



Building Bridges: Exploring the Link Between Immigration and Trust in Canadian Government Institutions

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About the report and data

This report was prepared for the Consortium on Electoral Democracy (C-Dem) using the 2022 Democracy Check-Up Survey (Harell, Stephenson, Rubenson and Loewen, 2023). The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors.

The data can be found at:
<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/C-Dem>
<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/21L3YU>

All analyses are weighted to be reflective of the population on age, gender, region, and language.

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Introduction

Immigrants play a crucial role in Canada, contributing to the country's cultural diversity, economic growth, and social fabric. They bring a wealth of skills, talents and perspectives that enrich Canadian society while fostering innovation and entrepreneurship (Government of Canada, 2023). The success of their integration in Canada can be measured through lenses such as their attitudes toward Canadians and Canada. Yet, these attitudes are shaped by both pre- and post-immigration factors (Frank, Hou, and Schellenberg 2015; White, Bilodeau, and Nevitte 2015). This report seeks to analyze how immigrants view Canadian democracy and institutions by relying on the 2022 Democracy Checkup data (Harell et al. 2023).

The relationship between immigration and attitudes toward government institutions in Canada has been explored in several studies. Using data from the 1993 Canadian Election Study, Nadeau (2002) reports that foreign-born Canadians have higher satisfaction with democracy and higher support for Canada, the federal government, the courts, politicians, and political parties. For their part, Bilodeau and Nevitte (2003) find that immigrants from non-democratic backgrounds exhibit dramatically higher levels of political trust compared to people born in Canada. The authors call this a honeymoon effect and show that it reflects both an abundance of 'specific' and 'diffuse' support for political institutions. However, this honeymoon effect is temporary and fades over the years.

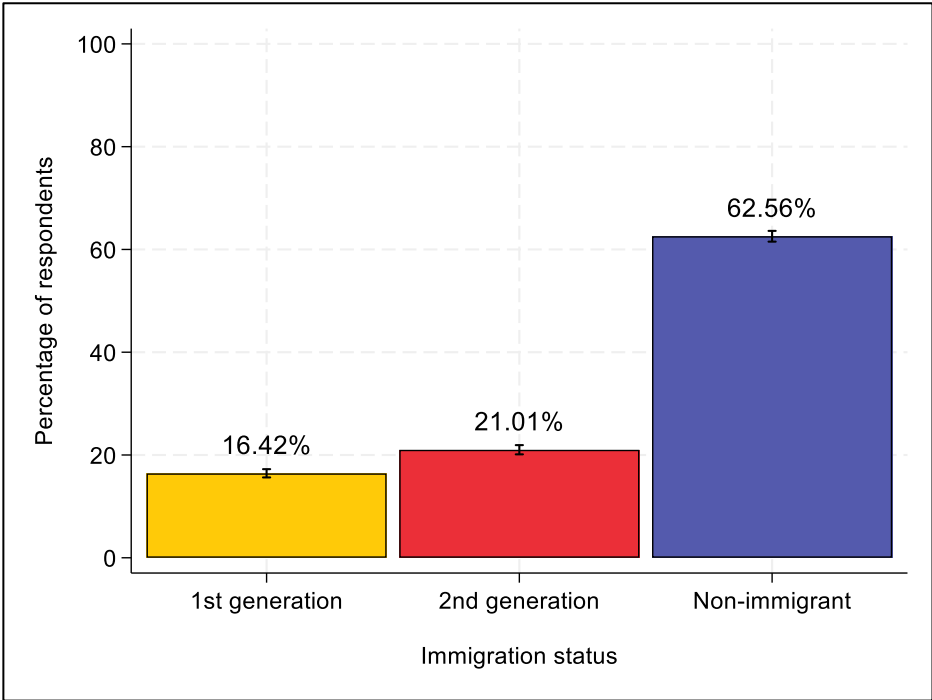
More recently, Bilodeau and White (2016) identified that generalized trust in people was generally higher among recent immigrants compared to the general population. In this matter, Canada differs from the European context, where studies show that immigrants have lower levels of trust (Dinesen and Hooghe 2010). Bilodeau and White (2016) also find that immigrants who express more trust in Canadians tend to express greater confidence in Canadian political institutions, have a higher interest in politics, and have higher life satisfaction. Higher levels of trust among immigrants can have implications for their satisfaction and confidence in government institutions, as trust plays a crucial role in their engagement and integration.

Overall, these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between immigration and attitudes toward Canadian democracy. The objective of this report is to update our knowledge regarding these attitudes using data from the 2022 Democracy Check-Up dataset. We will specifically focus on satisfaction with democracy, satisfaction with the federal and provincial governments, and confidence with Canadian institutions. All analyses are weighted.

Immigrants in Canada

It is useful to investigate the immigrant subsample in the 2022 Democracy Checkup (DC 2022) data before considering immigrants' attitudes. Figure 1 shows the proportion of first-generation immigrants (born outside Canada),¹ second-generation immigrants (at least one parent born outside Canada), and non-immigrants with 95% confidence intervals.² Most of the respondents in the DC 2022 were born in Canada. A total of 1,506 individuals are identified as first-generation immigrants, representing about 16% of the full sample. In this report, we focus on the attitudes of this subsample and compare them to those born in Canada (second generation and non-immigrant).

