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# The New Ontario

The Shifting Attitudes of Ontarians  
toward the Federation

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**New public opinion data suggests that attitudes of Ontarians toward the federation are shifting. From 1998-2005, Ontarians were unique amongst Canadians in believing their home province was treated well in the federation. Today, Ontarians resemble other Canadians in believing that there are inequities in the federation that must be addressed. The implications for our national politics may soon be apparent. The Ontario public may no longer be supportive of its provincial government playing its traditional role as a consensus-builder among competing provincial interests, potentially making divisive issues like carbon pricing even more volatile. Responding to this “New Ontario” will require the federal government to adopt a positive agenda for Ontario.**

Two of the defining features of Canada’s federal make up since World War II have been Ontarians’ lack of provincial identity, along with a sentiment among Ontarians that the federation generally worked in Ontario’s interests. Meanwhile, premiers elsewhere in the country were often ready to fan the flames of regional grievance by highlighting the mistreatment—both real and exaggerated—of the federal government toward their provinces. Premiers from other parts of Canada could count on a sympathetic ear among their populations because of a strong sense of provincial identity and a common belief that the federal government was in fact governing with the interests of the “centre” in mind—namely, in the interests of Ontario.

These kinds of claims were far less frequent devices of Ontario premiers, and when allegations of unfairness were made, they were far less likely to be believed by the people of Ontario. People in Ontario felt the country worked fairly well for them, that the federal government had Ontario’s best interests at heart and that speaking out in favour of one’s provincial interest was, well, “provincial”. In many ways Ontarians were right to think Canada worked for their province. Key foundational nation-building projects, including the building of the national railway and the St. Lawrence Seaway and the construction of an internal protected market, were cornerstones of Ontario’s prosperity, even when they were important to other regions of the country as well.

The readiness of Canadians outside Ontario to raise issues of regional dissatisfaction, and the comparative lack of such narratives in Ontario, was one of the defining elements of Canadian political culture. Ontarians usually expected their provincial premier to put the national interest ahead of any provincial interest, while most other Canadians expected their premiers to defend the provincial interest as well when on the national stage.

These realities were key elements of “how Canada worked.” It is possible that they are changing. If so, the implications for the federation could be far-reaching.

Consider, for example, the way we divide regional wealth in Canada. The politics of this exercise have always been fraught with tension. Ontario was often counted on to play the role of “honest broker,” mediating conflict and supporting the federal government’s efforts to build consensus among competing regional interests. What are the consequences for Canada if Ontarians are less willing to play this role?

The Mowat Centre for Policy Innovation measured whether Canadians in Ontario continue to have the lowest level of regional dissatisfaction in the federation. From 1996-2005, *The Centre for Research and Information on Canada* asked a series of survey questions designed to measure attitudes relevant to regional dissatisfaction. The Mowat Centre re-asked the key questions again, from January 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010 to a representative sample of 2,697 Canadians, including a special over-sample of 1,482 Ontarians.<sup>1</sup> Together, this data allow us to identify patterns of both continuity and change in Ontarians’ views of the federation.

We investigate Ontarians’ views in four major domains. First, the degree to which Ontarians feel their province is respected in the federation; second, Ontario’s influence in national politics, including trends in the nature and magnitude of the province’s influence; third, evaluations of the fairness of federal spending in Ontario; and finally, Ontarians’ sense of provincial and national identity.

