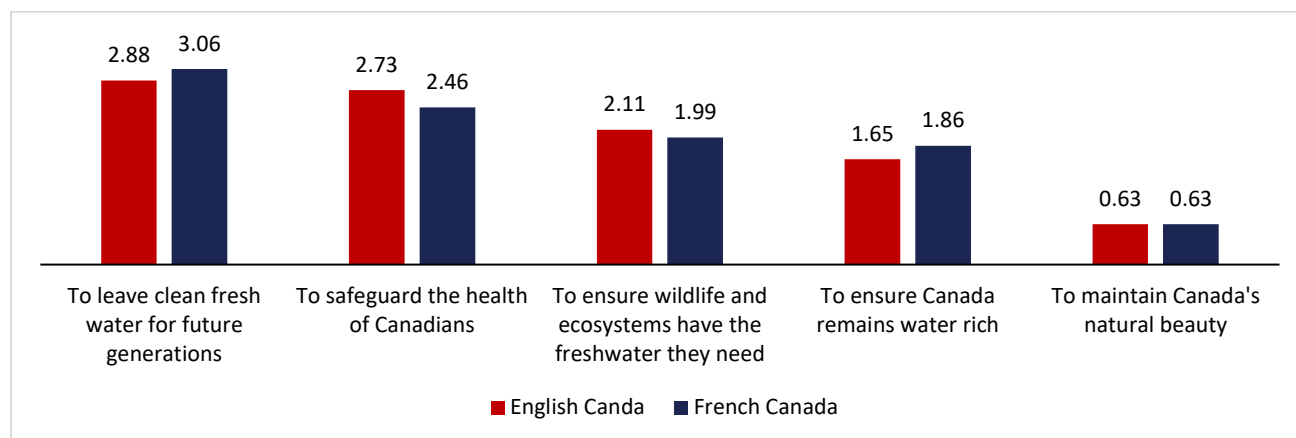
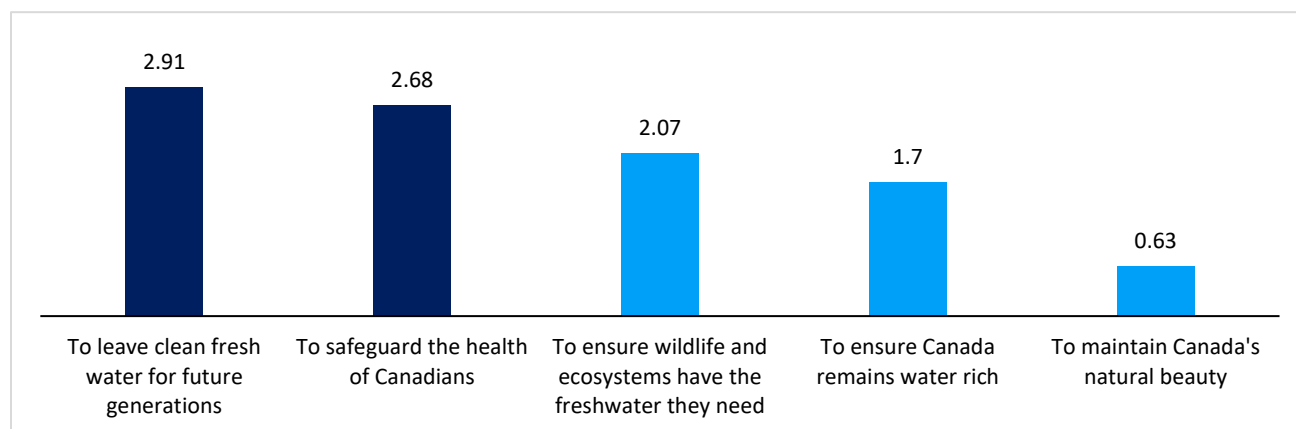
Canadian perceptions of freshwater protection improved modestly between 2021 and 2025. The proportion of Canadians rating protection as excellent or good increased from 55% in 2021 to 66% in 2025, suggesting growing confidence in freshwater protection efforts. Notably, those rating protection as "excellent" nearly doubled from 9% to 17%, while "good" ratings remained stable at approximately half of respondents (46% in 2021, 49% in 2025).

