

Historic Election Concludes amid Deepened Polarization

Post-Election Debrief
May 20, 2025



Executive summary: Rise of populism in Canada (i)

- » Polarization and populism* in Canada are not “fringe” and their depth should not be underestimated
 - In the most recent election, populist forces gained record vote support and nearly formed government
 - If the campaign had gone on for another week and/or if younger, disaffected male voters had shown up in the same numbers as moderate open voters, we might have witnessed a Conservative win, driven in large part by right-wing populists (plus some traditional “status quo” Conservatives who do not share the mistrust and disinformation of the populist base)

* *Populism is a path to seeking power with two main ingredients: 1) The idea that there is a corrupt elite which invokes deep suspicion of the current establishment; and 2) a belief that power should be more properly restored to the people (who, more often than not, become “my people,” not “others”). It is ideologically thin and can be expressed on the left, right, and centre (e.g., Roosevelt’s New Deal was centrist populism). Right-wing authoritarianism is an example of populism with a terrible historical record.*

Executive summary: Rise of populism in Canada (ii)

- » Most Canadians underestimate the scale and nature of this force
 - This is not traditional status quo conservatism

Executive summary: Demographics of new populism

- » The demographic bases are very different from the underpinnings of traditional status quo conservatism:
 - Younger, not older
 - Overwhelmingly male, not female
 - Centred on college-educated, not university-educated
 - Stronger in working-class, not middle-class Canada

Executive summary: Psychographics of new populism

- » In terms of psychographics (i.e., values and beliefs that influence behaviour), the divide is even stronger:
 - Extremely high institutional mistrust
 - High incidence of disinformation on vaccines, climate change, and geopolitics
 - Deep economic pessimism and sense of declining intergenerational mobility
 - Feelings of alienation from traditional narratives of progress
 - Trump 2.0 seen as benign or even positive by this cohort
 - Issues like tariffs or annexation are low priorities for them

Executive summary: Strategic implications

- » Responding to this nihilistic populist challenge requires both boldness and empathetic understanding
- » Economic grievances must be addressed without validating spurious beliefs
 - Trying to find some artificial centre on issues like climate change and public health would be injurious to the public interest
 - The era of being able to “have our own opinions but not our own facts” is over
- » **Immediate need:** confront the spread of domestic and foreign disinformation at the heart of the new enflamed affective polarization
- » **Long-term need:** rebuild an inclusive economy rooted in shared prosperity (inclusive, not extractive*)

* *Extractive institutions are those designed to benefit a small elite at the expense of the broader population. Inclusive institutions foster broad participation and shared prosperity.*

For further reading, see “Why Nations Fail: The origins of power, prosperity and poverty” by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (2013). Crown Currency.

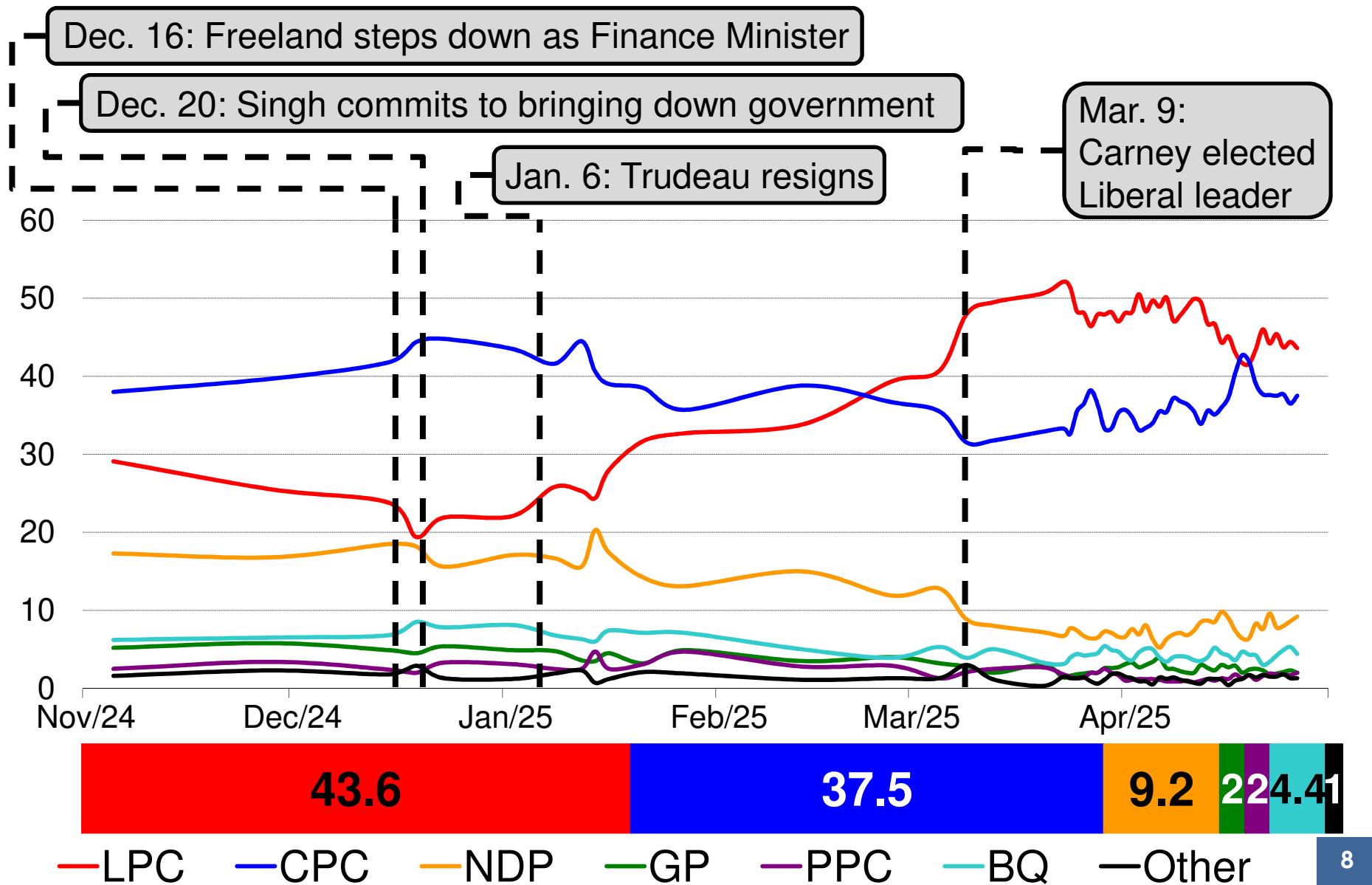
The 2025 Canadian election

- » The Liberal Party achieved an unprecedented comeback, which may well have steered the country away from the same populist trajectory that is gripping the United States
 - Satisfaction with the election was the highest in five elections
 - Confidence in the direction of the country leapt by almost 30 points
- » Canadians view the new two-party dominance between the Liberals and Conservatives with a mix of concern and uncertainty as to whether it will be permanent

For further reading, see:

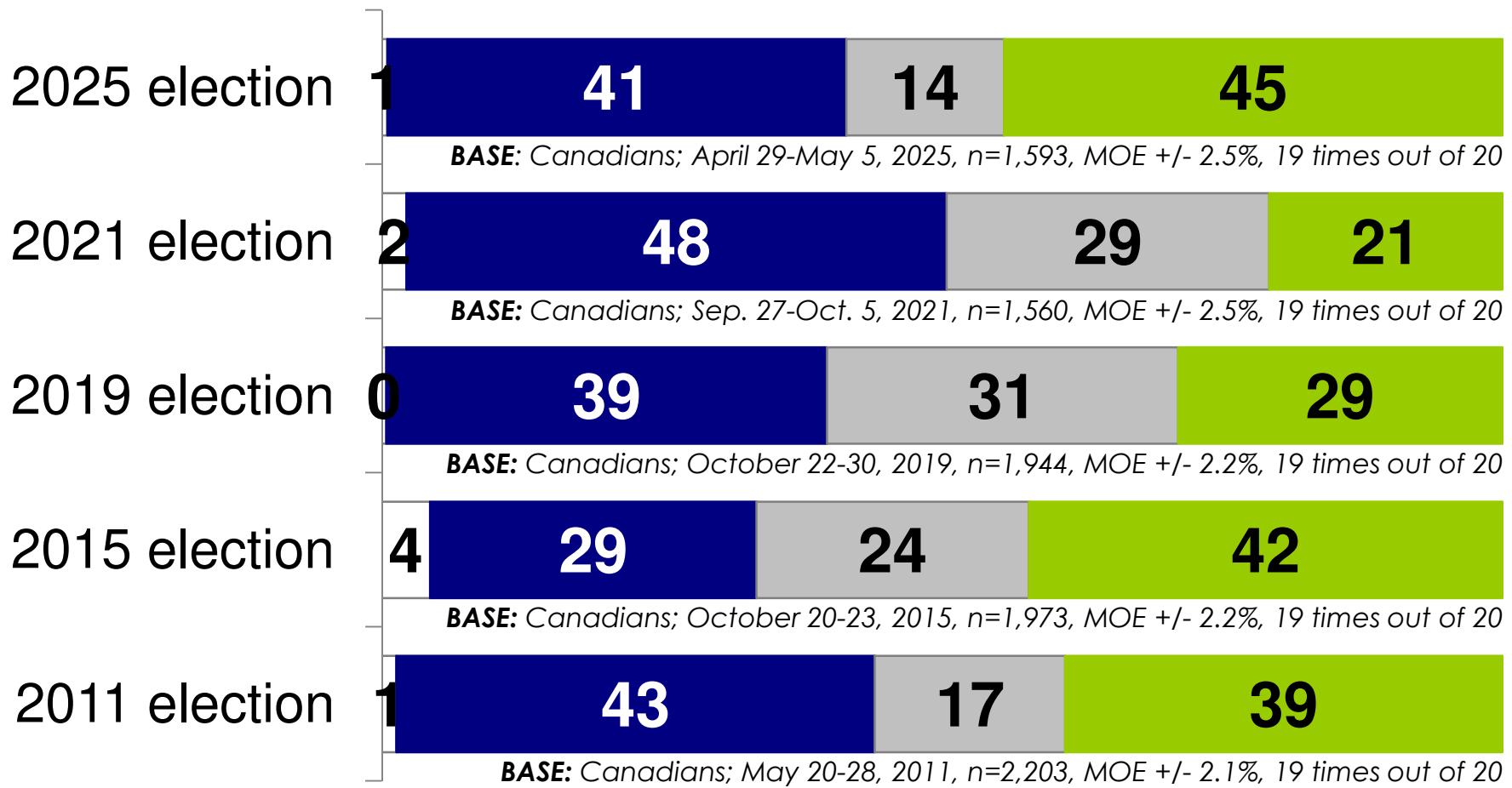
- [“What the Polls in Canada Are Really Saying”](#) by Catherine Kim (April 14, 2025), *Politico Magazine*.
- [“How Trump Turned Canadians Off Populism”](#) by Frank Graves (April 10, 2025), *Maclean’s Magazine*.

Major events shaping election campaign



Satisfaction with election results

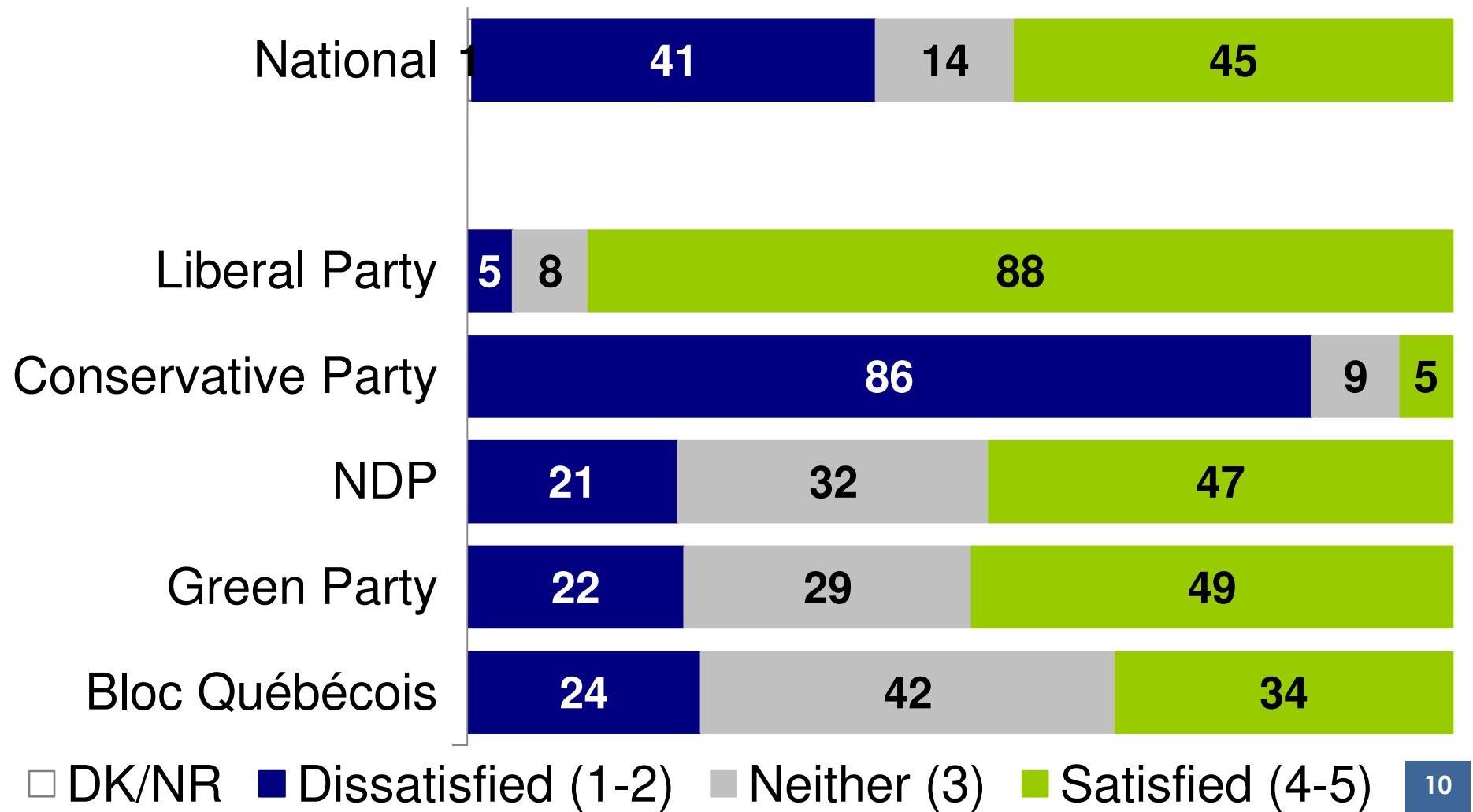
Q. Overall, how satisfied are you with the results to this election?



