

**IS THERE A NORTH AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE?
REFLECTIONS ON EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE**

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IS THERE A NORTH AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE? REFLECTIONS ON EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

For every self, there is a designated other. The United States often defines itself as “not Europe,” Canada as “not America.” Yet for much of the 2010 Olympics, there was a distinctly North-America-against-the-world vibe. Canadian fans carried “Go North America” signs and cheered American athletes in medal contention. National pride prevailed, of course, when the ultimate prize (for North Americans, at least), the gold medal in men’s hockey, was at stake. Nevertheless, the evidence of similarity among the two nations, including the fact that both teams included black and biracial athletes, poses the following intriguing question. If Europe can creep toward political union despite the manifest differences in language, culture, and political legal traditions, what are the impediments to greater unity between the two North American countries? After all, both are former colonies, peopled by waves of immigrants from abroad; English is an “official” language in both countries; both are federal regimes, both have first-past-the-post elections in single member constituencies; and both are influenced by British legal traditions. Now both have written constitutions, including protections for individual rights, that have elevated the power of the judiciary over elected representatives. In this context, are there cultural barriers to North American integration and collaborative policy-making?

This essay reviews recent survey evidence about how ordinary Americans and Canadians think about their national identity, the role of government, and each other. Our methodology is quite straightforward: we use data from the 2003 and 2006 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to compare opinions of the two publics on identical questions. This, of course, is just one approach to the measurement of political culture; it ignores the important role of literature, songs, movies, and official pronouncements and laws. (It also ignores other survey data sets.) Nevertheless, public opinion matters, both because it reflects and constrains these alternative expressions of national character and identity. Still, this is an admittedly partial view and our coverage is confined to an important but restricted set of themes.

Political culture is a patterned way of thinking about political life that is widely shared, spans the generations, and excludes other values and customs. It helps define what actions are legitimate and what projects are feasible. What, then, are the ideational codes governing

official behavior in the United States and Canada? The scholarly literature repeatedly stresses these two sides of the coin: *American Exceptionalism* and a *Continental Divide*. The seminal statement of this argument is by Seymour Martin Lipset. He argued that the American Revolution resulted in two distinct cultural trajectories: the Whig and libertarian American culture emphasizing distrust of the state and the Tory Canadian culture accepting of the need for a strong state and respect for political authority.

Lipset, of course, was not alone in arguing for American exceptionalism. Many scholars agree that the United States is an “ideological” nation united by a civic religion emphasizing individualism, egalitarianism, anti-statism, and populism. These values, he and others argue, have influenced American life in all domains, resulting in a diminished welfare state, a marketplace for religious commitment, an unusual level of philanthropic activity, and voluntarism. In addition, Americans are thought to be unusually patriotic, viewing themselves as a nation blessed by God, “a City on a Hill.” In his recent book, *Who Are We? Challenges to American National Identity*, Samuel Huntington worries that Mexican immigration along with the embrace of multiculturalism by modern elites will cause America’s common culture—an amalgam of individualism, religiosity, and patriotism spoke in English—to atrophy. For him and many others, to be an American means assimilation to this common culture.

In *Continental Divide*, Lipset saw the Canadian political culture as lacking a single unifying creed (and in saying this he was not remarking primarily of the uniqueness of Quebec or taking up the Two Solitudes metaphor.). The supposedly Tory roots of Canadian political culture dictated solidarity, social order, and a strong government in contrast to American individualism and hostility to authority. Canadian collectivism supports a larger governmental role in society and the economy, resulting in a welfare state similar to those in Western Europe. Perhaps because of continued historical ties to Britain and France, Canadians are described as less nationalistic, an assertion which echoes in popular depictions of Canadians today as more self-effacing, less brash, and less openly patriotic than their neighbors to the South.

The historical accuracy and empirical validity of these capsule descriptions naturally have been questioned and it is easy to point to more complexity and internal variation than this image of modal cultural traits allows for. And this is no idle matter, since the durability of a continental divide has implications for how publics in the two countries might approve proposed reforms

both internally and in their foreign, economic, and military relations. In other words, political culture can shape the direction of North America's future so a look at contemporary American and Canadian political values compare is timely. In doing so, we shall look not only at gross comparisons at the national level but also at how possible differences between Francophone and Anglophone Canadians and between native-born and immigrant residents in both countries affect the overall picture and the possibility of greater convergence in the future.

We focus on four main themes:

1. Patriotism and National Attachment
2. Definitions of the "true" American/Canadian
3. Immigration and Multiculturalism
4. Individual responsibility and the role of the state.

We also comment briefly on some scattered evidence about how the two nations view each other.

National Identity

From a psychological perspective, national identity has three dimensions. The first is cognitive and refers to self-categorization or how one answers the *Who Am I?* question. The second dimension is affective or emotional, referring to feelings of closeness to or attachment with one's country and fellow citizens. Patriotism or love of one's country is an obvious indicator. Finally, there is the normative content of a nation's identity, ideas about what makes it unique. Here one asks about how the prototypical American or Canadian is conceived, something that identifies the subjective boundaries between "Us" and "Them." The ISSP data allow us to address all three aspects of American and Canadian identity.

Who Am I?

The ISSP's identity questionnaire opens with a list of ten characteristics and asks respondents to choose the first, second, and third most important among them when they "think of" themselves. Options include national, regional, religious, ethnic, occupational, and demographic identities. As it happens, Canadians and Americans alike tend *not* to choose geographic entities—neither nation nor region—when they identify themselves. Family relationships overwhelmingly dominate the self-concept, followed by occupation

and religion. But Canadians are more likely than Americans to pick out Canada or their region (“the part of Canada you live in”) as one of the top three identities. According to Figure 1, 34 percent of Canadians pick the nationality as one of the three identities and 38 percent choose their region. Americans are almost as likely as Canadians to choose their region as part of their identity, but are much less likely to choose the nationality. Within Canada, the propensity to choose nationality and region varies across critical subgroups. Not surprisingly, Quebec Francophones are less likely than other Canadians to choose the (presumably Canadian) nationality and more likely to choose (presumably) Quebec as part of their identity. Even so they are more likely to say “nationality” than Americans are (although for some nationality may mean Québécois). The gap between immigrants¹ and natives is similarly big. The US also exhibits an immigrant/native gap, but in the opposite direction: immigrants are more likely than natives to identify as American (although not more American than their Canadian counterparts do as Canadian).

