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## *Canada's Pulse*

### **Do Canadians Support the Troops?**

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Just where does the country stand on Canada's military mission in Afghanistan?

Since the former Liberal government dispatched the soldiers in 2005 support for the 2,300-troop commitment to the NATO operation climbed then fell. The latest polls show signs of buyer's remorse as people who once bought into the war change their mind.

- 55% supported the mission and 41% opposed it in a Strategic Counsel poll in March this year.
- 47% supported the mission in an Ipsos-Reid poll in July.
- Only 38% backed the Afghan exercise in an EKOS Research poll in mid-September, before Afghan president Hamid Karzai's speech to parliament on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.
- 57% supported the war in a September Ipsos poll after Karzai's speech, a poll that also followed prime minister Harper's pro-combat speech at the United Nations.
- 44% supported "the decision to send Canadian troops to Afghanistan" while 53% were opposed in the October Strategic Counsel poll for *The Globe and Mail*.

Contradictory polls are commonplace when voters are weighing the alternatives and still making up their minds. Millions say fighting the fundamentalist Islamist Taliban movement is a good war. But there is little enthusiasm for the battle.

**Only 28% “strongly” supported it in September’s Ipsos poll. Only 10% strongly supported it in October’s Strategic Counsel survey. In a May Vector Poll™ Canadians ranked the Afghanistan operation last in a list of 11 federal government priorities. Only 9% called it a top priority.**

Why are Canadians fighting in Afghanistan? The people aren’t sure.

In a Strategic Counsel poll in March, 70% thought the troops’ primary role was peace-keeping. Only 26% thought it was “primarily combat.”

In an EKOS Research poll in June...

- 51% agreed “Canadian Forces should participate in broader peace-support operations around the world which could involve both peacekeeping and, if necessary, nontraditional roles such as fighting alongside other allied troops to implement peace in a disputed area.”
- 46% agreed “Canadian Forces should only participate in traditional peacekeeping operations around the world that involve observation duties or monitoring a truce between two conflicting partners.”

In a Decima Research survey in September, 51% agreed that “I don’t understand why Canadian soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan anymore.” In an Ipsos poll the same month only half (48%) agreed that “Canada’s role in Afghanistan is vital to the future of the region” and that the troops “should stay there until they get the job done.”

Will the Conservative government fall in an Afghan quagmire? The war is like a time-release pill the Liberals left for the new government. Prime minister Stephen Harper has adopted the fight the Liberals started. But Harper’s war hasn’t moved his poll numbers, however.

Nonetheless, most Canadians want better relations with the US and expect Harper to handle that file better than the Liberal government he defeated. In the Ipsos August poll half (49%)

approved “the closer relationship that has been forged with president George Bush and the American administration than the previous Liberal governments” (49% disapproved). With troops in Afghanistan Canada gets points with Washington. Ipsos found two-thirds of Americans (65%) agreed in September that Canada’s role in Afghanistan is vital.

Most Canadians are by-standers in the fight anyway, and the casualties directly touch only a few households. There is no draft and no evidence on the street that the country is at war. The federal NDP wants the troops home right away, and most voters agree. But they haven’t leaned to the NDP. Party chief Jack Layton could kick-start a peace movement, however, if he campaigned for a referendum on the war and a war tax to protect social programs from going to Afghanistan with the troops. The lack of consensus over whether troops should be in Afghanistan is reflected in the wide array of views on when they should come home.

- In March in the Strategic Counsel poll 52% opposed a 10-year commitment to Afghanistan, but 44% favoured a decade-long engagement to “to rebuild and stabilize” the country.
- In April, when Decima Research asked a national sample, 25% said the troops should stay “as long as it takes,” but 43% said the troops should come home within a year. Another 25% said from a year or two to five years.
- In May in a Decima survey the public opposed extending the mission two years through 2009 – as Parliament did that month – by 54% to 41%.
- But by the August Ipsos poll 48% approved Harper’s extending Canada's commitment to the NATO Afghan mission in until 2009 (50% disapproved).

Some say or hope that if Canadian casualties mount support for the mission will fall. But sympathizers are not likely to change their minds even if the death toll rises. More casualties could build support for the war as the public rallies around their commander-in-chief. One response to high casualties is to withdraw; another is to send more reinforcements.

Millions of Canadians worry about saving face. In October's Strategic Counsel poll 36% said by withdrawing "our reputation in the world community" would be worse while 14% said it would be better (a 47% plurality said it would not change).