Despite this positive shift, a substantial proportion of Canadians, approximately one-third, continue to view freshwater protection as merely "fair" (31% in 2021, 30% in 2025), indicating persistent skepticism about the adequacy of current protection measures. The proportion rating protection as "poor" remained low in both periods (7% in 2021, 5% in 2025).

These findings suggest that while a majority of Canadians maintain at least moderate confidence in freshwater protection systems, there remains considerable room for improvement in public perception. The modest increase in positive ratings may reflect increased government attention to water issues, enhanced conservation efforts, or greater public awareness of protection initiatives in the intervening years.



Q23: Rank the following arguments from strongest to weakest for protecting freshwater in Canada (lower number reveals it was ranked higher than larger number)



Leaving Clean Water for Future Generations and Health is Strongest Argument

The intergenerational argument, leaving clean water for future generations, is the strongest among Canadians, with 41.4% ranking it #1 and an average rank of 2.08. This is particularly powerful among French Canadians (47.6% #1) compared to English Canadians overall (39.8% #1). Safeguarding health ranks second (30.4% #1), though notably stronger among English Canadians (32.0%) than French Canadians (23.3%). Natural beauty consistently ranks as the weakest argument with an average of 4.37 across both groups. A significant finding: French Canadians place notably higher importance on "ensuring Canada remains water rich" (17.5% ranked #1 vs 10.9% for English Canada overall), suggesting stronger nationalist/resource sovereignty concerns in this group; a 60% higher emphasis on this argument.



ECCC Comparison: Water Protection Values Hold Steady as Ethics Outweigh Economics Across Four Years

Both the 2021 and 2025 surveys reveal consistent priorities in how Canadians justify freshwater protection, with intergenerational responsibility and human health emerging as the most compelling arguments. Leaving clean freshwater for future generations ranked as the strongest argument in both periods—appearing in 64% of respondents' top three choices in 2021 and receiving the highest average ranking (2.05) in 2025. Safeguarding the health of Canadians ranked second in both surveys (57% top-three mentions in 2021, mean ranking of 2.35 in 2025), while ensuring wildlife and ecosystems have adequate freshwater ranked third (56% in 2021, 2.91 in 2025).

Arguments related to maintaining water abundance, natural beauty, and other considerations received substantially lower priority in both periods. This consistency demonstrates that Canadians frame freshwater protection primarily through moral obligations to future generations and public health imperatives rather than economic, aesthetic, or geopolitical considerations.

Think back to a specific experience or connection you have that makes you relate to the importance of water. Please describe it briefly.

Aggregate Results (n=1,658 text responses)

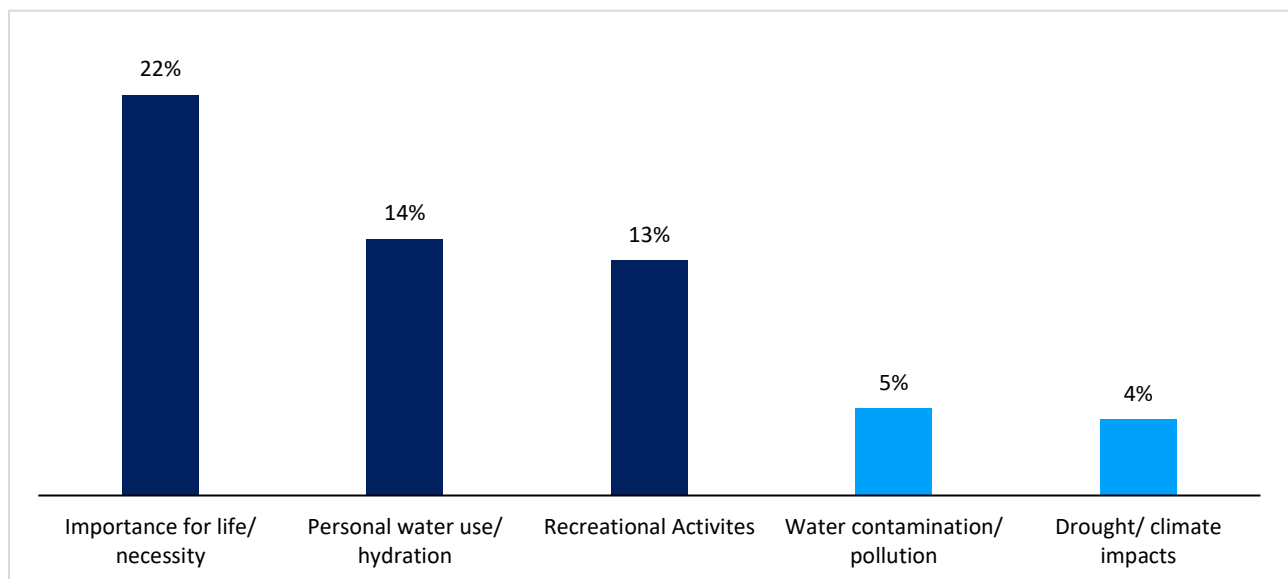
This open-ended question explores personal connections to water importance. Michigan respondents were included in this analysis, for 1,658 text responses. Thematic analysis revealed diverse experiences:

Major Themes:

- **Importance for life/necessity (22.0%):** Respondents frequently emphasized water as essential for survival and daily living
- **Personal water use/hydration (14.1%):** Many referenced drinking water, staying hydrated, and personal health needs
- **Recreational activities (12.9%):** Swimming, fishing, lakes, beaches, and boating featured prominently in memorable water experiences
- **No experience/don't know (12.2%):** A significant portion could not identify a specific experience
- **Water contamination/pollution (4.8%):** References to contaminated water, polluted lakes, and water quality issues
- **Drought/climate impacts (4.2%):** Experiences with droughts, low water levels, and climate-related water scarcity



- **Gratitude for clean water (3.7%):** Expressions of appreciation and awareness of privilege in having clean water access
- **Water scarcity/shortage (3.6%):** Personal experiences without water, outages, and rationing
- **Flint water crisis (3.5%):** Specific references to the Flint, Michigan water crisis and its impact
- **Natural beauty/environment (2.4%):** Waterfalls, peaceful lake experiences, and environmental appreciation
- **Education/learning (1.6%):** School programs, campaigns, and educational experiences about water
- **Indigenous/community issues (1.4%):** References to reserves, Indigenous communities, and water access inequities



Representative Quotes:

- "Native reservations don't have clean water"
- "When there was water shortage, it was important because we didn't have water and it was super important to conserve as much water as possible"
- "I lived in Flint for 4 years so I understand the importance of freshwater"
- "When I lived near a lake, I realized how peaceful and essential water is for life"
- "A burst water mainline occurred in my locality and we were without water for two days. This made us realize the importance of having clean fresh water"

Water's Centrality in Life Drives Connection's to Water's Importance

While many respondents connect water importance to basic necessity and personal use, a notable 12.2% could not identify a specific experience, suggesting water's importance is often taken for granted until threatened. The 3.5% specific mentions of the Flint water

it as a foundational competency rather than just factual knowledge.

Watershed: Shows "water" as central, with "river," "lake," "area," "drainage," "basin," "storage," "ecosystem," and notably "na" (suggesting some respondents weren't familiar with the term)

The presence of "na" as a prominent term reveals significant unfamiliarity with this concept among respondents. Those who do understand it associate watersheds with natural water systems, rivers, lakes, basins, and environmental concepts like drainage and ecosystems, indicating a more technical or geographical understanding.

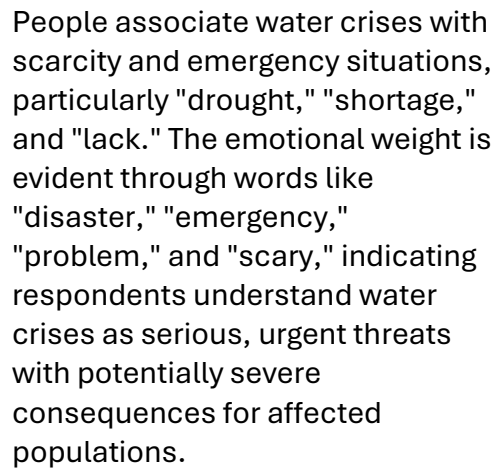


Water Tech: dominated by "water" and "technology," with words like "filtration," "treatment," "innovation," "purification," "clean," "hydro," "desalination"

Respondents view water technology as innovation-focused and solution-oriented, with heavy emphasis on treatment processes like "filtration," "purification," and "desalination." The prominence of "technology" and "innovation" alongside practical applications suggests people see water tech as an engineering field aimed at solving water quality and availability challenges.



