

Stronger Together? Support for Political Cooperation in Canada and the United States, 2005–2016

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INTRODUCTION

Few Americans appreciate how significant Canada is to their country. Yet the bilateral relationship between the United States and Canada is one of the most wide-ranging and intimate as any in the world. Following the signing of the Treaty of Ghent that ended the War of 1812, the two countries have enjoyed more than two centuries of peaceful relations. They are close allies, cooperating militarily in both NATO and NORAD, though not in Afghanistan. The economic bonds between the countries are exceptionally strong. Canada is the largest foreign supplier of energy products to the US. The two countries signed a free trade agreement in 1988 (subsequently extended to include Mexico in the NAFTA of 1994) that made Canada the US's main trading partner (until very recently, when China took over this position). Over \$1.6 billion in trade and 300,000 individuals cross the 5,500-mile shared border each day.

Despite the strength and breadth of these cross-border ties, relatively few Americans pay much attention to Canada. The stable and cordial relationship between the peoples of both countries translates into a generally placid bi-national relationship. Occasionally, however, this neglectfully placid mood is temporarily eclipsed, as was certainly the case when newly elected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came to Washington on an official visit in March 2016. Trudeau is the photogenic and upbeat 44-year-old son of former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau who became Canada's prime minister following the election victory of his Liberal Party on October 19, 2015. Accompanied by his wife Sophie Grégoire-Trudeau, the couple was given a warm and glamorous reception (including a star-studded state dinner) by President and Mrs. Obama. In an era of American dynasty politics with the likes of the Clintons and the Bushes, Justin Trudeau was ready-made for the American public—charismatic, interesting, and engaging.

The chemistry between the two leaders, who joked and ribbed one another and share a broadly progressive political orientation, was palpably warm and positive. In his welcoming remarks, President Obama acknowledged that Trudeau's "...election and first few months in office brought new energy and dynamism not just to Canada but to the relationship between our nations." Trudeau has been described as "Canada's John F. Kennedy" by some US commentators

(e.g., Robertson 2016), and uncharacteristically, the visit made Canada-US relations headline news in every corner of both countries.

Rare though they may be, such moments when Canada enjoys the attention of American politicians, media, and the public offer potential opportunities to advance the cause of bilateral cooperation. During the Canadian federal election campaign, Trudeau had been sharply critical of his predecessor Stephen Harper's handling of the American relationship, and particularly over his seeming obsession with securing American approval of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline project. Among Trudeau's many election promises was a commitment to restore harmonious relations with the United States. Being on center stage in Washington less than half a year after his election presented him with a golden opportunity in this respect.

How successful these two leaders—and their successors—will be in resetting the Canada-US relationship in the short time available before President Obama leaves office hinges on a wide variety of factors. One of these will be the public's support in each country for closer and more harmonious relations. In this brief article, we draw upon the results of over a decade of research surveying Canadians and Americans about their support for cooperation between Canada and the US on a variety of sensitive and important initiatives—national security, border security, anti-terrorism measures, and energy policy. These issues have given rise to significant friction in cross-border relations in the recent past. The persistent myth that the 9/11 terrorists entered the US through Canada, along with Canada's failure to join the US in the Iraq War, have made security issues a source of tension. Similarly, Canada's aggressive promotion of the Keystone XL pipeline proposal was a key irritant for relations in the energy sector. In this piece, we will look specifically for evidence that the publics of both countries provide a supportive context for improved cross-border relations under the new Trudeau government, as compared to the recent past. Our data come from parallel surveys of representative samples of Americans and Canadians conducted annually since 2005.

PUBLIC OPINION ON CANADA-US RELATIONS

While interdependence characterizes the Canada-US relationship, it is experienced differently on either side of the border.

Canada is roughly 10% as large as the US, economically and demographically, and therefore the US projects a large shadow over its northern neighbor. For example, the Canadian economy is far more dependent on the US than is the reverse. About three-quarters of Canadian exports come

However, a growing body of scholarship has countered this view by identifying a potentially significant role for public opinion as a constraint on potential policy options and as facilitating the pursuit of some positions and discouraging others (Holsti 1992; Murray and LeDuc 1974). Studies of

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to the US whereas only about one fifth of US exports go to Canada. Similarly, while only approximately 15% of all imports to the US come from Canada, the comparable figure for imports to Canada exceeds 50%. It is this economic asymmetry and concern over US influence and dominance over the Canadian economy that prompted Justin Trudeau’s father to famously liken the Canadian experience with the US to that of a mouse sleeping with an elephant. The former is necessarily alert to every twitch and grunt of the latter because harm can be done even when it was not intended. So it should not come as a surprise that Canadian knowledge and opinions about the United States are likely to be relatively well informed, while the same is not true of American opinions or knowledge of Canada. The recent election of Donald Trump and his “America First” campaign, which would advance a ‘buy American, hire American’ mindset adds yet another dimension to the bi-national relationship—not only is it asymmetrical, but it is also driven by an isolationist fervor that can negatively impact the Canadian economy. In this respect, the concern is not just one of dominance but of potential economic damage.