Figure 1. Immigration Status Distribution in the 2022 Democracy Check-Up

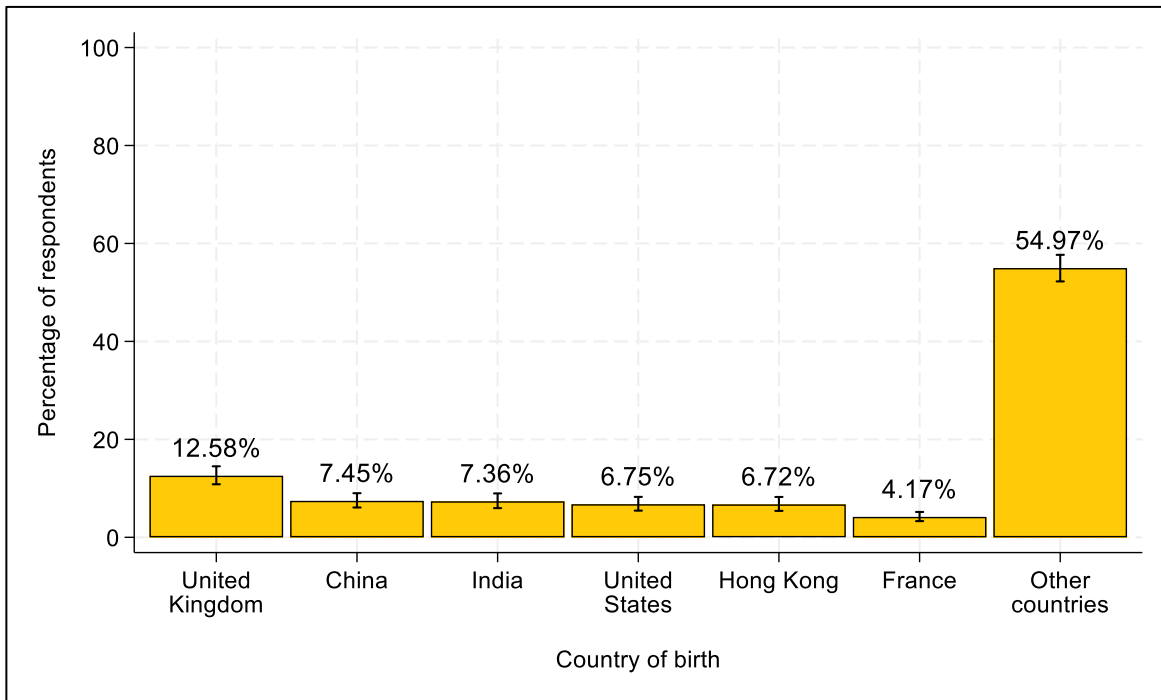


The distribution of the country of origin can provide insights into the diverse backgrounds of Canadian immigrants. Figure 2 highlights the most frequent countries encompassing four percent or more of the immigrant subsample. The most frequent country of origin is the United Kingdom, which accounts for 12.58% of the immigrant subsample. This is almost twice as much as the second and third most frequent countries, China and India. The United States and Hong Kong follow closely behind those countries, and then the percentages start to drop. Approximately 4% of the sample was born in France, and most of the remaining countries each account for less than 1 percent of the sample.

¹ Respondents born outside of Canada but with Canadian parents are coded as immigrants.

² We present 95% exact (Clopper-Pearson) confidence intervals for all figures with confidence intervals.

Figure 2. Countries of Origin Distribution



We can also look at how long the immigrants in the sample have lived in the country. Figure 3 presents the distribution of the immigrant's year of arrival in Canada across five periods. The 1971 threshold marks the beginning of the fifth immigration wave. The first period (before 1971) encompasses immigrants who arrived between 1920 and 1970, although most arrived after World War II. The rest of the immigrant subsample is divided into four 10-year periods between 1971 and 2020. The most recent immigrants in the DC 2022 arrived in 2020. The five time periods are roughly similar in proportion, with fewer respondents arriving between 1971 and 2000.

Finally, we can also look at patterns between the year of arrival and the country of origin. These patterns can be more easily understood after regrouping the countries by region. We present these patterns in Figure 4. The most frequent region of origin is Asia (40%), followed by Europe (35%), Central and South America (7.6%), North America (7.4%), Africa (6.9%), and finally Oceania (1.5%). Most respondents who arrived before 1971 in Canada are from Europe (69%). The share of European respondents consistently diminishes, with only 17% of Europeans in the most recent period (2011-2020). Asia is the most common region of origin during the 1981-1990 period (49%), as well as in the most recent period (59% of immigrants). India captures 29% of the most recent immigrants by itself. We can observe other patterns, such as the increase of immigrants from Central and South America in the 1980s and 1990s. This heterogeneity in the immigrant subsample regarding past experiences might shape their attitudes toward Canada and its institutions. Therefore, we control for these factors in the following analyses.