DK/NR Dissatisfied (1-2) Neither (3) Satisfied (4-5) 9

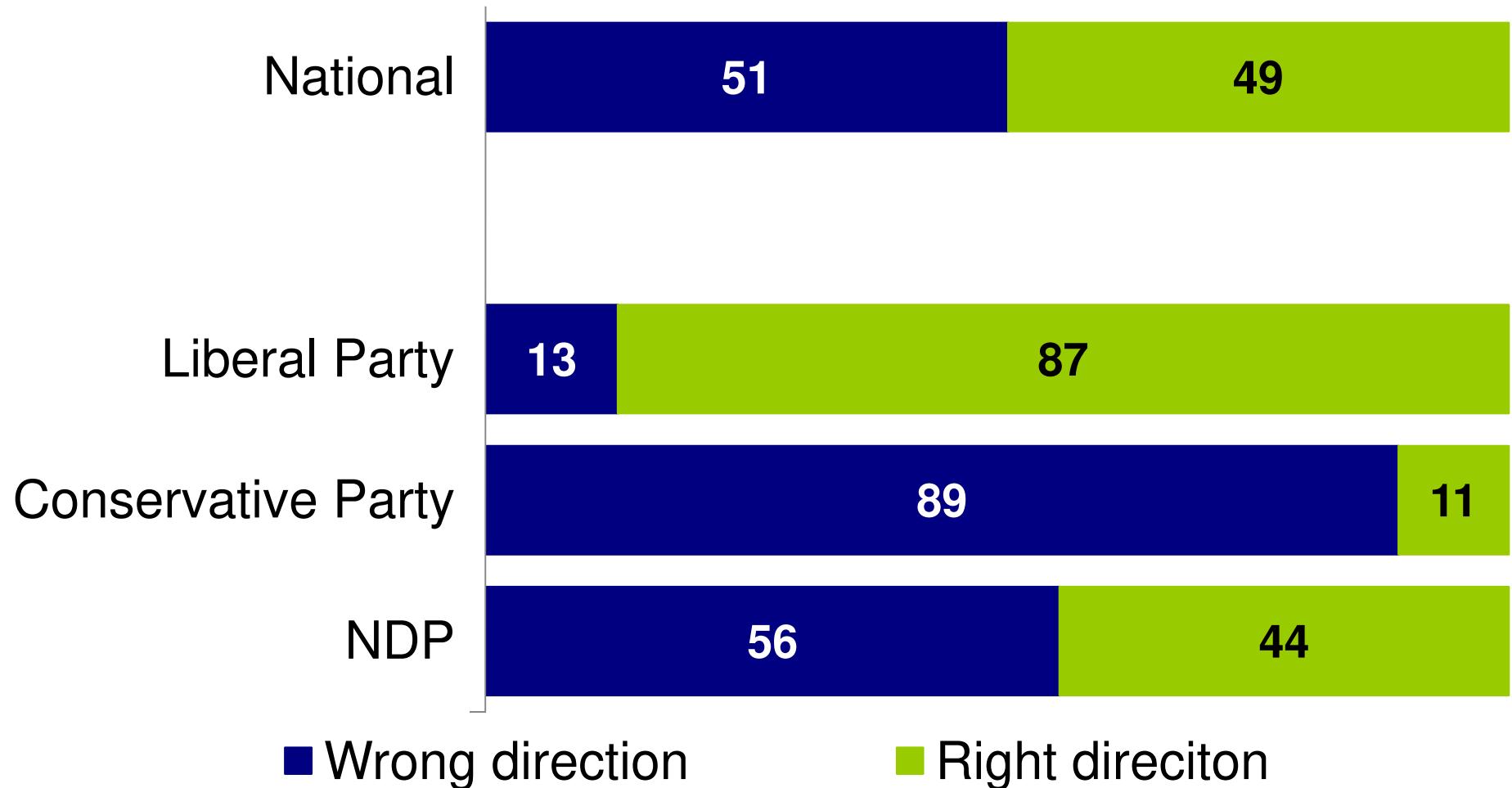
Satisfaction by vote

Q. Overall, how satisfied are you with the results to this election?



Direction of country

Q. All things considered, would you say the country is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?

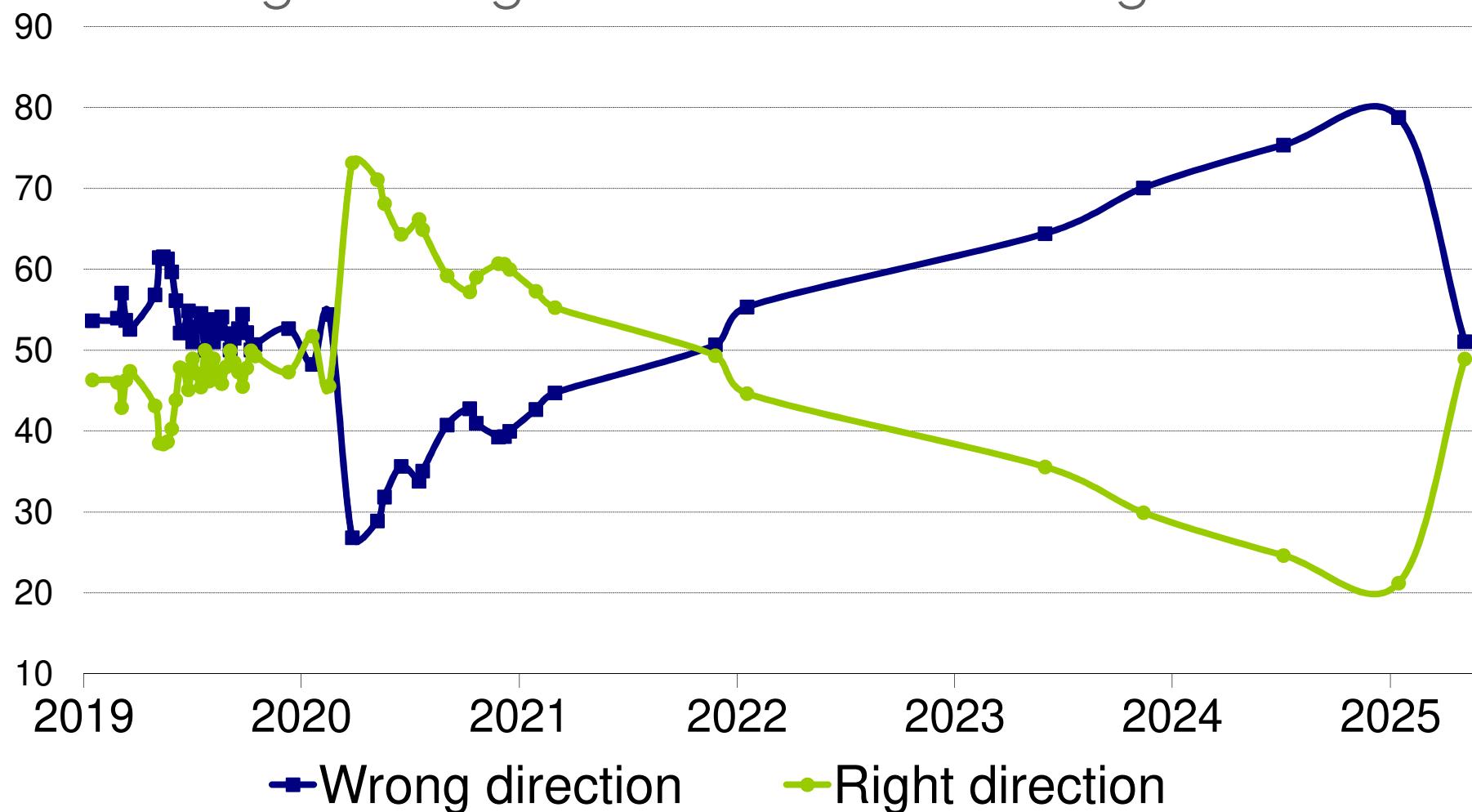


Note: Figures adjusted to exclude those who skipped the question.

BASE: Canadians (half-sample); April 29-May 5, 2025, n=793, MOE +/- 3.5%, 19 times out of 20

Tracking national direction

Q. All things considered, would you say the country is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?

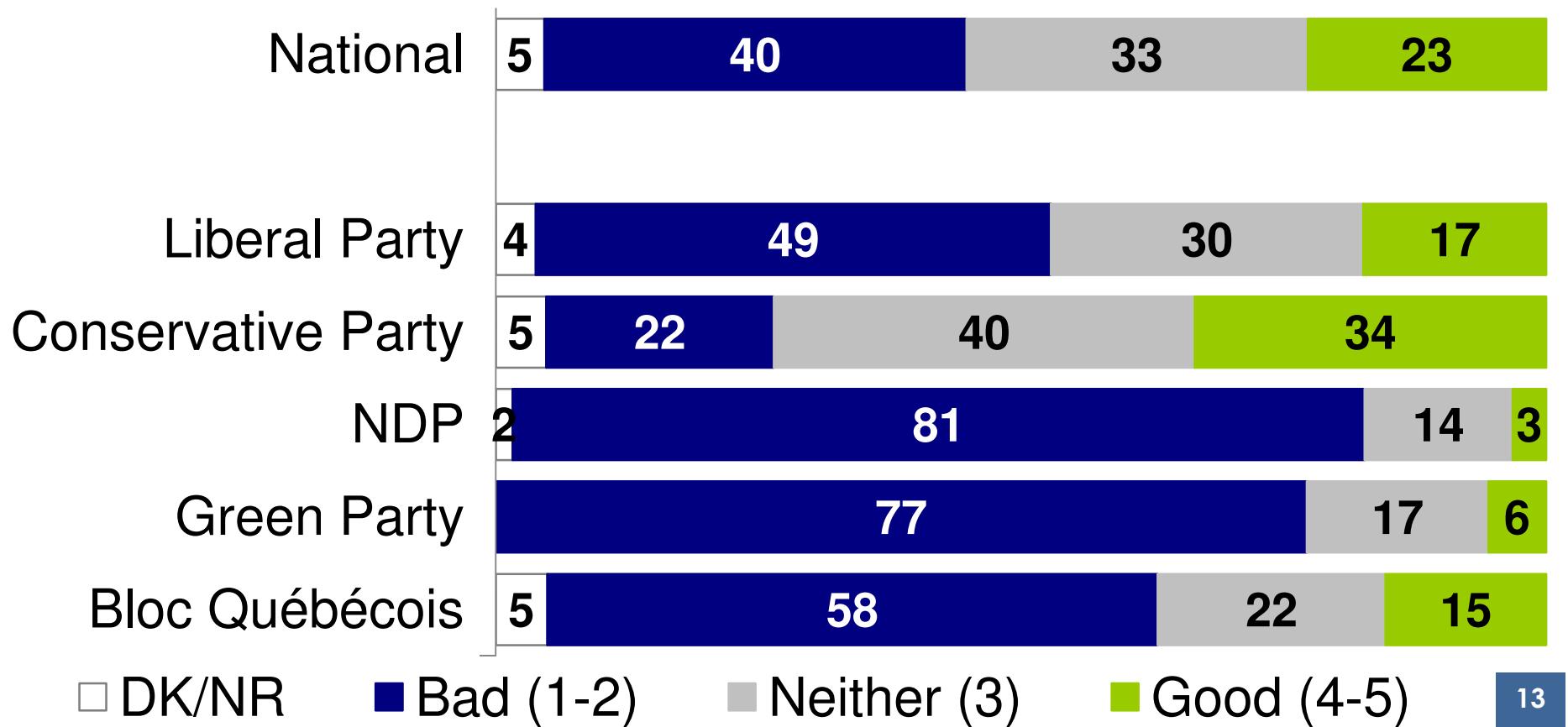


Note: Figures adjusted to exclude those who skipped the question.

BASE: Canadians (half-sample); April 29-May 5, 2025, n=793, MOE +/- 3.5%, 19 times out of 20

Views on two-party system

Q. Roughly 85% of the vote went to either the Liberals or the Conservatives. Do you think the dominance of these two parties is good or bad for Canadian democracy?



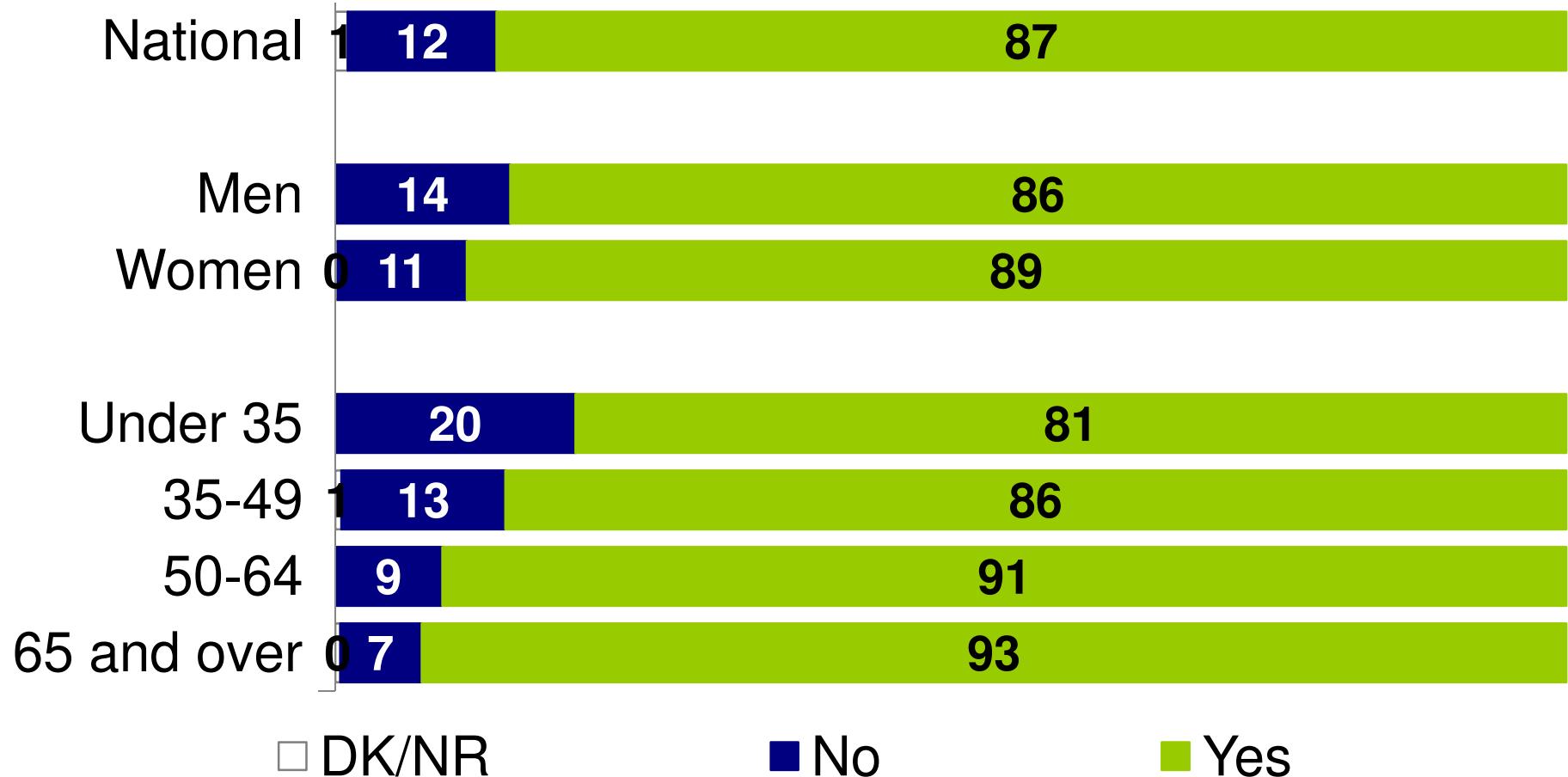
Voter turnout

- » Despite these profound shifts, further late movements saw a likely majority turn into a strong minority
- » Although survey reports of vote behaviour are exaggerated due to social desirability bias,* the underlying demographic patterns suggest the Conservative Party suffered a sharp turnout disadvantage
 - Many of the Conservative Party's key constituencies – young men, the high school and college educated, and working-class Canadians – had lower turnout rates
 - If voting were mandatory, it is highly plausible that the Conservative Party would have won

* **Social desirability bias** is the tendency of survey respondents to answer questions in a way they believe will be viewed favourably by others, often overstating socially accepted behaviours (e.g., voting) and understating stigmatized ones