Our first foray yields a mild surprise, then. Although in neither country is nationality or region a reflexive first choice in self-identification, Canadians are more likely than Americans to call their nationality to mind in their self-definition.

Warmth of Feeling

Does the self-identification reflex cash out in emotional attachment? In the aggregate, the identification and attachment patterns broadly correspond. The biggest discontinuity in Figure 2 maps directly onto the identification pattern of Figure 1: Quebec Francophones are both less attached to Canada and less proud of being Canadian than other Canadians are. Canadians outside Quebec are only slightly less attached to their country than Americans are to theirs. In both countries, immigrants are slightly less attached than natives on one indicator but not both. In a summary sense, then, Canada is less morally

¹ Here as elsewhere in this paper “immigrant” is somewhat misleading but inescapably so. The ISSP does not ask respondents their country of birth, only their citizenship. Naturally, we class the handful of noncitizens as immigrants. The ISSP does ask about parent’s nativity and so if at least one parent was born outside the country, we class the respondent as an immigrant. Many of these respondents must be immigrants themselves and all will have at least some exposure inside their family of origin to an immigrant perspective. Of course, this means that we elide many subtleties in the multigenerational immigrant experience.

unified than the US. Even so, Canadians are generally proud of the place, just not always “close” to each other.

For all that, the general question about national pride strikes us as weak. Its lack of content makes it easy for respondents to gravitate to the most positive category and this, in turn, may compress apparent differences between and within the countries. An alternative is to ask respondents how proud they are of specific political, economic, and cultural considerations. The ISSP asks this in relation to ten factors: democratic performance, global influence, the economy, the social security system, science and technology, sports, arts and literature, armed forces, history, and fairness. Not surprisingly, this yields the more nuanced picture of Figure 3 (for graphical simplicity we do not present breakdowns within each country). Overall, focusing on specifics moves both Canadians and Americans some distance down from the clouds: mean values for the 10-item index are almost 0.2 away from the positive extreme. Both countries move roughly the same distance, although the Canada-US difference seems a tiny bit wider, with Americans more likely to express pride in their country’s history and achievements

The summary index masks striking differences for certain questions, and the direction of difference also varies across questions. For instance, Canadians are prouder than Americans of their social security system; indeed this is the one domain in which Canadians are prouder than Americans. This is not to say that Canadians distinguish their welfare state as specific reason for pride; in fact, the social security rating is right at the mean for all the elements. What Americans value most highly are the country’s armed forces. And here the Canada/US gap is at its widest (0.3 of the possible 0,1 range). The armed forces are the most highly rated object on the US side even as they are the second lowest on the Canadian side. (It is natural to wonder if Canadians have changed their opinion after a decade and 140 combat deaths in Afghanistan.)

Although national pride does not necessarily cash out in chauvinism, Figure 4 indicates a broad correspondence between pride in the armed forces and unconditional support for national foreign policy initiatives. On the latter, the ISSP asks if “people should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.” In neither country do majorities simply rush to the flag. But if the Canadian tilt is clearly to the negative, US opinion is evenly

balanced. The Canada/US gap is narrower than for pride in the armed forces, but subgroup variation within each roughly corresponds between the questions. Differences within each country (mainly within Canada, to be sure) are less impressive than the gap between the countries.

The Content of National Identity

What does it mean to be an American or a Canadian? A central issue is whether authenticity can be *achieved* or whether one must basically be born with it. One can ask, for example, that a person speak a national language, acquire citizenship, respect the country's institutions and laws, and experience the subjective feeling of membership. A country can make it very difficult to achieve some of these things. But the barriers are removable in principle, and removing them can be a zone of contestation. Other barriers are hard—even impossible—to break down. To have US or Canadian ancestry can only be acquired across generations. It is currently easier for many Americans to claim Canadian ancestry than for many persons currently resident in Canada! To be born in Canada or the US is not something one can achieve on one's own. To have lived in a country most of one's life is achievable in principle but it certainly helps to have born in the country in the first place, and a short duration can be a basis for denying access to citizenship. To be a Christian is also achievable but at a very high cultural price for some (including for many native-born persons). The ISSP asks about all eight of these traits, the first four "achievable" and the last four, "ascribed."

In both countries, respondents are much more likely to emphasize achievable characteristics than ascribed ones. The difference between Canada and the US is minuscule, with mean values around 0.9 in each place. Within each country, differences are similarly minuscule. Where the countries diverge is over ascribed characteristics. For US respondents, the mean value is 0.70; for Canadians the corresponding mean is 0.55. The Canada/US difference holds for all four ascribed characteristics but is biggest over whether being a Christian is necessary to national identity: the gap is 0.23. The gap is widest at the top end: where on the US side, 49% of respondents say that it *very* important to be a Christian, the share on the Canadian side is 22 percent. Not surprisingly, there is considerable variation within each country. The US pattern is clear:

immigrants are less persuaded of the claims of ascription than the native-born are, and this resistance extends to Christianity as a badge of membership. In Canada, the immigrant-native gap is as large as in the US. It is as large, that is, for ascription in general. For Christianity in particular, it is narrower—and with Quebec Francophones, the gap is nonexistent. So the gaps within in each country do not explain the gap between countries. Native-born Canadians, including Quebec Francophones, are modestly less likely than US immigrants and much less likely than native-born Americans to impose an ascriptive test.

