



Public Perceptions of Immigration in Waterloo Region

Background

In June 2018, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada in discussion with Local Immigration Partnerships across Canada delivered the presentation “Support for Immigration: Public Opinion and How it Informs Our Approach.”¹ It was discussed that around the world, Canadians remain among the most accepting of immigrants.² It was noted that in current public opinion research public views on immigration in Canada continue to be mostly positive but that some polarization of opinion is taking place; in particular a decrease in the perceived positive impact of immigration as scope narrows from all of Canada to one’s neighbourhood.

The Environics Institute for Survey Research report “Focus Canada – Spring 2019: Canadian public opinion about immigration and refugees” states: “Overall, Canadians’ views about immigrants and refugees have held remarkably steady since last fall, and in a few cases have become more positive. As before, there is no public consensus on the presence and impact of immigrants and refugees, with significant segments of the population holding opposing views [...]. Opinions are more evenly divided when it comes to concerns about too many immigrants not adopting the right values and some refugees not being legitimate; but in these cases the balance of opinion has held steady if not improved slightly in the past six months.”³

To better understand local opinions, the Immigration Partnership commissioned research on public perceptions of immigration in Waterloo Region. Data was gathered through the 2019 Waterloo Region Matters Survey, a mixed-mode survey conducted by the University of Waterloo’s Survey Research Centre.⁴ Results present a snapshot of public opinion at this time and may change.

Survey Results

Results show similar trends in Waterloo Region as have been seen in Canada-wide surveys on public perceptions of immigration. Opinions tend to be quite positive related to questions focused on the community conditions and benefits of immigration, whereas they become less positive related to questions focused on the actions of immigrants and refugees and supports to them.

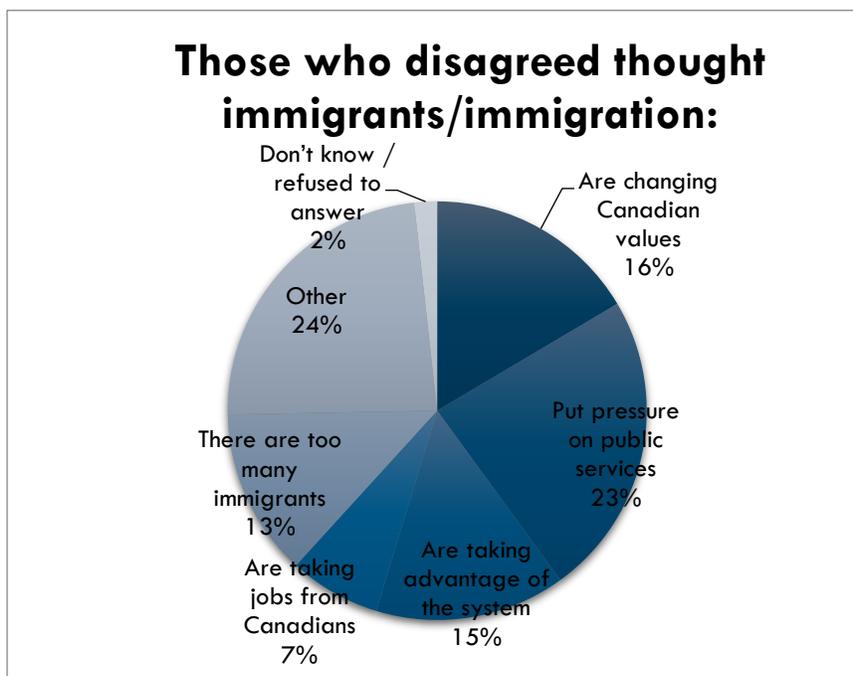
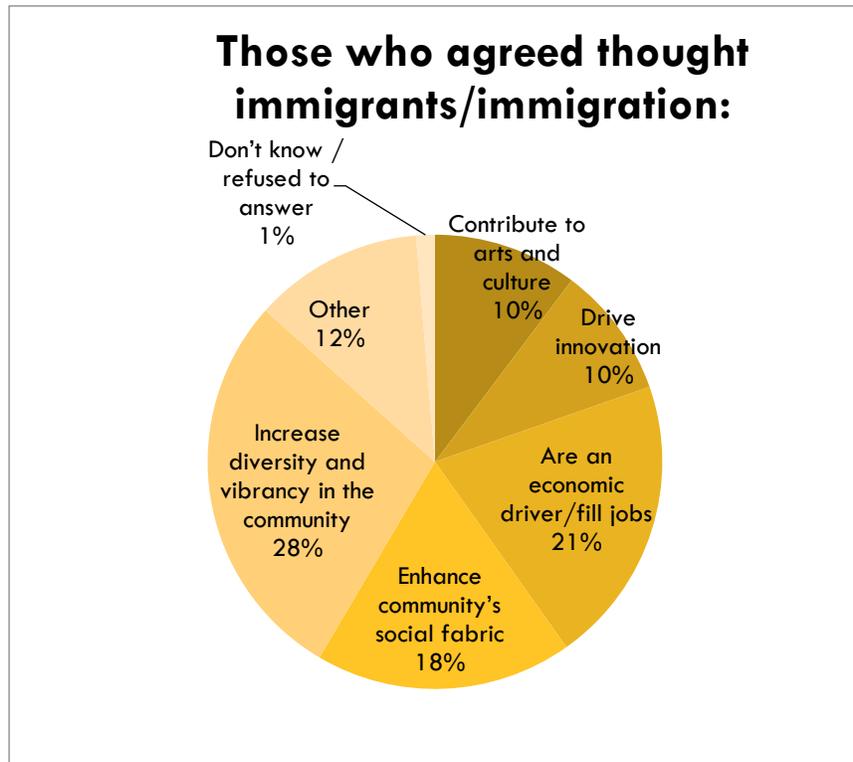
¹ Presentation on file with the Immigration Partnership.