Voter turnout by age/gender

Q. Did you vote in the most recent federal election, held on April 28th?

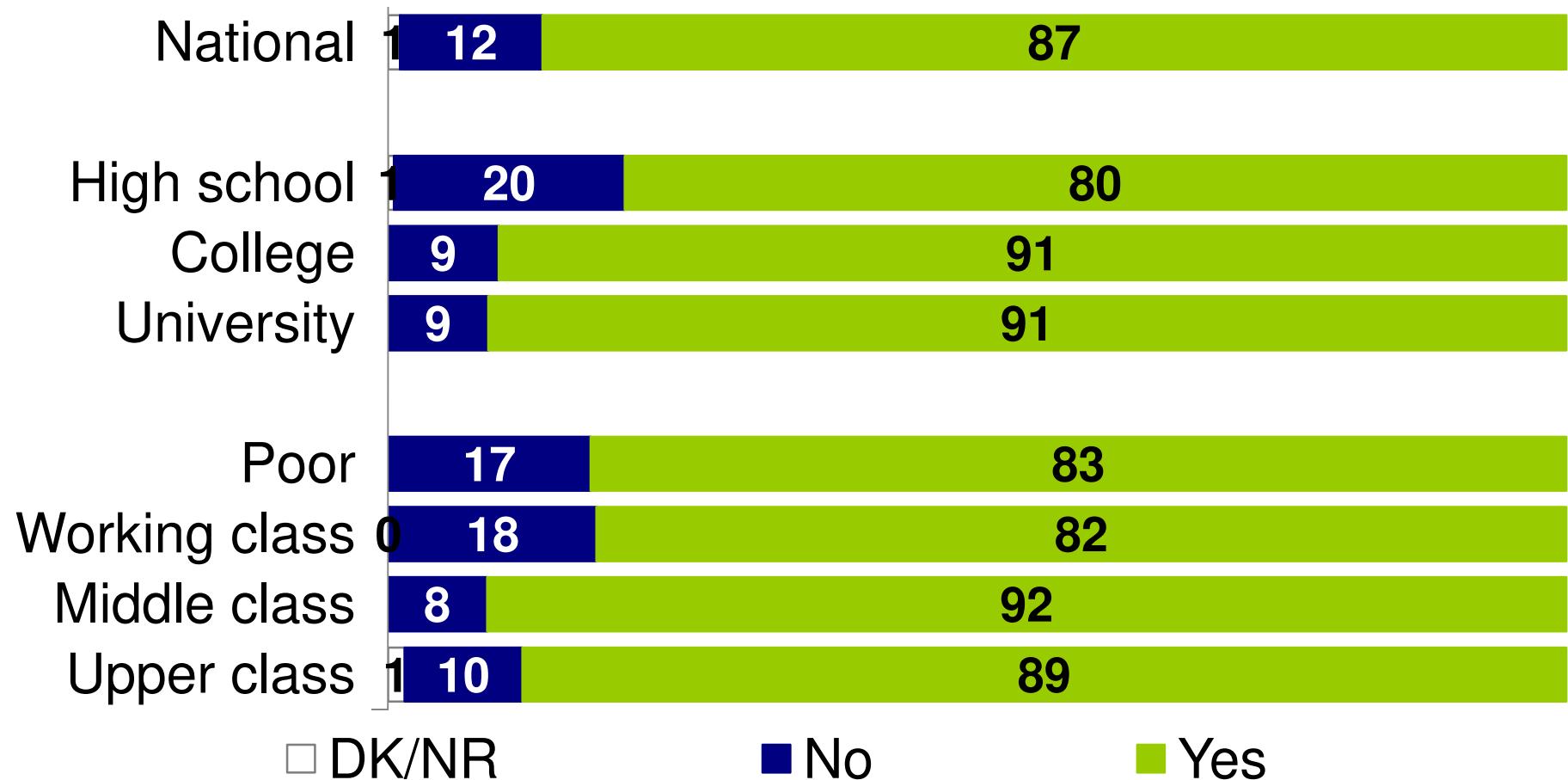


Note: Figures on vote behaviour exaggerated due to social desirability bias

BASE: Canadians; April 29-May 4, 2025, n=1,633, MOE +/- 2.4%, 19 times out of 20

Voter turnout by social class/ethnicity

Q. Did you vote in the most recent federal election, held on April 28th?



Note: Figures on vote behaviour exaggerated due to social desirability bias

BASE: Canadians; April 29-May 4, 2025, n=1,633, MOE +/- 2.4%, 19 times out of 20

Unprecedented change (i)

- » The U.S. election and its aftermath have had a profound impact on Canada
 - Trajectory uncertain, in flux
 - Record nadir on world has become more dangerous
- » U.S. election strongly mirrors populist movements in Canada
 - Record rise in opposition to immigration; 88% opposition among Conservatives compared to 35% among Liberals
 - Even larger gulf on Conservative-Liberal attitudes to visible minority immigration
 - Pull up the drawbridge? (hostility to outgroups is a feature of right-wing authoritarian populism*)

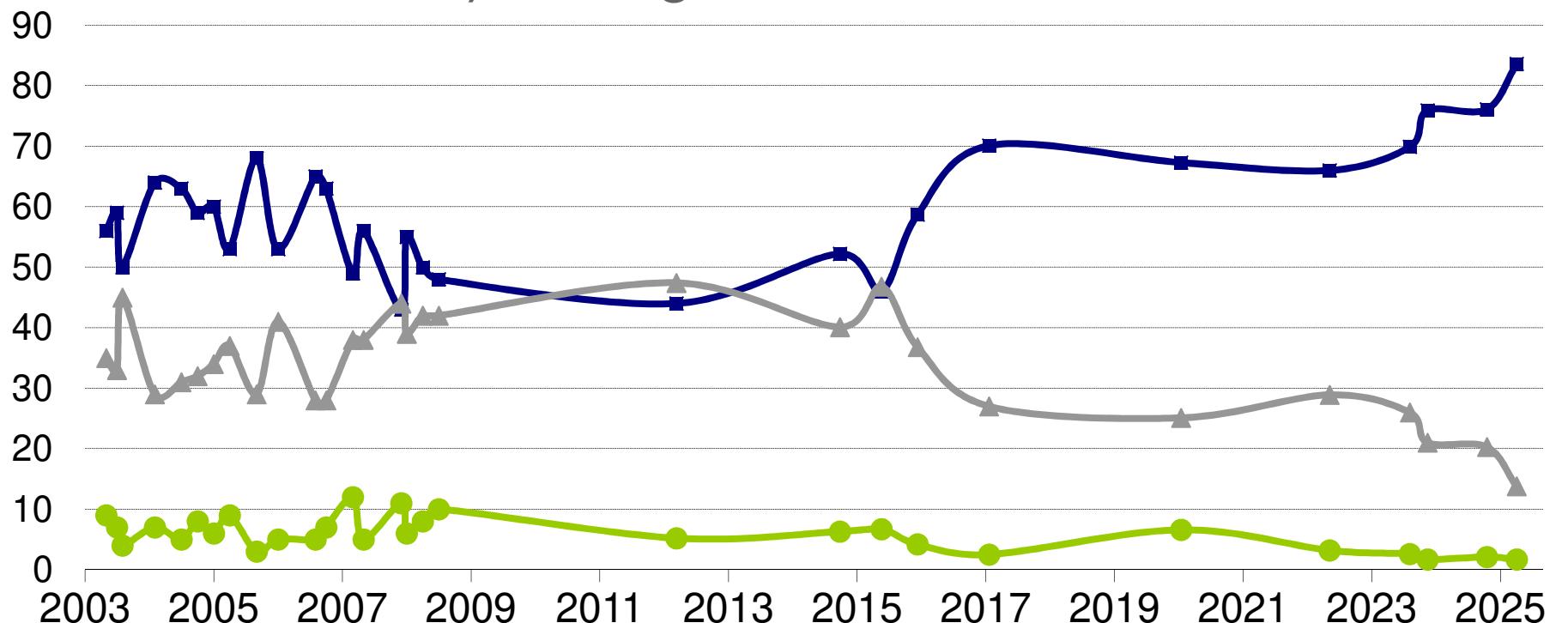
* *Right-wing authoritarian populism* refers to a political ideology that combines strong support for a dominant leader, strict law and order, hostility toward outgroups (such as immigrants or minorities), and a belief that traditional values are under threat

Unprecedented change (ii)

- » The Trump 2.0 shock and awe announcements, including talk of tariffs and annexation, triggered a sharp and continuing rise in national attachment and a search for economic and social sovereignty
 - The rise in attachment to Canada is focussed in older, more open Canada

Perceived danger in the world

Q. From your own point of view, do you feel that, overall, the world is safer, more dangerous, or about the same as it was five years ago?



More dangerous

About the same

Safer

19

BASE: Canadians; March 25-April 2, 2025, n=2,054, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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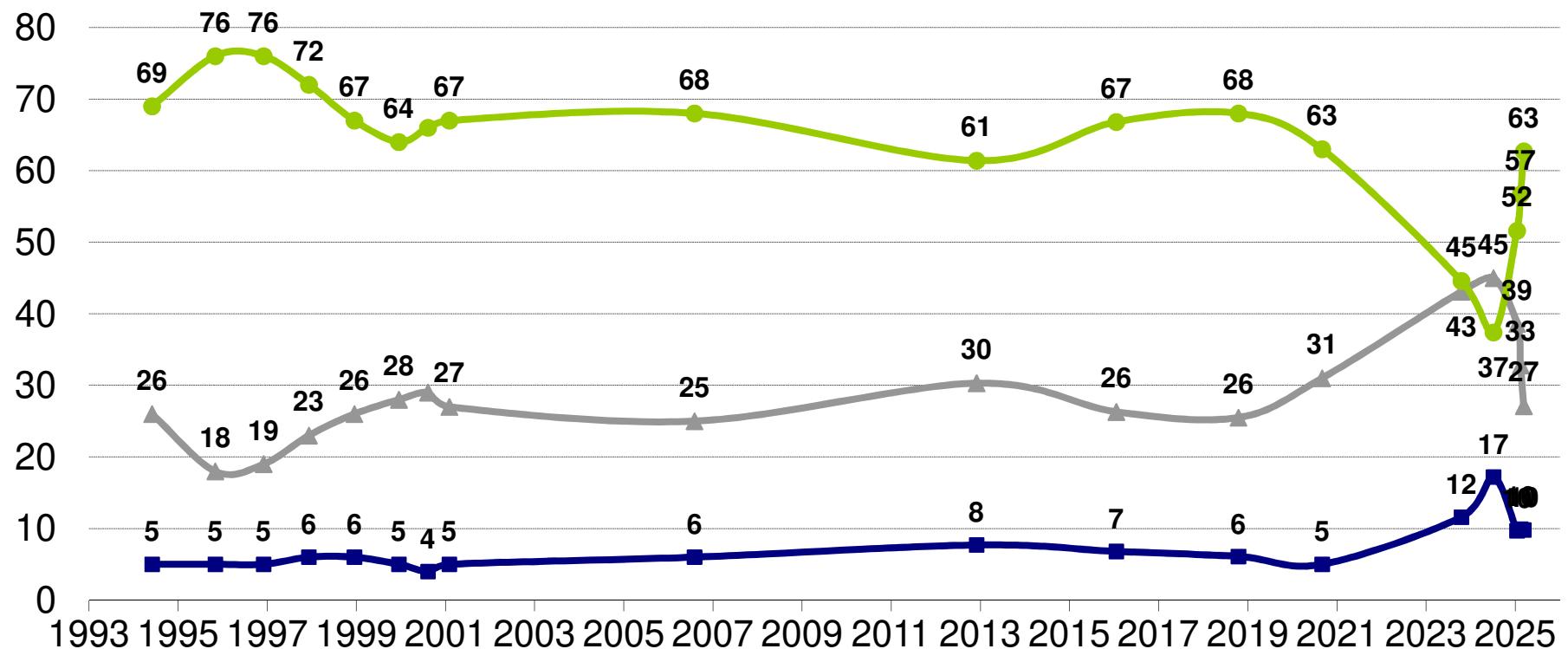
Attitudes to immigration

Q. In your opinion do you feel that there are too few, too many or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?



Attachment to Canada

Q. How strong is your own personal sense of belonging to... ?
Canada



0 10

27

63

— Not strong (1-2) — Moderately strong (3-5) — Very strong (6-7)

21

BASE: Canadians; March 7-11, 2025, n=1,524, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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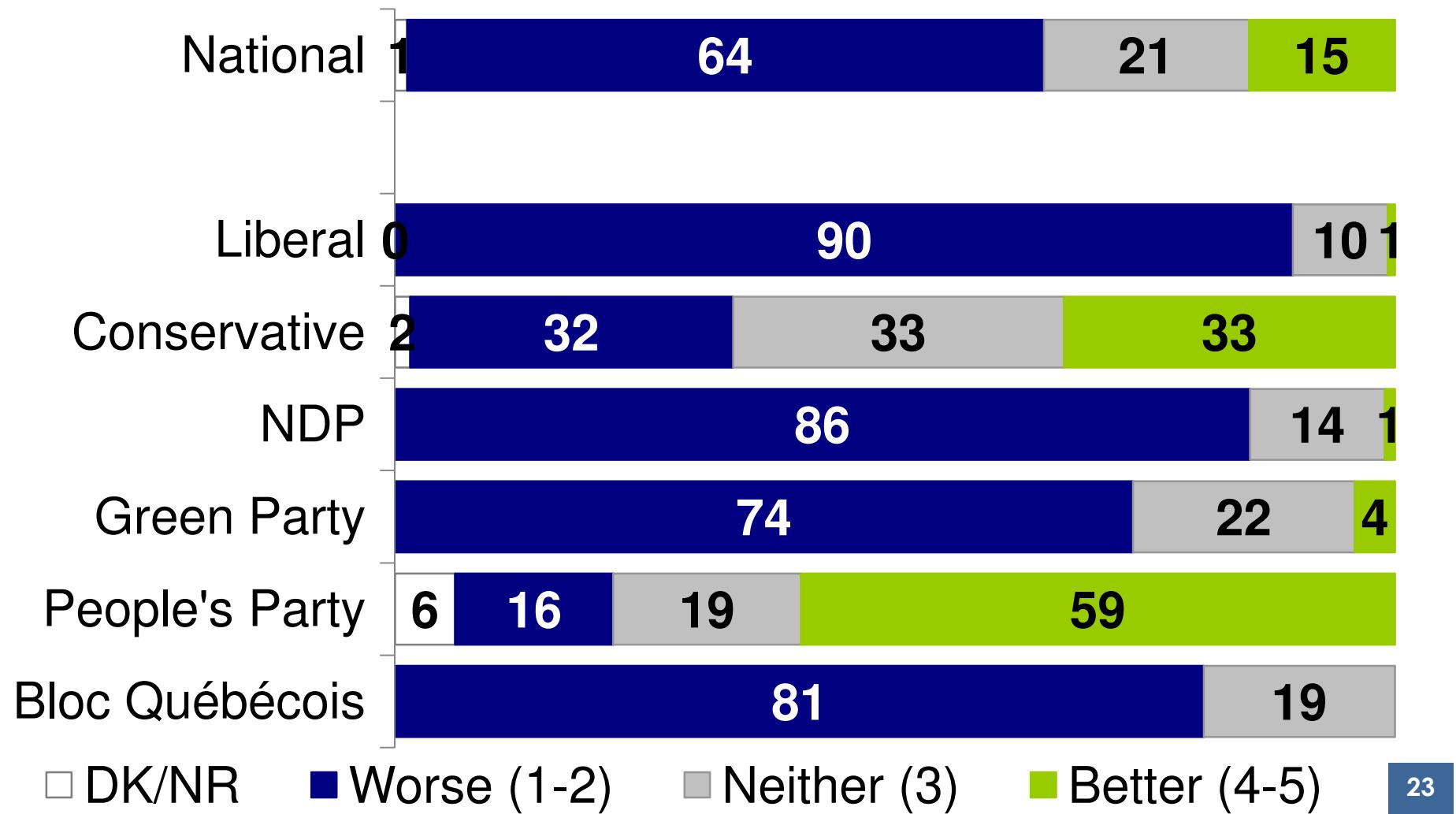
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Attitudes to Donald Trump

- » Expectations of Trump 2.0 were low, but most Canadians believe it is much worse than their earlier expectations
 - Precipitous decline in state of Canada-U.S. relations
- » At this point, Canadians are hopeful, but uncertain how this will end
 - Virtually all moderate voters believe we are seeing a breakdown in the world order
 - Shockingly, a plurality of Canadians are concerned the U.S. may attempt to seize Canada by force
 - Canadians leaning to more forceful – rather than conciliatory – approach to dealing with U.S.

