

Surveying Opinions Across the Border

*The Niagara Report Project**

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Abstract

Canada and the US are neighbors whose futures are inextricably bound together. Among a host of other things, they share the most important, and most extensive, bilateral economic relationship in the world, and for seventeen years their economies have been integrated in a free trade zone. Surprisingly, in light of the intensity of cross-border connections, no effort has been made to monitor, on a systematic and cross-time basis, the relationship as it is perceived by citizens on either side of the 49th parallel. This paper introduces such a project – “the Niagara Report”. We discuss several of the methodological and design considerations in fielding such a project. And we present the first results of our surveying of parallel samples of about 1,000 Canadians and Americans in August 2005. We report on their responses to a benchmark series of questions that will be replicated in subsequent years. We hope that this project will add to our understanding of the processes of integration and interdependence as they unfold in the years ahead.

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The ties that have developed between Canada and the United States are among the most intimate, intense, multifaceted, and important of any two pairs of nations in the world. The two countries share a commitment to liberal democratic values, the longest undefended border in the world, and the largest bilateral trade relationship in the world. Economic interdependence has been spurred by the “Free Trade Agreement” that came into effect in 1989, and which was expanded to include Mexico in a “North American Free Trade Agreement” (NAFTA) in 1994. With approximately \$1 billion a day in goods, services, and investment income, and more than 200 million people a year, crossing the U.S.-Canadian border, the two countries comprise in significant respects a single community of fate.

The relationship between Canada and the United States develops within a climate of public opinion. While the cross-border relationship is generally harmonious, inevitably there are tensions that arise from time to time. Disagreements over the country’s different stances on the Iraq war, for example, were especially sharp, and concerns were expressed in Canada over a spike in anti-Americanism, and American talk radio shows in particular carried comparably negative opinions about Canada. Similarly, mad cows, seemingly intractable softwood lumber disputes, passport requirements for travelers, and political pressures to harden the border against threats to our security, are among the most recent sources of tension and concern. Such issues remind us that our tranquil Canadian-American relations cannot simply be taken for granted.

Remarkably little effort has been made to monitor the pulse of opinions on the Canadian-American relationship. As such, we are not well equipped to understand the short term effects that popular opinions may have on particular policies. Neither can we monitor longer term trends in popular attitudes that may be indicative of deeper forces of integration or strain. This contrasts sharply with the situation in the European Union, where semi-annual surveys of member states known as the *Eurobarometer* have since 1973 measured a broad range of attitudinal benchmarks and challenges to the integration process. To redress this situation, a partnership between the University at Buffalo and SES Research has undertaken the first of what will become an annual survey of opinions on either side of the border. This paper introduces our project, outlines our funding model, and discusses the results of our first wave of fieldwork.

Surveying Processes of Cross-National Cooperation and Integration

Public opinion is one of the many factors that shape a country’s foreign policy (Rosenau, 1961). The constraint on policy makers posed by citizen orientations and attitudes is likely to be in some proportion to the salience of the relationship in question, and in this respect our consideration of Canadian-American attitudes confronts a fundamental asymmetry. The United States is simply much more salient to Canadians than the reverse. With only one tenth the population, Canada is very much the nervous mouse next to the US is the elephant. And the vast majority of Canadians live within a couple hundred miles of the border, whereas most Americans do not (according to 2004 census estimates, slightly less than 1/3rd of Americans live in states that border Canada;

see www.census.gov), further enhancing the differential salience of the relationship on either side of the 49th parallel. All of this means that Canadians are more likely than Americans to be aware of the importance of the Canadian-American relationship, and therefore more likely to be an attentive public in terms of the country's foreign policy in this area (Holmes, 1974: 611). There is no reason to expect this constraint to be constant over time. Heightened Canadian economic nationalism in the 1970s, for example, may have exerted a particularly strong influence on Canadian policy makers at that time (Murray and Leduc, 1976-77). More recently, it has become customary to talk of a "permissive consensus" in terms of opinions on trade policy in Canada (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). This situation may not last, of course, and it seems clear that whatever the direction that future continental relations take, the Canadian public (at least) will be a significant player that will require attention (Alexandroff and Guy, 2003).