It is often assumed that public preferences will translate into public policy through the representative process in democracies (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). While this assumption may be borne out in many areas of domestic policy, some have questioned its applicability in the foreign policy realm. Indeed, a scholarly consensus emerged in the decades following the end of World War II that domestic opinion is generally not an important determinant of a country’s foreign policy. In part, this is because public opinion in the area is usually volatile, unstructured, dependent upon the mass media, and frequently ill-informed (e.g., Holsti 1992). More so than in other issue domains, the public tends to defer in the foreign policy realm to political leaders who are in possession of the latest and most appropriate information with which to articulate and project national interests into the international arena. Moreover, foreign policy elites frequently attempt to manipulate public opinion in their own country to strengthen their hand in dealing with foreign powers. They may also attempt to sway opinions in other countries through public diplomacy campaigns designed to exert pressure on the government to align with their policy objectives (Hale 2012).

American opinions of Canada have shown that Americans typically do not know much about their neighbor to the north, but generally are positively disposed to Canadians, seeing them more or less like themselves (see Hale 2012). While for the most part benign, this situation renders it difficult for Americans to comprehend how and why Canada might not always support the US when the two countries diverge (as over the 2003 war in Iraq).

Reflecting the greater salience of Americans to Canada, there are many more studies of public opinion and Canada-US relations undertaken by Canadian as compared to American scholars (Gravelle 2014). Yet existing research, often reliant upon studies focused on a single theme or issue, lack access to longitudinal data based on repeated administration of the same survey questions (Sigler and Goresky 1974; Anderson and Stephenson 2010). In the remainder of the article we attempt to advance our appreciation of the nature of public support for closer cross-border cooperation by using repeated measures of opinion on contentious policy areas over the 12 years since 2005.

SUPPORT FOR CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION ON SECURITY ISSUES AND THE “WAR ON TERROR”

Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the United States has become preoccupied with the “war on terror” at home and abroad. For its part, Canada has also tightened and expanded its security posture, though not to the same degree as has the United States. This brought issues of national (or homeland) security, border security, and counter-terrorism to the forefront of both American and Canadian politics. On the American side, Mueller and Stewart (2011) estimate that over the 2002–2011 period direct expenditures on domestic security in the US amounted to about \$690 billion, and when indirect expenses (such as additional insurance charges and other costs borne by private actors, etc.) are included the total spent exceeds \$1 trillion dollars. Canada, according to estimates by the CBC (2008), had spent \$24 billion on security between September 11, 2001 and 2008. The agencies created in the aftermath of 9/11, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) currently employ about 240,000 and 13,000 people respectively. Security has become big business in both countries, but particularly in the US.

Canadians and Americans share an interest in defending their countries and fighting terrorists. However, differences in threat perceptions and competing political and organizational agendas can complicate and thwart the development of cross-border cooperation in these areas (Hale 2012). For example, there is an obvious tension when American measures “thicken” the northern border in the name of security at

However, Canadian respondents are consistently less enthusiastic about closer cooperation with the US across the board, but especially so with respect to the question of national security (where after 2013, the prospect of closer cooperation appeals to fewer than half of respondents).

The data presented in the three figures give some indication that national political leadership has an impact on the

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the cost of adding impediments to the smooth flow of goods and people across the border. Americans are more likely to accept this tradeoff than Canadians, whose economy is more heavily dependent on trade with the US. As the former US Ambassador to Canada Paul Cellucci famously put it, “security trumps trade” (Cellucci 2007).

So there is considerable potential for Canadian and US publics to view cooperation on these security matters differently. How do residents of each country view the attractiveness of closer cooperation across the border on national security, border security and anti-terrorism measures? Figures 1, 2, and 3 present our survey results on these issues over the past 12 years. The charts reveal considerable support for closer cooperation on these matters, but also highlight some interesting divergences. Strong majorities of Americans favor closer cooperation with Canada on all three measures.