Water Crisis: centered on "water," "drought," "shortage," with "emergency," "problem," "lack," "scarcity," "disaster," "flooding," "contaminated"





II. Appendix A: Methodology

Quality Control Measures

Rigorous quality control ensured only attentive, engaged participants were included in the final analysis. Respondents were disqualified if they exhibited patterns indicative of low-quality responses, including: (1) straight-lining behavior (selecting the same response option throughout); (2) completion times under 4 minutes (insufficient for thoughtful consideration); or (3) nonsensical or irrelevant open-text responses (random characters, off-topic content, or gibberish). Survey completion averaged 12-15 minutes.

Demographics

How old are you?

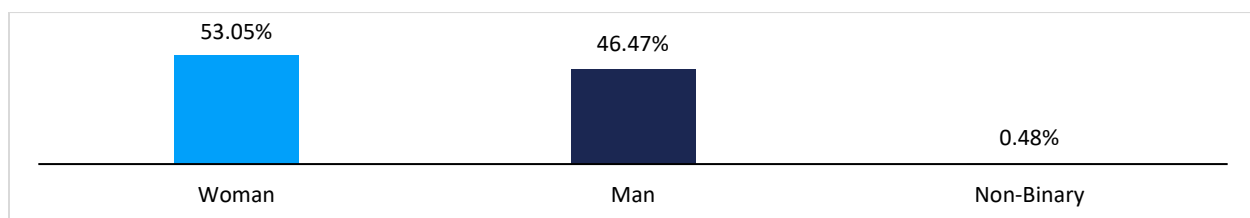
Aggregate Results: The age distribution chart displays a broad range of respondents from ages 18 to 96, with representation across all age groups. The most common ages include 24 (47 respondents), 30 (47 respondents), and 39 (43 respondents), showing strong representation in the 25-45 age range. The distribution gradually decreases after age 60, with fewer respondents over age 75.

By Group:

- English Canada: Canadian respondents show similar age distribution patterns to the overall sample, with strong representation from ages 20-65
- USA: US respondents have comparable age distribution, with notable representation in the 30-40 and 60-70 age ranges
- French Canada: French Canadian respondents show similar distribution patterns across all age groups

What is your gender?

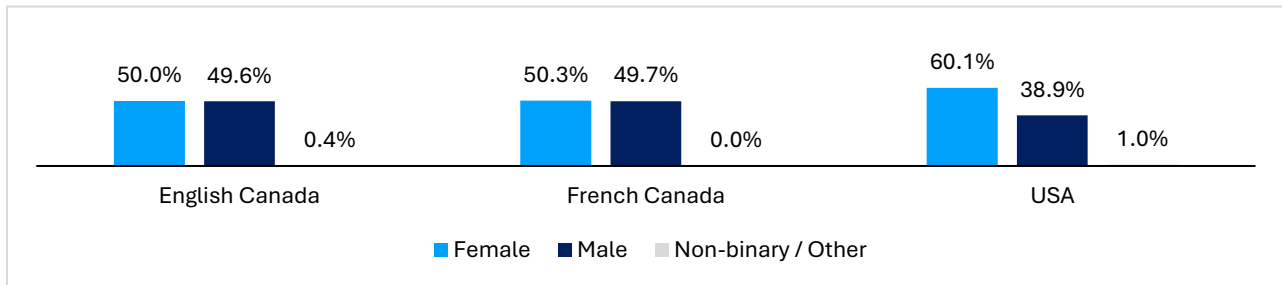
Aggregate Results: The gender distribution shows 53.0% female (879 respondents), 46.4% male (770 respondents), 0.5% non-binary/other (8 respondents), and 0.1% prefer not to say (1 respondent) across all respondents.