Immigration, Diversity, and Multiculturalism

If Canadians are less fearful of immigrants and immigration than are Americans, they are more resistant to policies of multiculturalism. This patterns holds notwithstanding—or possibly because of—the country’s elaborate suite of multicultural policies.

Where clear majorities of Americans want fewer immigrants than at present, Canadian opinion is evenly balanced. And Americans are more likely to see negative consequences of immigration for their jobs, for the economy as a whole, for crime, and for the country’s culture. It is natural to wonder how much these differences simply reflect the composition of the population. The foreign-born percentage of Canada’s population is half again as great as that for the US and Canada permits relatively easy access to citizenship. It could just be that native-born Canadians and native-born Americans are very much alike, and so might be each country’s foreign-born residents, with the collective difference being nothing more than the product of immigrant/native compositional. As it happens, the story is *not* true. Differences between immigrants and natives in each country are roughly similar, gaps of about 0.15 in each country and for each indicator. Although Quebec Francophones are slightly more anti-immigrant than other Canadians, the difference is small, dwarfed by the immigrant/native gap. It is also dwarfed by the Canada/US gap within comparable groups. By implication, foreign-born Americans are more concerned about immigration than are foreign-born Canadians. Indeed, foreign-born Americans are only slightly less anti-immigrant than native-born Canadians. The Canada/US gap is not, then, the result merely of Canada’s having more immigrants inside its borders. The difference reflects some truly collective aspect of each

country's experience. It is possible that difference is contextual: native-born Canadians may just be more accustomed to newcomers in their midst. Another plausible factor is the relative balance of legal and illegal immigration. Canada is well positioned to choose its immigrants and is not a major destination for illegal migration. Indeed, some of the illegal immigration that does occur may be en route to the US. Yet another factor could be the relative diversity of immigration sources. If Canada has become racially quite diverse, especially in its metropolitan places, it is also diverse in the sources of its diversity. This contrasts with the fact that two out of three foreign-born persons in the US is Hispanic. Finally, there is 9/11. Although Canada has not been immune to national security hysteria and has generally accommodated US policy in this domain, it was not a Canadian city that was directly attacked in 2001.

It might be thought that the Canadian experience of selective immigration and rapid naturalization also encourages public discourse relatively favorable to multiculturalism. Certainly, in the realm of policy, Canada puts more multicultural goods on the table. Be that as it may, the Canadian mass public seems to be more assimilationist than the American one. For one thing, Canadians are slightly less likely than Americans to believe that newcomers can be fully part of the nationality. This gap is entirely the result of the transborder gap between *native-born* Canadians and Americans. Similarly, native-born Canadians are sharply more likely than their US counterparts to insist that newcomers adapt. Indeed, notwithstanding a small native/immigrant gap, new and old Canadians alike are more assimilationist than their US equivalents. Most assimilationist of all are Quebec Francophones, not surprisingly given the cultural context. This is also consistent with the generally less multiculturalist discourse in the province, illustrated by the events in Hérouxville and the debates over “reasonable accommodation.” The continental gap holds, although on a smaller scale, for resistance to official policies to help maintain traditions—a staple of multicultural policy. In both countries, opinion leans against subsidized cultural assistance. Here, however, lies a small irony: Quebec Francophones are more—*not less*—willing than other Canadians to accommodate other groups' traditions.

The Scope of Government

One area in which American and Canadian attitudes might be expected to diverge quite sharply is in the role of government. The conventional stereotypes of the two political cultures emphasize Americans' individualism and suspicion of authority in contrast to Canadians' stress on collective obligations and support for expansive state action. Free market ideology, it generally is held, has far less resonance in Canada than the United States and no Canadian equivalent of Horatio Alger comes quickly to mind.

One key factor might be political trust, a generalized willingness to let the state go about its business. But in his recent edition of *Citizen Politics*, Russell Dalton shows that between 1950 and the present, the trajectory of political trust was remarkably similar in both countries, with pervasive political allegiance steadily eroding. The measures of trust, however, seem clearly to capture responses to current conditions and assessments of government performance and do not directly assess either support for institutional arrangements and regime norms or expectations of government in particular policy domains. We know, of course, that there are clear differences in policies enacted in the two countries: the contrasts in health care, economic policy, education, and even government assistance for immigrants clearly point to a greater state role in Canada. These policy differences may reflect contrasting cultural norms regarding what should be the responsibility of government and what should be left to citizens' own efforts, and it is conceivable that these norms could complicate the evolution of cross-national approaches to dealing with interdependent problems.

Expressed opinion on policy is notoriously flabby, however. When asked if governments should spend more or less in a specific policy domain, respondents tend to be one-sidedly pro-spending. This is in contrast to a presumption in the opposite direction for spending in the abstract. Ostensibly anti-statist US respondents are no less susceptible to this pattern than respondents elsewhere. More telling are questions about whether the government should or should not have the responsibility for certain problems, which the ISSP explored in its 2006 round. The following problems were listed: controlling prices, financial assistance to students, helping industry grow, protecting the environment, guaranteeing living standards for the unemployed and the old (two questions), providing

decent housing, providing health care, providing jobs for everyone and reducing income differences. These questions clearly focus on domestic policy and do not speak to expectations of the country's international role or obligations.

In both countries the dominant outlook is that the government should take on responsibilities in most areas. Protecting the environment, protecting the living standards of the elderly, and providing health care are at the top of the list of perceived governmental responsibilities in both countries.