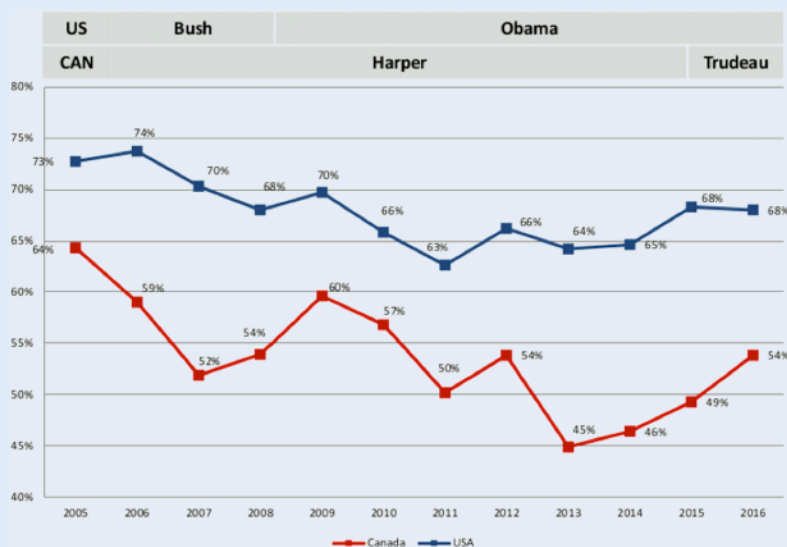
support for closer cooperation. For Canadians, the replacement of the hugely unpopular George W. Bush by President Obama in 2008 made the prospect of closer cooperation with the US more palatable to an additional 6% of Canadians on both security issues, and 5% on the question of anti-terrorism measures. Even among Americans, support for closer cooperation with Canada registered a perceptible uptick with Obama’s election (between 2008 and 2009 there was a 1% increase in support for closer cooperation on the national security item, a 2% increase in support for cooperation to fight terrorists, and a 5% increase on the border security item).

The mere existence of the Obama administration is not enough to propel positive Canadian sentiment in a post-Bush era, however. Drawing on other data collected in our surveys for example, in 2012 under the Obama administration a 22-point drop in the proportion of Canadians who identified the US as closest on human rights occurred coincidentally at the time when the Obama administration was managing the issue of drone strikes in Syria. This suggests that even an administration seen aligning with Canadian values is not given a blank check. It is judged by its action by a Canadian public acutely aware of US global politics.

Even with this divergence, more recently, Justin Trudeau’s election in 2015 as Canadian Prime Minister appears to have been accompanied by greater enthusiasm for cross-border cooperation on both sides of the border in these areas. For example, between 2015 and 2016 there was a 3% increase in the proportion of Canadians seeking closer cooperation with the US on national security

Figure 1

Canadians and Americans on Support for Closer Cooperation on National Security



Note: Percentage supporting “much closer cooperation” and “somewhat closer cooperation.”

(and 3% more Americans sought closer cooperation in this area after Trudeau's election). On the issue of closer border security, however, there was no change between 2015 and 2016 in the level of support for closer cooperation among Americans, while an additional 3% of Canadians supported this objective over that period. Support for closer cooperation in the fight against terror went up 2% among Americans since 2015, and up 5% among Canadians. Clearly, the elections of both Obama and Trudeau have been associated with

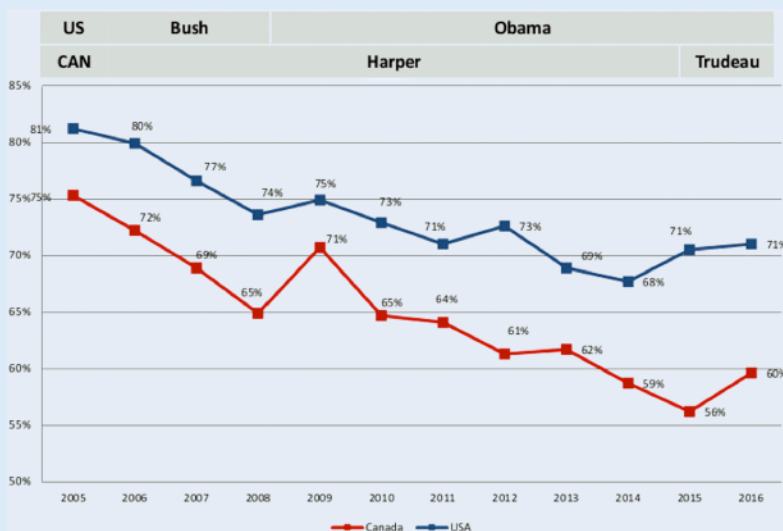
greater optimism and trust across the border on the security files.

