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Commissioned Paper:  
Social Cleavages Series  
Understanding the Freedom Movement:  
Causes, Consequences, and Potential  
Responses

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# UNDERSTANDING THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT:

CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND POTENTIAL RESPONSES

## Introduction

For some time, we have been studying the expressions of what we have called “ordered populism.”<sup>1</sup> While many were skeptical of the claim that Canada’s political landscape was being shaped by the same populist forces which had explained the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum, the empirical evidence was compelling. An index designed to measure authoritarian (or what we preferred to call “ordered” outlook) was very predictive of Canada’s last two federal elections. In this paper, we will demonstrate that understanding ordered populism is critical to understanding the emergence of the so-called “Freedom Movement,” but this also has to be understood in terms of the impacts of the debates around vaccines and mandates and the growing role of disinformation in shaping these forces.

In this brief paper, we will examine both the longer-term forces which have produced this new sorting of the population into a much more polarized state. We will also demonstrate how the arrival of the pandemic affected these forces. In the incipient stages, Canada saw a diminution of polarization and a highly significant jump in trust in government. As the pandemic wore on, polarization re-emerged, perhaps more intensely than before the pandemic. The ephemeral rise in trust at the outset of the pandemic had largely disappeared. These and other forces – particularly the rising role of disinformation – set the table for the ‘Freedom’ movement to emerge.

Notably, at the outset of the pandemic in March 2020, the majority of Canadians thought the pandemic would be over within six months. Today, two and a half years later, the majority of the public think a return to normal will not occur for at least two years – if ever.<sup>2</sup> This vanishing horizon for an end to the pandemic, coupled with associated and unprecedented levels of stress,<sup>3</sup> is also an important factor to consider.

The skepticism about the thesis that there was indeed “Northern Populism” akin to that propelling Trump in the United States was abandoned by many as we saw a series of blockades and protests, the most serious one being the over three-week occupation of the nation’s capital.

We will review shifting public response to the so-called Freedom Movement and show how it links strongly to populism, polarization, and politics. Notably when Canadians were asked in our poll to identify the salient “costs” of the pandemic, deep polarization about the vaccine topped a formidable potential list of costs. Second was the erosion of institutional trust.

Our analysis will also look at the role of mis- and disinformation (MIDI). This is an extremely powerful new force which is deepening polarization and mistrust in ways that could not have

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Graves, “*Northern Populism: Causes and Consequences of the New Ordered Outlook*”, University of Calgary School of Public Policy SPP Research Papers, Vol. 13:15 (June 2020), University of Calgary. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3feG5HR>

<sup>2</sup> EKOS Research Associates, “Risk Monitor – Wave 35,” August 2022.

<sup>3</sup> EKOS Research Associates, “Risk Monitor – Wave 35,” August 2022.

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been imagined even a decade ago. While the impacts of MIDI can be clearly documented, effective policy responses have proven elusive. This is complicated by the interconnections between these phenomena and the new political landscape. The essay will conclude with some thoughts on the range of shorter, medium, and longer term responses to these threats.

## 1.0 The Broader Historical Context

In *Northern Populism*,<sup>4</sup> we demonstrated that ordered populism is a critical new force shaping the Canadian political landscape. Despite significant skepticism of this analysis at the time, the Freedom Movement vividly illustrates this force in Canada.

Let's begin with what we mean by populism. Despite the intensity of interest in the topic, it really doesn't have a clear social scientific meaning. Key experts seem to agree that populism has two main ingredients: 1) The idea that there is a corrupt elite which invokes deep suspicion of the current establishment, and 2) a belief that power should be more properly restored to the people (who, more often than not, become 'my people', not 'others'). Other common features of populism, which some also describe as a strategy for governing or gaining power, are tendencies to nativism, skepticism toward established authorities such as the media and science, an aversion to foreigners, and an affinity to the local 'somewhere' rather than the global 'anywhere'.<sup>5</sup>

Populism is typically ideologically thin and can be expressed across the ideological spectrum. We are interested in a particular form of populism: authoritarian – or ordered – populism.<sup>6</sup> The key conditions for the rise of authoritarian or 'ordered' populism include:

- Declining middle class, wage stagnation and hyper-concentration of wealth at the very top of the system;
- Major value shifts which see more progressive values displacing traditional social conservative values which, in concert with economic despair, produce a cultural backlash by those seeing loss of identity and privilege;
- A growing sense of external threat expressed in both a sharp long-term rise in the belief that the world has become overwhelmingly more dangerous and rising normative threat which sees the country and its public institutions moving in the wrong direction; and
- Declining trust and ideological polarization.