Figure 3. Immigrants' Year of Arrival Distribution

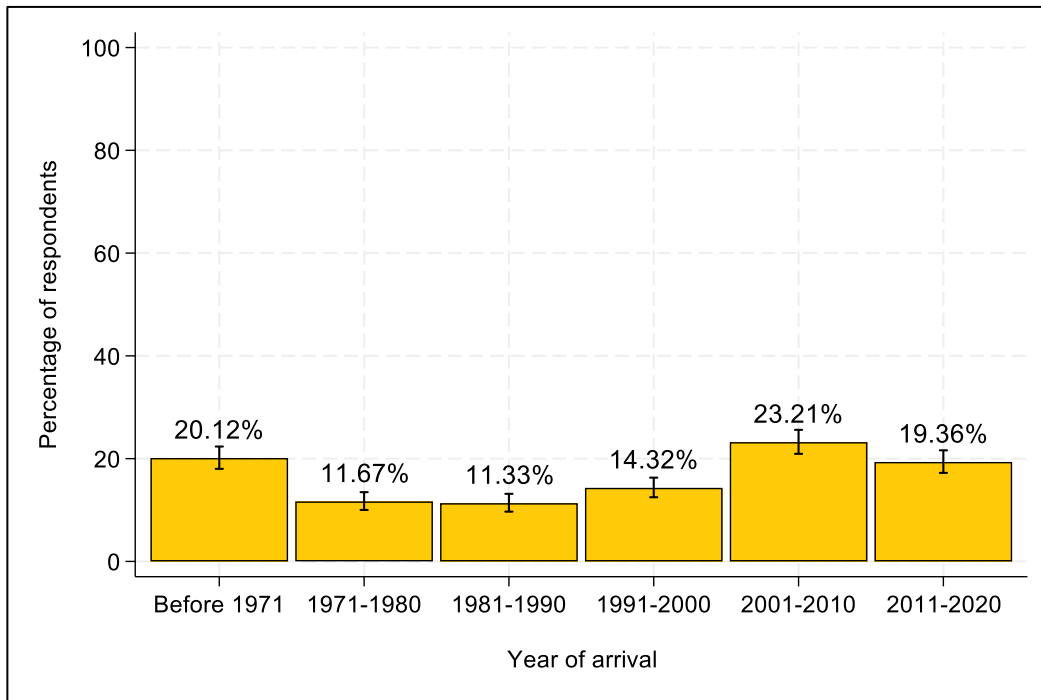
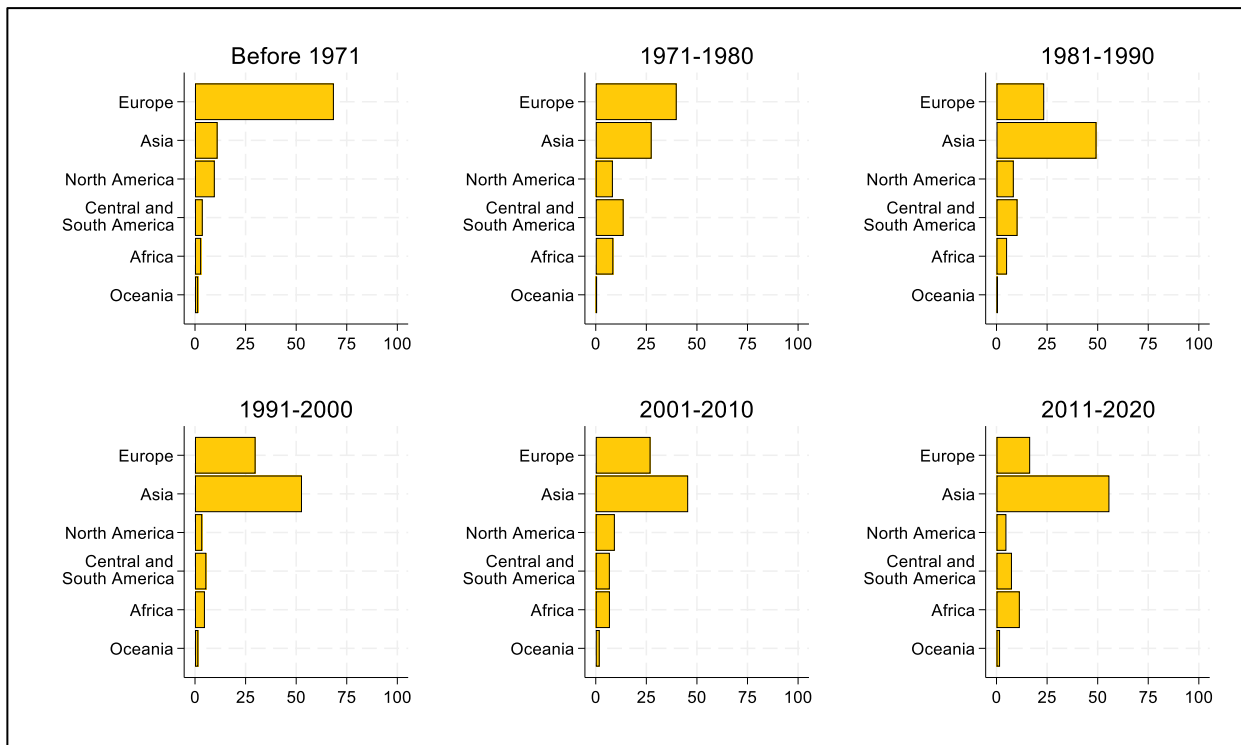


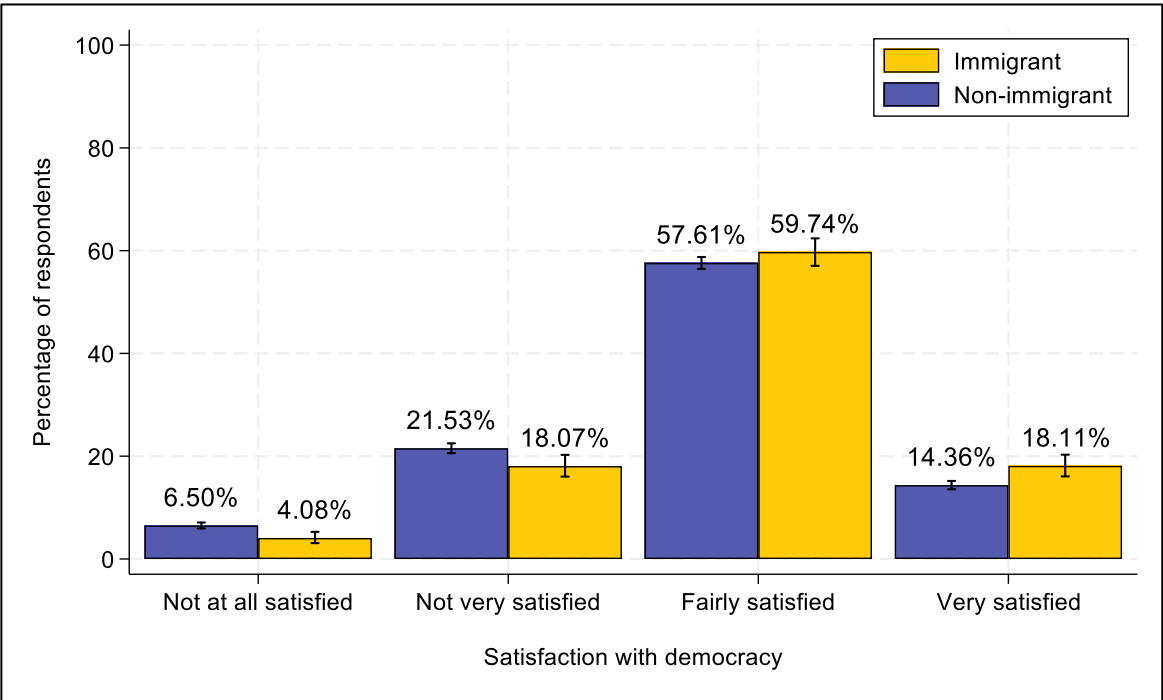
Figure 4. Patterns of Immigration in the 2022 Democracy Check-Up



