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REPORT

THE FIRST ANNUAL CANADIAN ARCTIC SURVEY

OBSERVATOIRE DE LA POLITIQUE ET LA SÉCURITÉ DE L'ARCTIQUE (OPSA)

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ET LA SÉCURITÉ DE L'ARCTIQUE

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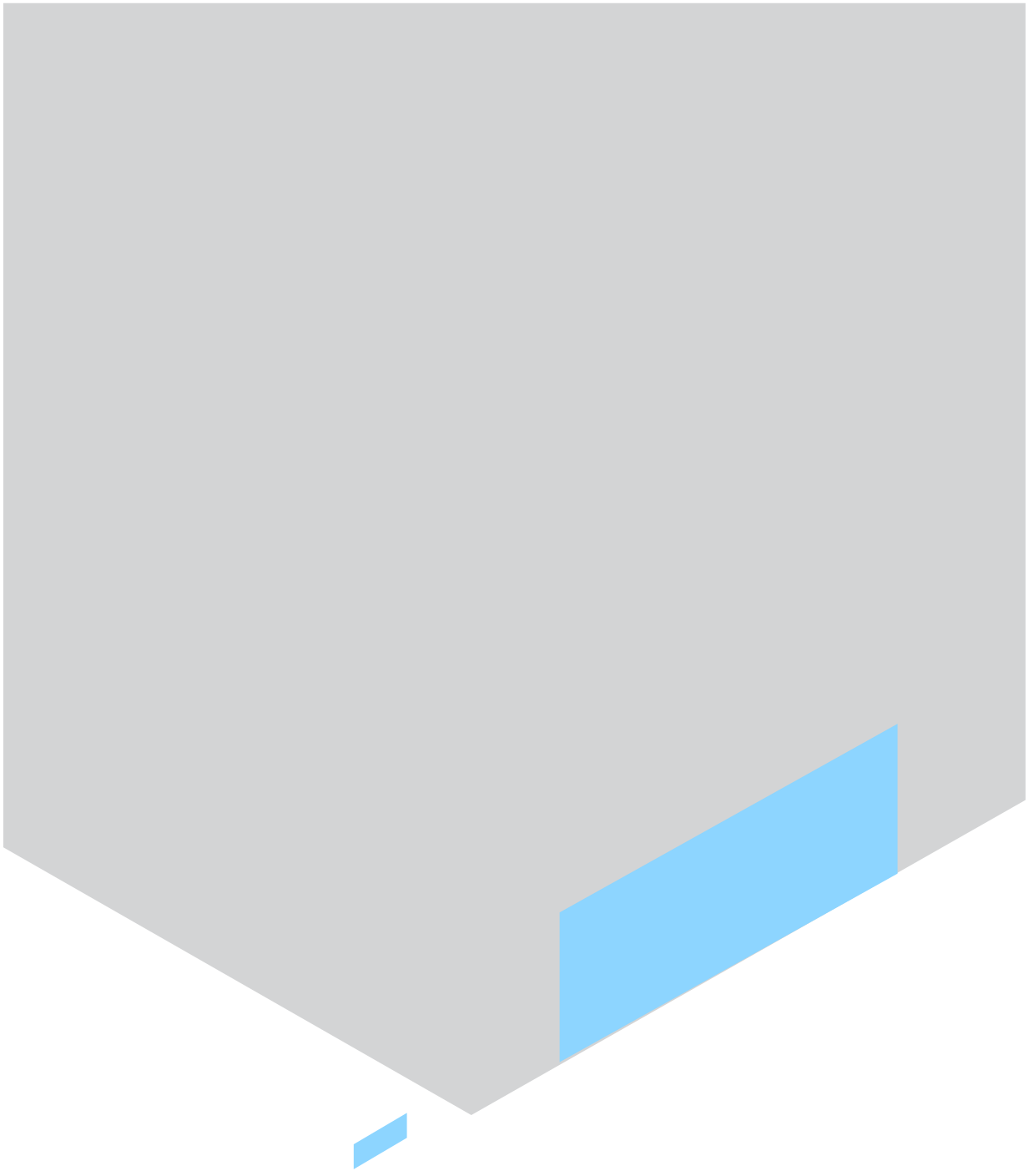

REPORT

The first annual Canadian Arctic survey

Mathieu Landriault and Mirva Salminen

The Arctic is central to Canada's national identity and the Canadian Arctic is pivotal to several key defence and infrastructures policies. While polling periodically capture the pulse of Canadians from Southern Canada, very little is known about how Arctic residents think about key Arctic debates and issues. In many cases, we cling to anecdotes and sweeping generalizations ("Northerners support policy X") without hard evidence. This report ambition to go further than anecdotal evidence and simplistic assumptions of the Canadian Arctic by analyzing data from an opinion poll conducted with respondents from the three Canadian Northern territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut).