But Canada/US gaps do appear, although not always in the expected direction. Figure 7 focuses on the gaps and orders policy domains by the Canada/US difference. The gap is measured in two ways, to convey the upper and lower bounds of difference. The simplest indicator is the difference of means, where the indicator within a country is scaled to the 0,1 range. A slightly sharper picture is conveyed by the difference in the size of the within-country gap between the “definitely should” and “definitely should not” extremes. In four domains Americans are *more* likely than Canadians to grant the government a role: controlling prices, giving financial aid to students, helping the economy grow, and providing jobs (although this is a policy option with only weak support in both countries). In the other six domains, Canadians are more statist, although for the most part only slightly so. The biggest gap is for reducing income inequality. Indeed, if we focus on the “definitely should/should not” extremes, the gap is quite striking. (For comparison this difference is presented as a proportion.) Also striking when the gap is conceived this way is the difference over health care. Here, however, support for a government role in health care was high in the US, just not as stratospheric as in Canada.

In sum, the picture is actually quite mixed. Canadians are not systematically more likely than Americans to look to the state. It is true that in domains conventionally seen as part of the welfare state, Canadians are more statist. If we sum across health care, aid to elderly, aid to unemployed, guaranteeing jobs, and reducing income inequality, Canadians in the aggregate are modestly more supportive of broadened state action.

Moreover the differences that do appear are as likely to be the consequence as the cause of policy differences. Canadians, for example, have direct experience with universal compulsory health care and, although the system's merits and defects are hotly debated,

Canadians do not experience the system as something against nature. For Americans, in contrast, universality remains a hypothetical. A counter example might be opinion on financial aid for students. Canadians may downgrade its priority because postsecondary tuition tends to be lower in Canada and the Canada has no real private system to drain families' savings. In this case, the imperative for government assistance to individual students seems less compelling. Taken all together, the data hardly suggest a deep continental divide in policy culture. Rather, support for a greater government role in Canada has its roots in a different policy-making process and in different interest group politics rather than in general cultural values. The prospects for cooperative approaches to problems such as environmental protection, economic development, and immigration are not seriously constrained by the modal values of national publics.

Images of the National Other

We conclude whether by asking whether Americans and Canadians like each other, whether the similarities in their values and institutions are associated with feelings of mutual affection and trust that can usefully undergird intergovernmental relations. A 2009 Pew Center on Politics survey of national samples in both countries, asked Canadians how favorably they viewed Americans as a whole and asked Americans the same question about Canadians. Figure 8 shows that favorable rather than unfavorable opinions are overwhelmingly the dominant response, but also that the opinions of Canadians are more nuanced and moderate. Only 18 percent of Canadians say they have a *very* favorable opinion of Americans, even in the Obama age. By contrast, fully 39 percent of Americans are enthusiastic about Canadians. In fact, overall Americans seem as favorably disposed toward Canadians (89 percent) as to their fellow citizens (also 89 percent).

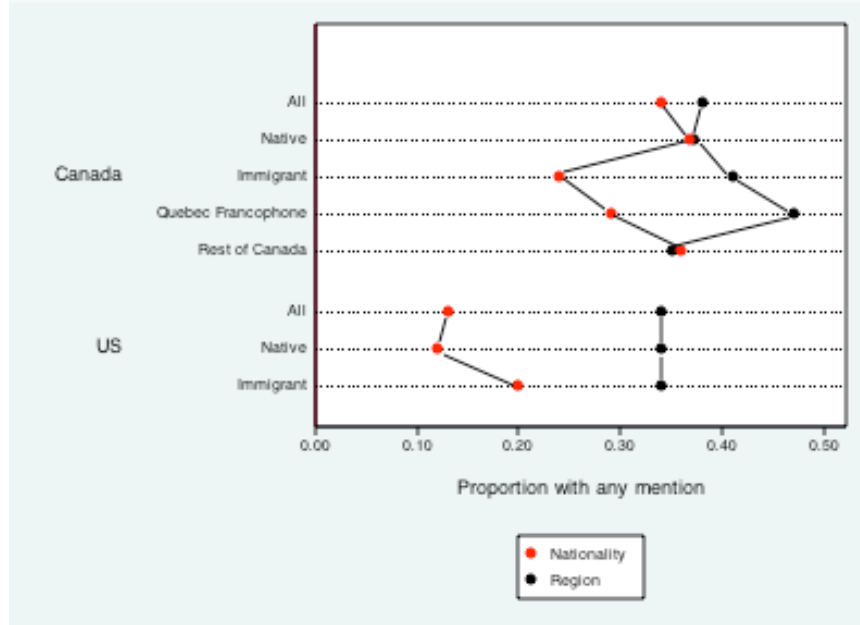
Among ordinary citizens in both countries, then, there is little evidence that their North American neighbor is defined as the Other whose example must be held at bay. In this regard, there is a disjunction between the values of the general public and the political postures of ideological elites. In recent discourse, the American right has portrayed Canada as a quasi-socialist, politically correct and wimpy other. The Canadian left returns the favor, pointing to the failures of predatory capitalism, harsh individualism,

and a warmongering foreign policy as an American identity to be shunned. This may be a case where being guided by the first 100 names in the Vancouver and San Francisco phone books would be safe.