Existing studies of the impact of public opinion are deficient in a number of respects. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in light of the asymmetry in the relationship described above, scholarly attention devoted to the public opinion dimension of the Canadian-American relationship has focused on Canada. While US attitudes towards Canada have remained overwhelmingly benign or cooperative, this neglect is perhaps simply unfortunate. However, recent developments in American opinion suggest that when provoked, American opinion towards Canada can turn sour. Arguably, some evidence of this potential has been forthcoming in recent years. Responding to the refusal of Canada to join the American-led "coalition of the willing" in the most recent Iraq war, Canadian moves to reform marijuana laws, approve single-sex marriages, and to harsh criticism coming from Canadian media and even from MPs like Carolyn Bennett, American talk radio echoed with anti-Canadian sentiment. Similarly, American initiatives regarding border security – exemplified by the proposal to require passports of all border-crossers by 2007 – suggest that Canadian policy makers need to be attentive to the climate of opinion in the United States.

Beyond the relative neglect of popular American orientations to Canada, our understanding of the cross-border relationship remains constrained by two further limitations. Most importantly, there is a shortage of evidence based on questions that have been used consistently over time to monitor attitudes (Stigler and Guy, 1974: 638). Secondly, there is a dearth of studies of opinion that are fielded at the same time on both sides of the border. Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to report on consistent measures over time is Michael Adams' exploration for evidence of convergence in Canadian and American values. As President of *Environics*, a leading Canadian opinion research firm, his *Fire and Ice* (2003: 9) is based on responses of Canadian and American citizens to three surveys, the first fielded in 1992, the second in 1997, and the third in 2000 (totaling 14,413 separate responses). Adams' primary interest in the book is on the question of whether there is any evidence to suggest that deep-seated values are converging. He is less interested in the ebbs and flows of attitudes and more superficial orientations, so the reliance on only three time points is not particularly crippling. However, lacking frequently repeated measures over a more extensive time frame makes it difficult to separate genuine long-term trends from more short-term responses on a whole host of important questions.

Our understanding of the evolving Canadian-American relationship has been limited by this lack of information. We currently lack a running record of opinions comparable to that which has been compiled by the European Commission over the past three decades to monitor the progress towards European integration. As the Commission's web page notes, "since 1973, the European Commission has been monitoring the evolution of public opinion in the Member States, thus helping the preparation of texts, decision-making and the evaluation of its work." Carried out in the spring and fall of every year in all member states, these surveys have probed such issues as support for European integration, national goals and political issues, party preferences, ideological orientations, subjective well-being, and the like. Special surveys have also been conducted on particular issues of concern. Known collectively as the *Eurobarometer*, these surveys have become centerpieces not only of the European Commission's monitoring of the process of integration (Pütz, 2002) but they have also been widely utilized by academic researchers addressing a wide variety of important scientific questions (e.g., see the collection of essays in Reif and Inglehart, ed., 1991).

Recognizing the contributions that systematic cross-national survey research can make to political decision makers and social scientists alike, we decided to come together to create a unique cross-border partnership for the purpose of establishing a "Eurobarometer-like" database on the Canadian-American relationship. We describe the model that we developed in the next section, and turn to the initial results of our surveying in the final section of this paper.

Designing "The Niagara Report"

The lack of a more systematic approach to surveying opinions about Canada and the United States is an indication of a broader challenge, namely the absence of institutional actors whose charge it is to monitor the evolution of the cross-border relationship. There is no equivalent of the European Commission in North America. As such, poll questions developed by commercial research firms are frequently developed in response to issues or current events rather than monitor longer-term integration processes. There is relatively little incentive to replicate earlier questions. Moreover, there is relatively little polling in the US regarding Canada. In the past, the Canadian government (through the Embassy in Washington) has commissioned polls in order to compare Canadian with American orientations (Sigler and Goresky, 1974: 637-8). There remains, in other words, a serious need to undertake a regular, recurring, consistent and long-term monitoring of the Canadian-American relationship.