² Gallup, World Poll 2016.

³ See: https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/focus-canada-spring-2019/environics-institute---focus-canada-spring-2019-survey-on-immigration-and-refugees---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=8dd2597f_2.

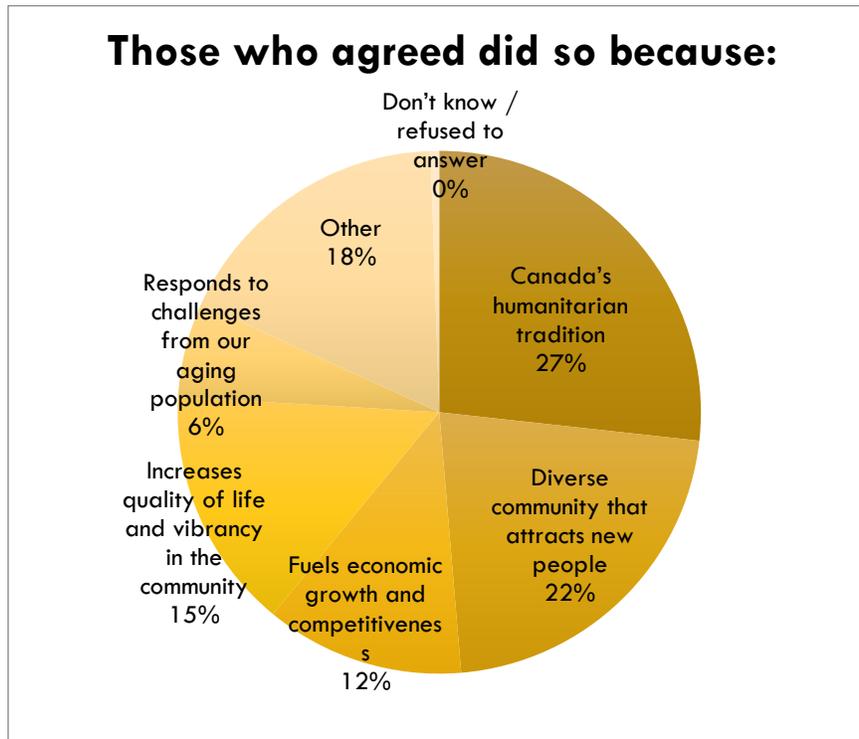
⁴ See: <https://uwaterloo.ca/survey-research-centre/>.

Sixty-six per cent of Waterloo Region survey respondents agreed that immigration has a positive impact on their city or township; 34 per cent disagreed.⁵