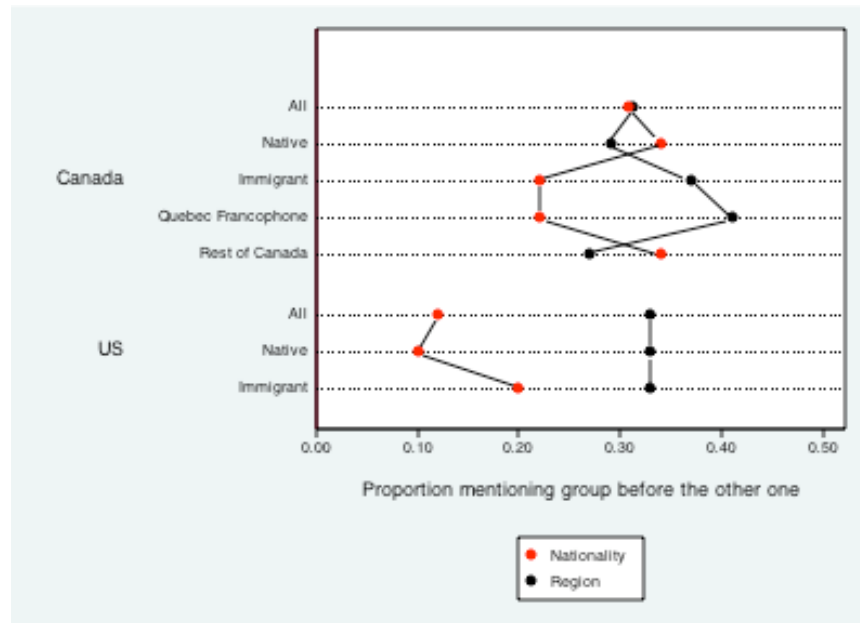
Conclusions

Once we get below surface expressions of pride, Americans do seem more solidary than Canadians: less divided on who they are, prouder of their achievements, and more willing to project power. By the same token, the American identity is more exclusive, more defined by traits that are difficult or impossible for newcomers to acquire. Although differences on policies at the core of the welfare state are modest, Americans are less interventionist than Canadians. These differences notwithstanding, the two populations hold each other in high regard.

In short, barriers to North American coordination do not lie mainly in the Canadian and American publics. The differences mostly seem modest, and most are as plausibly the result of policy differences as the cause of them. The barriers are, in a word, structural, not cultural. They may reflect different distributions of objective interest. They may reflect how interests are aggregated in the policy process, where each country has its own historical endowment and each country organizes power in its own way. But they do not seem deep in the DNA.