In thinking about the evolving political landscape, it is important to recognize that the traditional left-right spectrum has morphed more into an open-ordered axis. While there are some continuities in the open-ordered and left-right axes, there are also some profound differences, as evident in the simplified table below. The following table gives a stylized summary of what we think are some of the key differences between the traditional left-right axis and the newer open-ordered axis. The exact lineage and evolution of left-right and open-ordered is unclear and demands further research.

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Graves, "Northern Populism: Causes and Consequences of the New Ordered Outlook", University of Calgary School of Public Policy SPP Research Papers, Vol. 13:15 (June 2020), University of Calgary. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3feG5HR>

<sup>5</sup> Goodhart, David, "The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics," 2017, Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Kristin Nelson, "Who's drawn to fascism? Postwar study of authoritarianism makes a comeback", Ideas, CBC Radio, April 4, 2021. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3PxajIH>

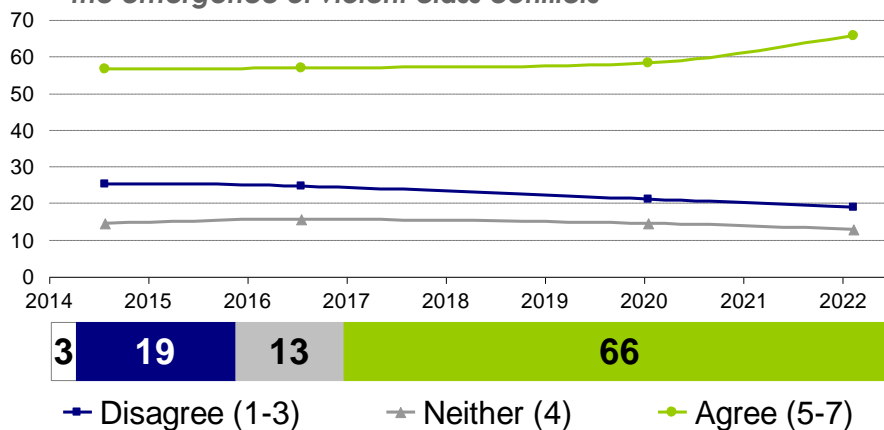
<b>Table 1: Left-Right vs. Open-Ordered</b>	
<i>How is the new ordered outlook different from the traditional right?</i>	
<b>Left</b>	<b>Right</b>
-Collectivism -Active government -Social ills societally produced -Rehabilitation	-Individualism -Minimal government -Individuals are authors of social problems -Punishment
<b>Open</b>	<b>Ordered</b>
-Cosmopolitan -Anywhere -Pro-diversity and immigration -Optimistic about the future -Reason and evidence -Creativity	-Parochial altruism <sup>7</sup> -Somewhere -Deep reservations about diversity/anti-immigrant -Deeply pessimistic about future/public institutions -Moral certainty -Good behaviour

Two-thirds of Canadians (66%) agree that if present trends vis-à-vis the concentration of wealth at the very top continue, we may well see “violent class conflicts” (up from 58% in 2020). This number is considerably higher amongst those sympathetic to the ‘freedom’ movement which is strongest amongst economically vulnerable males lacking university educations.

## Likelihood of violent class struggles

**Q.** Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

*If the current patterns of wage stagnation among all except those at the very top continue, I would not be surprised to see the emergence of violent class conflicts*