By Group:

- English Canada: 49.9% female, 49.6% male, 0.3% non-binary/other, 0.1% prefer not to say - showing nearly equal gender representation
- USA: 60.0% female, 39.0% male, 1.0% non-binary/other - with a higher proportion of female respondents
- French Canada: 50.3% female, 49.7% male.



Key Findings: The US sample has a notably higher proportion of female respondents (60%) compared to English Canada and French Canada (both approximately 50%), which should be considered when interpreting regional differences.

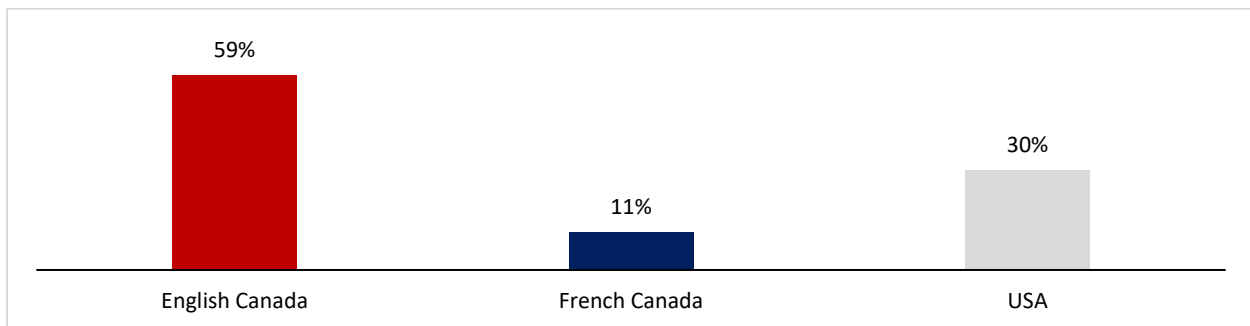
Where do you live?

Note: This question directly corresponds to the groups variable used for segmentation throughout this analysis.



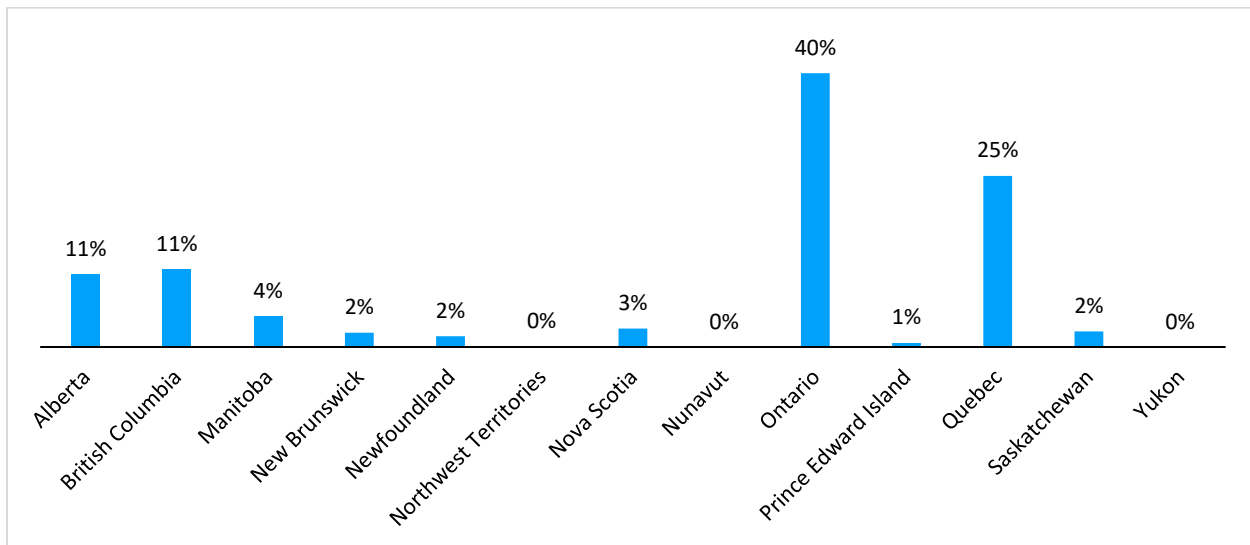
Total Distribution:

- English Canada: 971 respondents (58.5%)
- USA: 498 respondents (30.0%)
- French Canada: 189 respondents (11.4%)
- **TOTAL: 1,658 respondents**



What province/territory do you currently reside in? (Canada only)

English Canada (n=971): The provincial distribution shows strong concentration in Ontario, which accounts for nearly half of all Canadian respondents. Ontario has the highest representation at 45.9% (446 respondents), followed by British Columbia at 13.3% (129 respondents), Quebec at 12.7% (123 respondents), and Alberta at 12.5% (121 respondents). Together, these four provinces account for 84.4% of Canadian respondents.