A. Any mention of country or region



B. Mentions country before region or vice versa

Figure 1: National and Regional Identities

Source: ISSP 2003-4

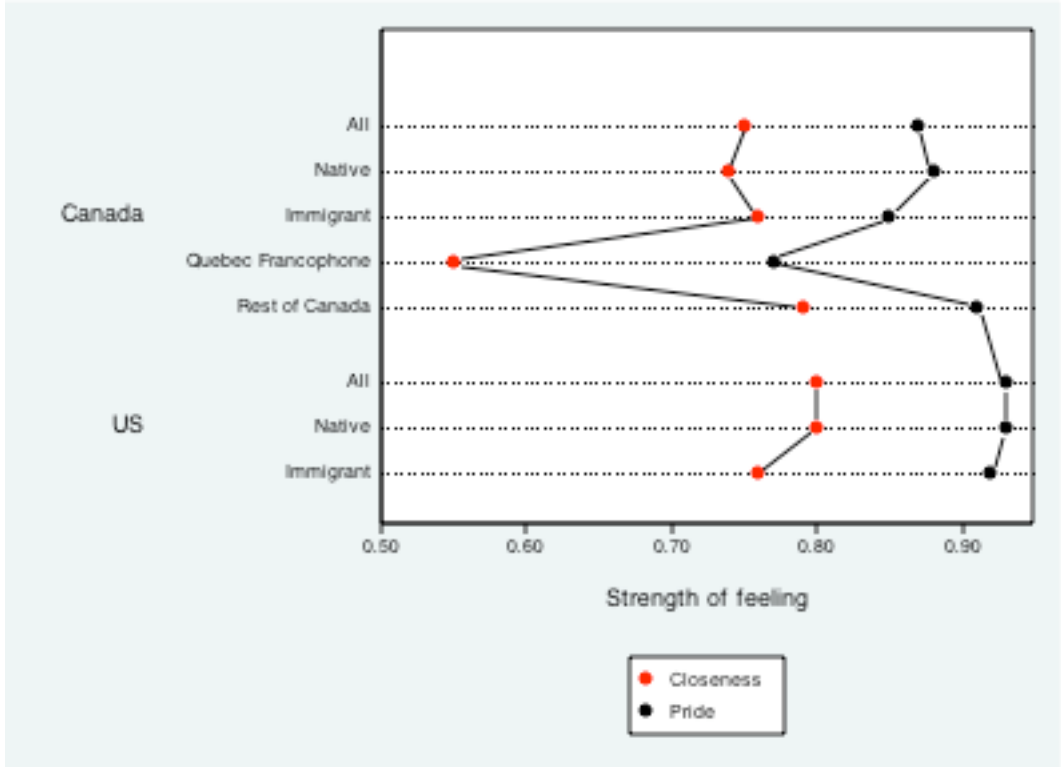


Figure 2: Attachment to the Country

Source: ISSP 2003-4

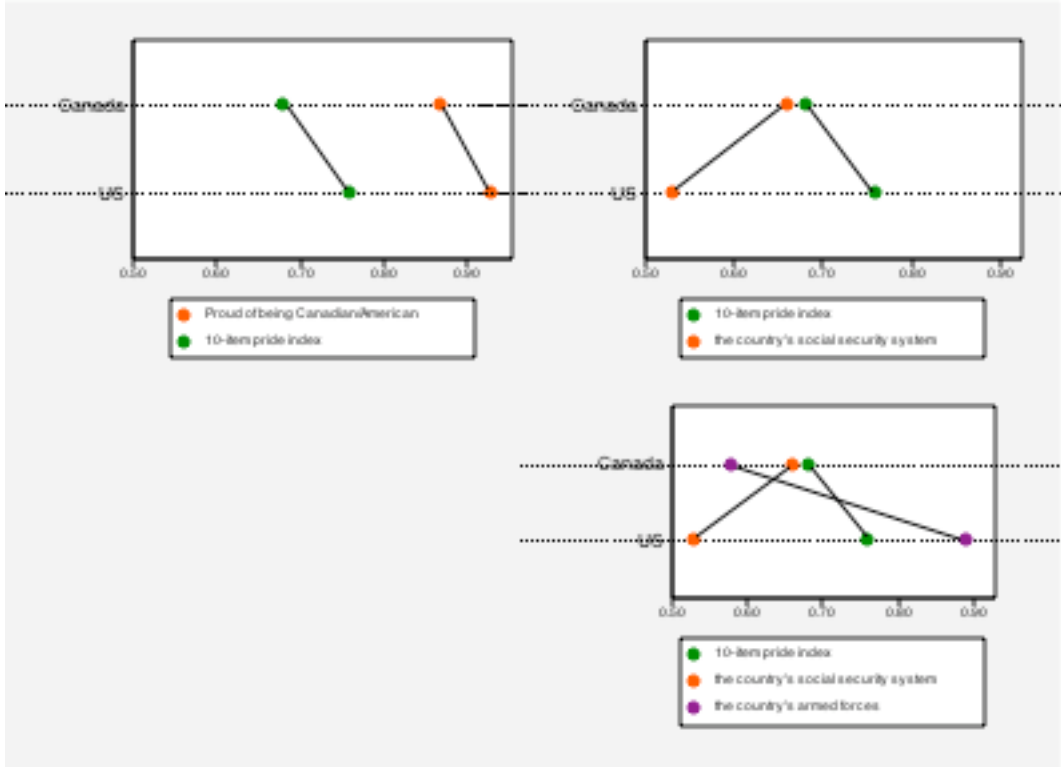


Figure 3: National Pride

Source: ISSP 2003-4

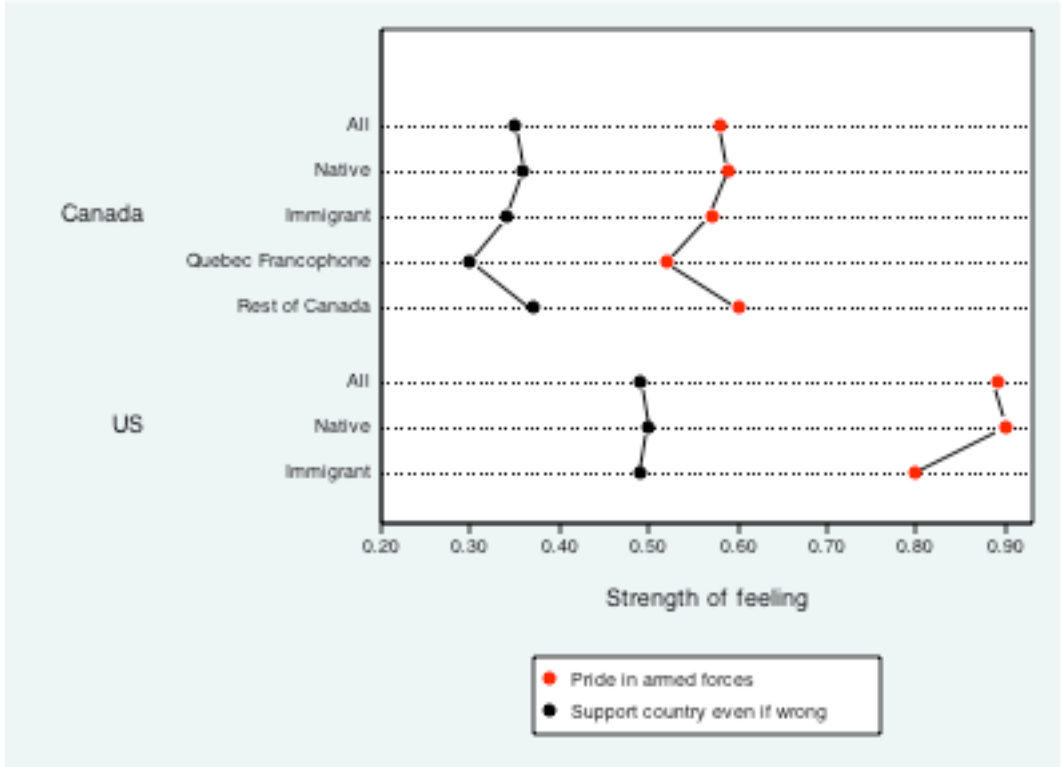