One theory is that it's not body bags that turn public opinion on war; it's marketing tactics. Last year *The New York Times* reported that George Bush's speechwriters had concluded, "Americans would support a war with mounting casualties on one condition: that they believed it would ultimately succeed."

Polls indicate Canadians will tolerate many more coffins if they feel Harper has a plan for victory. The polls show no correlation between combat deaths and declining support for the anti-Taliban struggle. Sympathy for the Afghan offensive has held up as troop deaths continue.

- With 12 Canadian dead (11 soldiers, one diplomat) by March, in a Strategic Counsel poll 59% were willing to accept casualties to help Afghanistan "achieve security and stability" (39% were not willing).
- With 20 dead, in August 58% said it too high a price while 36% said it's the price "that must be paid" (the Strategic Counsel poll).
- With 36 Canadian fatalities, in September's Decima poll 59% felt "Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan are dying for a cause we cannot win."
- With 40 dead, in the October Strategic Counsel poll, 55% said it's too high a price to pay while 42% said it's the price that must be paid "to help bring stability and peace to Afghanistan."

How has Canada come to this, engaged in a far-off war the public hardly notices for a cause few can articulate?

Many Canadians like the idea of punching above their weight, being a global player in the worthy cause of routing terrorists. For example, a week after 9/11 in poll by COMPAS Research two thirds agreed that "known terrorists should be treated like enemies in war and eliminated whenever there is an opportunity to do so without harming innocent people."

Five weeks after 9/11, in a Léger poll, eight in 10 agreed with the government's decision to support the American air strikes against Taliban targets in Afghanistan. Only 21% said it "would be sufficient cause for Canada to pull back its military support to the United States... if Canadian soldiers perish in combat."

Many Canadians think of themselves as more peace-loving than Americans, but Canadians can be nearly as bellicose. In dire circumstances Canadians are as combative as Americans.

Before the first US-led Afghanistan invasion, in 2001, six in 10 in the Léger poll supported Canadian military assistance to the US "if the United States decided to carry out military strikes against countries other than Afghanistan." As for invading Iraq, Canadians were equivocal.

**By 54% to 22% Canadians did not think George W. Bush had justified his intention to occupy Iraq, according to an August 2002 Léger poll. But by 46% to 38% Canadians agreed "Iraq poses a real threat to the United States."**

In five EKOS polls throughout 2002 four in 10 people supported Canadian participation "if the US and its allies decide to attack Iraq." On the eve of America's 2003 occupation of Iraq, most Canadians (56%) supported the US attack in a Léger poll.

- 46% backed the invasion, if the United Nations sanctioned it, while 10% supported the US attack even unilaterally. A third opposed the US invasion (36%) under any circumstances.
- 44% said Canada should support military action against Iraq while 43% were against (13% had no opinion). But Canadian support grew as the Americans pushed ahead.

When the Iraq invasion started, Léger found that only 33% agreed the US and its allies were "justified in declaring war against Iraq" while 48% disagreed.

In May, however, "now that the regime of Saddam Hussein has been destroyed," nearly half (46%) agreed military action by the US and its allies was justified, in a Léger survey. A 41% minority said it wasn't justified (12% had no opinion).

As the polls show, Quebec is the country's most pacifist region. Two months before the US opened its conquest of Iraq, 62% in Québec versus 43% nationally said Canada should not

support an invasion. When the battle started, in Québec only 18% found the US justified while 72% disagreed.

Will Québec's opposition to the Afghanistan campaign hurt Harper in a province he needs to carry to win a majority government? Québec's mood is more complex than simply pacifist. Québec nationalists are reluctant to take up arms for another country, Canada in this case.

But if Harper did try to make Canadians share the sacrifice, his support would vaporize. In the March Strategic Counsel survey 83% were "proud" of their troops in Afghanistan, but few would take their place.

**Civil disobedience would be likely if the government drafted soldiers. In the June Decima poll just 28% agreed they would serve "if I was the right age and was drafted to join Canada's forces and serve in Afghanistan." Only 13% agreed, "If I could, I would volunteer to serve in Afghanistan."**

Nonetheless, those who want to withdraw the troops need to recognize that their fellow Canadians can be quite hawkish. Undoubtedly as many were pleased as appalled to watch their TV's in June and see a Canadian soldier on CBC telling a small group of young Afghan men, "It's not a good idea for you to join the Taliban.... Our soldiers are very good shots, and you're only going to wind up dead."

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Vector Research ([www.vectorresearch.com](http://www.vectorresearch.com)) has conducted phone, mail and on-line polls and focus groups for unions and private sector clients in Canada and the US for more than 20 years.