Views on Trump presidency

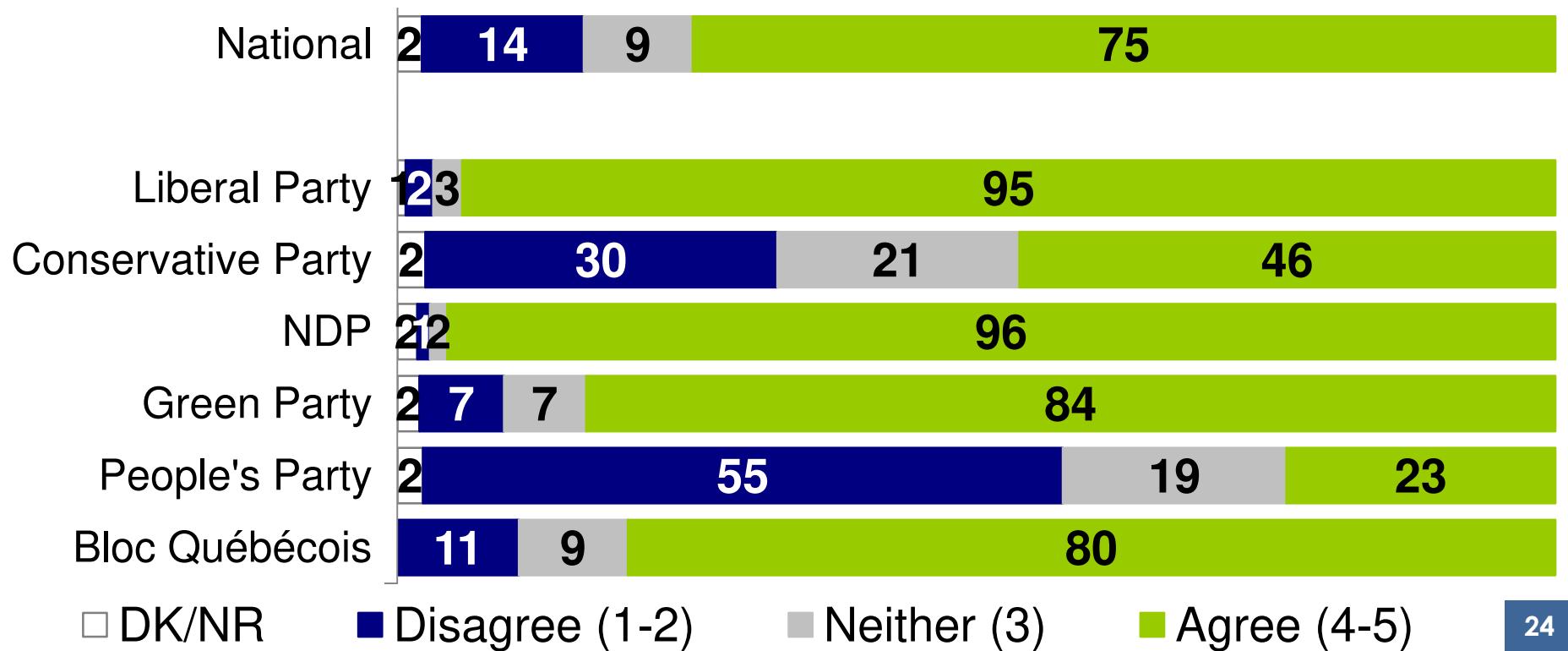
Q. All things considered, do you believe the Donald Trump presidency has been better or worse than you expected?



Concerns about world order breakdown

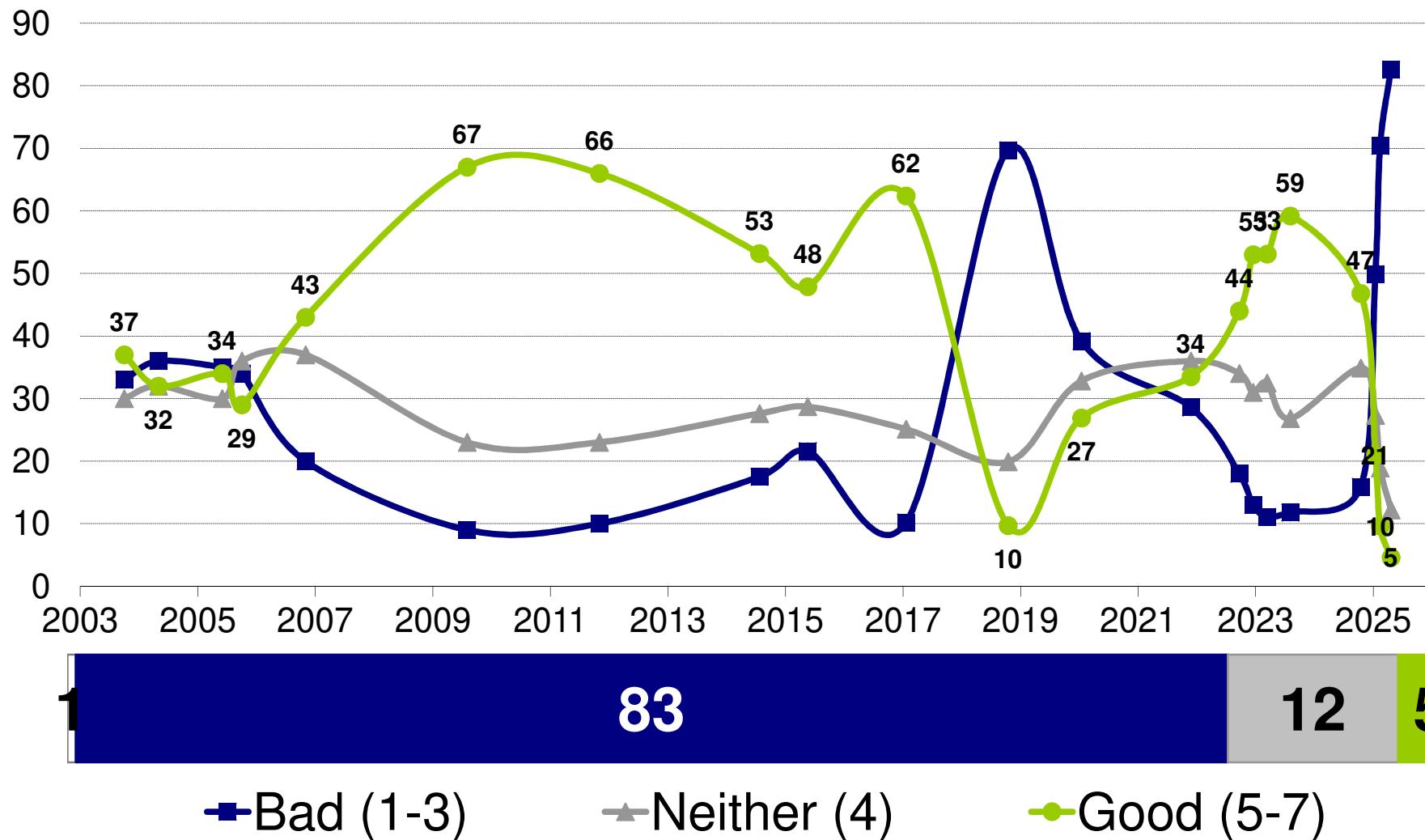
Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I really worry that Donald Trump's policies will lead to a breakdown of the current world order (such as through weakening alliances like NATO, disrupting world trade, and undermining international institutions)



Perceived state of Canada-U.S. relations

Q. How would you currently describe relations between Canada and the United States?



BASE: Canadians; April 14-21, 2025, n=1,521, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

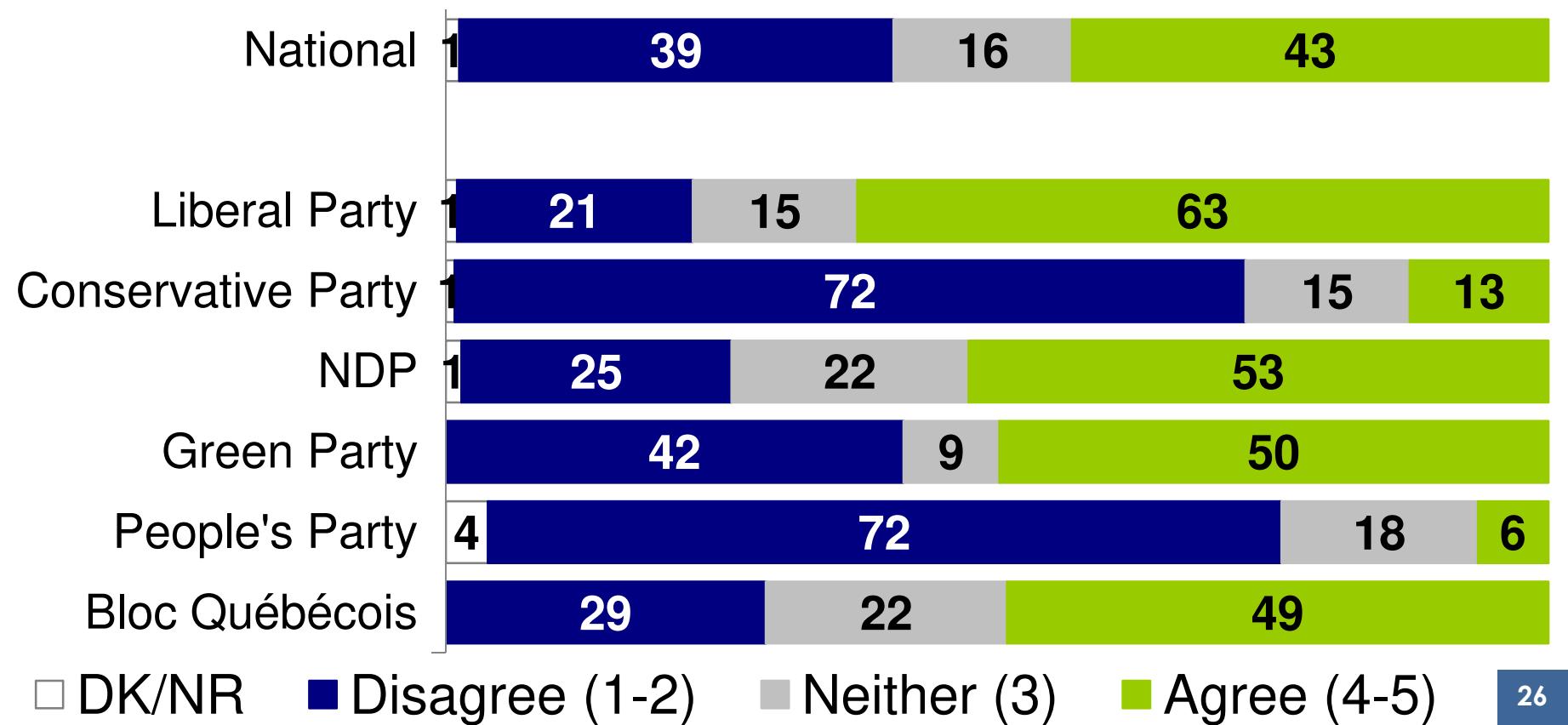
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Concerns over U.S. invasion

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I really worry that Donald Trump might attempt to annex Canada by military force

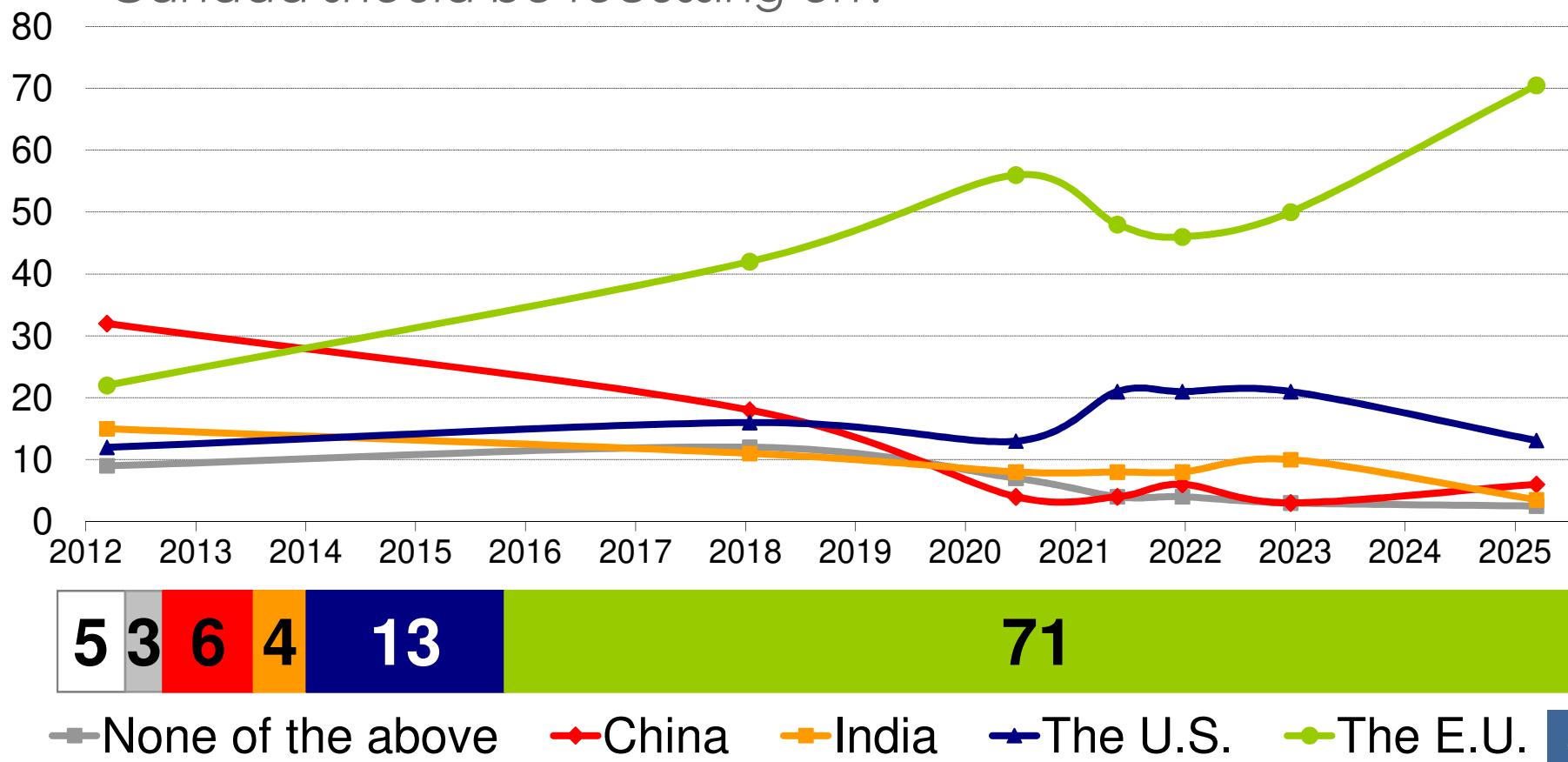


International trade

- » Canadians unconvinced diplomacy/legal appeals will have much success
 - Canadians open to diversifying to other markets such as Europe
- » While there is an imperative to negotiate with the U.S. to remove punishing tariffs, support for strengthening trade with the U.S. has plummeted to a historical nadir
 - There is also strong interest in trade with other regions – particularly Europe
 - Conservative voters are less open to new arrangements in Europe and are less wary of a renewed U.S.-Canada relationship
- » Notably, the tariff threats have not buoyed a desire for more trade with China or India

Preferred trading partner

Q. For much of the last century, Canada's economy has been closely tied to the United States. Over the last few decades, however, Canada has been opening up trade with other countries. Which of the following partners do you believe Canada should be focussing on?