With this in mind, the University at Buffalo – The SUNY and SES Research¹ have entered into a partnership in which an annual poll containing a consistent and parallel set of questions will be administered simultaneously to representative samples of

¹ Dan Kolundzic of the Buffalo Office of the Canadian Consulate was instrumental in the conception of this study, in putting SES Research in touch with UB, and in raising financial support for the first wave of the study. As such, while he did not take part in the construction of our questionnaire, he is in every sense a full partner in this project and largely responsible for its successful launch.

citizens in the United States and in Canada. Since we intend this to be a long-term enterprise, and because we believe that for a variety of reasons that on-line surveying constitutes a fast-growing and increasingly attractive alternative to traditional survey implementation methods, we have decided to utilize an on-line process to administer our surveys.

The subject content and the need to contextualize the alignment of perceptions from among a group of key trading partners were among the key factors in choosing an online methodology. As opposed to measuring alignment on a binational basis (how closely or different are Canadians to Americans), respondents in Canada and the United States were asked to rank among seven major trading partners. Our online approach of fairly contextualizing choices between countries is better achieved by showing a list online than by reading a list over the telephone. Presenting the seven countries visually in a rotation is, therefore, more methodologically robust.

There are many advantages of on-line as opposed to phone interviewing, and this is not the place to enter into an extended comparison of the two modalities. Several brief comments are in order, however. Phone interviews are becoming increasingly difficult to implement as refusal rates and cell-phone usage increases. As these trends do not show signs of changing, we faced the likelihood of having to move to on-line surveys at some point. In order to avoid interrupting the continuity in implementation over time, we chose to adopt on-line implementation at the outset. Of course, the chief and most obvious disadvantage associated with on-line surveying concerns the bias that is introduced by the “digital divide”. Lower income and older people are less likely than younger, affluent, and well-educated individuals to regularly access the internet. In the current situation, several points can be made. First of all, internet access is growing astronomically all over the world (the *Computer Industry Almanac* places the global internet population in 2004 at 934 million, and projects it to grow to 1.07 billion this year). In this respect, Canada and the United States represent two of the most “wired” countries in the world, (with 62% and 63% connected, respectively – all statistics from www.clickz.com/states/web-worldwide/). With the proportion of internet users growing, over the long term the bias introduced by this mode of implementation will diminish.

Since our intention is to monitor the cross-border relationship over the long term, it was necessary to think creatively about financing such a project. Funding agencies who might normally be approached to fund a research project would likely be deterred by our long time horizon. As such, we have decided to fund our general project by selling questions to sponsors, and as part of the agreement with SES Research, a general benchmark question of academic interest would be available for every question sold to a sponsor. The sponsor was not obliged to share the results of “their” question with the academic researchers, but could do so if they wished. We experienced no problem identifying sponsors for the first survey, raising enough in sponsorships to have a dozen questions available to the authors. As the project unfolds and the additional data points are added, we feel confident that the Niagara Report will increase in value and profile, thereby easing the fund-raising process even further.

Finally in terms of design, since we are interested in measuring attitudes to the Canadian-American relationship within the context of globalization processes that are shrinking the world generally, we decided to “frame” the relationship for respondents by asking them to rate the other country (i.e. the US for Canadian respondents and Canadians for American respondents) relative to the other major trading partners (fortunately, the top seven trading partners for both countries is identical). We intend to use this battery of questions over time to monitor shifts in the relative salience of the two countries to one another in relation to relevant others.

Preliminary Results from the First Wave

The first wave of surveying for the “Niagara Report was fielded between August 22-24th, 2005, with 1,107 Canadian and 1,057 American respondents who were 18 years or older. Both surveys have margins of error of +/- 3% 19 times out of 20.

Previous surveys tapping attitudes related to Canadian-American relations have tended to see the relationship in isolation from the broader international commitments and entanglements of their country. We felt that it would be important to contextualize the Canadian-American relationship by allowing respondents to judge their orientations to Canada (for Americans) or the United States (for Canadians) in the context of other countries which are leading trading partners. Fortunately, the list of seven major trading partners is the same for both countries: China, Japan, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Mexico, and Canada/United States. A battery of questions asked respondents to identify the first ranked and second ranked countries from this group with whom they felt closest to in terms of human rights, family values, and business values. As might be expected, on human rights and family values, American respondents rated Canada as the closest country of their major trading partners, with the UK coming second, and a majority of Canadian respondents reciprocated by naming the US as the closest country to them on these measures, with the UK coming second.