## Respect

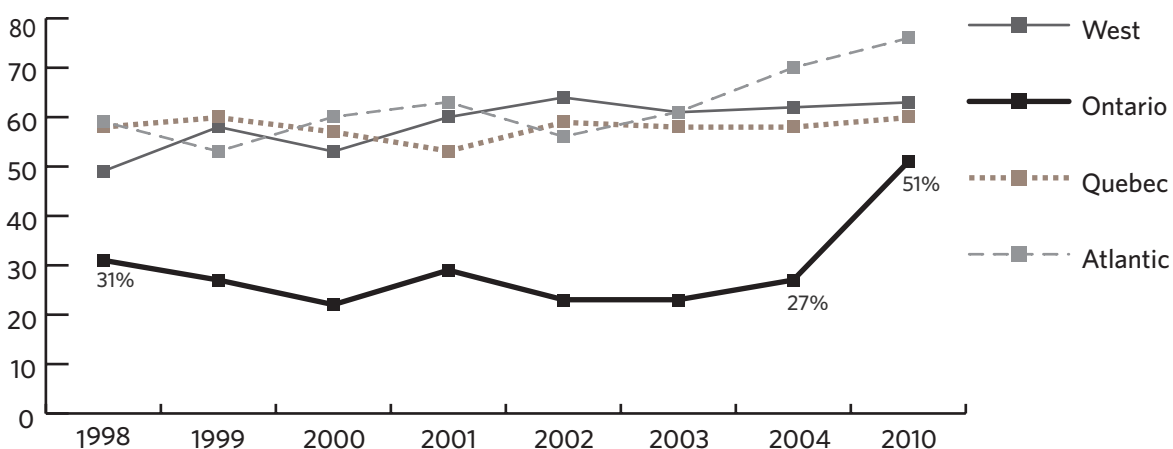
We ask Canadians whether their province is “treated with the respect it deserves in Canada.” In Ontario, 51 percent answer “no.”<sup>2</sup> Considered on its own, this level of perceived disrespect seems high: how can half the population of the country’s most populous province feel that their province is not treated with respect? The finding looks more sensible, however, when compared to views elsewhere in the country (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Ontarians feel more respected than all other Canadians. Outside Ontario, 63 percent of Canadians feel their province is not treated with the respect it deserves. The highest level of perceived disrespect is in the Atlantic prov-

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inces, where 76 percent of respondents answer “no” to this question.

However, perceptions of disrespect have increased far more in Ontario than elsewhere. In fact, levels of perceived disrespect in Ontario have virtually doubled since 2004, when just 27 percent of Ontarians felt that their province was not treated with the respect it deserved. Since then, levels of perceived disrespect have risen to 51 percent—a startling jump. Striking on its own, this figure is even more remarkable when compared with dynamics in other regions, where trends in perceived disrespect are flat or demonstrate only slight increases.

**Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who say that their province is not respected**



Although Ontarians are still slightly less likely than other Canadians to say their province is not treated with respect, Ontarians’ views now resemble those of other Canadians. Overall, in 2004 and in earlier years, Ontarians were alone in Canada in feeling their province was respected; today, Ontario has joined the ranks of the aggrieved.

## Influence

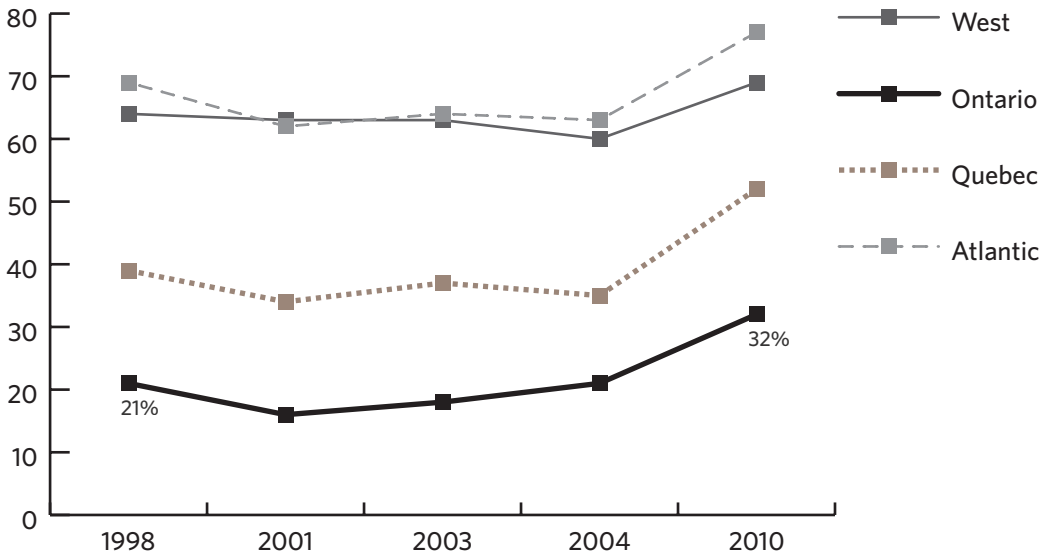
We obtain similar results when we ask Ontarians about their province’s influence on important national decisions. Just 32 percent of Ontarians feel the province enjoys “less than its fair share” of influence. Outside Ontario, by contrast, 63 percent of Canadians feel their province has less influence than it deserves (see Figure 2). This result looks fairly positive, but the historical analysis reveals a distinct trend. Dissatisfaction with the province’s influence at the national level has risen from 21 percent in 2004 to include 1/3 of Ontarians today.

