



Resentment in the Canadian Federation

Canadians in every province are resentful about their province's place in the federation, but resentment runs higher in some provinces than others.

These are the findings of a new Resentment Index that we created using questions from the Confederation of Tomorrow 2022 survey. The results can help us better understand the politics of resentment that seem to course through the federation.

Many criticisms of the workings of Canadian federalism focus on fairness and equity – or the lack thereof. We can see examples of this in the Alberta government's recent campaign for a "Fair Deal" and its 2021 referendum on equalization, and more generally in the renewed discussion around Western alienation (or even "Wexit") in the Prairies. But commentators in every province – even Ontario¹ – have argued that their province is underserved, overlooked or ignored.

How much of this percolates down to the general public? And to what extent does this feeling of resentment vary among the provinces?

Using a unique set of questions from the Confederation of Tomorrow 2022 survey of Canadians, which touch on how people feel about how their province is treated in the federation, we created an index of regional resentment. Our index builds on the concept of place-based resentment, which occurs when someone identifies strongly with the place where they live, and resent political elites whom they believe cater to the needs of groups in other jurisdictions. The concept has been used to explain the resentment rural communities feel against urban communities² and has impacts for political behaviour, such as voting.³

The index combines answers to questions about whether respondents think their province receives its fair share of money the federal government spends on programs and transfers, whether their province receives the respect it deserves, whether their province has a distinctive culture that is misunderstood by the rest of the country, whether it has its fair share of influence on national decisions, and whether the four major regions of the country contribute their fair share to Canada. Taken together, these questions provide a snapshot of how resentful or aggrieved Canadians are about the place of their province in the federation.

Figure 1 shows the distribution on the Resentment Index, by province, ranging from -6 (least resentful) to + 6 (most resentful), with each provincial average indicated and provinces ranked from most resentful to least.

As figure 1 shows, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador stand out as having the highest average scores on the Resentment Index. Ontarians on the other hand, are the least resentful. We report the full distribution here, and not just the average, to display more information. For instance, while Quebec ranks,

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- ¹ M. Mendelsohn, 2012. "[Ontario staggers under burden of fiscal federalism](#)" *Toronto Star*.
 - ² K.J. Cramer. 2016. [The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker](#).
 - ³ B.K. Munis. 2020. "[Us Over Here Versus Them Over There...Literally: Measuring Place Resentment in American Politics](#)" *Political Behavior*.

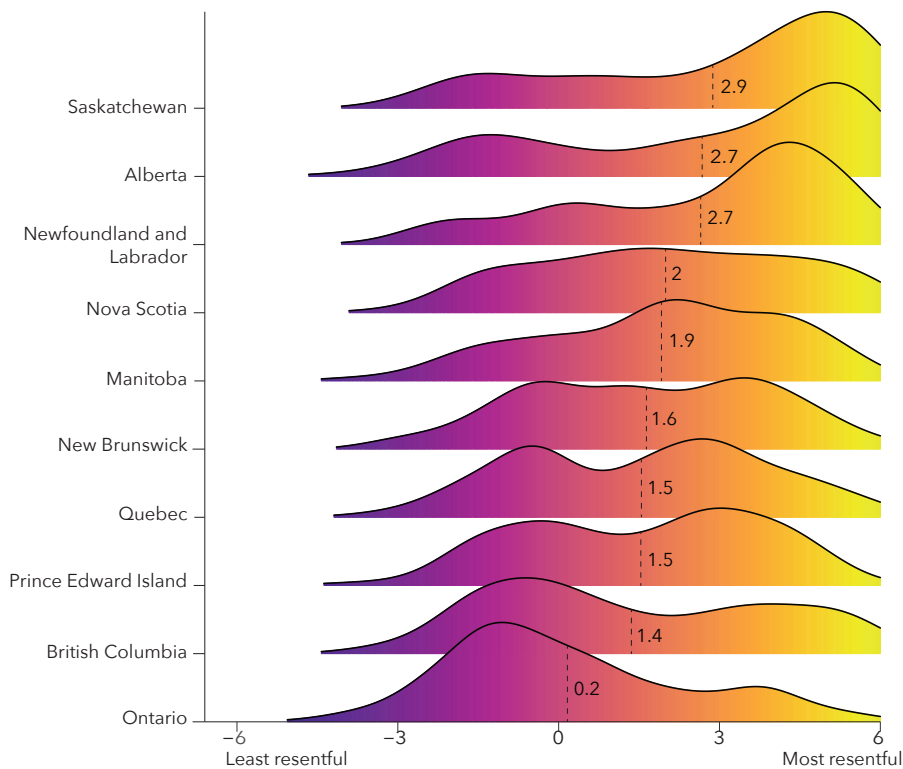


Figure 1. Resentment Index, by province

Provincial distributions with averages indicated. The Resentment Index combines eight questions from the Confederation of Tomorrow 2022 survey of Canadians. We excluded the North due to limited sample sizes in the three territories. The results presented exclude nonresponses and are based on a total sample of 2,662 respondents.

surprisingly, seventh out of 10, it is also the province in which the distribution is the most bimodal (two humps)⁴; in other words, it is the province where the population is the most divided on these questions.

