

PERCEPTIONS AND POLARIZATION:

MEASURING THE PERCEPTION GAP BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL CANADIANS

By Sean Speer and Peter Loewen





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent U.S. presidential election (and its chaotic post-election tensions) highlight the risks of growing political polarization. This experience ought to be a wake-up call for policymakers and citizens around the world of the destructive consequences of an “us” versus “them” political dynamic and how it may manifest itself in their own jurisdictions.

One potential fault line in Canada is the urban-rural divide. Canadian policymakers should pay closer attention to divergent experiences, perspectives, and voting patterns among urban versus rural populations. Only by understanding what unites and divides us can policymakers hope to govern in a manner that is inclusive and responsive to all Canadians.

This report – the first in a two-part series on the urban-rural divide in Canada – aims to fill an empirical gap in what we know about how urban and rural Canadians perceive one another’s circumstances, experiences and perspectives.

Drawing on original survey work conducted by University of Toronto’s Policy, Elections and Representation Lab, the report analyses how urban, suburban and rural Canadians perceive the economic, cultural and political conditions in cities, suburbs and rural communities in order to see how we perceive one another’s circumstances and perspectives and whether our perceptions are influenced by where we live. A “perception score” enables us to measure the intensity of differences in perceptions across people and places.

This analysis finds that, although Canadians perceive significant differences in the economic, cultural and political conditions between cities, suburbs and rural communities, there are only minimal differences in our perceptions. That is to say urban, suburban and rural Canadians share similar perceptions of the magnitude of differences between urban, suburban and rural life in Canada. We have broadly similar understandings about how our fellow citizens think, live, work, and vote.

INTRODUCTION

Political polarization is growing across the western world.¹ There are various factors behind its rise, including the role of the internet, political realignment and geographical sorting.^{2,3,4} Scholars may dispute the relative roles of these different factors, but few doubt the net effect on our politics and society.

It would be wrong to assume Canada is immune to these forces. We are already witnessing, for instance, a spike in regional alienation, political extremism and other signs of nascent polarization. It is important, therefore, that we come to understand the underlying causes and address them so as to avoid the proliferation we have seen in the United States and elsewhere.

One expression of this trend towards polarization is a growing sense that different groups and places have distorted perceptions of one another's circumstances and perspectives. This "perception gap" can make it challenging to have cross-cultural dialogue, reach political compromises, and ultimately sustain social cohesion. Sometimes perceptions can matter even more than the facts.

This report aims to better understand how urban, suburban and rural Canadians think about one another's circumstances and perspectives. The goal is to see whether Canadians have differing perceptions about how their fellow citizens think, live and vote, according to where they live.

 **Although urban, suburban and rural Canadians believe there are significant economic, cultural and political differences between locales, how people perceive the magnitude of these individual differences does not materially change according to where they live.**

The work is part of a year-long program led by Prime Minister of Canada Fellow Sean Speer on the urban-rural divide in Canada and how we can cultivate greater mutual understanding and respect among urban and rural Canadians. The project comprises a combination of public policy analysis, community engagement and knowledge translation.

This first report draws on survey work conducted by the University of Toronto's Policy, Elections and Representation Lab (PEARL). The PEARL asked urban, suburban and rural Canadians how they perceive economic, cultural and political conditions in cities, suburbs and rural communities to see how we perceive one another's circumstances and perspectives and whether our perceptions are influenced by where we live. Using a "perception score" that measures the intensity of differences between locales relative to a national average, we are able to assess those perceptions.

The goal of this analysis is not necessarily to determine whether people's perceptions are accurate. That is an interesting question that future Public Policy Forum or PEARL research may seek to test. Instead, our aim is to understand whether people perceive major variations between urban, suburban and rural places on key economic, cultural and political issues and whether these perceptions differ based on where one lives.

WHAT ARE OUR FINDINGS?

There are two key takeaways from this analysis:

1. Canadians perceive considerable variation between urban, suburban and rural places on issues ranging from ethnic diversity and economic dynamism to political preferences and social values.
2. Perceptions of these place-based variations, however, do not differ much among urban, suburban and rural Canadians.

That is to say, although urban, suburban and rural Canadians believe there are significant economic, cultural and political differences between locales, how people perceive the magnitude of these individual differences does not materially change according to where they live.

A good example is how survey respondents think about income inequality. Urban, suburban and rural respondents recorded perception scores of 52.34, 52.18 and 52.31, respectively, on whether the level of inequality in suburban places was below, above or at the national average. The point is not that we believe there are urban, suburban and rural differences in levels of inequality, but rather that our perceptions of these differences are narrowly clustered in a small range no matter where we live.