Table One about here

The most interesting feature of the results from these items came on the question of business values. Whereas 63% of Canadians rated the US first (or closest) on this measure, only 18% of American respondents rated Canada as closest. In terms of business values, 39% of Americans saw Japan as closest, and about 26% ranked Britain closest. Only 18% of Americans rated Canada as closest on business values. This disparity captures quite dramatically the asymmetry in the relative sense of economic salience of residents of an economic superpower next to a middle power and *visa versa*. Perhaps equally interesting, however, is the low ranking of our NAFTA partner, Mexico, on these three measures. Column three of Table One shows the miniscule proportions of both Canadians and Americans who feel closest to Mexico. Obviously, relationships across the 49th parallel remain much closer than those across the Rio Grande. Of interest is the fact that many of the perceptions of Canada among Americans are not geocentric. Americans in the Southern US were just as likely to have positive impressions of

Canadians as Americans in the Northern States (data not shown). We will be interested in tracking trends in these measures over time.

Since 9/11, borders have hardened against terrorism, and awareness of the role of borders in contributing to security has heightened. As such, we decided to ask a battery of questions about the perceived sources of threats by asking respondents to select which countries from the list of major trading partners should be singled out for special treatment at the border. This provides another way of measuring perceptions of closeness or proximity with each other. Here the results point out some strong similarities in the views of Canadians and Americans, but also some interesting differences. When the question concerns the cross-border movement of goods, responses did not differ greatly across the Canadian-American border. Respondents in both countries felt that those originating in Mexico posed the greatest risk (named most frequently by about 4 in 10 Canadians and 5 in 10 Americans). The second highest group of respondents in both countries felt that goods from China should be thoroughly examined. Goods being imported from Britain appear to present the lowest level of risk for both Canadians and Americans. When the issue concerns visitors who present themselves at the border, however, a sharp difference emerges between Canadians and Americans. For Americans, visitors from Canada present no particular threat and the responses reflect the pattern observed for packages/containers. However, while Mexican visitors present the greatest perceived risk for Canadians also, it is Americans who come close behind in terms of the perceived need for thorough questioning. Whereas Canadians are generally viewed benignly by Americans, many Canadians are wary of the potential threat posed by visiting Americans. With murder rates and gun violence rising in Canadian cities, it seems likely that this perception is related to the cross-border traffic in illicit arms. Interestingly, for both Canadians and Americans, Japanese visitors are least likely to be felt to require a thorough screening at the border.

Table Two about here

A third indicator of the perceived closeness of Canadians and Americans can be taken from responses to a series of four questions tapping the willingness to, or importance of, cooperation between the two countries along a variety of measures. Table Three presents the results of our questioning respondents about cooperation in national security, border security, anti-terrorism measures, and energy policy. The results suggest that there is substantial support for increased cross-border cooperation, with Americans appearing to be slightly more in favor of stronger cooperative efforts across the board. On the other hand, only a small minority of Canadians – not higher than 22% on any item, is in favor of their country taking a more independent line vis-à-vis Americans. The comparable percentage of Americans seeking less cooperation never reaches double digits.

Table Three about here

Obviously, there is considerable commonality of outlook and sentiment across the Canadian-American border. It is interesting that the sense of closeness felt by residents of

northern North American appears so strongly even at the end of a period of abnormally high tension and bad-temper. Canadians refused to join the American-led coalition that unseated Iraq, for example, and bristle at the prospect of having to present passports at American borders. On-going disputes over mad cows and softwood lumber, combined with some intemperate comments about Americans by a Mississauga, Ontario MP, all have drawn attention to differences across the border. By the same token, American disappointment at Canada's unwillingness to support the Iraqi war effort, coupled with displeasure at Canada's perceived liberal policies on gay marriage and marijuana, have also led to an unprecedented level of Canada-bashing, at least on some conservative talk-radio shows. Of course, until we have data over time on the issues we've measured we cannot identify how much of what we see in our data is the product of short-term factors as opposed to more enduring and deep-seated orientations. The high level of support for cross-border cooperation suggests that the irritants in the relationship are of relatively minor importance as drivers of public opinion.