The survey was carried out from May 8 to 26 2025 amongst a random sample of 609 Canadians aged 18 and over living in the three Northern territories. Answers were collected through a hybrid online/phone method[1]. Questions focused on respondents' opinions about the Arctic strategic and geopolitical context as well as their preferences on specific Arctic policies.

On the Arctic strategic and geopolitical context

So, how did Northerners perceive the Arctic geopolitical environment? For one, Northerners are anxious about Arctic sovereignty. For example, 85% of respondents agreed that Canada must use its Arctic sovereignty or it will lose its part of the Arctic. This high level of anxiety could also be seen with Southern Canadians, with 73% of respondents agreeing to the same statement in August 2024.

If insecurity is high, then which state do Northerners identify as the most serious threat to the Canadian Arctic? The rhetoric about the 51st state, tariffs, and several Trump administration's executive orders have significantly shifted the security landscape in the North. The U.S. was considered the most serious threat by a plurality of respondents (37%), with Russia arriving a close second (35%) and China a distant third (17%, see figure 1).

[1] In total, 102 cases were collected online while 507 were collected through telephone. The technique guaranteed equal probability sampling. The margin of error associated with the total sample is 3.97 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. All the data have been statistically weighted by age, gender, and region to ensure the sample's composition reflects that of the actual population of Canada's three territories according to 2021 Census data.

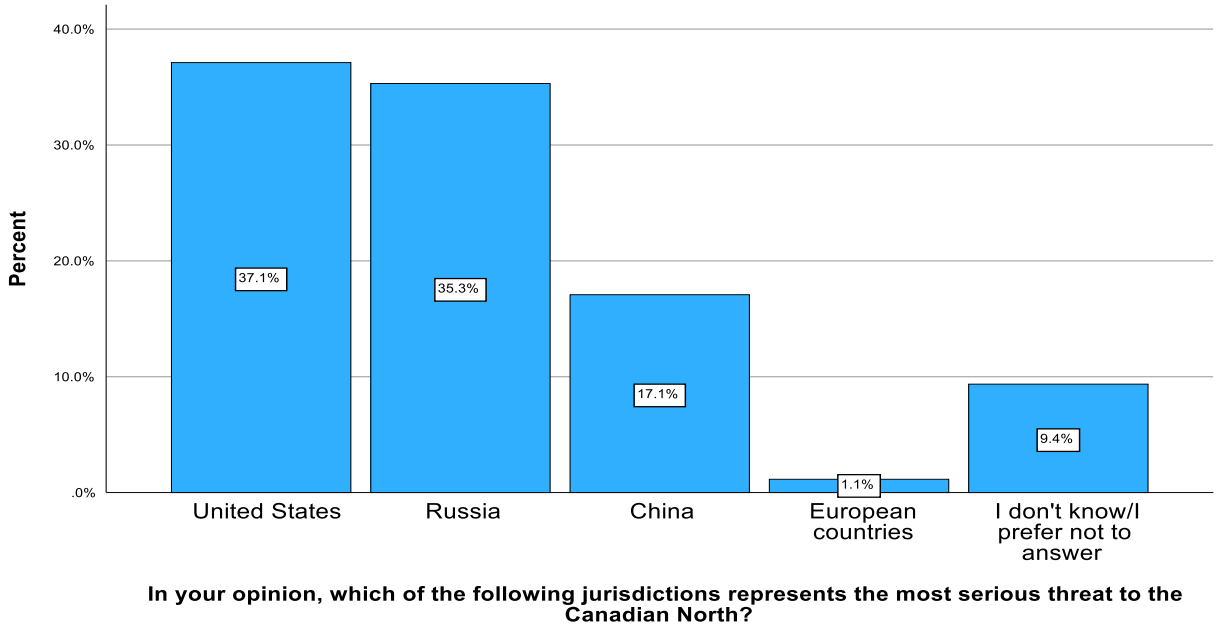

Figure 1: Threat assessment by Northern respondents.