Immigrants and Attitudes Toward Canadian Democracy

Respondents were asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction with democracy in Canada on a 4-point scale ranging from "very satisfied" to "not at all satisfied." Figure 5 presents the distribution of both immigrants' and non-immigrants' satisfaction with democracy. The percentages correspond to the share of respondents who answered a given response choice within their respective immigrant or non-immigrant subsample. The distribution of immigrants' satisfaction with democracy is slightly skewed to the right, which indicates that immigrants exhibit higher levels of satisfaction than non-immigrants. If we create a single variable measuring satisfaction on a 0 to 1 scale, where 0=not at all satisfied and 1=very satisfied, the average level of satisfaction with democracy in Canada is 0.606. Immigrants (mean=0.640, standard deviation=0.242) are more satisfied than non-immigrants (mean=0.603, standard deviation=0.252) by 0.037 points on average ($t(9742)=-5.21, p<.001$). This difference is statistically significant but not particularly large.

Figure 5. Satisfaction with Democracy among Immigrants and Non-Immigrants



Next, we estimate two OLS regression models to better assess the differences between immigrants and non-immigrants. We control for age, gender,³ education, and income in Model 1. We constrain our analyses to the immigrant subsample in Model 2 and add controls for the respondents' region of

³ Respondents answering "non-binary" and "another gender" are excluded from the analysis.

origin and length of stay in Canada in years.⁴ The models are reported in Table 1. Model 1 confirms that immigrants are more satisfied with how democracy works in Canada. Model 2 further suggests that Europeans are particularly less satisfied than immigrants from other parts of the world and that the length of stay in Canada is negatively associated with satisfaction with democracy. An immigrant who has lived in Canada for 25 years will be 0.035 points less satisfied on average, which represents a very small change, covering only one tenth of the distance to the next, less satisfied, answer category (the distance between two answer categories is 0.33 on a 0-1 scale).

The DC 2022 has questions capturing the level of satisfaction regarding the performance of the federal government under Justin Trudeau's leadership and the level of satisfaction regarding the performance of the respondent's respective provincial government. Respondents had four answer choices for both questions, ranging from "very satisfied" to "not at all satisfied." Both government satisfaction variables are recoded on a 0 to 1 scale, where 0=not at all satisfied and 1=very satisfied. The average level of satisfaction on this scale is 0.438 for the federal government and 0.473 for the provincial government. Both governments score much lower than the level of satisfaction with democracy (mean=0.606). Figures 6 and 7 show the satisfaction distributions for the federal and provincial governments, respectively. The figures suggest that immigrants are more satisfied than non-immigrants with the federal and provincial governments' performance. We find that for the federal government, immigrants (mean=0.491, standard deviation=0.312) are more satisfied than non-immigrants (mean=0.433, standard deviation=0.310) by 0.058 points on average ($t(9741)=-6.63$, $p<.001$). This difference is statistically significant and slightly larger than the difference found for satisfaction with democracy in Canada. As for satisfaction with the provincial government, immigrants ($M=0.493$, $SD=0.307$) are also more satisfied than non-immigrants ($M=0.481$, $SD=0.336$) but by only 0.012 points on average, $t(9737)=-1.32$, $p=.1879$. This difference is rather small and is not statistically significant.

Following the same approach as for Models 1 and 2, we estimate two regression models with each variable as the dependent variable, one controlling for basic sociodemographic characteristics (Models 3 and 5) and one for the immigrant subsample, also controlling for the region of origin and length of stay in Canada (Models 4 and 6). The models are reported in Table 1. Model 3 confirms that immigrants are more satisfied with the federal government's performance. Model 5 suggests a statistically significant difference between immigrants and non-immigrants for provincial government satisfaction once basic sociodemographic characteristics are controlled for. Models 4 and 6 show that Europeans are less satisfied with the performance of both levels of government. North Americans are particularly less satisfied with the provincial government. Further analyses (not shown) suggest that it is specifically immigrants from the United States who are less satisfied with

⁴ Non-immigrants are coded as the reference category for the region of origin or smallest value for the length of stay in Canada. The immigrant dummy captures the variance associated with having data for these questions.

provincial government performance. Finally, immigrants who have lived longer in Canada are less satisfied, although the difference is only significant for federal government satisfaction.