**BASE:** Canadians; February 2-9, 2022, n=1,004, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

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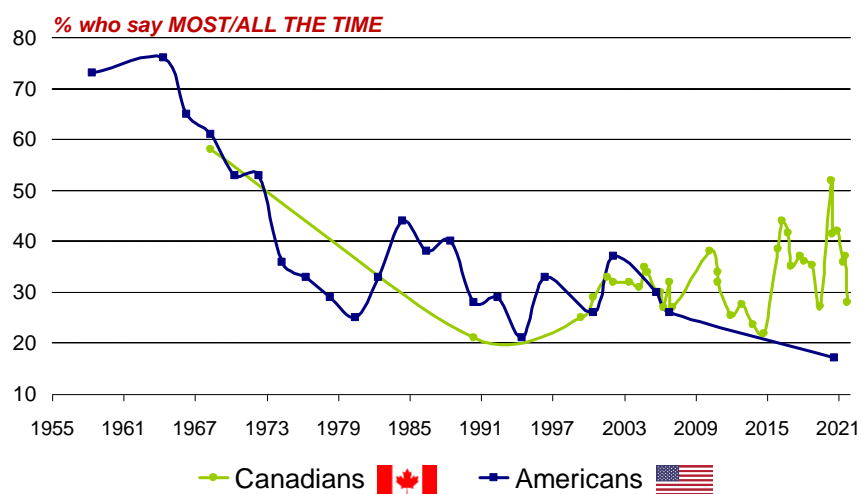
<sup>7</sup> Haidt, Jonathan, "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion," 2002, New York: Pantheon Books.

## 2.0 The Impacts of the Pandemic on this New Polarization

The pandemic initially produced a dramatic diminution of polarized views on government and country and there was a huge jump in trust in the federal government and approval of the federal government. Trust in professionals and institutions (and perhaps social cohesion) also rose fairly dramatically. Indeed, trust in government, politicians, and public servants reached a 25-year high. Interestingly, there was no such rise in the United States, which may explain the country's comparatively poorer vaccine uptake, as trust in government, in science, and in public health are all interrelated.<sup>8</sup>

### Tracking trust in government

Q. How much do you trust the federal government in Ottawa/Washington to do what is right?



BASE (U.S.): Americans; August 7-16, 2020, n=710, MOE +/- 3.7%, 19 times out of 20

BASE: Canadians; Oct 5-12, 2021, n=1,002, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

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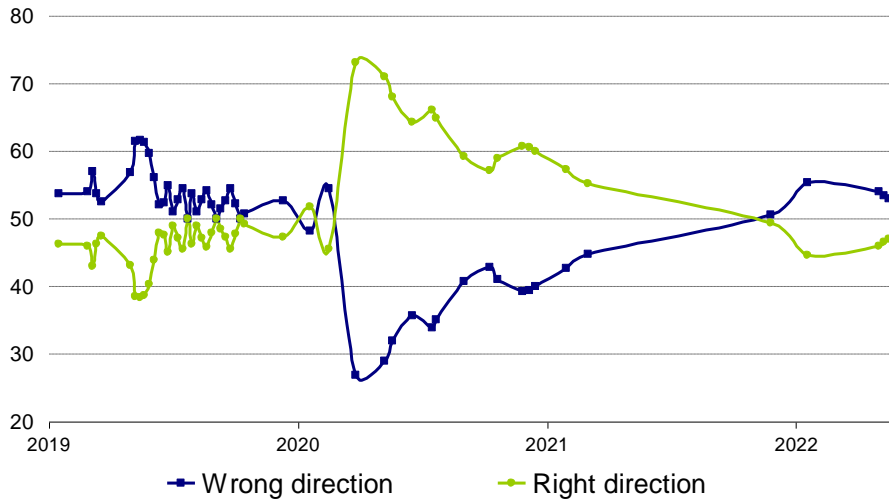
As time went on, however, polarization began to creep back in. In terms of confidence in national direction, the 73 per cent of Canadians who felt the country was headed in the right direction in the spring of 2020 has recently plummeted to just 47 per cent. Confidence in national direction was particularly low among men under 50 years of age, residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan, working-class Canadians, and the non-university educated. These are some the groups which show the highest levels of identification with the freedom and anti-mandate movements.

In particular, stark divisions are emerging on the open-ordered fault line. Not only does this produce different responses to safe behaviour challenges, but it will also manifest itself in alternate versions of what post-COVID-19 Canada is going to look like. For example, those sympathetic to the freedom and anti-mandate movements are also much more likely to see climate change as a trivial of false issue.

<sup>8</sup> Doyle McManus, "Canada just surpassed us on vaccinations. Good for them, and shame on us," Los Angeles Times. August 1, 2021. Available online at: <https://lat.ms/3PI9eOn>

## Direction of country

Q. All things considered, would you say the country is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?



Note: Figures adjusted to exclude those who skipped the question.