No previous poll has asked this question, making it difficult to draw any comparison with past polls surveying Northerners. Again, for the sake of comparison, a majority of Southern Canadians (59%) picked Russia as the most serious threat in our summer 2024 poll, with the U.S. a distant second (14%) and China not far behind (12%). This result does not bode well for the future of Canada-U.S. relationship in the Arctic as the U.S. is now seen as a credible threat to Canada, on par with a traditional foe like Russia.

In this context of heightened anxiety and emerging threats, Northerners predictably privilege assertive solutions. A net majority (62%) thinks that Canada "should pursue a firm line in defending its sections of the Arctic" while only 26% prefer a diplomatic approach to border or resource disputes in the Arctic. The same question was asked in the 2010 and 2015 Rethinking the top of world polls, sponsored by the Gordon Foundation (Gordon Foundation, 2015). The "firm line" approach is in net progression, a sign of a period where the space for compromises is perceived as more limited (see table 1).

	Rethinking 2010	Rethinking 2015	2025
Canada should pursue a firm line in defending its sections of the Arctic	41%	38%	62%
It is better to negotiate a compromise with other countries	46%	47%	26%
National disputes over the Arctic are unnecessary. It should be an international territory like Antarctica	8%	11%	7%

Table 1: support for different approaches to Arctic border and resources disputes.

One final consideration on the Arctic environment: climate change. It is often mentioned in Arctic conferences and institutions that climate change represents the most serious threat to Arctic residents. We wanted to investigate how climate change was perceived by Northerners. Focusing on the causes of climate change, we queried respondents to figure out if they believed climate change was caused by human activities (the scientific consensus), by natural cycles or if the causes were unclear. Surprisingly, in a region hard-hit by global warming, only 60% agreed with the scientific consensus of anthropogenic climate change. To be fair, this level of support is close to the national average (63% in 2025, see Angus Reid Institute, February 27 2025).

On Arctic policies and priorities

We also enquired respondents on specific themes or policy areas to register the public opinion's pulse on more concrete matters.

First, defence spending. We registered in Canada an increase in support for defence spending since the mass invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022. This increase was more modest in omnibus polls (surveys on different issues) rather than ones centered on military matters only (Landriault, Walling and Minard, 2024). Hence, we predicted a relatively high level of support, hovering around 50%. Support for increased defence spending was much higher at 72%, against only 14% choosing to spend the same amount in defence (see figure 2). The

figures match polls asking similar questions to Southern Canadians (Angus Reid, June 9 2025).