Conclusion

Canadians and Americans share a great deal. We share the landmass of North America and the continental economy that has developed around it. We share a cultural heritage, a commitment to democracy, and as a result of all this, our destinies are intensely intertwined. We have introduced in this paper a project that promises to provide a measure of the public dimension of this intimate relationship by replicating a series of benchmark questions over the years into the future. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the emergence of a greater and deeper understanding of the continental integration process.

Our first wave of surveying suggests that in 2005 there are many commonalities in the ways in which Canadians view Americans and *visa versa*. We feel particularly close to one another on human rights and family values. Recognizing our substantial common interest, citizens on both sides of the border support more cooperation on a host of matters concerning security and energy. However, there are also signs that there remain differences in opinion on several items. Americans are less likely than Canadians to recognize the similarity of their business values. And Canadians are more likely than Americans to recognize a threat posed by visitors from the other country when they seek entry at the border. Whether these differences reflect the current tensions or more deep-seated and enduring patterns will become clear as the "Niagara Report" unfolds over the years ahead.

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Table One
Countries With Most “First Choices” as Closest On Various Dimensions, and the Proportion Picking Mexico as Closest

	Country Closest Most Frequently (%)	Second Most Frequently Named Country Closest (%)	% Naming Mexico closest
Canadian Respondents			
Human Rights	United States (43)	Britain (36.4)	0.4
Family Values	United States (43.1)	Britain (30.4)	1.7
Business Values	United States (63.1)	Britain (16.8)	0.5
American Respondents			
Human Rights	Canada (51.4)	Britain (40.5)	1.6
Family Values	Canada (41.3)	Britain (35.6)	4.7
Business Values	Japan (39.2)	Britain (18.5)	1.4

“I am going to provide a list of countries, and thinking about the United States (for Americans; Canada for Canadians) in relation with those countries, could you please rank the top two countries that are closest with the United States (or Canada) in terms of _____?”

Table Two
Scrutinizing the Movement of Goods and People Across Borders

	Most Frequently Named Source Country (%)	Second Most Frequently Named Source Country (%)	Least frequently Named Source Country (%)
Canadian Respondents			
Package/Container	Mexico (39)	China (28.1)	Britain (1.3)
Visitor	Mexico (31.5)	United States (29.6)	Japan (2.5)
American Respondents			
Package/Container	Mexico (49.3)	China (27.8)	Britain (2.8)
Visitor	Mexico (50.3)	China (21)	Japan (3.5)

“Thinking about when a package or shipping container of goods enters Canada/the United States from one of the countries listed below, please rank the first and second country that Canadian/American customs officials should thoroughly inspect the shipment?” and “Thinking about when a visitor from one of the countries below arrives at the Canadian/American border, please rank the first and second country whose visitors Canadian/American customs officials should question most thoroughly?”

Table 3
Desirability of Cross-Border Cooperation/Greater Integration Between Canada and the United States

	Much Closer Cooperation	Somewhat Closer Cooperation	Stay the Same	Somewhat separate	Completely Separate
<i>National Security</i>					
Canadian Respondents	29.8	34.5	11.3	12.1	9.8
American Respondents	37.2	35.5	11.3	6.7	5.8
<i>Border Security</i>					
Canadian Respondents	39.4	35.9	10.5	7.0	5.5
American Respondents	46.9	34.3	9.3	3.2	3.6
<i>Anti-Terrorism</i>					
Canadian Respondents	43.7	29.6	7.0	9.4	8.9
American Respondents	55.8	30.3	6.7	2.2	2.9
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neither	Somewhat Unimportant	Very Unimportant
<i>Energy Policy</i>					
Canadian Respondents	57.1	27.6	5.6	3.8	3.4
American Respondents	64.7	24.3	4.7	1.8	1.9

For first three items, “In terms of (National Security, (i.e., NATO, the United Nations)/Border Security/anti-terrorism measures), should the United States and Canada be moving towards greater and closer cooperation, or should they be maintaining more separate policies and priorities?”

For last item, “In your opinion, how important or unimportant is it for the United States and Canada to work together to develop an integrated energy policy to remove any dependence on Middle East Oil? Is it very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, or very unimportant?”