Table 1. Immigration Status and Democratic Satisfaction

Dependent variable	Satisfaction with democracy		Satisfaction with federal gov.		Satisfaction with provincial gov.	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Models						
Immigrant (ref: non-immigrant)	0.04***		0.06***		0.03***	
	(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)	
Female (ref: male)	0.01	-0.02	0.04***	0.03	-0.02**	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Age	0.00***	0.00*	-0.00***	-0.00	0.00***	0.00**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education (ref: no university)	0.03***	0.01	0.04***	0.01	-0.02**	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Income (0-1 scale)	0.05***	0.03	-0.00	-0.10**	0.04*	0.05
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.04)
Region of origin (ref: Asia)						
Europe		-0.05**		-0.08***		-0.10***
		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)
Africa		0.01		0.04		-0.02
		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)
Central/South America		-0.02		-0.01		-0.06
		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)
North America		-0.02		-0.05		-0.21***
		(0.02)		(0.04)		(0.03)
Other		-0.05		-0.08		-0.17***
		(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)
Length of stay (in years)		-0.001**		-0.001*		-0.001
		(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)
Intercept	0.51***	0.62***	0.43***	0.64***	0.39***	0.49***
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.04)
R-squared	0.013	0.026	0.016	0.062	0.015	0.045
N	9,679	1,475	9,678	1,474	9,674	1,474
Immigrants subsample	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Survey weights	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 6. Satisfaction with the Federal Government Among Immigrants and Non-Immigrants

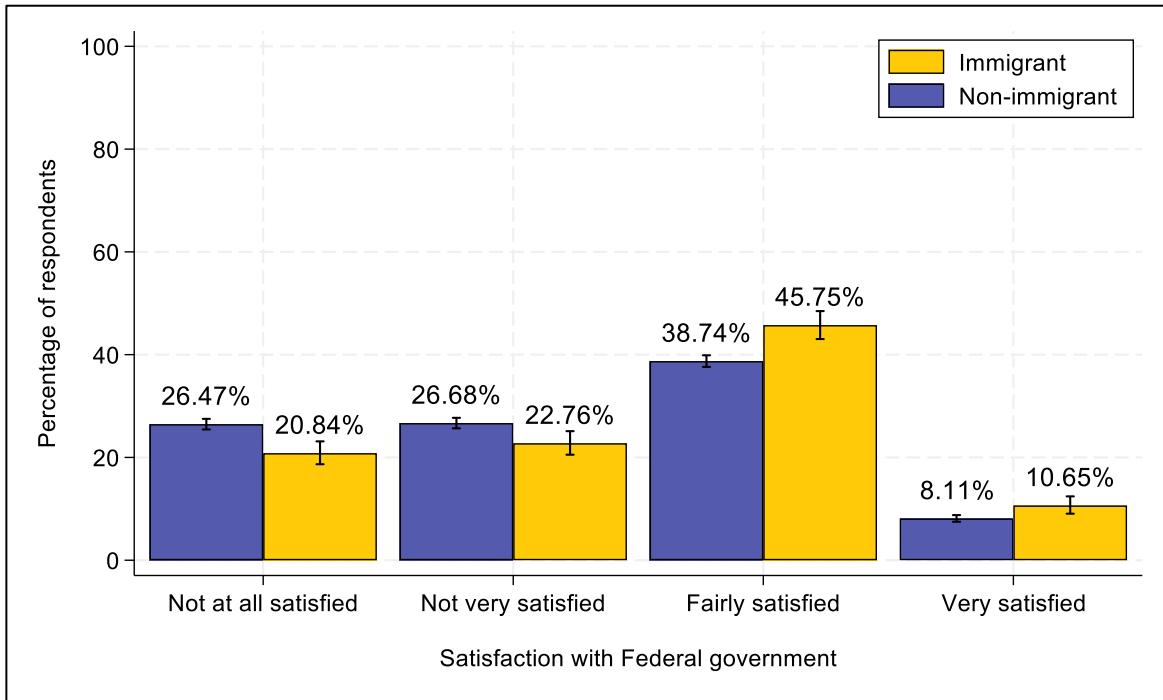
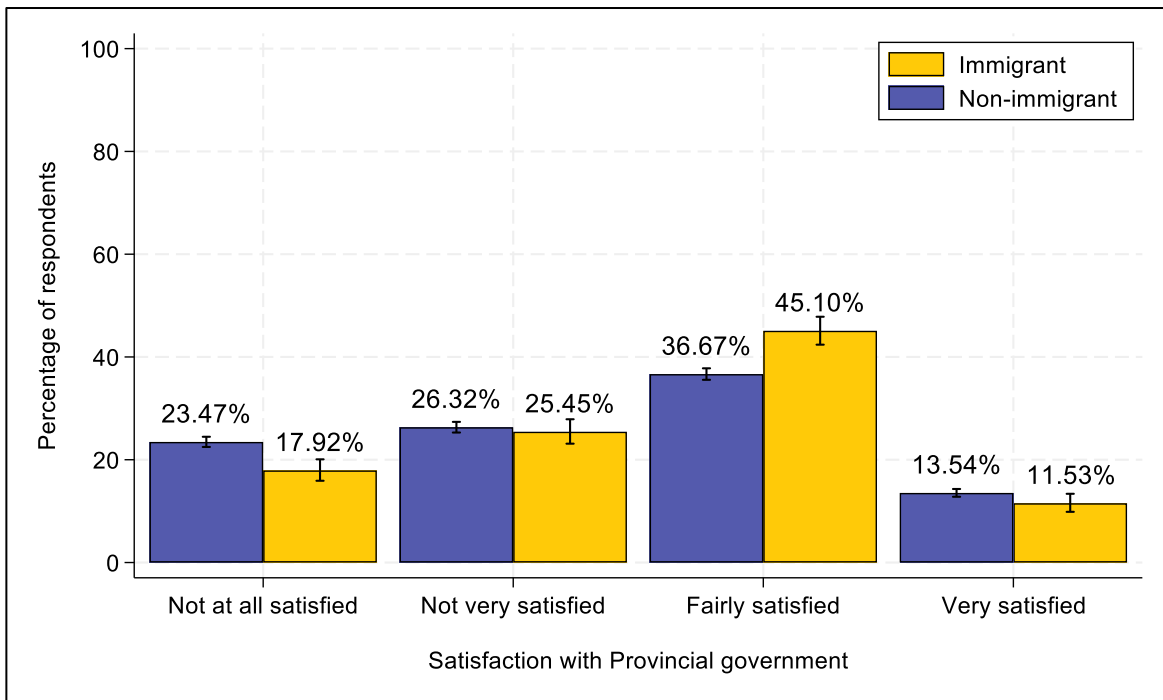