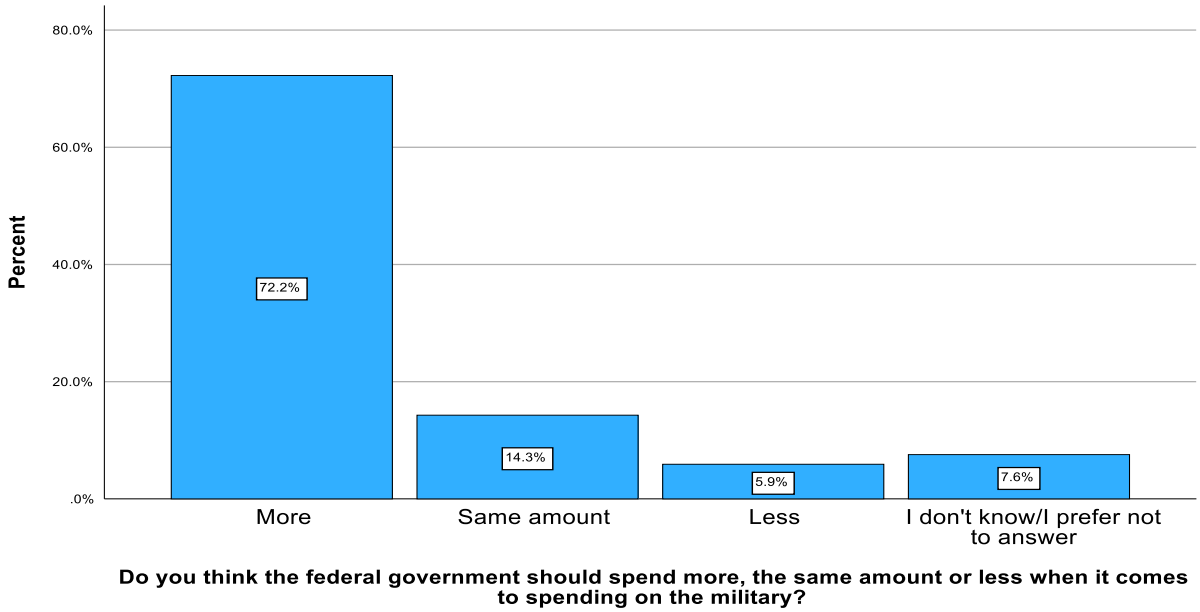

Figure 2: Support for defence spending.

We then turned our attention to questions of resource development. We asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the ban on oil and gas exploration in the waters of the Canadian Arctic. This moratorium was enacted in 2016 by then Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and several Northern leaders voiced criticism that the ban was blocking Northern development and was put in place without consultation with Northerners (CBC, December 22, 2016). In our 2024 poll of Southern Canadians, we found strong support (65% support against only 30% of opposition) for this measure. Was this policy solely championed in the South?

To the contrary, we registered solid support in the North for this measure, with 64% agreeing with the moratorium. This result is in just line with a 2019 Environics poll that registered 65% support for the same measure (WWF, August 16, 2019): the moratorium continues to enjoy wide support amongst Northerners. However, strong regional variations were observed, with Yukon being highly supportive (67%) and the Northwest Territories less (56%) but always gathering a majority of respondents in support of this measure.

Views on mining were more contrasted, albeit tilting on more negative perceptions. 47% of respondents thought negative consequences of mining on the environment and Indigenous traditional customs outweighed positive impact of this industry on jobs and revenues, against only 37% thinking the opposite (see figure 3).

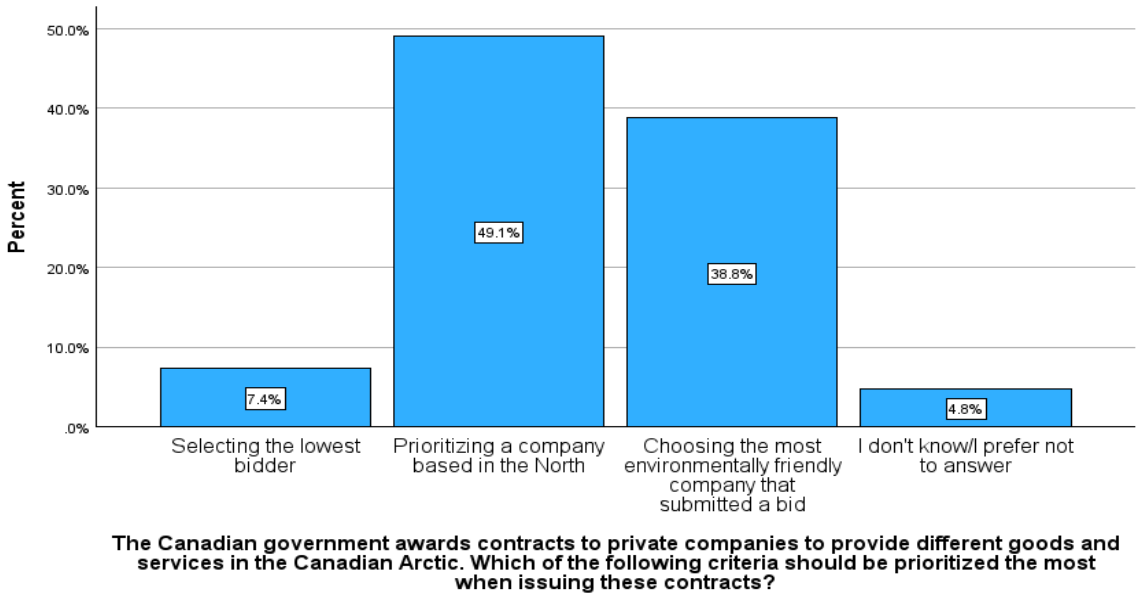

Figure 3: criteria to consider when the federal government issues contracts in the North.