Complete Distribution:

- Ontario: 446 (45.9%)
- British Columbia: 129 (13.3%)
- Quebec: 123 (12.7%)
- Alberta: 121 (12.5%)
- Manitoba: 51 (5.3%)
- Nova Scotia: 30 (3.1%)
- Saskatchewan: 26 (2.7%)
- New Brunswick: 22 (2.3%)
- Newfoundland: 17 (1.8%)
- Prince Edward Island: 5 (0.5%)
- Northwest Territories: 1 (0.1%)

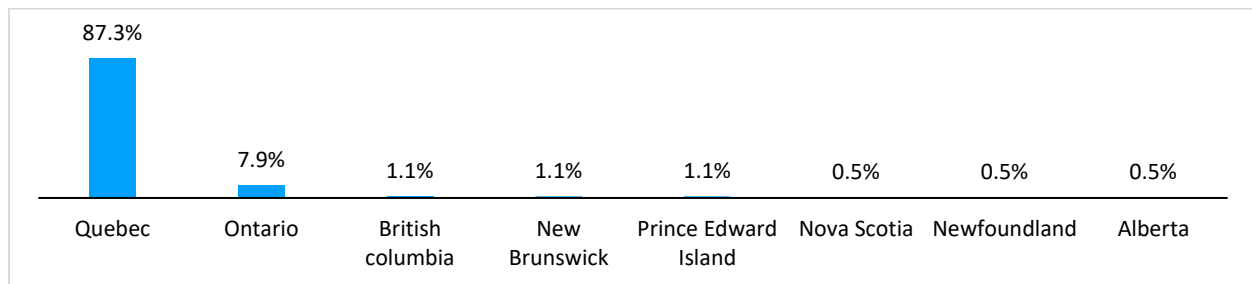
Key Findings: The sample is heavily concentrated in Canada's most populous provinces, with Ontario alone representing nearly half of all Canadian respondents. The four largest provinces (Ontario, BC, Quebec, Alberta) account for over 84% of responses, which aligns roughly with Canada's population distribution. Atlantic provinces show modest representation (5.7% combined), while territories are minimally represented (0.1%).

French Canada (n=189): The French Canada group shows strong concentration in Quebec, as expected for French-speaking Canadians. Quebec accounts for 87.3% (165 respondents) of the French Canada group, with Ontario providing most of the remainder at 7.9% (15 respondents).



Complete Distribution:

- Quebec: 165 (87.3%)
- Ontario: 15 (7.9%)
- British Columbia: 2 (1.1%)
- New Brunswick: 2 (1.1%)
- Prince Edward Island: 2 (1.1%)
- Nova Scotia: 1 (0.5%)
- Newfoundland: 1 (0.5%)
- Alberta: 1 (0.5%)



What state do you currently reside in? (USA only)

Aggregate Results (US respondents only, n=486): The state distribution shows all US respondents are from Michigan.

Complete Distribution:

- Michigan: 486 (97.6%)

Methodology Note: The US sample is not geographically representative of the United States as a whole, with all respondents from Michigan alone. This means that "USA" responses throughout this survey should be interpreted as exclusively reflecting Michigan perspectives rather than broader American views.

Methodology Note: The French Canada group appropriately represents Quebec's Francophone population, with nearly 9 in 10 respondents from Quebec. The small



representation from other provinces (12.7%) reflects Francophone communities outside Quebec, particularly the significant presence from Ontario which has substantial French-speaking populations in Eastern Ontario and other regions. This means that “French Canada” responses throughout this survey should be interpreted as primarily reflecting Quebec Francophones, with some exposure to other francophone communities across the nation.