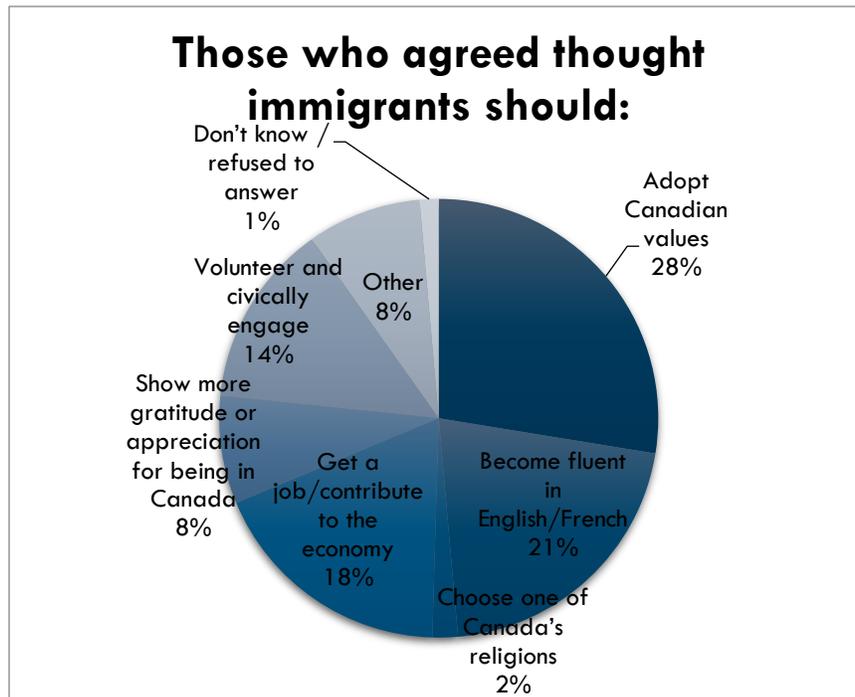
⁵ Question: "What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Immigration has a positive impact on your city or township'"

Among survey respondents, 72 per cent were proud of Waterloo Region's reputation as a welcoming society for immigrants and refugees; 26 per cent disagreed.⁶



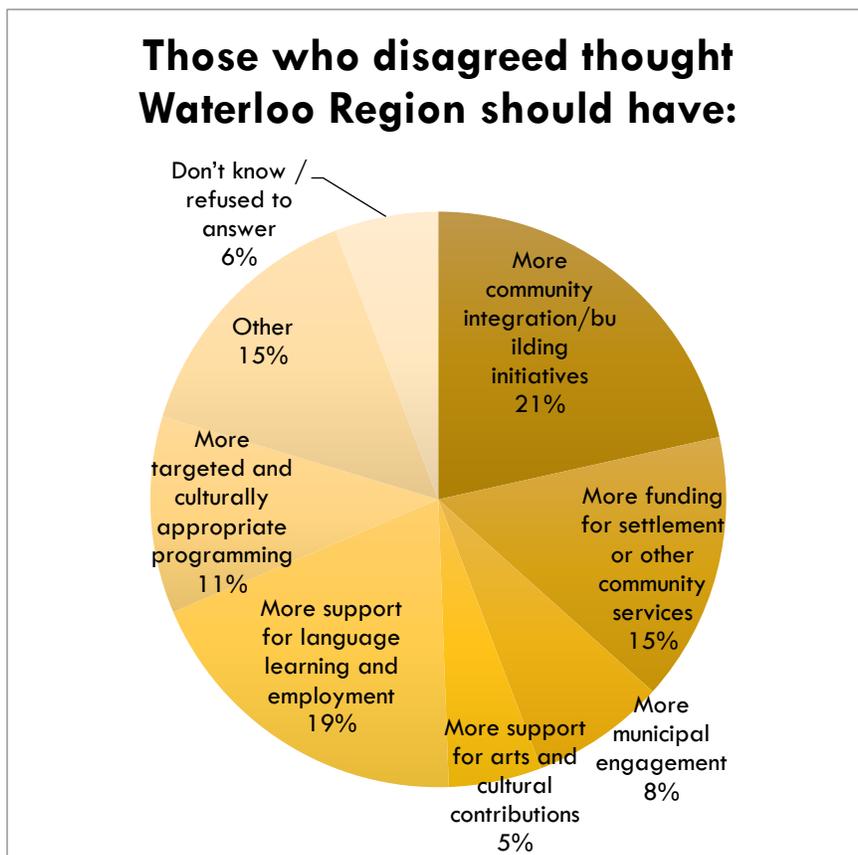
⁶ Question: "What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'I am proud of Waterloo Region's reputation as an open and welcoming society for immigrants and refugees'" Two per cent refused to answer or stated they did not know.
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Forty-five per cent of survey respondents agreed that immigrants and refugees need to do more to integrate into Canadian society; 53 per cent disagreed.⁷



⁷ Question: What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Immigrants and refugees need to do more to integrate into Canadian society' Two per cent refused to answer or stated they did not know.

Fifty-three per cent of respondents agreed Waterloo Region does enough to support immigrants and refugees; 43 per cent disagreed.⁸



⁸ Question: "What is your level of agreement or disagreement with the statement 'Waterloo Region does enough to support immigrants and refugees'" Four per cent refused to answer or did not know.