Figure 7. Satisfaction with the Provincial Government Among Immigrants and Non-Immigrants



Immigrants and Institutional Trust

The DC 2022 has a question capturing the respondent’s confidence levels in various Canadian institutions. Respondents are asked to indicate their level of confidence using four options: "a great deal," "quite a lot," "not very much," and "none at all." The variables are then recoded on a 0 to 1 scale where 0=none at all and 1=quite a lot. The seven institutions included in this survey are the federal government, the respondent’s respective provincial or territorial government, the courts, Elections Canada, the media, police officers, and the public service. Analyzing the distribution of responses for these institutions can provide valuable insights into public trust and confidence levels in these key pillars of society and, specifically, how immigrants feel about these institutions.

Before studying the confidence distributions between immigrants and non-immigrants, it can be useful to compare the mean confidence levels across institutions. Figure 8 displays the confidence levels for all seven Canadian institutions in descending order. Figure 8 also indicates the mean level of confidence for all respondents (first column), within the immigrant subsample (second column), and within the non-immigrant subsample (third column). All the differences across institutions are statistically significant (t-test, not shown). Elections Canada enjoys the highest level of trust, followed by judicial institutions (police, courts) and the public service. Both levels of government have low confidence levels, and the media has the lowest of all. Overall, immigrants report higher levels of confidence than non-immigrants in most institutions. Finally, it is worth noting that the differences based on immigration status are relatively small when compared to most pairwise differences across institutions.

Figure 8. Levels of Confidence in Canadian Institutions

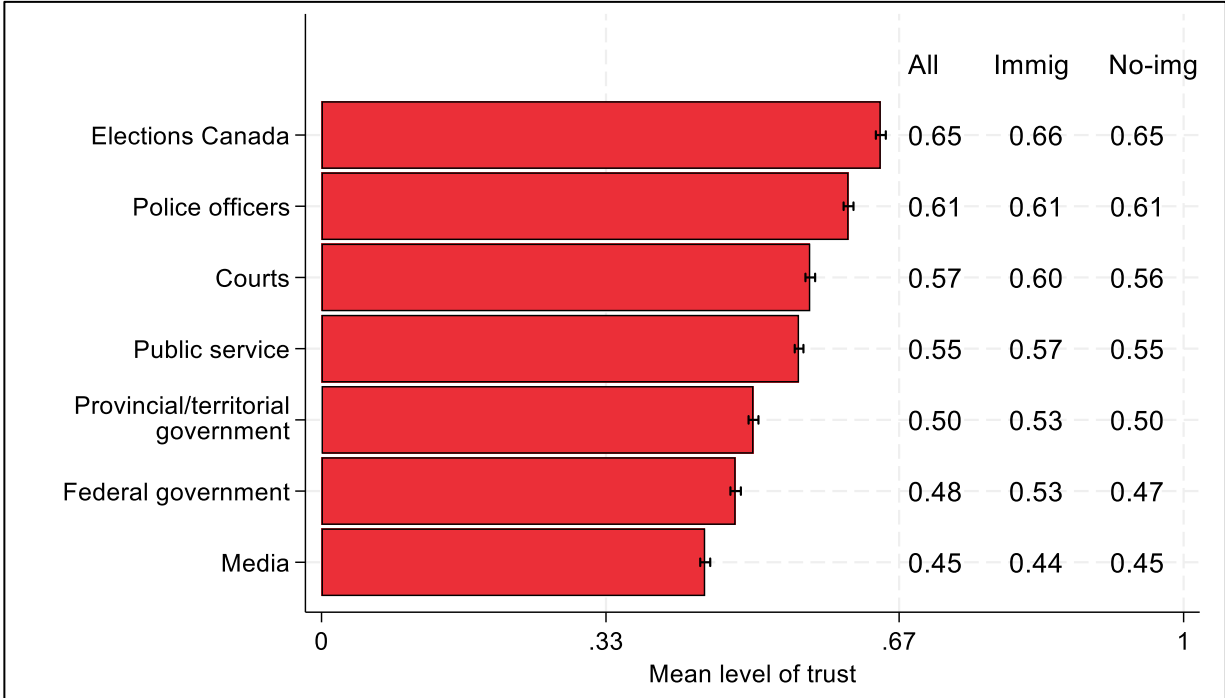


Figure 9 shows the distributions of both immigrant and non-immigrant levels of confidence in four Canadian institutions. The percentages for each subgraph correspond to the share of respondents who answered a given response choice within their respective immigrant or non-immigrant subsample. We can see that immigrants report slightly higher confidence levels in the federal government, the provincial (territorial) government, and the courts. Statistical tests (t-test, not shown) confirm that these differences are statistically significant. However, there are no significant or meaningful differences for Elections Canada. The difference between immigrants (mean=0.662, standard deviation=0.262) and non-immigrants (mean=0.653, standard deviation=0.271) is only 0.010 points on average ($t(9737)=-1.25$, $p=.211$). Although Elections Canada does not enjoy a higher level of trust among immigrants like the other institutions, it is worth recalling that this institution has the highest level of trust across all seven institutions.