BASE: Canadians; March 7-11, 2025, n=1,524, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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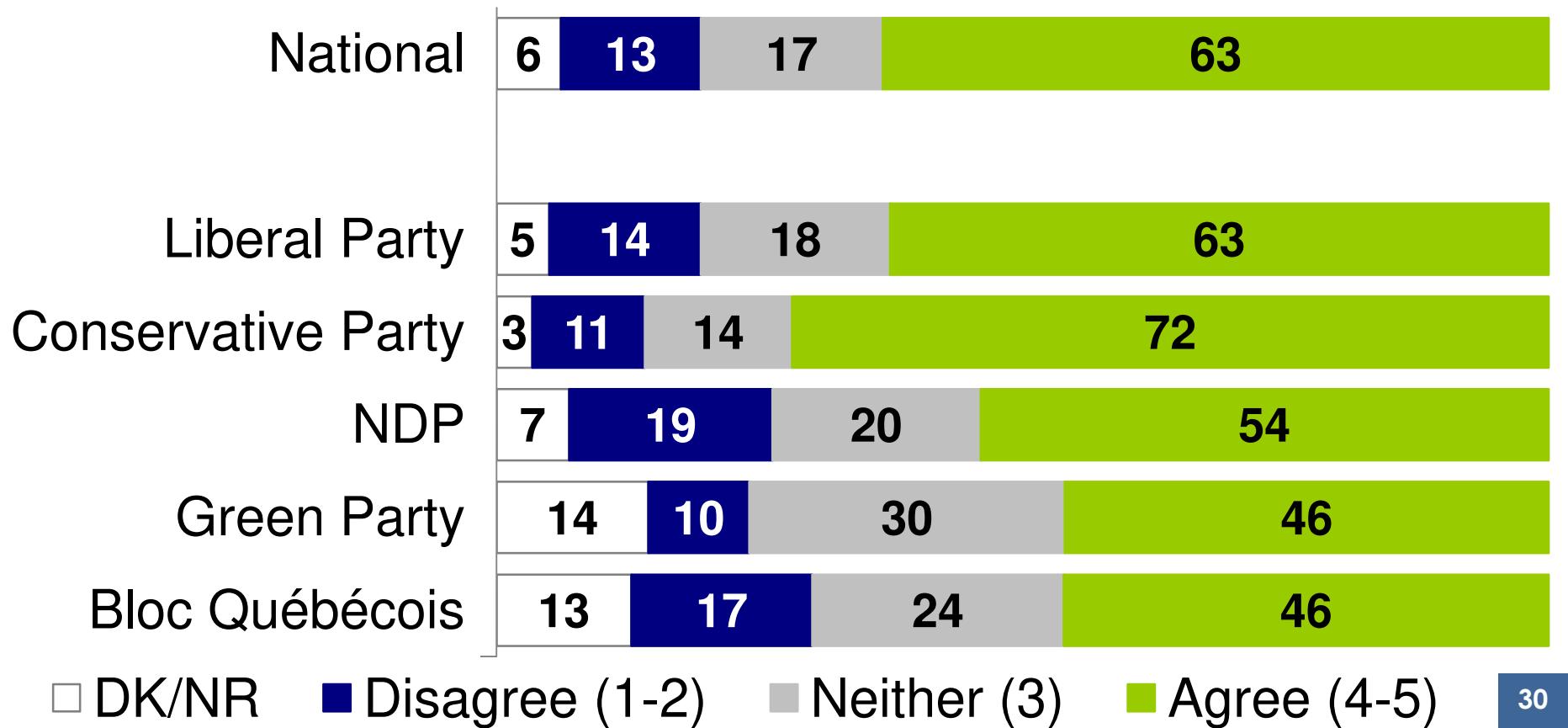
Factors influencing 2025 election (i)

- » These findings reveal a Canada which is polarized at levels we have never seen
- » Most Canadians believe this to be true and, whatever the significant virtues of this election, most Canadians think the election result has exacerbated polarization

Views on polarization by vote

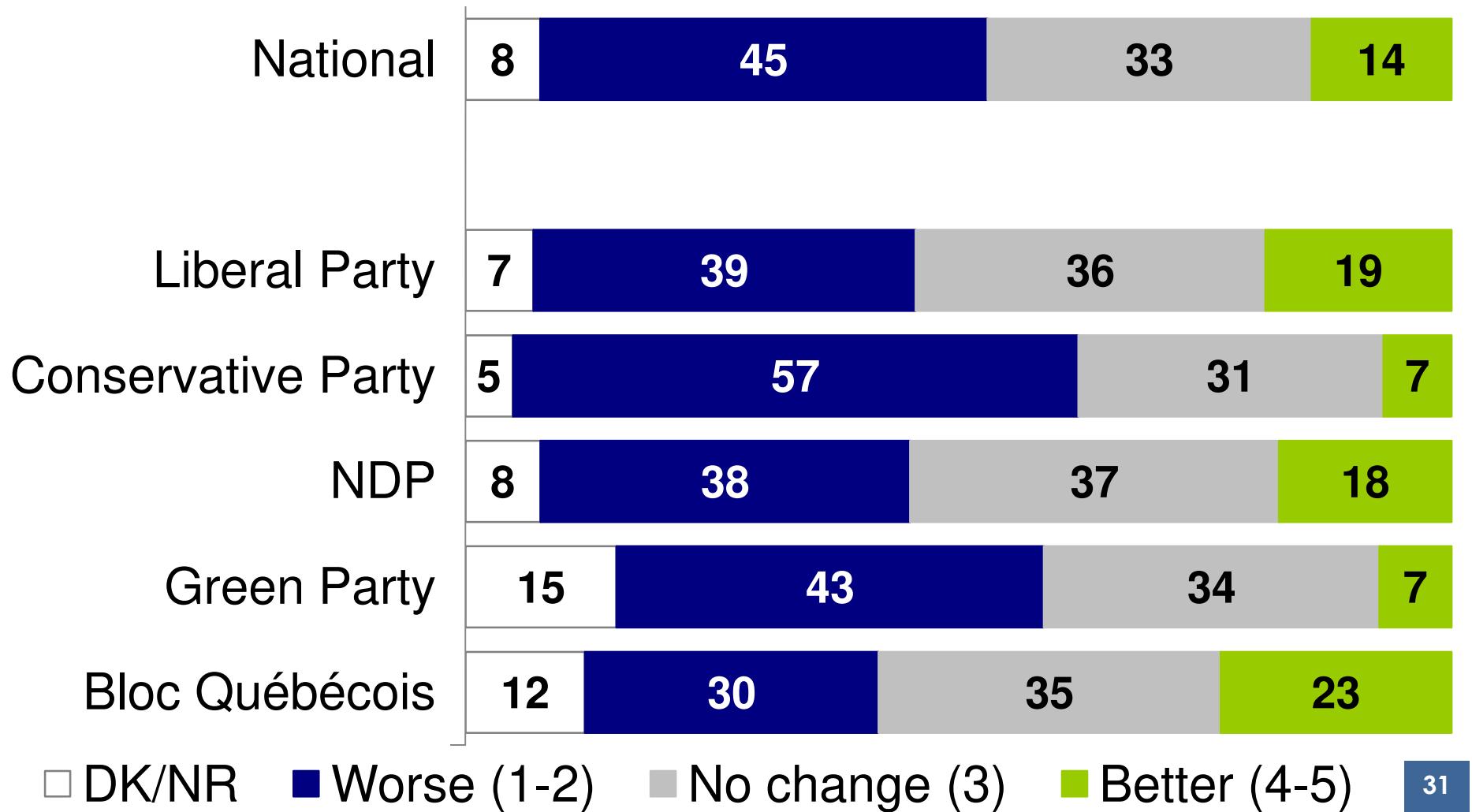
Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I don't think Canada has ever been as polarized as it is today



Impacts of polarization on election

Q. Compared to before the election, do you believe polarization in Canada has gotten better or worse?



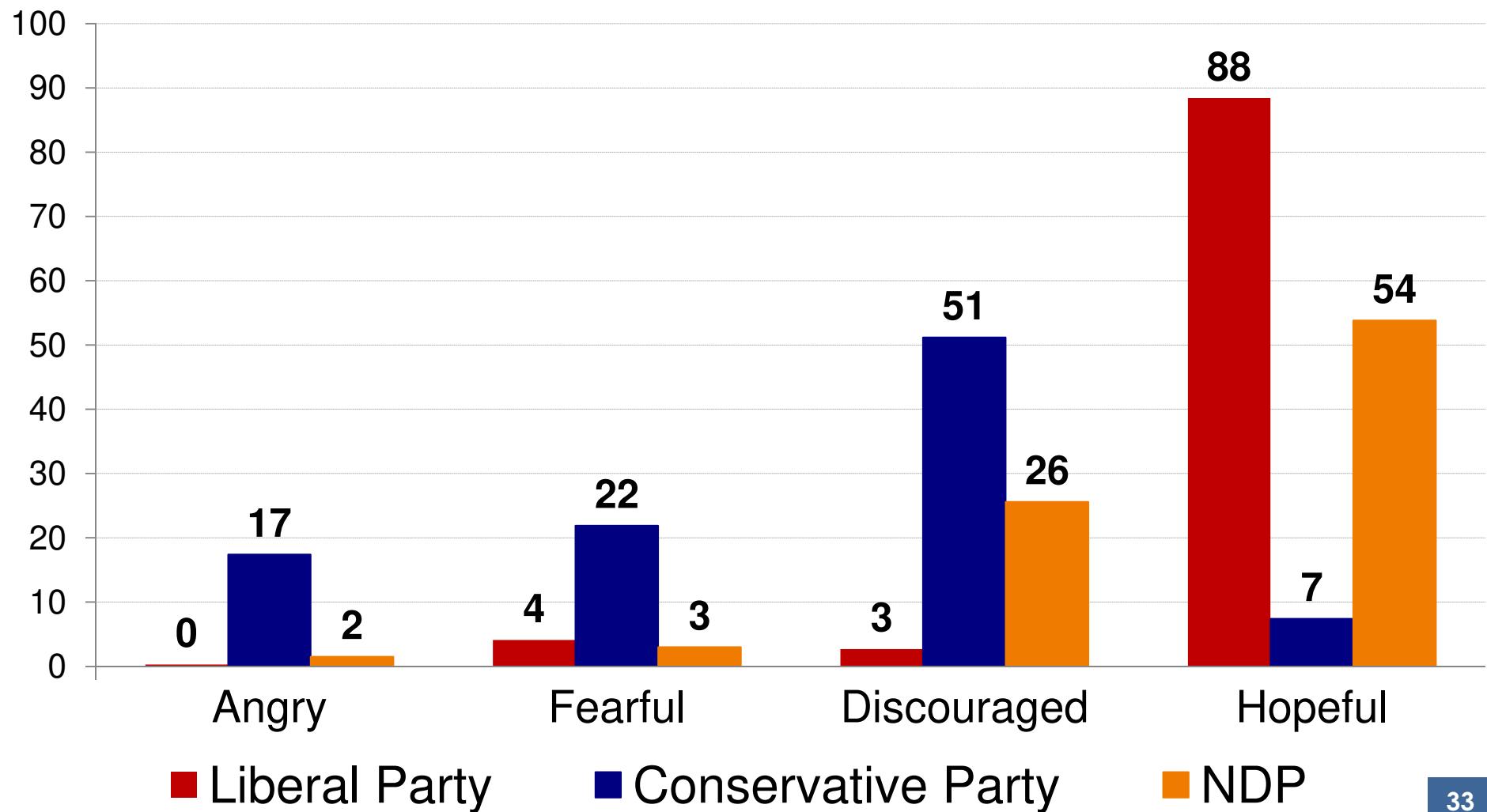
Factors influencing 2025 election (ii)

- » We now have two roughly equally sized Canadas that are profoundly different in terms of region and demographics, but even more so on key values, beliefs, and psychographic profiles
- » Factors such as institutional mistrust, level of disinformation, and “ordered”/right-wing authoritarian personality outlook are dramatically more predictive than any demographic factors
- » While a victory for open Canada, this election has not quelled the force of this new Northern populism*
- » Although hope is the prime emotional response to this election, for the ordered cohort, the dominant emotions are despondent and angry

* For further reading, see “Northern Populism: Causes and Consequences of the New Ordered Outlook” by Frank Graves. Published in *University of Calgary School of Public Policy SPP Research Papers*, Vol. 13:15 (June 2020), University of Calgary. Available online at: <https://bit.ly/3fgG5HR>

Emotional response by vote

Q. Which of the following emotions best describes your response to the outcome of this election?



BASE: Canadians; April 29-May 5, 2025, n=1,593, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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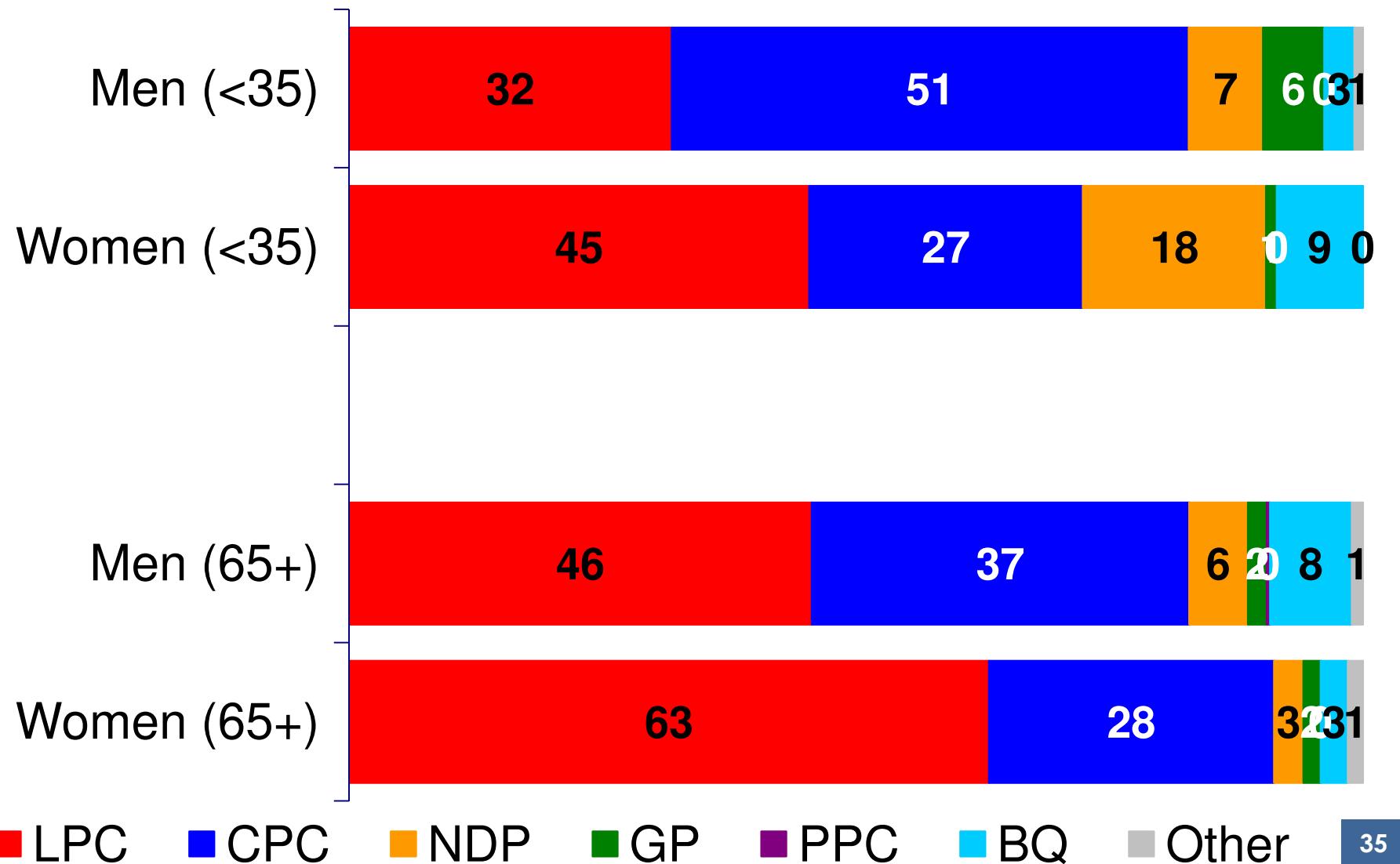
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Divergence among young voters

- » The central political divide among young Canadians is not generational, but gendered
 - The under-35 cohort is not a monolithic group
 - Young women remain more progressive and are comparatively more supportive of climate action, immigration, and social equity (and were not attracted to the Conservative Party)
 - Young men, in contrast, are considerably more mistrustful and dis informed and are increasingly aligning with the Conservative Party (and forcing it to embrace a more populist agenda)

2025 vote age/gender

Q. Which party did you vote for in this election?



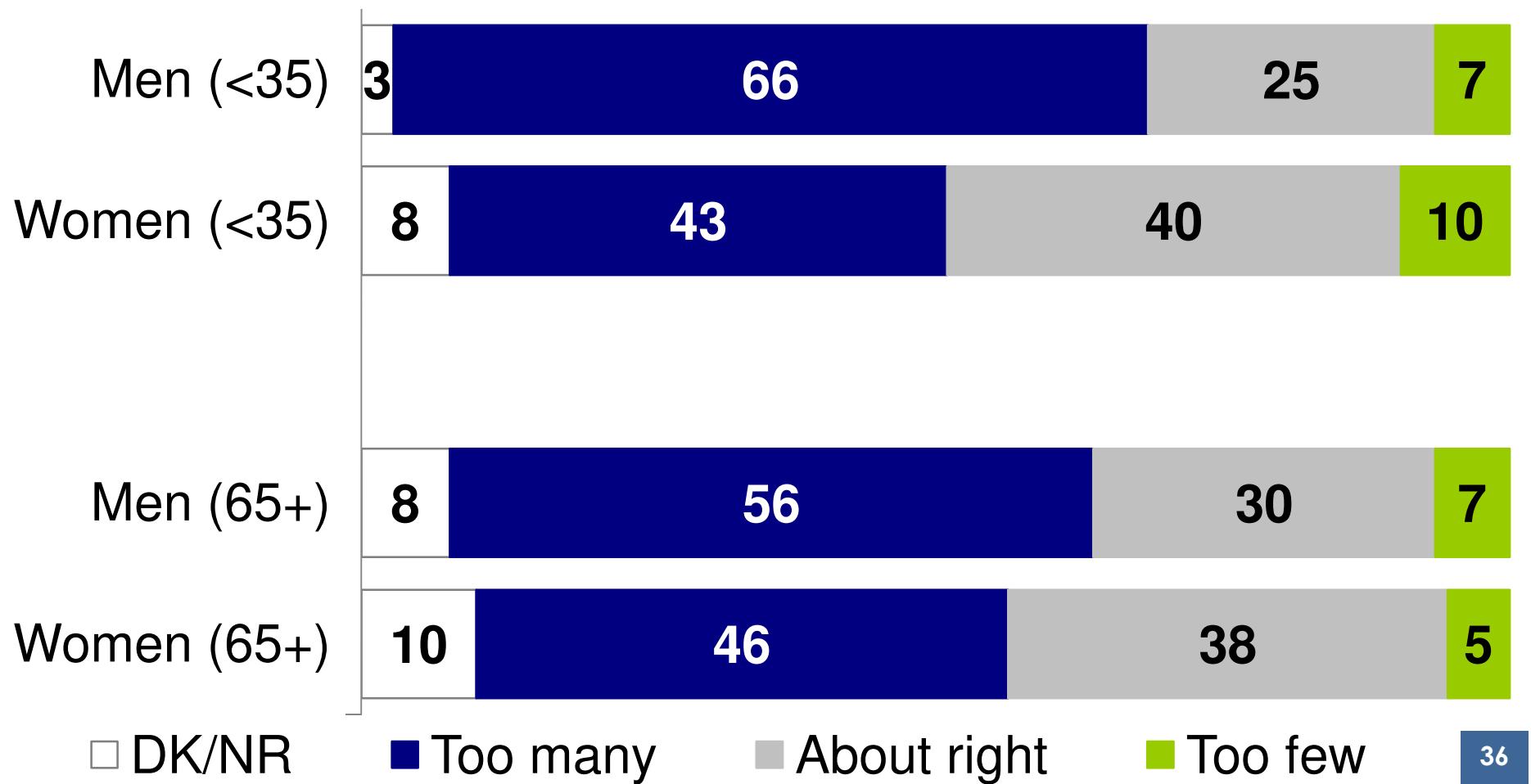
BASE: Voters; April 29-May 5, 2025, n=1,474, MOE +/- 2.6%, 19 times out of 20