DIGGING DEEPER

Looking at some of the components of the index helps to unpack this result. For instance, a closer look at whether Canadians feel like their province has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada shows that this is not what sets Alberta or Saskatchewan apart (see figure 2). Theirs is not a resentment based on a feeling of cultural misunderstanding, the way it is for Quebecers and residents of Newfoundland and Labrador.

When we look at perceptions of whether each region contributes its fair share to the country, the distinctive basis for resentment in the Prairies becomes clearer. Figure 3 shows whether respondents believe that other regions contribute their fair share to the country. On average, residents of all provinces think the region where they live contributes more than its fair share (for each province, the corresponding point in the chart on the question about its own region is to the right of zero). But there are important differences to note as well. For instance, only those in the four Atlantic provinces think that the Atlantic region contributes more than its fair share to Canada; everyone else disagrees. In contrast, residents in all provinces agree, to some extent, with those from Manitoba to B.C. that the West contributes more than its fair share.

The case of Quebec is revealing. Only Quebecers feel (on average) that their province contributes more than its fair share to Canada; those in the Prairies are the most likely to disagree. But Quebecers are also less likely to call other regions' contributions into question. This partly explains why the province

⁴ Only responses by francophones are included. The double hump is even starker when we include responses by anglophones.

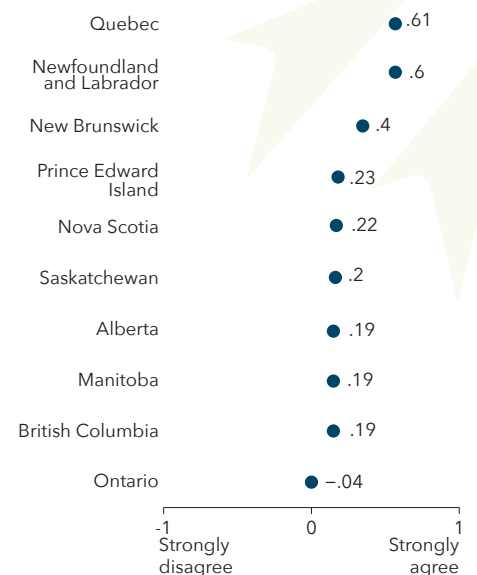


Figure 2. Agreement with the statement "My province has a distinct culture that is often misunderstood by people living in the rest of Canada" (provincial average)

