

# QUICK IMPACT



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## The great paradox of the North

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Canadians have a complex relationship with the North. While the territory is a strong symbol of our identity, and [we react strongly to threats to its](#) sovereignty, this vast region is often forgotten and chronically underfunded.

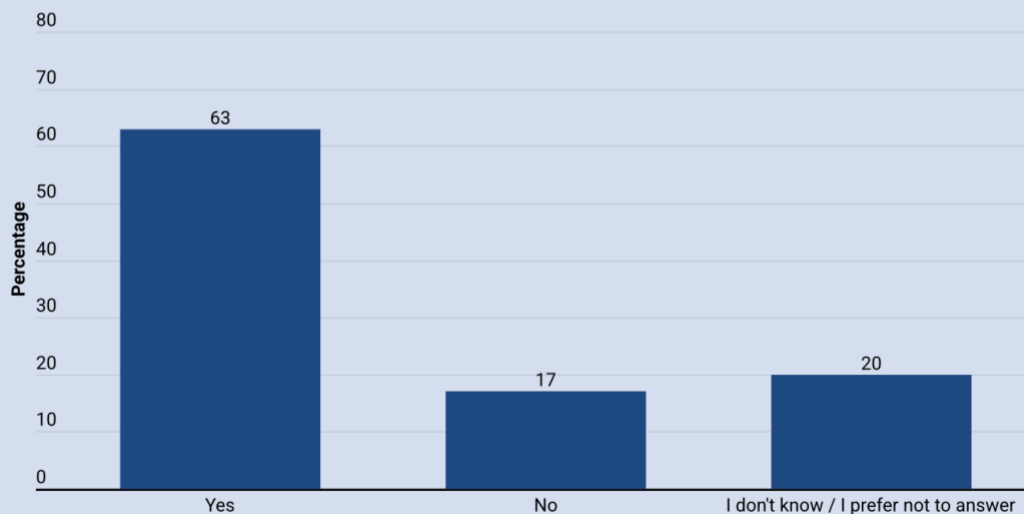
The empowerment of northern institutions and communities has been slow and incomplete. Local northern authorities are still dependent on the federal government. Nunavut was the last territory to sign [a devolution agreement](#) on January 18 2024. It will not be implemented until 2027.

With this paradox in mind, we surveyed 2,081 Canadian citizens to better understand their perceptions of the North, which includes the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Our objective was to measure their support for empowering this vast area. The survey was carried out in collaboration with SOM from July 30 to August 13, 2024. It revealed that Canadians generally support greater autonomy for the North, but consider the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic to be a secondary issue.

Respondents see Canada's North as a strategic issue. A large number (42 per cent) see infrastructure in Canada's Arctic as being of national importance, rather than purely regional (33 per cent) or local (16 per cent). A majority (63 per cent) of respondents support the idea that northern territories should be delegated more powers and responsibilities. This support is the same across the country's political spectrum. Equal support is found among Liberal (64 per cent), Conservative (64 per cent) and New Democrat (63 per cent) voters. Surprisingly, respondents who voted Bloc Québécois in the last general election were even more supportive (69 per cent).

Figure 1

**A majority of Canadians believe the federal government should give more power and responsibilities to the three northern territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut).**



Source : Mathieu Landriault and SOM, 2024.

## For autonomy, but against resource extraction

While the majority of respondents supported greater autonomy for Canada's North, they were divided over revenue the region draws from extractive industries – even as they are already well established in the North. These industries already account for a significant proportion of territorial government revenues and employ many northern residents.

A greater proportion of respondents (46 per cent) had a negative opinion of the mining industry in Canada's North, compared with 41 per cent who had a positive view. The same applies to the resumption of oil and gas exploration in Canada's Arctic waters. Among respondents supporting greater territorial autonomy, 71 per cent supported a moratorium on oil and gas exploration in Canada's Arctic waters.

In other words, Canadians are in favour of delegating more responsibility to the three northern territories, but they are opposed to the revenue sources most likely to fund these new powers. Paradoxically, 68 per cent of those opposed believe that natural resources in the North will be in high demand in the coming years.

## Environmental protection first

Our survey revealed that self-determination for northern Indigenous Peoples is not a top priority for Canadians. For 58 per cent of respondents, empowering Indigenous Peoples living in the Arctic came third or fourth out of four suggested priorities. The top priority for Canadians is protecting the environment, chosen by 32 per cent of respondents, while only 15 per cent put Indigenous autonomy first.

As a result, Canadians perceive the Canadian North as a region to be protected, rather than an area where communities live and work. This is also true of government contracting. Our survey shows that respondents give greater preference to awarding public contracts to companies adopting the most eco-responsible practices (44 per cent) than to Indigenous companies operating in the North (35 per cent).

## A gap between political discourse and public opinion

So there seems to be a gap between the rhetoric of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples espoused by Canada's political class and public opinion. For ten years, our governments have been adopting policies aimed at recognizing Indigenous ancestral rights and self-determination, but Canadians attach very little importance to this.

This confirms the results of our research carried out during the [2019](#) and [2021](#) federal general elections when we studied the proportion of messages on Indigenous issues posted by candidates from all parties on social networks. Candidates debate issues that are dear to the hearts of citizens during election campaigns, so these discussions tend to reflect the electorate's true concerns and interests.

We found that less than three per cent of social media posts dealt with Indigenous issues, and that these were mostly posted by party leaders on important occasions such as the [National Day for Truth and Reconciliation](#). What's more, issues affecting Indigenous Peoples were of particular interest to Liberal and NDP candidates, while they were conspicuous by their absence from the Conservative campaigns.

The results of our most recent poll show that, in public opinion, autonomy for the North does not necessarily mean recognition of Indigenous self-determination. And while Canadians support the autonomy and development of northern territories, they are not prepared to give carte blanche to the exploitation of natural resources at the expense of environmental protection.

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