BASE: Canadians (half-sample); May 13-17, 2022, n=604, MOE +/- 4.0%, 19 times out of 20

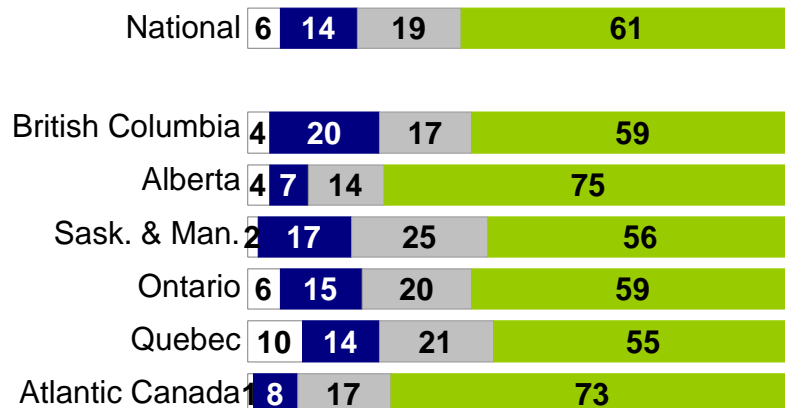
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There is a growing consensus that the country has never been so polarized. Polarization around vaccines ranks as a leading source of anxiety and a record high number of Canadians worry about “violent” class conflicts if trends in wealth concentration continue.

## Views on polarization

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

*I don't think Canada has ever been as polarized as it is today*



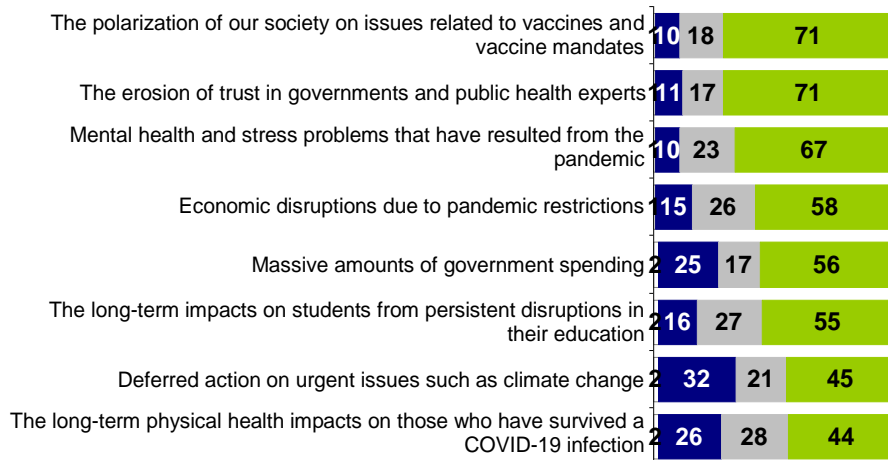
DK/NR Disagree (1-2) Neither (3) Agree (4-5)

BASE: Canadians; March 17-22, 2022, n=1,048, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

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## Preliminary accounting of pandemic costs

**Q.** In your view, how serious are the following costs of the COVID-19 pandemic?



DK/NR
  Not serious (1-2)
  Somewhat (3)
  Serious (4-5)

**BASE:** Canadians; February 25 – March 3, 2022, n=1,097, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

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### 3.0 The Freedom Convoy and the Emergencies Act

So-called “freedom” protests vividly captured public attention and saw the country roughly divided into two groups: 1.) those who were sympathetic to and “identified” with the movement; and 2.) those who did not. Most Canadians agree the country has never been so polarized and this view is stronger among supporters of the convoy.

We have intense polarization, but it is not splitting the country into two equally sized groups. Public support for the protests varied depending on the phrasing of the question, but opposition to the protests consistently outweighed support by a wide margin. For instance, the Freedom Convoy’s “memorandum of understanding” – a document published on the protesters’ website that demanded the Governor General and the Senate either override all pandemic restrictions across the country or resign – elicited the support of 22 per cent of Canadians,<sup>9</sup> which offers us a lower limit of support for the movement. Similarly, 22 per cent of Canadians “identified” with the protesters.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the protesters may have had some sympathy as the underdogs; strikingly, 38 per cent of Canadians believe they have genuine issues versus 58 per cent who see them as a minority fringe.

As time went on, sympathy for the convoy protests appeared to recede somewhat, but a residual segment of supporters remain intensely emotionally engaged. We would conclude sympathy with Freedom Movement captures somewhere between a quarter and a third of Canadians; the movement represents a minority, but not a fringe.