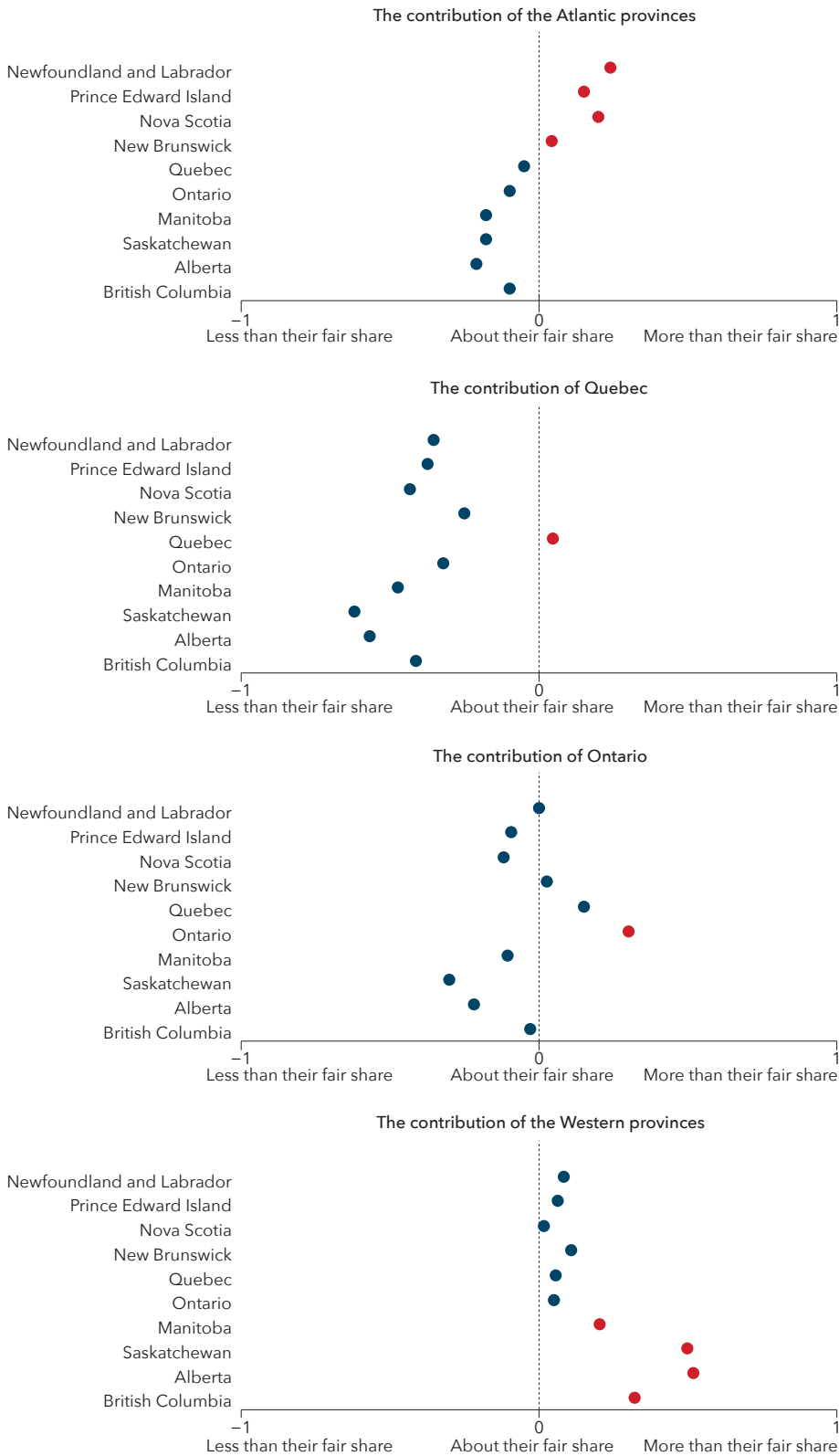


Figure 3. How respondents in each province rated the contribution of other regions

Provincial average. Rating of own region indicated in red. The full wording of the question is “And given the resources available in each region of the country, do you think the each of the following regions of Canada are contributing about their fair share, or more or less than their fair share?”

rates lower than some might expect on the overall Resentment Index. While residents of Quebec believe that their province contributes more than its fair share, they don't tend to view this in zero-sum terms (i.e., that if they contribute more, it must be because others contribute less). Quebecers may feel they are misunderstood and not respected, but this is not necessarily tied to the direct resentment of *other regions*.

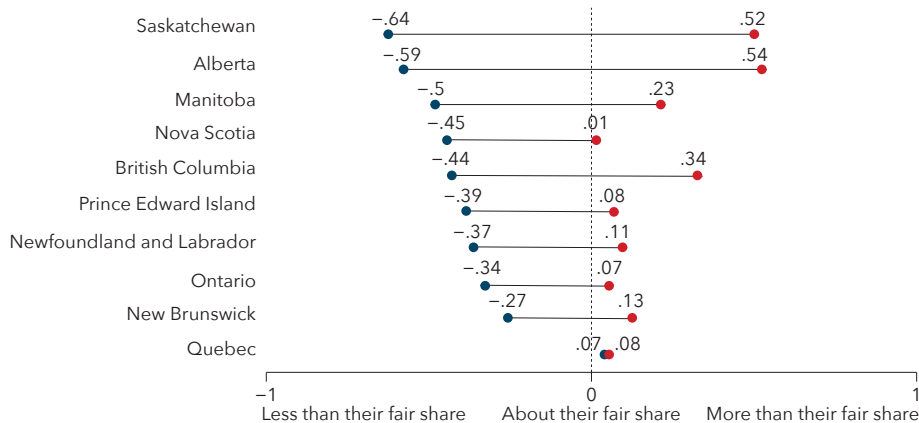


Figure 4. Comparing how respondents from each province rated the contribution of Quebec and the West

The full wording of the question is “And given the resources available in each region of the country, do you think the each of the following regions of Canada are contributing about their fair share, or more or less than their fair share?”

• Quebec • West

This stands in contrast to the situation in the Prairies. In these provinces, the sense that they contribute more than their fair share is combined with the view that Quebec contributes less. In other words, perceptions of unfairness are linked directly to resentment of other regions, notably Quebec.

To make the contrast clearer, figure 4 shows how each province sees the West’s contribution to Canada compared to that of Quebec. The large distance between the two points at either end of the bars in the three Prairie provinces is not mirrored in Quebec.

IMPLICATIONS

These results have two main implications. The first is that they can expand our understanding of the politics of resentment in the federation. It is now perhaps less mystifying why Quebecers think they are looked down upon⁵ by other Canadians. And it is also less mystifying why, rightly or wrongly, perceptions of “special deals” for Quebec have such potential to inflame opinions in other parts of the country. As we have written elsewhere⁶, we face a paradox in that the practice of asymmetrical federalism is presented as a way of alleviating Quebec’s frustrations with federalism, but it exacerbates them in the rest of the country. Our new Resentment Index helps bring this into focus.

The other implication is that addressing regional alienation in Canada requires much more than a more responsive federal government, as helpful as that might be. This is because the sense of alienation is deeply rooted in zero-sum perceptions of how the country works that go far beyond opposition to recent federal policies on issues such as energy or the environment. Progress will require a more honest dialogue that addresses the elephant in the room – namely the resentment of Quebec – head on. Whether the country’s political leadership – party leaders of all stripes at the federal and provincial level – are up to this challenge remains to be seen.

⁵ See for instance Breton, Parkin and Savoie. 2022. “[Francophone Quebecers increasingly believe anglophone Canadians look down on them](#)” *Policy Options*.

⁶ Confederation of Tomorrow 2020. [The Division of Powers and Resources](#).



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