

Support for Canada's role in Afghanistan below 50%: poll

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Support for Canada's military mission in Afghanistan has dropped below 50%, a new survey suggests, marking a significant decline over the past three years.

The survey by the Innovative Research Group, conducted between Oct. 20 and Oct. 23, indicates 45% of Canadians support the mission, down from 59% in June 2006.

Residents in Quebec voiced the most opposition to the Canadian mission in the war-torn country, with 68% of those polled in the online survey saying they were against sending troops to Afghanistan.

Elsewhere in the country, a majority of respondents in Alberta and the Atlantic provinces were also opposed to sending troops, each with 51% of respondents against sending troops. The other three regions polled -- Ontario, the Prairies and B.C. -- were between 42 and 44% against the idea.

Wesley Wark, associate professor at the University of Toronto's Munk Centre for International Studies, said Quebec's widespread opposition to the Canadian mission is not surprising and has been evident in previous Canadian conflicts.

"The outlook in Quebec tends to be at odds with the rest of Canada," Wark said Saturday. "It was true in [the Second World War], it was true in [the First World War] and it was true in the Korean War.

"They tend to be not so sure that the Canadian national interest is served by foreign wars. I'm sure that outlook has been reinforced when Quebec units, like the Van Doos, have taken highly publicized casualties [in Afghanistan]."

Quebec and the Atlantic provinces also felt more strongly than other regions that Canada's military involvement was "putting Canadian lives at risk for no apparent benefit."

Some 60% of Quebec residents and 45% of respondents from Atlantic Canada felt that way, the survey suggested. The next highest regions were Ontario and Alberta, with 34% each, agreeing with the sentiment.

But pollster Greg Lyle, director of the firm that conducted the survey for the Ottawa-based Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, said the most surprising part of the survey was the fact that Canadians were generally found to be less willing to deploy troops to any conflict zones as casualties in Afghanistan mount; 47% of respondents agreed there are times when Canada needs to be ready to intervene, even if our military may be killed and injured, down from 55% in June 2006.

"That means there's a fundamental change in the value structure Canadians bring to conflict," he said. "Canadians have become less willing to send troops overseas in principle."

La belle province, once again, led the charge against active duty for Canadian troops -- 41% of Quebecers said they "always opposed sending the Canadian military into war," compared to the 21% national average.

On the controversial topic of maintaining a military presence beyond the expected pullout date of 2011 if asked to do so by the United States, Quebec and Alberta were most opposed, by margins of 63 and 55%, respectively.

Nationwide, 49% of respondents were opposed to the extension of a military presence if asked by the U.S., while 40% were in support of it -- a finding Lyle attributed to the "Obama influence." (11% were undecided.)

In the preceding question, respondents were asked to choose one of three viewpoints on Canadian presence in Afghanistan beyond 2011: keep military forces in place to maintain security; end the military mission and focus on humanitarian work and reconstruction; or pull Canadian presence out of the country completely.

While most opted for the latter two options (53 and 23% respectively), 15% thought the military should stay in some form.

That number jumped by 25% -- to the aforementioned 40% -- only once the question specifically referred to President Barack Obama increasing U.S. troop presence and asking for Canada to stay as part a plan to provide military security and allow for renewed economic, political and social efforts in the country beyond 2011.

"What that means is that it's not an absolute non-starter for the U.S. to ask us to stay involved," said Lyle. "It's going to be a lot of work to try and get a majority to agree . . . but it would be an option to try and convince Canadians to stay."

Wark said to compare polls from October 2009 and June 2006 is a difficult considering how much has happened and changed in Afghanistan over that period.

"In Afghanistan context, a June 2006 poll would have been fairly early on in the deployment of troops to Kandahar and before the Canadian mission started to take serious casualties and before some of the complexities around the situation in Afghanistan were clearly understood," he said.

He said the combination of three factors -- the significant death toll of Canadian troops serving in Afghanistan, an uncertain amount of progress in the war and Canada's pledge to end the combat mission in 2011 -- also likely contributed to the majority of Canadians being reserved in their support of the mission.

Wark believes, however, that the October 2009 results could change, depending on how the situation takes shape in the coming months.

"Many things could happen in Afghanistan that could shift the direction of public opinion in Canada," Wark said.

"One would be if a legitimate government stands up in Afghanistan, I think that would change the views a bit. If there seems to be some form of military progress toward security, that could also (create a shift). In other words, good news stories -- good news stories could change their opinion."

The results of the online survey -- which polled more than 1,000 people -- are considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

With files from Amy Husser, Canwest News Service

SIDEBAR:

Question: Do you support or opposed sending troops to Afghanistan?

Response for those "opposed":

- Countrywide -- 50%
- B.C. -- 43%
- Alberta -- 51%
- Prairies -- 44%
- Ontario -- 42%

- Quebec -- 68%
- Atlantic -- 51%

Question: Which of the following points of view best reflects your reaction to the number of Canadian soldiers who are being killed in Afghanistan?

• I have always opposed sending the Canadian military into war fighting assignments; I have been willing to send the military to fight in some circumstances but the more Canadians I see killed in Afghanistan, the more I question whether we should even send Canadians; or I feel badly for soldiers and their families, but I still believe there are times when Canada needs to be ready to intervene, even if our military may be killed and injured.

Response for those "always opposed" to sending military to war:

- Countrywide - 21%
- B.C. - 14%
- Alberta - 18%
- Prairies - 11%
- Ontario - 15%
- Quebec - 41%
- Atlantic - 15%

Question: The current military mission of Canada in Afghanistan is set to end in 2011. When it comes to Canadian presence in Afghanistan after 2011, which of the following views is closest to your own? Canada should keep its military forces in Afghanistan beyond 2011 to maintain security in the country; Canada should put an end to its military mission past 2011 and concentrate exclusively on humanitarian work and reconstruction; Canada should get out of Afghanistan by 2011 and put an end to all of its activities, military and non-military.

Response for those who want to "get out" by 2011:

- Countrywide - 23%
- B.C. - 17%
- Alberta - 25%

- Prairies - 15%
- Ontario - 20%
- Quebec - 31%
- Atlantic - 22%

Question: Would you support or oppose Canada extending its military presence in Afghanistan after 2011 if President Barack Obama increased the U.S. troop presence and asked Canada to stay as part of a plan to provide military security to allow renewed international efforts to address Afghanistan's economic, political and social issues?

Response for those who "oppose":

- Countrywide - 49%
- B.C. - 43%
- Alberta - 55%
- Prairies - 39%
- Ontario - 42%
- Quebec - 63%
- Atlantic - 51%

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