Ontarians’ perceptions of trends in the province’s national influence parallel these findings (see Figure 3). When asked if their province’s “influence on important national decisions” is “increasing, decreasing or staying about the same,” 50 percent answer that it is “decreasing,” and just 8 percent

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think the province's influence is "increasing," a lower figure than in any other region.

**Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who say that their province enjoys less than its fair share of influence**



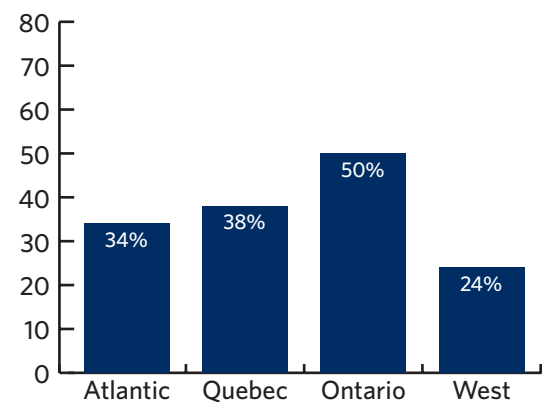
In Quebec, 38 percent think their province's influence is decreasing. These findings point to possible new points of tension in the country: the traditional "centre"—Ontario and, more generally, Central Canada including Quebec—feels that its influence in the federation is declining. This makes it more likely that Ontario and Quebec will attempt to exercise the considerable power that they retain in order to protect their interests.

## Fairness in Fiscal Transfers

On the issue of the distribution of federal spending, we see further evidence of Ontarians' increased sense of dissatisfaction with the federation. When asked if Ontario receives "its fair share" of "the money the federal government spends on different programs and on transfers to the provinces," almost 63 percent of respondents answer that the province receives "less than its fair share" (Figure 4).

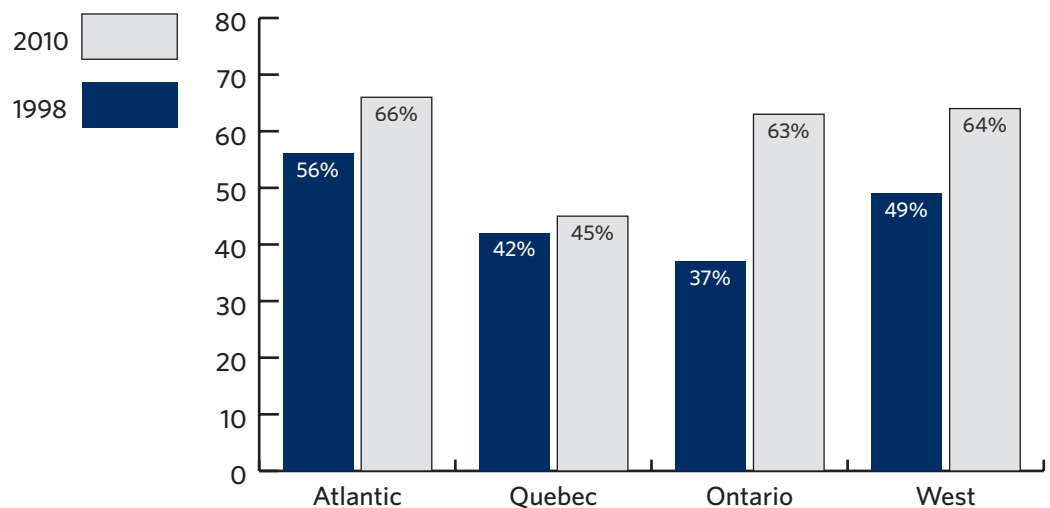
To be sure, a majority in all regions (except Quebec) believes that their province receives less than its fair share of federal dollars, a sentiment that has only increased over the years. What is noteworthy about Ontario is that in contrast to other provinces, discontent over fiscal federalism represents a major break with the past. In 1998, just 37 percent of Ontarians felt the province

**Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who say that their province's influence on important national decisions is decreasing**



received less than it deserved in federal spending, making the province remarkably satisfied when compared to other provinces. Today, Ontario's level of dissatisfaction over federal spending is actually above the national average of 59 percent.

**Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who say that their province receives less than its fair share of federal dollars**



In Ontario, discontent over fiscal federalism represents a major break from the past. Today, Ontarians' level of dissatisfaction over federal spending is actually above the national average.

The trends for all these questions are similar: Ontarians are more likely to have concerns about the province's treatment and status in the federation and, in this regard, Ontarians and Canadians elsewhere are now more alike than they were in the past. The results for each question, however, are not identical. Ontarians take a differentiated view of the province's treatment: while a majority continues to believe that Ontario has a very strong influence on national decisions, a majority now also believes that the province does not receive its fair share of federal spending.

## Identity

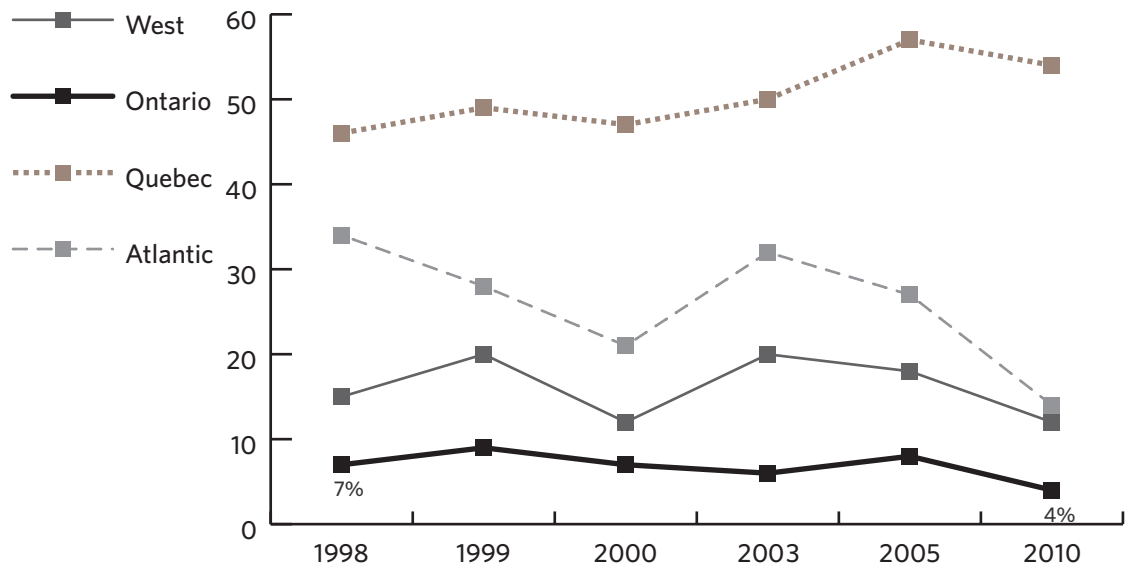
Do these trends in evaluations of federal treatment reflect changes in Ontarians' sense of identification with Canada? The short answer is "no." The data makes clear that changes in Ontarians' sense of regional discontent are not explained by increases in provincial identity, with only 4% identifying with Ontario more than with Canada (Figure 5). There has been virtually no change on this point since 1998 and Ontarians continue to identify with their province less than Canadians elsewhere. In fact, compared to 2005, Ontarians are increasingly likely to identify themselves as either a "Canadian only" or a "Canadian first." The implication is that, whatever else Ontarians may think about the federation,