Figure 9. Confidence in Canadian Institutions among Immigrants and Non-Immigrants (federal government, provincial/territorial governments, the courts, and Election Canada)

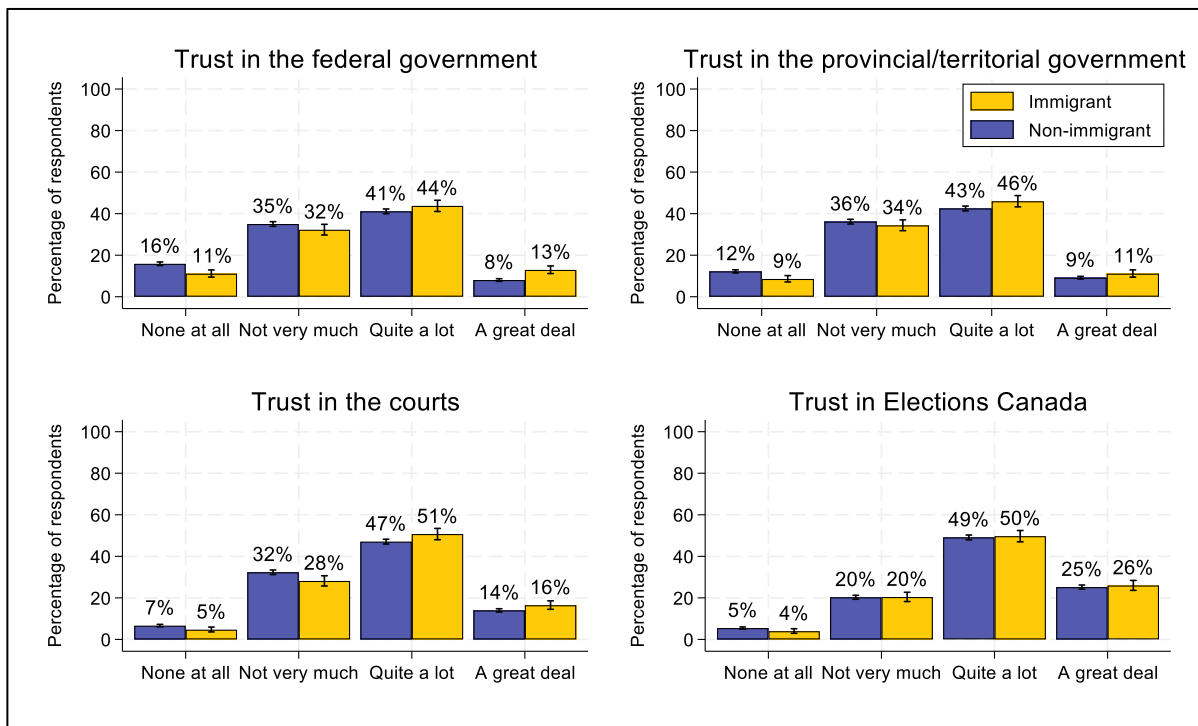


Figure 10 displays the confidence level distributions for the remaining three institutions (the media, the police, and the public service) and the average trust score distribution (for all seven institutions). Immigrants report higher confidence levels in the federal government, their provincial (territorial) government, and the courts. The differences in the distributions are small and difficult to identify visually. Statistical tests (t-tests) indicate immigrants report lower levels of trust in the media (-0.018, $p=.0232$) and the police (-0.020, $p=.0065$) but higher levels in the public service (0.014, $p=.0258$). The bottom right subgraph highlights how immigrants marginally trust Canadian institutions more.

Figure 10. Confidence in Canadian Institutions among Immigrants and Non-Immigrants (the media, police officers, and the public service)