Beyond the general popularity of cooperation on security issues across the border—perhaps the most significant story told by the data in the three figures—is the gradual erosion in support for closer cooperation since 2005. With the exception of Americans supporting closer cooperation with Canada on national security (where the drop was 5%) the proportion supporting closer cooperation fell by double dig-

its on all three measures over the 12-year period. Despite ebbs and flows of opinion, it appears as though the passage of time after the horror of the 9/11 terrorist attacks has diminished the resolve in both countries for cross-border cooperation on these issues. Even with the much-heralded 'bromance' between President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau, respondents in both countries have less appetite for this in 2016 than when our surveying began in 2005. Moreover, with the recent election of Donald Trump, it seems unlikely that the two leaders will be able to recover much of the support for closer cooperation in these areas that has been lost over the past decade.

Figure 2

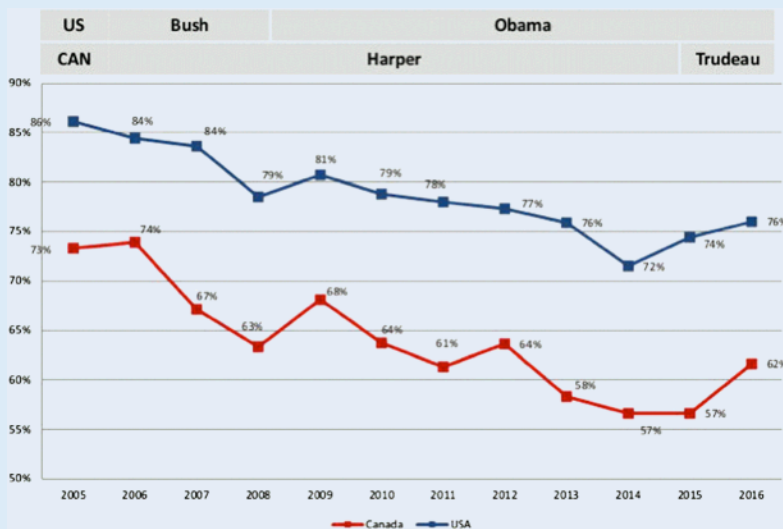
Canadian and Americans on Support for Closer Cooperation on Border Security



Note: Percentage supporting "much closer cooperation" and "somewhat closer cooperation."

Figure 3

Canadians and Americans on Support for Closer Cooperation on Anti-Terrorism Measures



Note: Percentage supporting "much closer cooperation" and "somewhat closer cooperation."

Support for Closer Cooperation on Energy Policy

Both the United States and Canada are among the largest consumers of energy in the world on a per capita basis. With political unrest in the Middle East, both countries share an interest in secure supplies of energy, and these markets in Canada and the US are deeply integrated. Vivid evidence of this was obvious when the electrical grid failed in August 2003, blacking out 10 million Ontario residents and 45 million people in the eastern US. Canada is the fifth largest producer of energy in the world and virtually all its exports in this sector go to the US (Hale 2012). Yet the issue of an integrated energy policy is complicated somewhat by environmental considerations. The US administration of

George W. Bush and the government of Stephen Harper in Canada were both closely associated with the fossil fuel sector while both Obama and Trudeau have pursued more environmentally-friendly energy options (Hale 2012). As noted earlier, Harper's government made securing approval of the Keystone XL pipeline project a central policy objective in bilateral relations with the US in the years following its proposal in 2008. In vetoing the proposal in November 2015 (shortly after Harper left office), President Obama signaled his resolve to leave a positive legacy on environmental concerns.

than they were in 2005. Given the prominence of the Keystone XL issue in the public domain in both countries, it is perhaps surprising that there is no evidence of a downturn in support of Americans for cooperating with Canada on energy after 2008 when President Obama's administration came to power. In fact, support in Canada for greater energy cooperation increased in the post-Keystone XL rejection period, suggesting that the current dialogue between Canada and the US is more closely aligned not only with expectations in the US but with the Canadian public. There is, therefore, strong evidence

This, compounded with an administration taking a path different from Canada on a wide range of issues including climate change, the future of NATO, the importance of global trade and the role of the United Nations, creates a context where America's trusted, historic ally to the north will have views which do not align with the Trump Administration.

Noting that the issue had taken on great symbolic significance for the American public, President Obama argued that "America is now a global leader when it comes to taking serious action to fight climate change...And, frankly, approving this project would have undercut that global leadership" (quoted in Davenport 2015).