#### Support for convoy protests

**Q.** As you may know, the convoy protests are an ongoing protest movement made up of truckers and other demonstrators who, among other things, blockaded several Canadian cities and border crossings with the United States in February 2022. The protest was sparked by vaccine mandates for cross-border truck drivers, but later grew to a push for an end to all pandemic restrictions. To what extent do you support or oppose this movement?

#### May 2-6, 2022



**BASE:** Canadians; May 2-6, 2022, n=1,559, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

#### February 16-21, 2022



**BASE:** Canadians; February 16-21, 2022, n=1,003, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

DK/NR    Oppose (1-2)    Neither (3)    Support (4-5)

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<sup>9</sup> EKOS Research Associates, “Risk Monitor – Wave 28,” February 2022.

<sup>10</sup> EKOS Research Associates, “Risk Monitor – Wave 29,” February 2022.

## Perceived authenticity of convoy protest

Q. [IF FOLLOWING VERY CLOSELY/SOMEWHAT CLOSELY] Some people say the convoy protest is a genuine reflection of broad public anger and concerns, while others say it reflects the views of a fringe minority. Which of these statements comes closest to your own point of view?



- The protest reflects public anger and concerns
- The protest reflects the views of a fringe minority
- DK/NR

BASE: If following closely; February 2-9, 2022, n=928, MOE +/- 3.2%, 19 times out of 20

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The protests were not reflective of overall public outlook on issues such as masks and vaccine passports but, at the same time, were not merely expressions of a fringe minority. This is by no means a random quarter of the public, but has clear demographic, attitudinal, and behavioural factors.<sup>11</sup>

One important driver of sympathy toward the convoy protest was generational. Under-50 Canada (particularly men under 50) was much more sympathetic to the protests and their cause and the balance of support and opposition was pretty evenly divided in these younger cohorts. For over-50 Canada, there was broad opposition to this movement. Other key drivers include education (with the college educated more sympathetic and university educated more opposed) and household size (with support for the protests correlated with number of children). Unsurprisingly, support was strongly correlated with vaccine acceptance; 97% of vaccine refusers supported the protest, compared to just 12% of those who have received three or more doses.

Supporters of the freedom movement are much more disinformed and economically anxious and their support is underpinned by intergenerational resentment and class conflicts. Supporters are extremely distrustful of government and almost entirely reject any further restrictions.

A key feature of supporters of the convoy protest is that they score much higher on the ordered (authoritarian) outlook index and are much more hostile to outgroups. This is connected to a sense of status and identity threat, and a values backlash which echoes themes found in so-called "great replacement" conspiracy thinking, common in the United States. Indeed, they are three times as likely to say there is too much immigration and too many immigrants are members of visible minorities.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Valpy and Frank Graves, "Who supports the 'freedom' protesters and why," Toronto Star, February 16, 2022. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3QxksGy>

## Approval of government by support for protests

**Q.** All things considered, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of how each of the following is handling the COVID-19 pandemic?

*The Government of Canada as a whole*

### Opposes convoy protest



### Supports convoy protest



DK/NR  Disapprove (1-2)  Neither (3)  Approve (4-5)

**BASE:** Canadians; February 2-9, 2022, n=1,004, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

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## Support for convoy protest by open-ordered index

**Q.** Based on what you know, to what extent do you support or oppose this protest?

### Open outlook



### Neutral outlook



### Ordered outlook



DK/NR  Oppose (1-2)  Neither (3)  Support (4-5)

**BASE:** Following protests; February 2-9, 2022, n=1,004, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

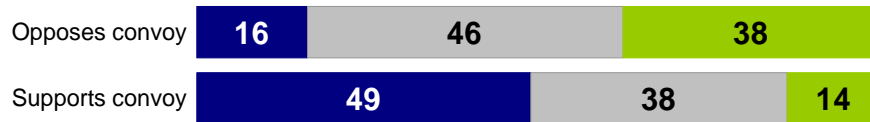
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## Attitudes to immigration by convoy support

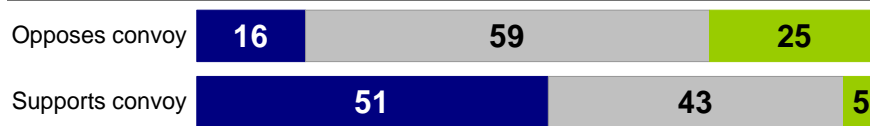
Q. In your opinion do you feel that there are too few, too many or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?