Changes in Ontarians' sense of regional discontent are not explained by increases in provincial identity. Ontarians demonstrate the highest level of Canadian identity in the country.

Canada remains the primary pole of social identification.

The fact that Ontarians continue to demonstrate the highest level of Canadian identity and the lowest level of provincial identity in the country represents a challenge for Ontario political leaders interested in mobilizing the Ontario public on issues of federal treatment. Ontarians have more negative judgements of federal treatment than in the past, but continue to lack the high level of provincial identity found in some other provinces. It is this provincial identity that can turn a sense of unfair treatment into a combusive political issue.

**Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who identify with their province more than with Canada**



## A New Canada and a New Ontario?

These findings paint a nuanced and coherent picture of Ontarians' evolving attitudes toward the federation: Ontarians continue to have the strongest sense of Canadian identity in the country, but are increasingly similar to other Canadians when it comes to believing that their province is treated unfairly within the federation.

The decline in Ontarians' sense of being treated fairly reflects a national pattern, but where Ontario stands out is in the steepness of its slide. Although the province does not lead the country in its sense of regional dissatisfaction, it certainly leads in the growth of such dissatisfaction over the past five years. A key question is whether the trend in Ontarians' evolution will continue. If it does, it would further complicate the federal government's job of forging consensus on divisive issues.

The implications for our national politics of this important change in Ontarians' attitudes may soon be apparent. Governments across Canada are facing fiscal challenges. Deficits are large and structural. Federal transfers that help provinces fund programs such as health care and post secondary education are due for renegotiation. The costs of battling climate change will soon be divvied up across the country. With these issues on the horizon, Ontarians are more willing to support a more vocal, interest-based approach to the federation, much like the one adopted in other provinces.

Through much of Canada's post-war period, when inter-regional divisions heated up, Ontario was often a calming presence. The Ontario public may no longer be supportive of such a posture, making divisive issues like carbon pricing even more volatile. [MC](#)

Ontarians are increasingly similar to other Canadians when it comes to believing that their province is treated unfairly, and are more willing to support a more interest-based approach to the federation.

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>The survey was fielded by Pollara to a stratified random sample of their 'Town Hall Online Panel.' Panel members are recruited from representative, general population telephone surveys. All analyses reported in the paper incorporate appropriate sampling weights. The Mowat Centre is committed to transparency in our research. All original results from the survey are available on our website, along with question wording. See [http://www.mowatcentre.ca/general/MCpoll\\_Attitudes\\_02-2010.pdf](http://www.mowatcentre.ca/general/MCpoll_Attitudes_02-2010.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Throughout the paper we confine the analysis to valid responses; that is, we exclude the generally small number of respondents answering "don't know" or who refused to answer the various questions.

<sup>3</sup>Results from the four western and four eastern provinces were aggregated given sample sizes. All results are available on our website, including province by province breakdowns for all questions.

## About the authors

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## About the Mowat Centre

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The Mowat Centre for Policy Innovation is an independent, non-partisan public policy research centre located at the School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Toronto.

The Mowat Centre undertakes collaborative applied policy research and engages in public dialogue on Canada's most important national issues, and proposes innovative, research-driven public policy recommendations, informed by Ontario's reality.

We believe a prosperous, equitable and dynamic Canada requires strong provinces, including a strong Ontario, and strong cities.

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