To what extent have these considerations influenced public support for the development of an integrated energy policy? Figure 4 reveals levels of public support for this are extremely high in both countries. While there are fluctuations in these measures over the 12-year period we examine, levels of support in both countries are only slightly lower in 2016

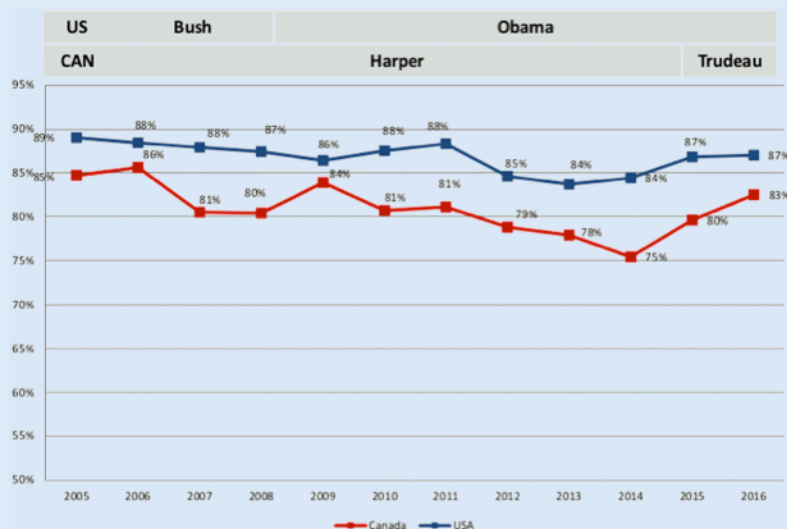
of a "permissive consensus" in the area of energy policy that is based on a widespread recognition of the strong national interest for both countries in cooperation in this critically important sector.

The beginning of the Trump presidential era, propelled by voter dissatisfaction, represents a new phase in the bi-national relationship. Some could characterize the past two decades as one of benign neglect on the part of the Americans. The bi-national relationship worked, there were few major friction points and it was business as usual. One could argue that there was a political consensus between Republicans and Democrats around the idea that global trade—and therefore

trade with Canada—was good for the American economy and for creating prosperity. However, Donald Trump's views on the NAFTA and trade in general are in contrast to both the Democrat and the Republican establishments. For Canada, a country reliant on good trade relations with the United States, there could be no greater threat to economic stability. This, compounded with an administration taking a path different from Canada on a wide range of issues including climate change, the future of NATO, the importance of global trade and the role of the United Nations, creates a context where America's trusted, historic ally to the north will have views which do not align with the Trump Administration. The question remains, however: how, if at

Figure 4

Canadians and Americans on Importance of Developing an Integrated Energy Policy



Note: Percentage supporting "much closer cooperation" and "somewhat closer cooperation."

all, will isolationist sentiment, driven by President Donald Trump reshape the generally positive public opinion sentiment that currently exists between Americans and Canadians? It is too early to tell.

CONCLUSION

Our findings of over a decade of polling opinions on cross-border cooperation between the United States and Canada support a number of concluding observations. First, there is strong support among publics in both countries for cooperation. Second, the support is consistently stronger among Americans than Canadians, regardless of the issue. This support is strongest and most consistent when the cooperation is aimed at developing an integrated energy policy, and least consistent and strong among both Americans and Canadians on the issue of national security. Support for cooperation on border security and anti-terrorism measures fall in the middle, with substantial majorities favoring closer cooperation. Whatever divergences arise among politicians, policy makers, and elites in the “chattering classes,” public opinion at the grassroots in these countries provides little foundation for bilateral discord on these important policy domains. Having noted this, our third general observation is that public support for closer cooperation is—across the board—lower in 2016 than it was when we began our polling in 2005 (albeit only marginally so in the case of the integrated energy policy item).

Perhaps one should consider the bi-national relationship as being characterized by both a healthy alignment and healthy divergence on issues ranging from energy policy through to human rights. It is not connected to a particular party in either country but stems from the practical interests and common sense of purpose that bind both countries. In the face of the declining levels of support for closer cooperation, the potential counterweight stemming from the warm personal relations that had obviously been established between former President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau seem unlikely to survive the recent change in the US administration. Rather, the election of President Donald Trump effectively opens a new chapter in the bi-national relationship. If President Trump pursues protectionist and nationalistic policies that harm the Canadian economy, the bilateral

relationship can become frayed—regardless of the friendships, the public opinion goodwill, and the common economic and political interests of both countries. It remains to be seen how uncertainty on this—as on so many other issues—is resolved by political developments in the United States in the months and years to come. ■

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