Q. Forgetting about the overall number of immigrants coming to Canada, **OF THOSE WHO COME** would you say there are too few, too many or the right amount who are **MEMBERS OF VISIBLE MINORITIES**?

### Attitudes to immigrants



### Attitudes to visible minorities



DK/NR  
  Too many  
  Right number  
  Too few

BASE: Canadians (half-sample each); February 2-9, 2022, n=502, MOE +/- 4.4%, 19 times out of 20

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It is possible that economic anxieties are driving the protest as much as issues around vaccines and masks. Those most adamantly opposed to masks and mandates have (by far) the bleakest economic outlook. The 'cultural' expressions (e.g. greater antipathy to immigration) may be even more concerning but they are not what set these forces in motion.

## 4.0 The Role of Disinformation

Disinformation is proliferating at an alarming pace and is having an extremely corrosive impact on public interest (e.g., vaccine uptake) and democracy. Disinformation, coupled with other structural changes, is radicalizing much of the Canadian right.

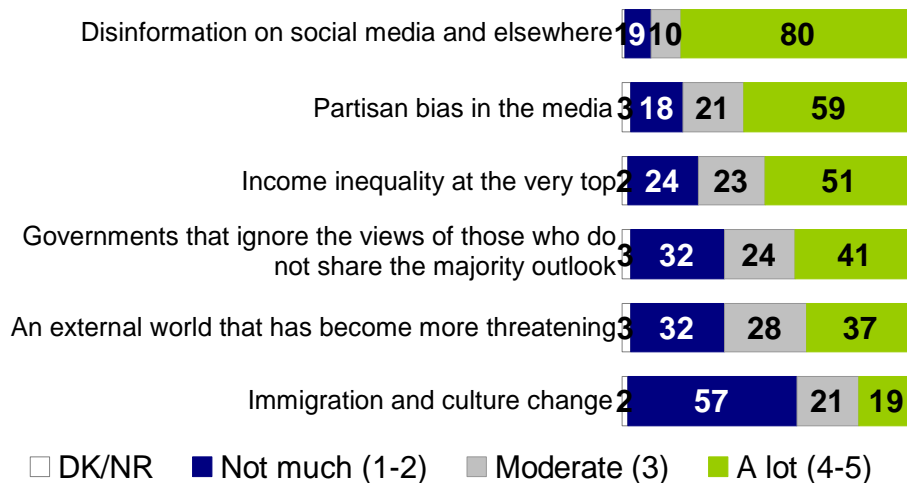
It is clear that disinformation is linked to mistrust, polarization, and, in particular, vaccine refusal. Similarly, opposition to vaccine passports shows a linear correlation with disinformation. Disinformation has polarized the debate around vaccines and passports and will shift to debates about foreign policy, the climate emergency, and many other issues.

Disinformation is strongly correlated with distrust in the medical and scientific communities. Notably, distrust in journalism is also linked to disinformation. These finding suggests that the disinformed are turning to alternative media sources – such as social media – for what is often spurious information and advice.

By a wide margin, Canadians see disinformation as a leading driver of polarization, a problem that is denied in the world of vaccine refusers and convoy supporters. A clear majority of Canadians see social media as the primary culprit in the rise of disinformation.

### Causes of polarization in Canada

**Q.** [IF SERIOUS PROBLEM (2-5)] To what extent do you believe each of the following are to blame for the current level of polarization in Canada?



**BASE:** Sees polarization as serious; March 17-22, 2022, n=1,007, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

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## Perceived seriousness of disinformation

**Q.** As you may know, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a great deal of disinformation about the diagnosis and treatment of the disease, as well as various conspiracy theories about how the disease originated. Overall, how serious do you think this problem is?