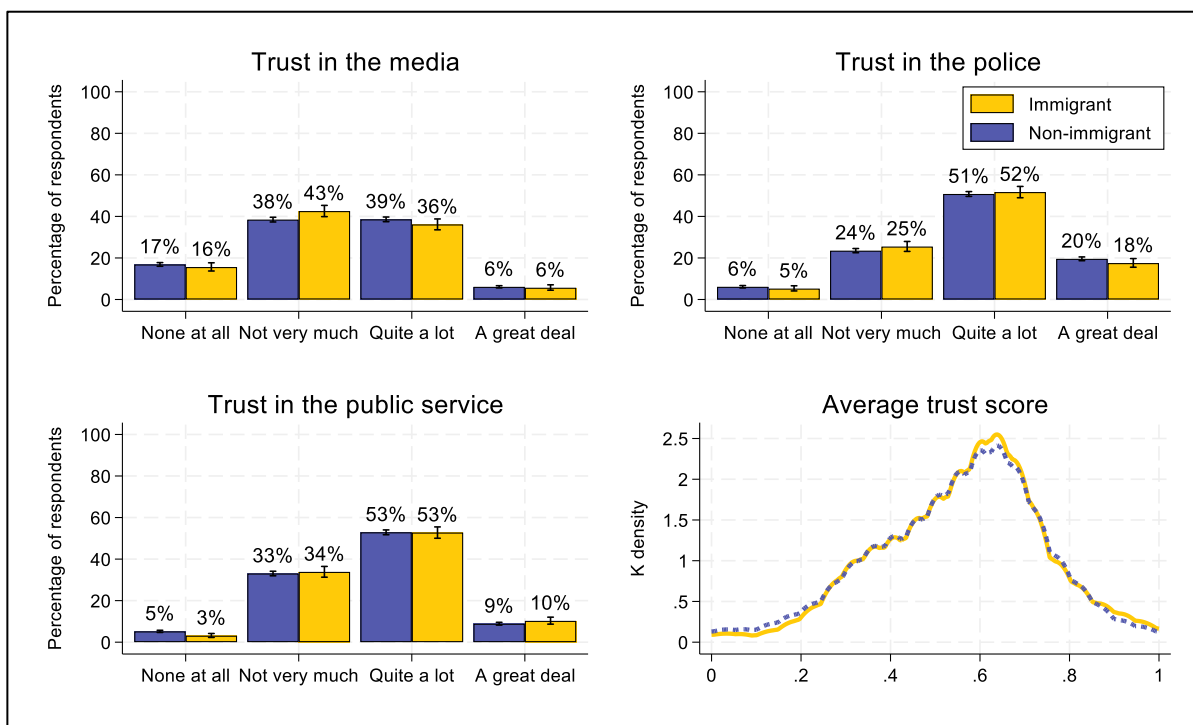


Table 2. Immigration Status and Confidence in Canadian Institutions

	Federal gov.	Prov. gov.	Courts	Elections Canada	Media	Police	Public service
Models	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Immigrant (ref: non-immigrant)	0.05***	0.04***	0.03***	0.00	-0.01	-0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Female (ref: male)	0.01	-0.02***	-0.03***	-0.04***	-0.01	0.00	-0.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	-0.00	0.00***	0.00***	0.00***	0.00***	0.00***	0.00*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education (ref: no university)	0.03***	-0.00	0.04***	0.05***	0.03***	-0.01	0.02***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Income (0-1 scale)	0.05***	0.04**	0.12***	0.12***	0.04**	0.09***	0.06***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Intercept	0.43***	0.43***	0.43***	0.48***	0.34***	0.40***	0.50***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Adj R-squared	0.012	0.013	0.037	0.055	0.016	0.059	0.009
N	9,676	9,679	9,675	9,675	9,678	9,679	9,676
Survey weights	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

We further assess the differences in institutional trust through multivariate OLS regression models. We first report in Table 2 models regressing confidence levels for each institution on age, gender, education, and income. The results are straightforward: once we control for these sociodemographic characteristics, we can observe that immigrants report more confidence in both levels of government and the courts and that there are no statistically significant differences between immigrants and non-immigrants for Elections Canada, the media, the police, and the public service.

Next, in Table 3 we present models focussing on the immigrant subsample and controlling for the region of origin, length of stay in Canada, and sociodemographic characteristics. We can observe similar patterns as discussed in Models 2, 4, and 6 (Table 1). Immigrants from Europe tend to have lower levels of trust, while those from North America (i.e., from the United States) trust their provincial government less specifically. Immigrants in the "other" category (predominantly from Australia and New Zealand) also tend to report less confidence in various institutions. In sum, immigrants from Western countries tend to be more critical of democracy and Canadian institutions. Finally, immigrants who stay longer in Canada tend to have lower levels of confidence, although the differences remain small, even after living a long period in Canada.

Table 3. Immigration Background and Confidence in Canadian Institutions

	Federal gov.	Prov. gov.	Courts	Elections Canada	Media	Police	Public service
Models	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Female (ref: male)	0.00	-0.04**	-0.03*	-0.06***	-0.00	-0.01	-0.02
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	0.00	0.00**	0.00***	0.00***	0.00	0.00***	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education (ref: no university)	-0.00	0.00	0.01	0.03*	0.01	-0.02	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Income (0-1 scale)	0.01	0.05	0.11***	0.11***	0.02	0.05	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Region of origin (ref: Asia)							
Europe	-0.05**	-0.09***	-0.04*	-0.01	-0.07***	0.02	-0.02
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Africa	0.04	-0.03	0.03	0.03	-0.02	0.04	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Central/South America	0.01	-0.04	-0.02	-0.01	-0.04	0.01	0.00
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)
North America	-0.04	-0.13***	-0.05	-0.00	-0.05	-0.02	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Other	-0.10	-0.19***	-0.08	-0.11*	-0.13**	-0.09*	-0.05
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Length of stay (in years)	-0.001**	-0.001**	-0.002***	-0.000	0.000	-0.001*	-0.001

	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Intercept	0.57***	0.53***	0.51***	0.52***	0.42***	0.48***	0.57***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Adj R-squared	0.027	0.055	0.040	0.055	0.017	0.036	0.011
N	1,475	1,475	1,474	1,474	1,474	1,475	1,475
Survey weights	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Conclusion

This report focussed on the differences in democratic satisfaction and institutional trust in Canada between immigrants and non-immigrants. To do so, we used data from the 2022 Democracy Checkup (Harell et al. 2023). Our findings provide valuable insights into the perceptions and attitudes of immigrants in Canada toward various aspects of the country's governance and institutions.

This report has two main takeaways. First, immigrants tend to report slightly higher levels of democratic satisfaction and institutional trust than non-immigrants. Second, these higher levels can be seen as a honeymoon effect as they tend to fade over time. These findings are in line with previous results in the Canadian literature (Bilodeau and Nevitte 2003; Nadeau 2002).

Going into the details, we find that respondents report higher levels of satisfaction with democracy than with the federal or provincial governments. Immigrants report higher satisfaction levels for all three variables, although the gap with non-immigrants is not particularly large. The largest gap is for satisfaction with the federal government. Immigrants' satisfaction levels are slightly lower for those who have lived longer in Canada. This negative trend is statistically significant for satisfaction with democracy and the federal government.

Examining confidence in various institutions, we find that Elections Canada and the police are the institutions with the highest levels of confidence, while the media is the institution with the lowest. We find that immigrants express higher levels of confidence in the federal government, their respective provincial/territorial government, and the courts. The differences between immigrants and non-immigrants are not statistically significant for the other institutions. Length of stay is negatively associated with confidence for six of seven institutions and statistically significant in four cases (federal government, provincial government, the courts, and the police).

Immigrants from Europe tend to be more critical of Canada's democracy and institutions in general, reporting lower levels of satisfaction and trust for most variables. Interestingly, we also find that immigrants from the United States seem more critical of the provincial government specifically.

Future research should continue to explore the factors influencing immigrant satisfaction and trust in institutions to further refine strategies for fostering positive engagement and integration. Additionally, ongoing monitoring of satisfaction levels among immigrants can help identify any emerging trends or changes in perceptions over time, guiding evidence-based policy decisions and initiatives. Ultimately, by promoting equitable and inclusive governance, Canada can continue to enhance immigrant experiences and strengthen trust in its government institutions.

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