Analysis

While most survey respondents (66 per cent) agreed that immigration has had a positive impact on their city or township, a significant 34 per cent of respondents disagreed with this statement. In the 2016 Census, Waterloo Region's population was 535,154, so this 34 per cent represents 181,952 residents who do not see a positive impact of immigration in their communities. This percentage is particularly concerning when we consider that Canada is a country that has benefitted greatly from immigration. The top three concerns expressed by respondents who did not agree that immigration has had a positive impact are based on perceptions around immigration putting pressure on public services (23 per cent), immigrants changing Canadian values (16 per cent) and immigrants taking advantage of the system (15 per cent).

The questions asked in this survey contained positive and negative statements around immigration. This was done intentionally in order to provide an opportunity to respondents to consider immigration from different perspectives and freely express support or concern around immigration in Waterloo Region. In this sense, we can observe some mixed results, whereby statements focused on community action tended towards more positive responses and questions focused on immigrant action tended towards less positive response.

For instance, 72 per cent agreed with the statement 'I am proud of Waterloo Region's reputation as an open and welcoming society for immigrants and refugees' on the basis of: Canada's humanitarian tradition (27 per cent), being a diverse community that attracts new people (22 per cent) and immigration as increasing the quality of life and vibrancy in the community (15 per cent). On the other hand, a negative statement phrased as 'Immigrants need to do more to integrate into Canadian society' clearly shows a polarization in responses. While 53% of respondents disagree with this statement, 45 per cent agreed that immigrants and refugees need to do more to integrate into Canadian society. When asked why they responded that way, respondents said that immigrants need to do more to: adopt Canadian values (28 per cent), become fluent in English or French (21 per cent) and contribute to the economy (18 per cent).

Another area of polarization in responses is around the statement 'Waterloo Region doing enough to support immigrants and refugees'. Fifty-three per cent of respondents agreed with this statement while 43 per cent disagreed. Those who disagree think there should be: more community integration and building initiatives (21 per cent), more support for language learning and employment (19 per cent) and more funding for settlement or other community services (21 per cent).

It should be noted that positive attitudes towards immigration tend to be most prevalent among people with high levels of education. Seventy-six per cent of respondents to this survey do have a college or university degree, so it is quite likely negative views towards immigration in Waterloo Region are higher than what is reported through this survey.

Conclusion

Surveys have methodological limitations and it would be useful to clarify through qualitative research the results of this survey; particularly in terms of the negative perceptions of immigration expressed by Waterloo Region residents.

However, the results of this survey appear to be consistent with the findings of national surveys on public support for immigration in Canada. As immigration becomes a polarizing topic and anti-immigration rhetoric rises around the world, including in Canada, it is important to periodically measure public perceptions of immigration at the local level and the reasons behind those perceptions. The results are a useful tool in tailoring public messaging and education to unpack and address myths and misconceptions around immigration and foster public support for immigration at community level.

Appendix

Survey methodology: Random-digit dialed (RDD) telephone and web surveys. RDD sampling of households within the Waterloo Region population and random selection within the household are used in initial recruitment by the SRC. This approach more accurately represents the Waterloo Region compared to non-probability sampling methods, such as recruiting members from web panel firms. The sample used for the web component of the Waterloo Region Matters Survey was originally recruited using RDD. Having a random selection of respondents and data that are representative of the population are important aspects of data relevance and utility.

Timing: Survey in field January-March 2019.

Study population: Adult residents, age 18 and over, within the Waterloo Region, including Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and the four townships.

Table 1: Demographics of survey participants

Variable		Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	47
	Female	52
	Other	1
Age	Young Adult	26
	Middle age Adults	37
	Older Adults	27
Municipality	Waterloo	20
	Kitchener	44
	Cambridge	25
	Other	11
Employment Status	Employed (full or part time)	58
	Retired/student/homemaker	38
	Unemployed/other	4
Household Income	<\$20,000	6
	Between \$20,000-\$50,000	20
	\$50,000-\$80,000	22
	Over \$80,000	52
Education	College/university degree	76
	High school or lower	21
	Other	3

Sample size: 500 completed surveys, representative by region/municipality and age.

Question selection: Questions were selected based on similar questions posed in Canada-wide surveys by national polling institutes. Both positively and negatively framed questions were selected to provide a balance of options and avenues for respondents to express their views. Ratings at 7 and above were considered in agreement with the statement and ratings 6 and below were considered in disagreement.

Questions:

Preamble: The next few questions are about immigration within Waterloo Region.

For each of the following statements, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement using a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 10 means “strongly agree”.