Figure 4: Pride in the Armed Forces and Chauvinism

Source: ISSP 2003-4

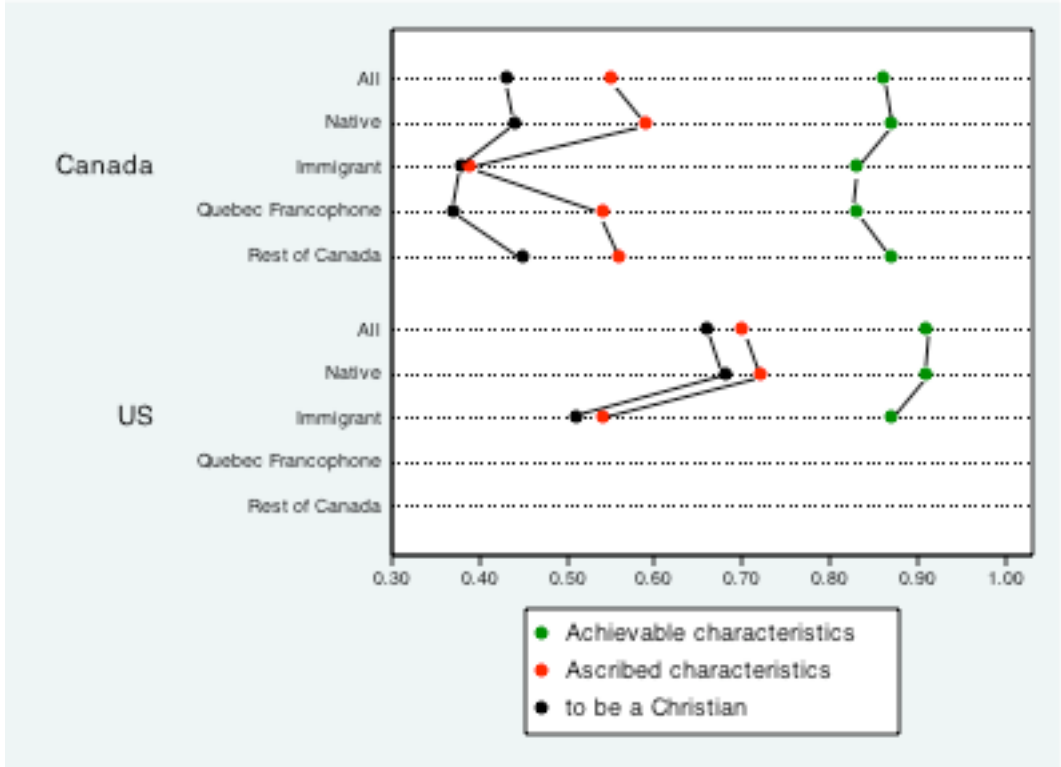


Figure 4: The Content of National Identity

Source: ISSP 2003-4

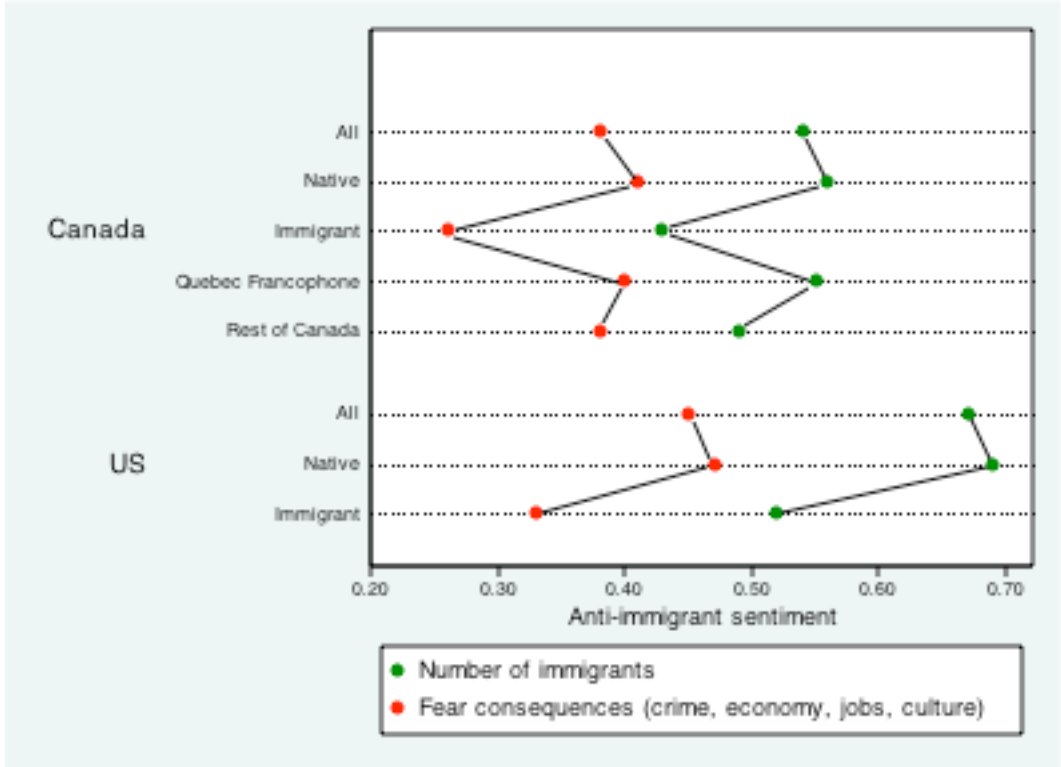


Figure 5: Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

Source: ISSP 2003-4

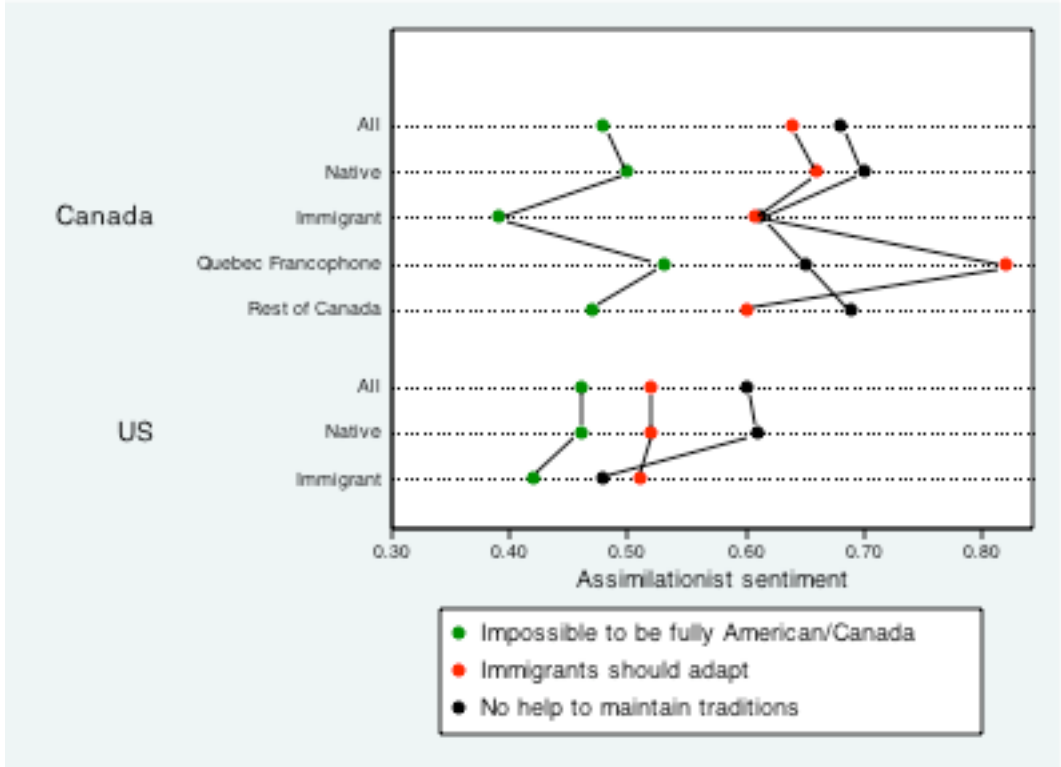


Figure 6: Multiculturalism and Assimilation

Source: ISSP 2003-4