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Attitudes to immigration by gender/age

Q. In your opinion do you feel that there are too few, too many or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?

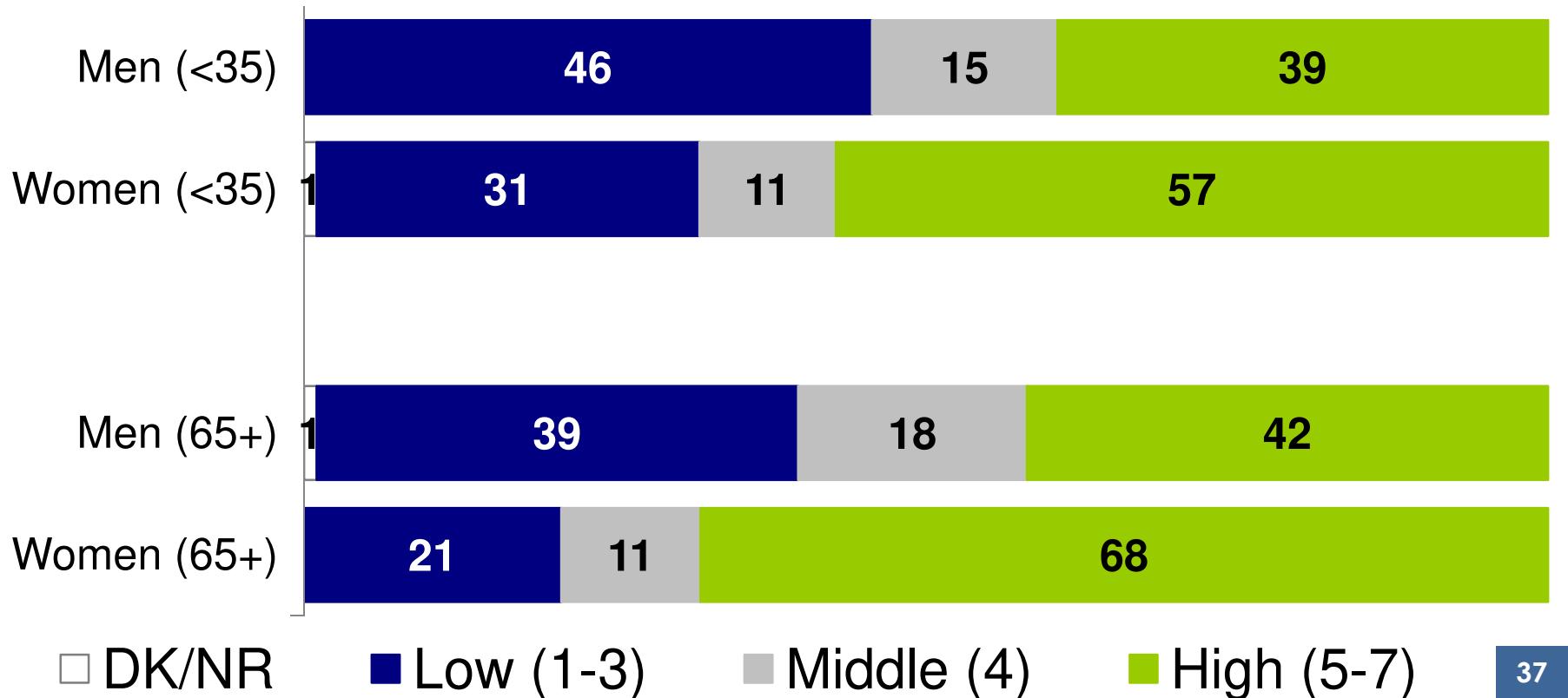


Public priorities

Climate change

Q. Canada is facing a series of difficult challenges. What priority should the federal government place on each of the following areas?

Dealing with climate change

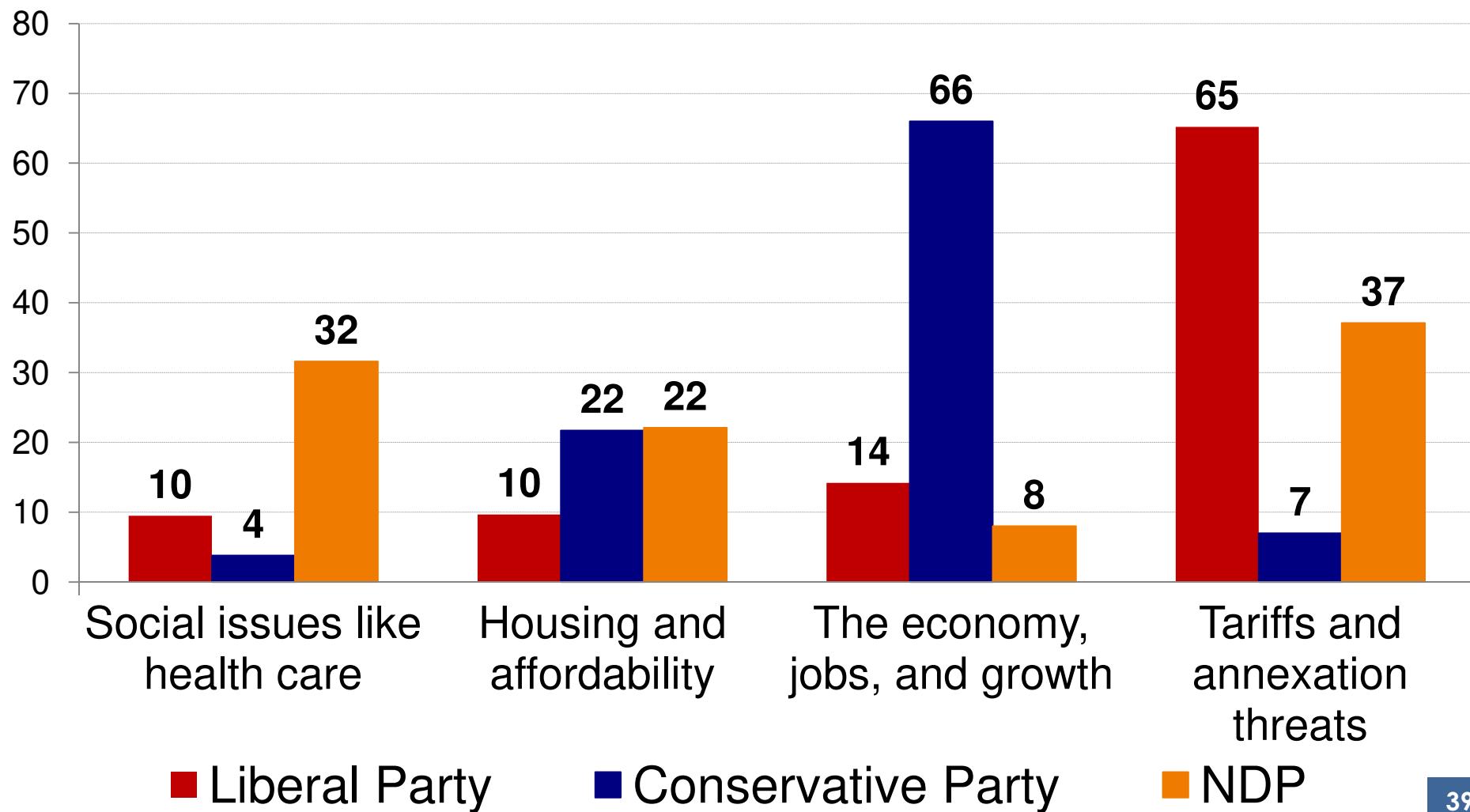


Election issues

- » At the outset of the campaign, the dominant election issue was Trump, tariffs and national sovereignty
 - As time went on, the importance of the economy and jobs rose to equal status and was the defining engine of the Conservative Party's recovery
 - Conservative supporters do not see Trump or tariffs as a defining issue at all
- » Whether this is a product of disinformation or other factors is unclear but given the trajectories, it is very possible that if the campaign had gone on for another two weeks, the election outcome would have been different

Most important election issue

Q. For you personally, what was the most important issue for this election?



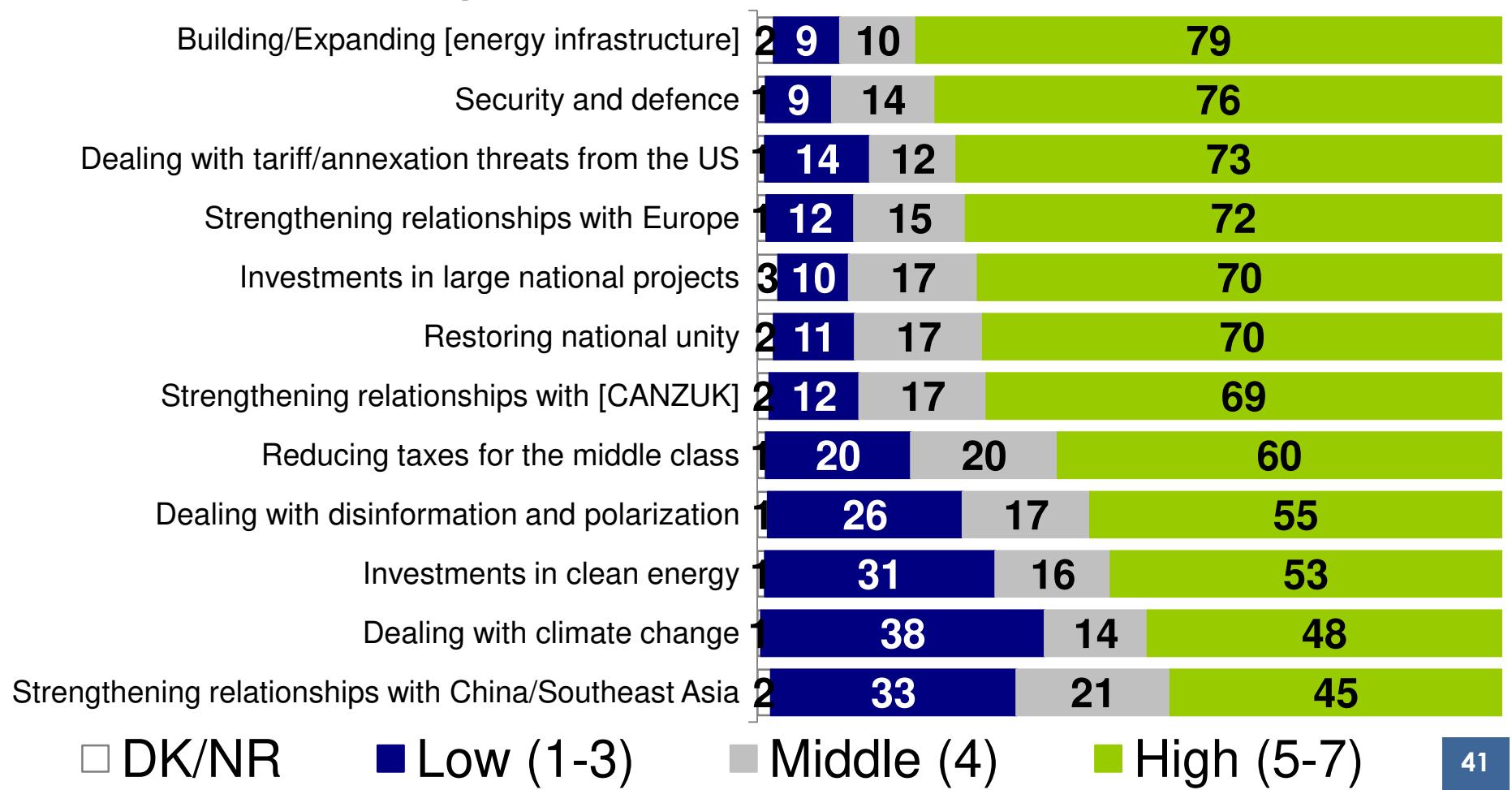
BASE: Canadians; April 29-May 5, 2025, n=1,593, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

Public priorities moving forward

- » Moving forward with investments in energy infrastructure and large national projects top list of priorities
 - Notably, support for defence spending has surged since Donald Trump ascended to the presidency
 - Other key priorities include bolstering trade with Europe and CANZUK nations
- » A vivid illustration of partisan differences is climate change
 - Support for dealing with climate change is nearly five times higher among Liberals than among Conservatives
- » Canadians rethinking their place in the world
 - Canadians want to be respected globally, but there has been a collapse in the desire for humanitarian or peacekeeping missions

Public priorities

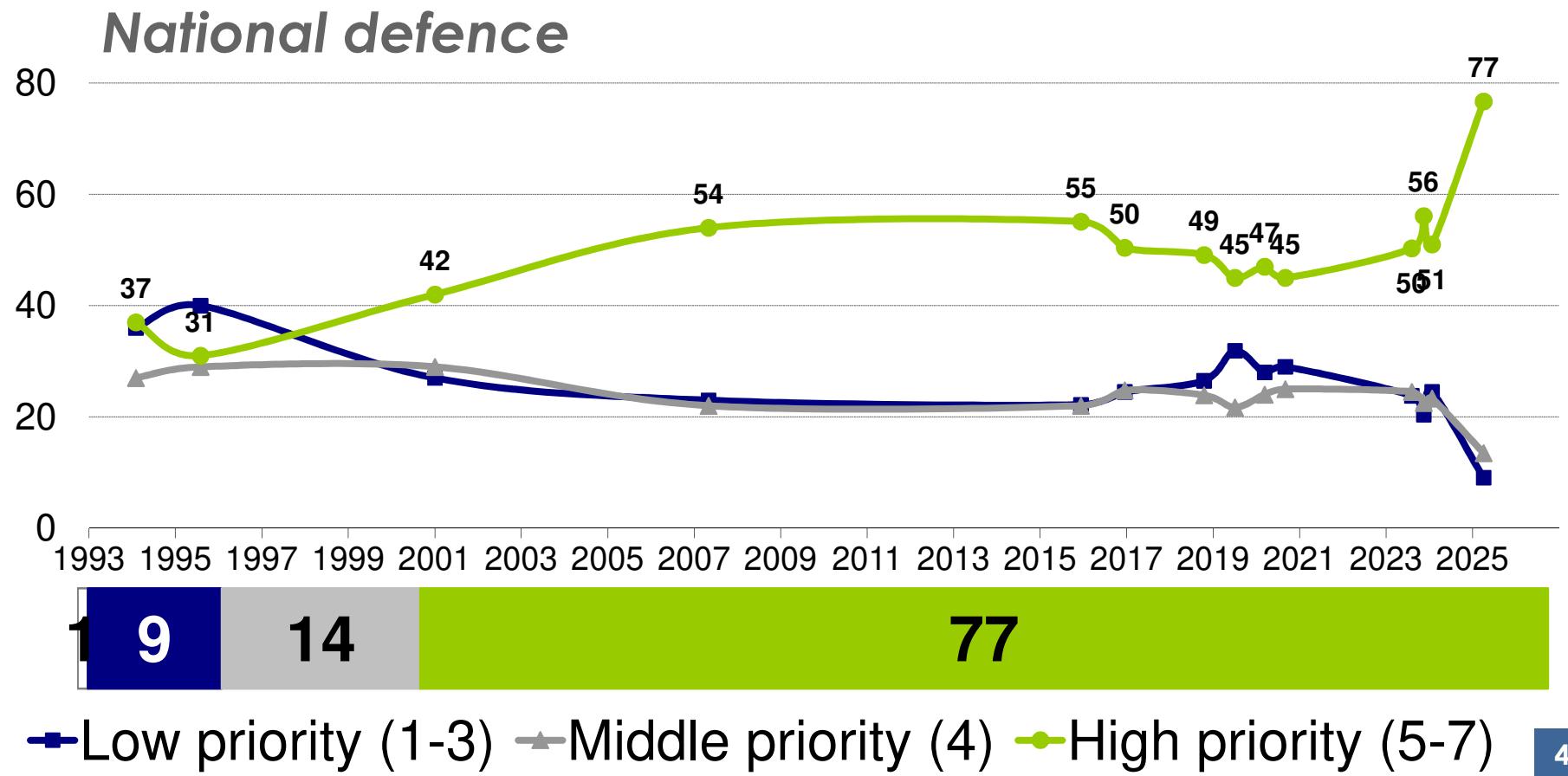
Q. Canada is facing a series of difficult challenges. What priority should the federal government place on each of the following areas?