### Received three or more doses



### Received two doses



### Vaccine refusers



DK/NR  Not serious (1-2)  Somewhat serious (3)  Serious (4-5)

**BASE:** Canadians; February 25 – March 3, 2022, n=1,097, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

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Disinformation is rapidly slipping over into other areas of debate. For instance, the perceived importance of issues such as racial equality, reconciliation, and climate change is strongly correlated to levels of disinformation. Most notably, the near-universal condemnation of Russian invasion of Ukraine has a key offside group – the disinformed anti-vaccine, anti-restrictions segment. The same disinformation underpinning vaccine refusal is also fuelling dramatically higher levels of sympathy with the Russian invasion. The fact that vaccine refusers are 14 times more likely to disagree Russia is committing war crimes, and 26 times more likely to say Canada should do nothing, provides a vivid illustration of the agility and power of disinformation.

## Views on invasion by vaccine acceptance

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

*I believe Russia is committing war crimes in Ukraine*

### Received three or more doses



### Received two doses



### Vaccine refusers



DK/NR    Disagree (1-2)    Neither (3)    Agree (4-5)

BASE: Canadians; March 9-13, 2022, n=1,035, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

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In December 2021, just over a month before the convoy protests arrived in Ottawa, more than half of Canadians (55%) supported enacting the Emergencies Act to combat the COVID-19 pandemic (however, support for the Act may have been more a measure of public anxiety than a measure of support for a particular government action). Although this question precedes the actual invocation of the Act it does show that a majority of the public supported its theoretical use.

## Support for enacting Emergencies Act

Q. The Emergencies Act gives the Government of Canada additional powers during a time of crisis, such as prohibiting travel, enforcing self-isolation, limiting assemblies, and mobilizing the military to back up the health system. **To what extent would you support or oppose the federal government enacting the Emergencies Act to combat the COVID-19 pandemic?**

### December 2021



### January 2021



Oppose (1-2)    Neither (3)    Support (4-5)

BASE: Canadians; December 15-21, 2021, n=1,015, MOE +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20

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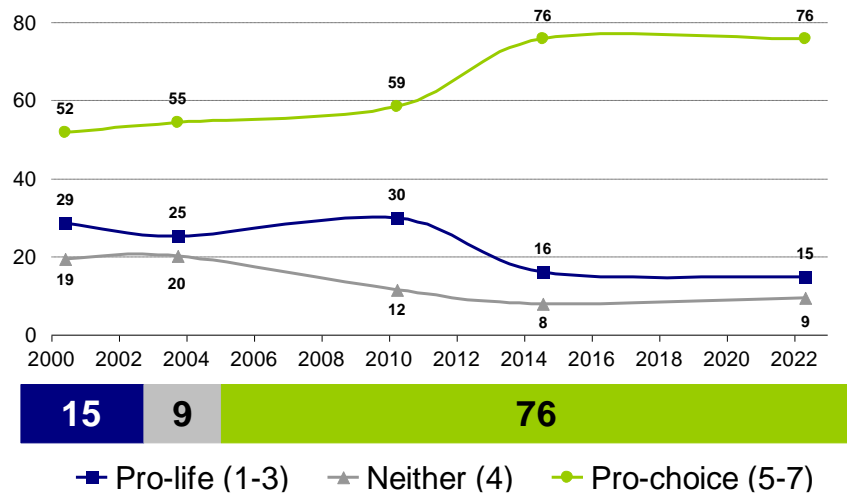
## 5.0 The Open Paradox

Overall, polarization continues (and is perhaps intensifying) but the fulcrum dividing open-ordered has shifted to the open side (see Table 1 for a description of the open-ordered spectrum). Attitudes to abortion, guns, trade, convoy protests, etc. all suggest shift to a more open outlook. This 'open paradox' is occluded by the intensity of opponents. For example, even today a clear majority of the public support the abandoned vaccine passport concept.

Canada has remained uniquely "open" in key areas such as immigration, trade, and diversity, and human rights. Notably, opposition to immigration is reaching historical lows (inversely linked to education, social class). But as Canada shifts emphatically open, this may ironically be intensifying the polarization and threat felt by the ordered minority (e.g., a dialectical response to perceived threat?).