These 2 pro-environment stances did not persist when we asked respondents which criteria the federal government should follow when issuing contracts in the Canadian Arctic. Prioritizing a company based in the North (49% support) was preferred to selecting the most environmentally friendly company (39%) or the lowest bidder (7%).

Finally, we surveyed respondents on emerging geopolitical issues. U.S. President Donald Trump was adamant about the necessity to annex Greenland, by force if necessary. Such action would put Canada in front of a difficult decision, between values and upholding international norms of the rule-based international order and economic interests of the bilateral relationship with U.S.

We questioned our respondents on their preferred option for Canada if Greenland was forcefully annexed by the U.S.

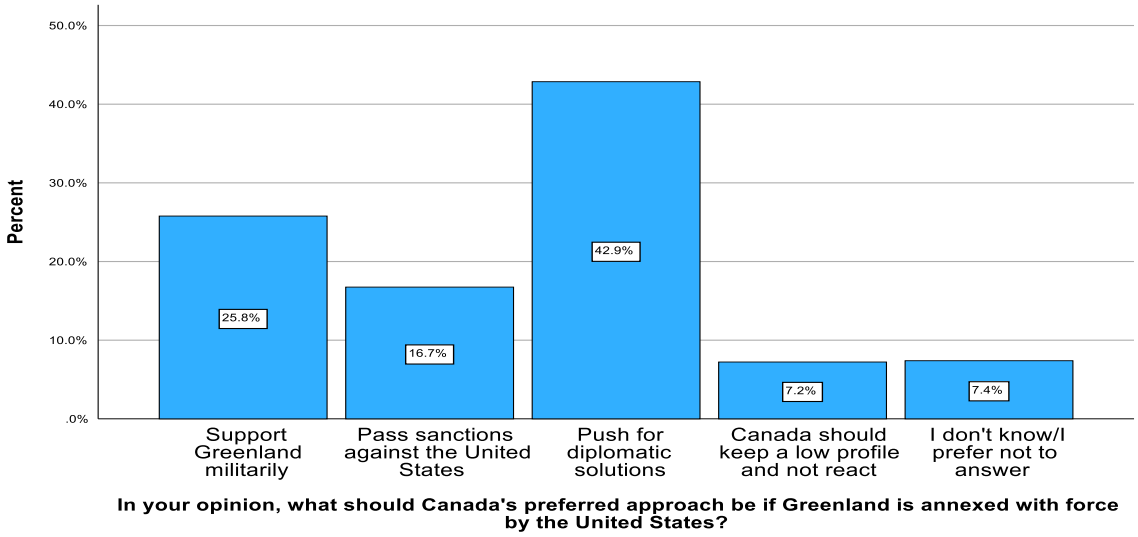

Figure 4: preferred approaches to a forced annexation of Greenland.

A plurality of respondents (43%) chose for Canada to push for diplomatic solutions while 26% thought Canada should support Greenland militarily (see figure 4). Related to the abrasive start of the Trump administration, Northerners do not perceive Elon Musk, an avid supporter of Greenland's annexation, positively. Overall, 69% of respondents had a negative perception of Musk against only 19% feeling positively towards the CEO. To note, the share of respondents harboring negative feelings for Musk was only 57% in Nunavut, a sign of the popularity of Starlink services in the territory.

Overall, we found that the Canadian North was anxious about Canada's Arctic sovereignty, and, in turn, supportive of more assertive approaches to deal with Arctic disputes, including increased military spending. The fast-paced and recent changes to the global geopolitical landscape are no stranger to this dynamic. These changes are also responsible for something that we could not imagine 12 months ago: the U.S. and Russia are almost tied as the most serious threat looming over the Canadian Arctic according to our respondents. Public opinion in Canada's North is also highly supportive of protecting this unique ecosystem, at times at the detriment of natural resource development.

This survey is a first attempt since 2015 at documenting public opinion about Arctic issues in Canada's North. We hope that this inquiry will become an annual exercise, allowing us to track changes in perceptions and preferences over time for this under-studied demographic.

About the authors

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