Public priorities

National defence

Q. Canada is facing a series of difficult challenges. What priority should the federal government place on each of the following areas?



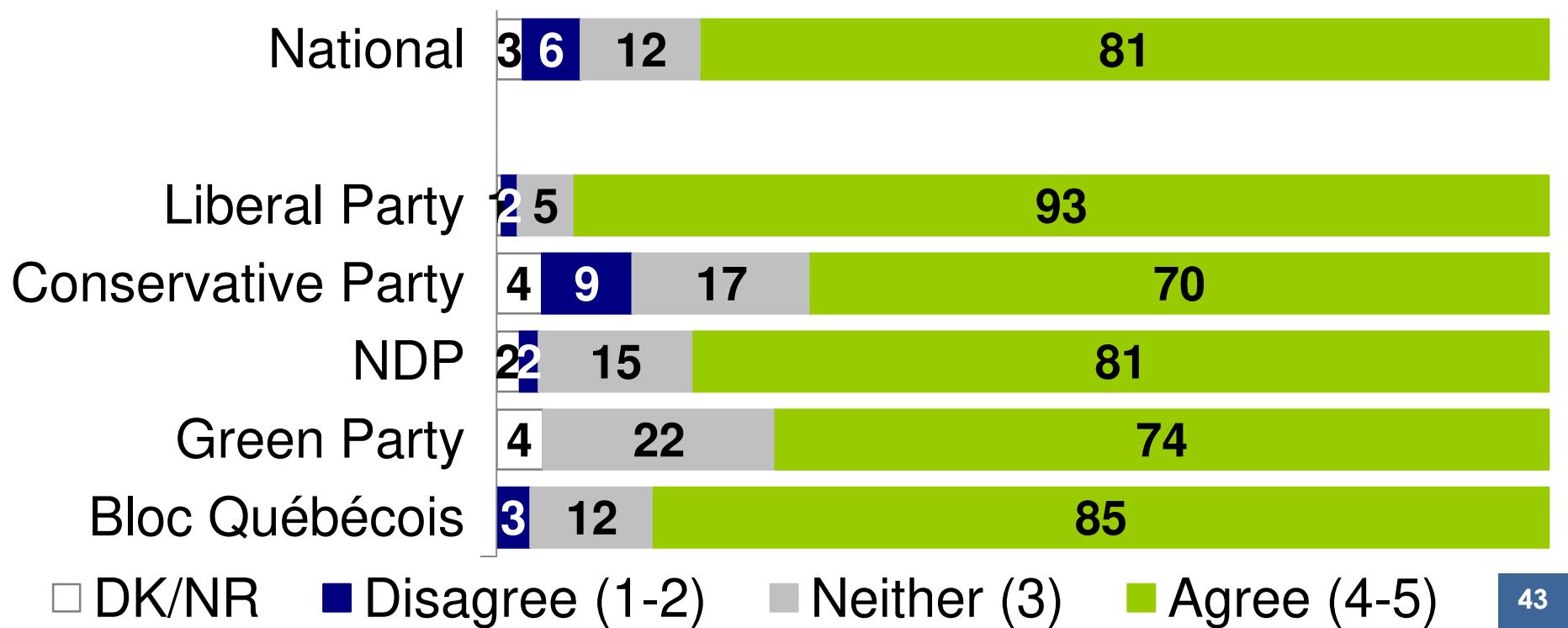
BASE: Canadians; March 28-April 2, 2025, n=1,513, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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Importance of natural heritage Canada's arctic

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

In order to strengthen Canadian identity in the face of sovereignty challenges from Donald Trump, we should increase emphasis on protecting Canada's arctic

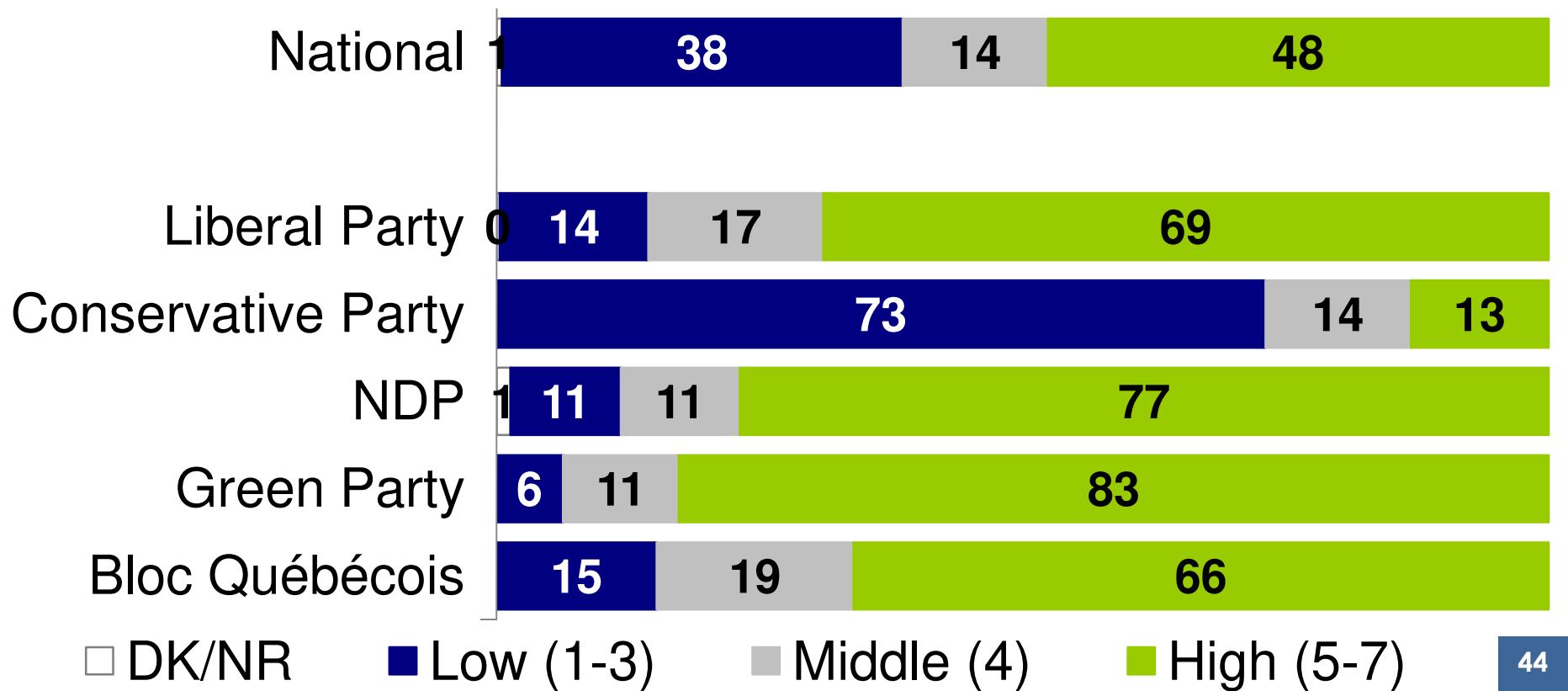


Public priorities

Climate change

Q. Canada is facing a series of difficult challenges. What priority should the federal government place on each of the following areas?

Dealing with climate change



Factors driving polarization (i)

- » The legacy of the COVID-19 era remains potent and toxic
- » Ten years ago, one's vaccine status would have precious little to do with one's partisan choices
 - Today, it serves as a proxy for mistrust and right-wing authoritarian outlook, revealing massive differences on whether Trump is a threat, whether climate change is real or a complete hoax, whether the government can be trusted, whether the country is in repair of irreparable decline, and so on
 - It is also strongly correlated with partisan leanings

2025 vote by COVID-19 vaccine uptake

Q. Which party did you vote for in this election?

Did not receive vaccine



Received 1-2 doses



Received 3+ doses



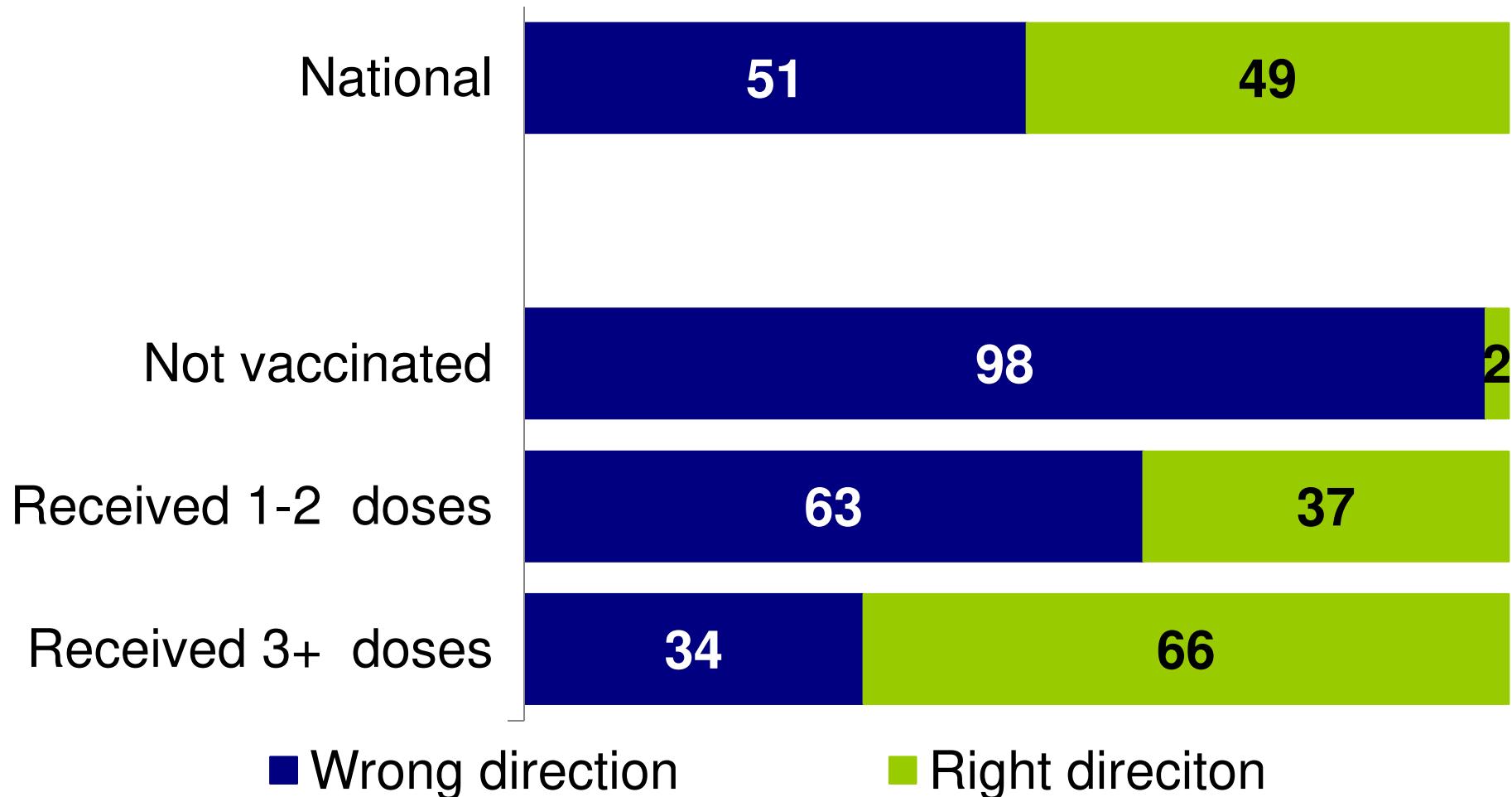
■ LPC ■ CPC ■ NDP ■ GP ■ PPC ■ BQ ■ Other 46

BASE: Canadians; April 29-May 5, 2025, n=1,593, MOE +/- 2.5%, 19 times out of 20

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Direction of country by vaccine uptake

Q. All things considered, would you say the country is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?

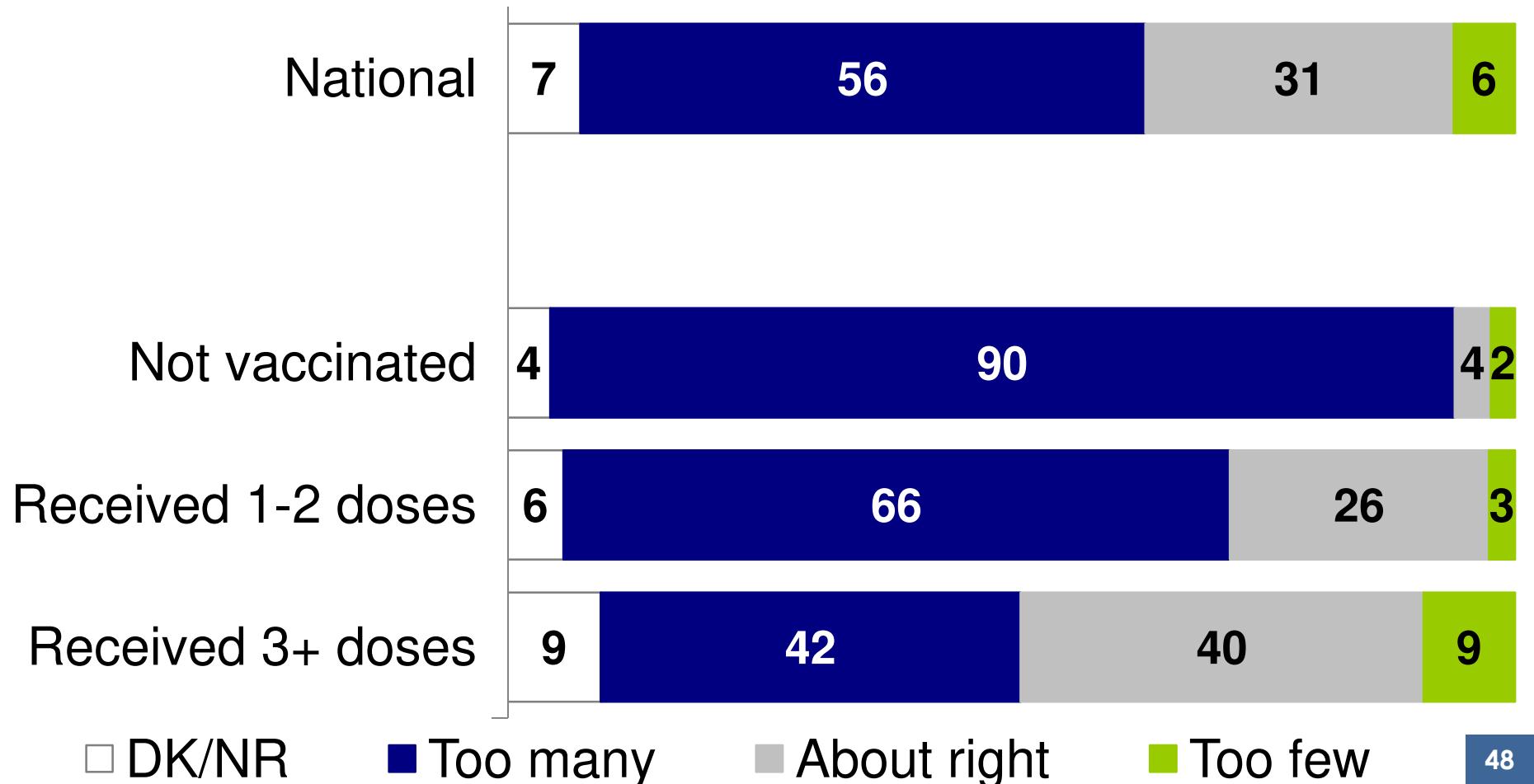


Note: Figures adjusted to exclude those who skipped the question.