### Views on abortion rights

**Q.** Thinking about your general views on abortion, would you say you are more pro-life or pro-choice?



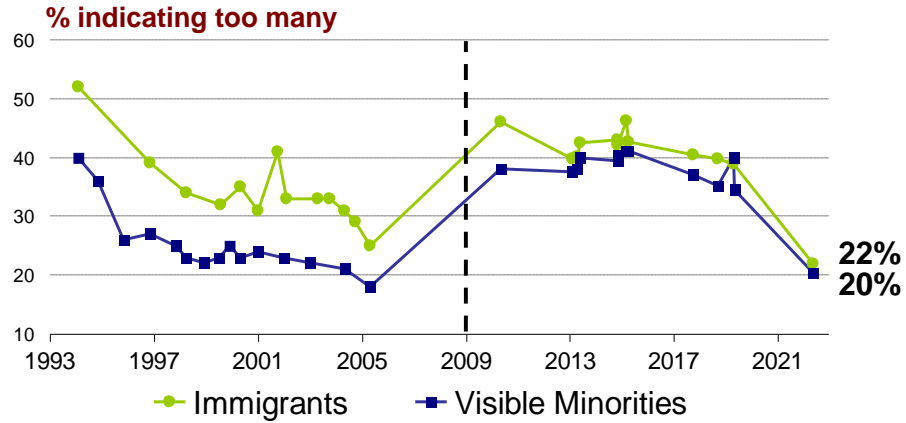
**BASE:** Canadians; May 2-5, 2022, n=1,268, MOE +/- 2.8%, 19 times out of 20

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## Attitudes to immigration/visible minorities

- Q.** In your opinion do you feel that there are too few, too many or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?
- Q.** Forgetting about the overall number of immigrants coming to Canada, **OF THOSE WHO COME** would you say there are too few, too many or the right amount who are **MEMBERS OF VISIBLE MINORITIES**?



**BASE:** Canadians (half-sample each); April 27-May 4, 2022, n=915-921, MOE +/- 3.2%, 19 times out of 20

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## 6.0 Conclusions

Understanding the forces which have produced the Freedom Movement is critical to repairing the polarization going on in the country. Fuller understanding of the causes and consequences of the Freedom Movement requires understanding the rise of populism and the factors that contributed to that. We have sketched out some key elements noting these have been percolating for some time across the Western World (including Canada). There are, however, unique expressions in Canada.

In terms of moving forward, we offer several suggestions. First, we note that depictions of those drawn to populism outlook as “deplorables” or a “radical fringe” are not helpful; instead, they give more emotional intensity to these groups. There are legitimate reasons for their grievances, even if they are disinformed and their solutions do not make sense. There is evidence that providing safe listening spaces produces some softening of polarization.<sup>12</sup> We would suggest using tools of public engagement where representative samples can offer informed, reflective, and representative advice to decision makers.

Next, we are losing the war on disinformation and we need to make immediate progress on developing practical solutions to dealing with MIDI. We have already seen how disinformation and polarization have created problems in helping us get past COVID-19. In the future, disinformation can further impact public safety and national security. Disinformation and polarization can stoke the flames of racial hatred and white supremacy – both of which we find are on the rise over the last few years. We also have research suggesting that disinformation is extending to climate change denial.

We would also note that polarization is too deeply entrenched to solve in the short-term through simply education. It is likely that approaches such as vaccine passports, which, although anathema to the Freedom Movement, may be necessary to resolve the pandemic. The idea of returning to a defined period where passports would be used to stimulate higher levels of take-up of a new bivalent vaccine is supported by a nearly three to one majority.

Finally, although the expressions of this movement are probably more acute in the cultural realm, the forces that set them in motion are rooted in economic factors and changes in the class structure. If we really want to make progress in the long run, we need to recreate the economic narrative of hope and shared prosperity.

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<sup>12</sup> EKOS Research Associates, “Risk Monitor – Wave 32,” March 2022.

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## For Further Reading

Frank Graves, "*Northern Populism: Causes and Consequences of the New Ordered Outlook*", University of Calgary School of Public Policy SPP Research Papers, Vol. 13:15 (June 2020), University of Calgary. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3fgG5HR>

Frank Graves, "*Polarization, Populism, and Pandemic: Implications for Canadian Outlook on the World*," in *Canada Among Nations 2020: Political Turmoil in a Tumultuous World*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Print.

Frank Graves, "*Pandemic, Polarization, and Expectations for Government: Rising Optimism about vaccine meets rising pessimism about second wave*," December 2, 2022. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3R4fGOT>

Kristin Nelson, "*Who's drawn to fascism? Postwar study of authoritarianism makes a comeback*", Ideas, CBC Radio, April 4, 2021. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3PxajIH>

Michael Valpy and Frank Graves, "*Who supports the 'freedom' protesters and why*," Toronto Star, February 16, 2022. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3OxksGy>