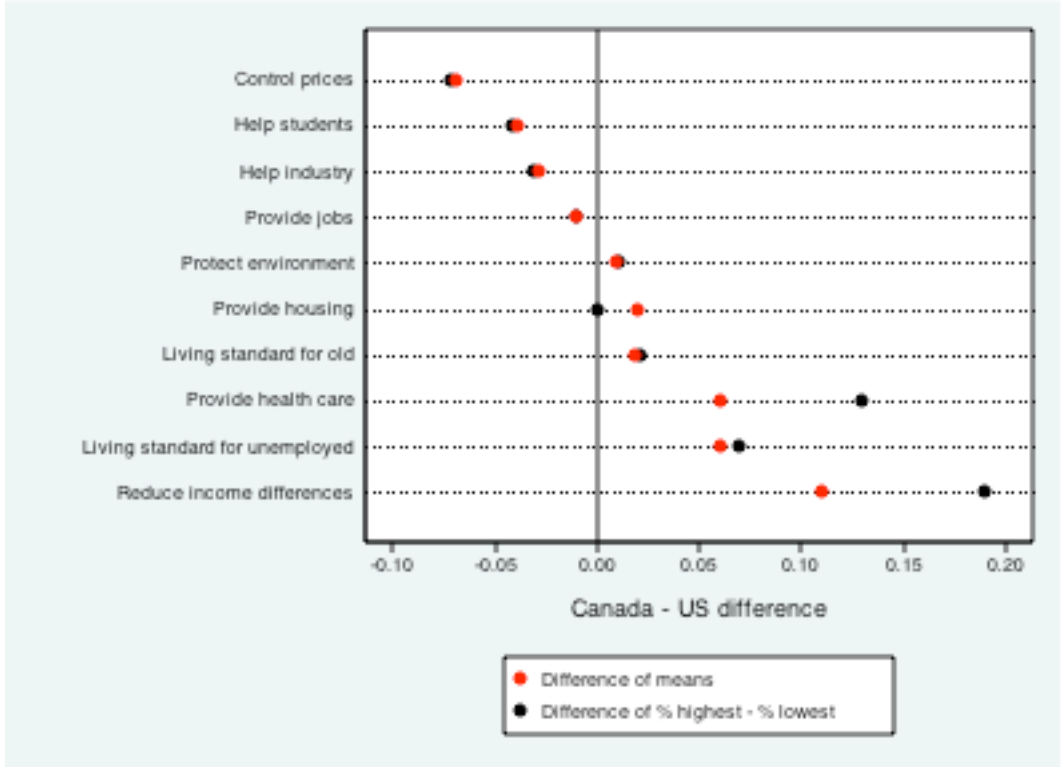
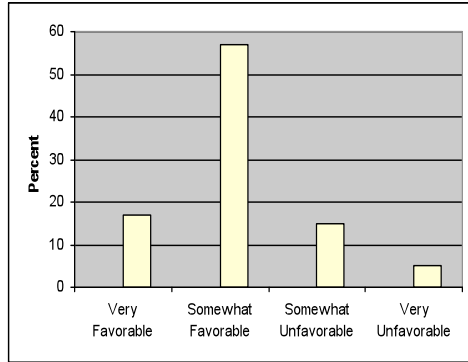


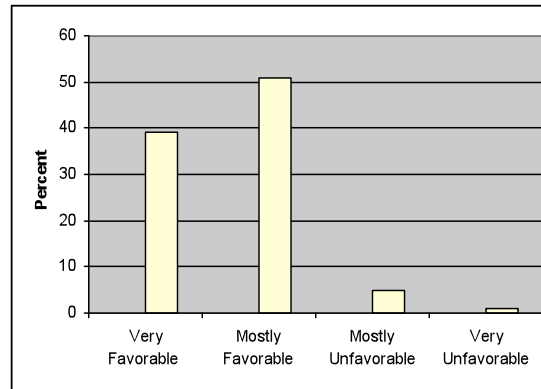
Figure 7: Support for Government Intervention

Source: ISSP 2006

What is your overall opinion of ...?
 CANADIANS ON AMERICANS



AMERICANS ON CANADIANS



AMERICANS ON AMERICANS

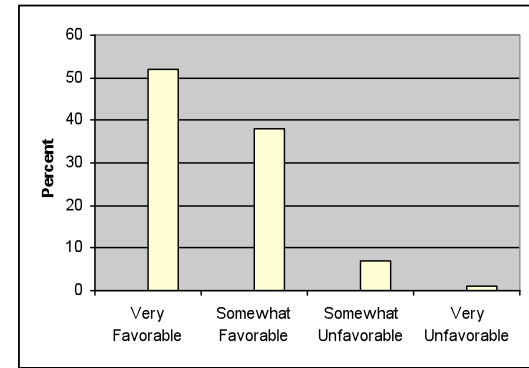


Figure 8: National Images of the Other
Source: Pew June 2009