BASE: Canadians (half-sample); April 29-May 5, 2025, n=793, MOE +/- 3.5%, 19 times out of 20

Attitudes to immigration by vaccine uptake

Q. In your opinion do you feel that there are too few, too many or about the right number of immigrants coming to Canada?



Factors driving polarization (ii)

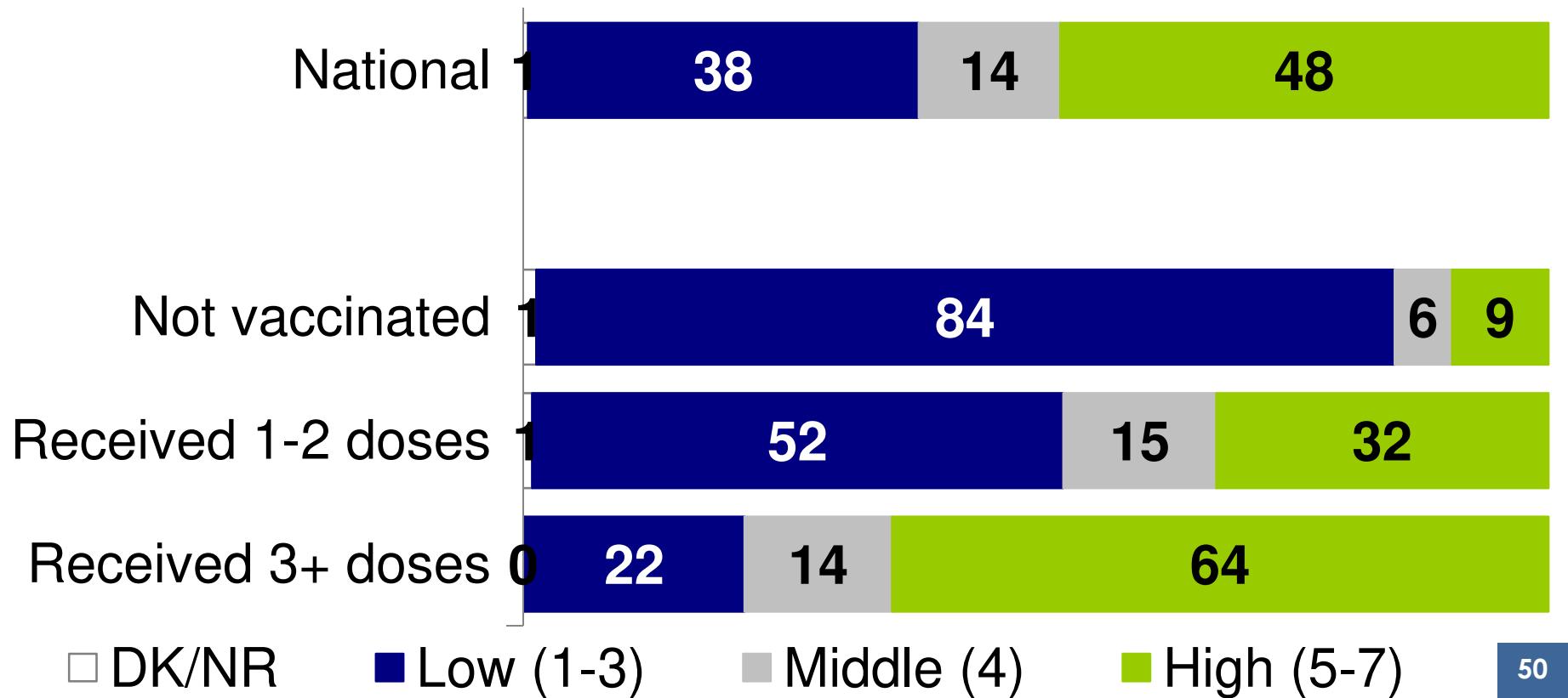
- » Perhaps the most vivid example of how the public interest can be compromised by disinformation and right-wing authoritarian populism is climate change
 - Looking at Canadians' overall ranking of priorities, climate change appears to be a middle-level priority (and declining)
 - However, breaking down the results by disinformation, trust, and populism reveals that climate change is a high priority for all those not in that camp, but an almost zero priority for populist, disinforming Canada
 - The same people who believe vaccines are harmful believe climate change is a hoax

Public priorities by COVID-19 vaccine uptake

Climate change

Q. Canada is facing a series of difficult challenges. What priority should the federal government place on each of the following areas?

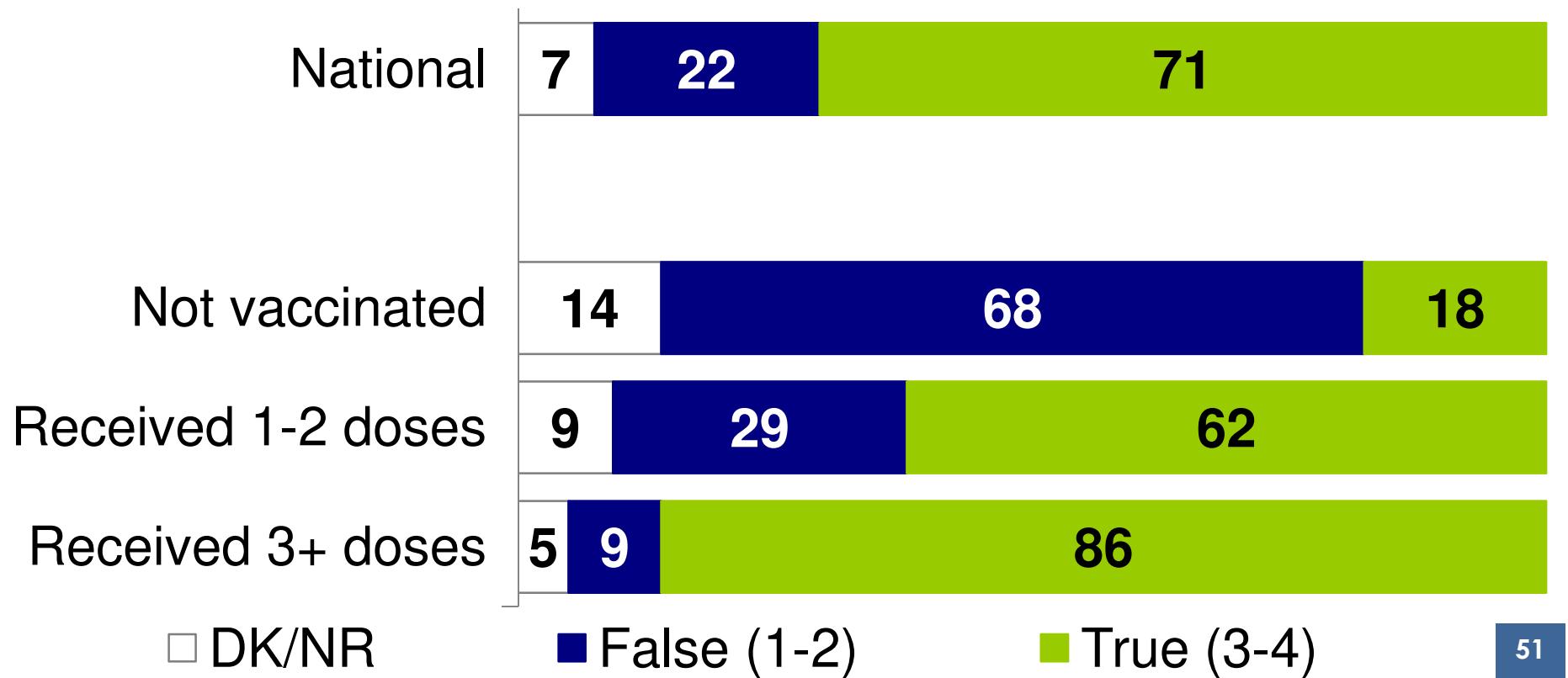
Dealing with climate change



Incidence of disinformation by COVID-19 vaccine uptake: Impact of greenhouse gas emissions

Q. To the best of your knowledge, are the following statements true or false?

Greenhouse gas emissions are the primary cause of climate change



National unity

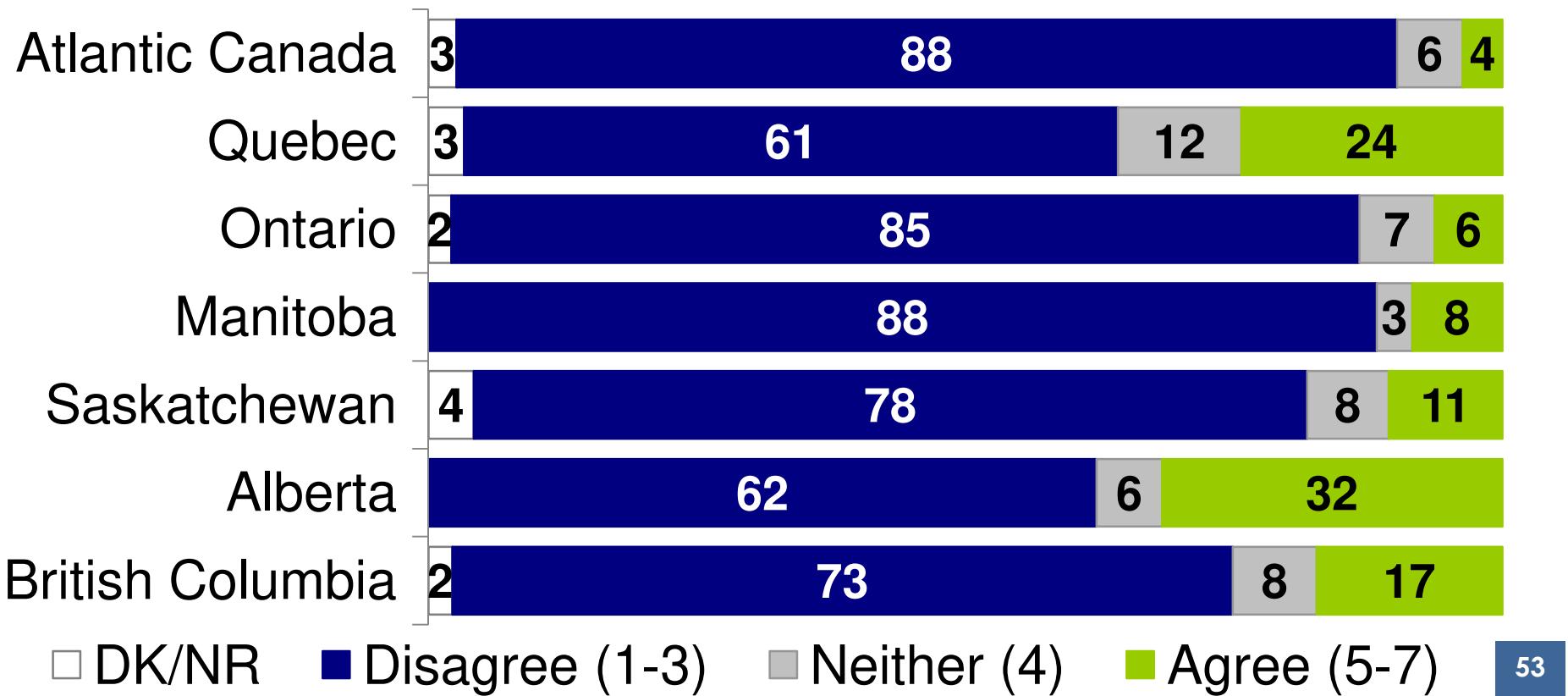
- » There may well be an incipient national unity crisis brewing, but it is far deeper than “western alienation” and it is a mistake to see it solely in those terms
 - What we’re seeing in Alberta and Saskatchewan is not so much a unity crisis, but rather the epicentre of populism
 - This trend is by no means isolated to these provinces
- » On a positive note, the legitimate spectre of Quebec separation – a far more plausible threat to national unity – is at a 50-year low

Attitudes to confederation by province

Preference for independence

Q. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I think my province would be better off as an independent country



Going forward (i)

- » Canada has never been more polarized
 - Legitimate ideological differences can exist (e.g., smaller versus larger government)
 - However, differences that are now increasingly rooted in disinformation and injurious to public interest and scientific consensus (e.g., attitudes to vaccines, climate change, and disinformation itself) are corrosive and damaging
- » In the short term, there are several areas of consensus on which Canadians on both sides of the divide see as important, such as mitigating polarization, unity, and strengthening our productivity, defence, and security
- » In the short to medium term, dealing with disinformation and online harm (e.g., hate speech, harassment, content that incites violence) will be critical
 - However, it will be resisted because polarization and disinformation are so embedded

Going forward (ii)

- » There is also a recognition that we have entered a fundamentally different and threatening new world order
 - But Canadians' understanding of what that might mean in terms of institutional shifts in trade, security, and foreign policy is rife with internal contradictions
 - We want to be global leaders and respected on the world stage, but this comes with a new focus on domestic security and a steep decline in support for humanitarian aid or peacekeeping abroad

Going forward (iii)

- » Although there is no apparent desire to talk about immigration, it needs to be added to Canada's medium-term agenda
 - With recent immigration levels, we maintained our median national age at 40
 - But *without* immigration, it would have risen to 43 (at our centennial, it was 25)
 - We are in danger of becoming a sclerotic gerontocracy
- » If Canada fails to enact smart immigration policies that attract the best and brightest talent to Canada, our economy and the sustainability of our social programs (given soaring dependency ratios) will be in ever greater jeopardy
- » New, younger Canadians are about three times more optimistic than young people born in Canada

Going forward (iv)

- » It is perhaps time to rethink government (once again), but with a scientific, evidence-based approach on objectives achievement, not a chainsaw, DOGE-like approach
 - Time for an Evaluator General?*

* An **Evaluator General** would function alongside existing oversight roles like the Auditor General and the Parliamentary Budget Officer, focusing specifically on evaluating whether government programs achieve their intended outcomes. Frank Graves has long been an advocate for an Evaluator General.

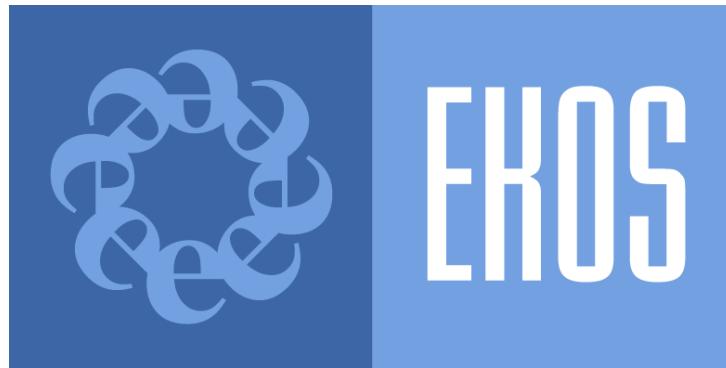
For further reading, see "[The case for having a federal evaluator general](#)" by Kathryn May (Policy Options, 2019).

Going forward (v)

- » Ultimately, Canada needs a plan for restoring a shared prosperity narrative where children can reasonably expect to enjoy a higher quality of life than their parents, a house, and a secure retirement
 - One strategy for restarting middle-class progress could be a wealth tax on the super rich, something which enjoys broad support in Canada

Further reading

- » Frank Graves, "[How Trump Turned Canadians Off Populism](#)." Maclean's Magazine (April 10, 2025).
- » Andrew Mercer, Courtney Kennedy, and Scott Keeter. "[Online opt-in polls can produce misleading results, especially for young people and Hispanic adults](#)." Pew Research Center (March 5, 2024).
- » Frank Graves and Stephen Maher, "*The Secret of Pierre Poilievre's Success*", The Walrus, January-February 2023 edition, pp. 38-44 (2023).
- » Catherine Porter, "['Somebody Planted the Guns': In Canada, a Raided, Distrusting Village Blames the Police](#)." New York Times (September 24, 2022).
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