A simple way to think about our findings is this: Canadians perceive significant differences in the economic, cultural and political conditions across the country but there are only minimal differences in our perceptions.

WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN FOR POLARIZATION IN CANADA?

We can debate whether the perceived degree of variation across locales ought to be cause for concern to policymakers. Respondents, for instance, perceive significant place-based variation in the rates of economic growth between cities, suburbs and rural communities. There may be good policy and political economy arguments for trying to minimize these variations. [Previous PPF](#) research has highlighted a role for place-based policies to encourage greater investment and opportunity in rural and economically distressed places in order to reduce geographical inequality.⁵

But it is rather good news that the perceptions of urban, suburban and rural Canadians about the economic, cultural and political conditions in urban, suburban and rural places do not greatly differ according to one's place. We share broadly similar understandings about how our fellow citizens think, live and vote.

“ One of the factors behind polarization is people’s perceptions about how others live, think and vote.



DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The data and analysis for this paper were produced by Peter Loewen and his PEARL team. PEARL conducted a survey of 2,064 respondents in May and June 2020.ⁱ Respondents were provided via the Fulcrum panel, administered by Abacus Data and processed through the Qualtrics platform. They were sampled according to age and gender distributions within regions.ⁱⁱ

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the economic conditions, cultural norms and political preferences in urban, suburban and rural places. The goal was to see if respondents perceived differences between these places relative to a national average, and whether the perceptions of these placed-based variations differed among urban, suburban and rural respondents.

Respondents were asked about 11 topics:

1. Economic growth
2. Unemployment levels
3. Levels of wealth
4. Economic inequality
5. Use of government services
6. Conservative voting
7. NDP voting
8. Liberal voting
9. Conservative social views
10. Ethnic diversity
11. Immigration levels

Using a sliding scale, respondents were asked to choose whether the circumstances, experiences and perspectives in urban, suburban and rural places on these issues were below, above or at a national average.

ⁱ We asked respondents to self-identity where they lived with the following question: “What best describes the place where you currently live?” Response categories were “A city”, “A suburb”, “A large town”, “a small town”, or “a rural area.” Respectively, 45%, 29%, 7%, 10%, and 8% of respondents fell into these categories. We combine the final three categories for our analysis of “rural respondents.”

ⁱⁱ While the frequency results below are presented on unweighted data, no substantive conclusions change when IPF weights (such as those raked on age, gender, and province) are applied.

The PEARL team then produced a “perception score” to measure the intensity of perceived differences between locales relative to a national average.

The perception score reflects an aggregation of respondents’ perceptions out of an overall score of 100. On the survey platform, respondents were presented with a scale ranging from 0 to 100, where 0 was marked as “A lot less than the Canadian average,” 50 was marked as “Average,” and 100 was marked as “A lot more than the Canadian average.” Accordingly, scores over 50 indicate respondents think Canadians in some places are above the average on a particular measure, while scores below 50 indicate they believe Canadians are below the average. While the numbers do not easily convert into percentages or another quantity, we can compare differences across outcomes (for example, economic growth versus unemployment levels) to understand where Canadians perceive bigger differences.

This analysis is not concerned with how the respondents’ perceptions conform to the actual outcomes. Future PPF or PEARL research may seek to compare these perceptions with the facts to assess whose perceptions are closer to the reality. The focus of our analysis is how people’s perceptions of key economic, cultural and political questions differ between urban, suburban and rural places.

This is relevant because one of the factors behind polarization is people’s perceptions about how others live, think and vote. Research, in fact, shows distorted perceptions not only fuel polarization, but that polarization can in turn lead to even more distorted perceptions.⁶ It can produce a vicious cycle which can ultimately drive more political polarization and social attenuation.

PEARL’s analysis permits us to see whether Canadians perceive significant differences in the circumstances, experiences and perspectives between urban, suburban and rural places, and if these perceptions are shared among respondents. This research and its underlying methodology can therefore help Canadian policymakers, the media and the general public better understand how urban and rural Canadians perceive one another’s circumstances, experiences and perspectives and, in turn, start to narrow the “perception gap” in our country.

The rest of this paper highlights the similarities and differences in perception across the 11 topics covered in the survey and subsequent analysis.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

Respondents were asked about the rates of economic growth in urban, suburban and rural places. The goal was to understand whether they believe economic growth is below, above or at the national average in these places.

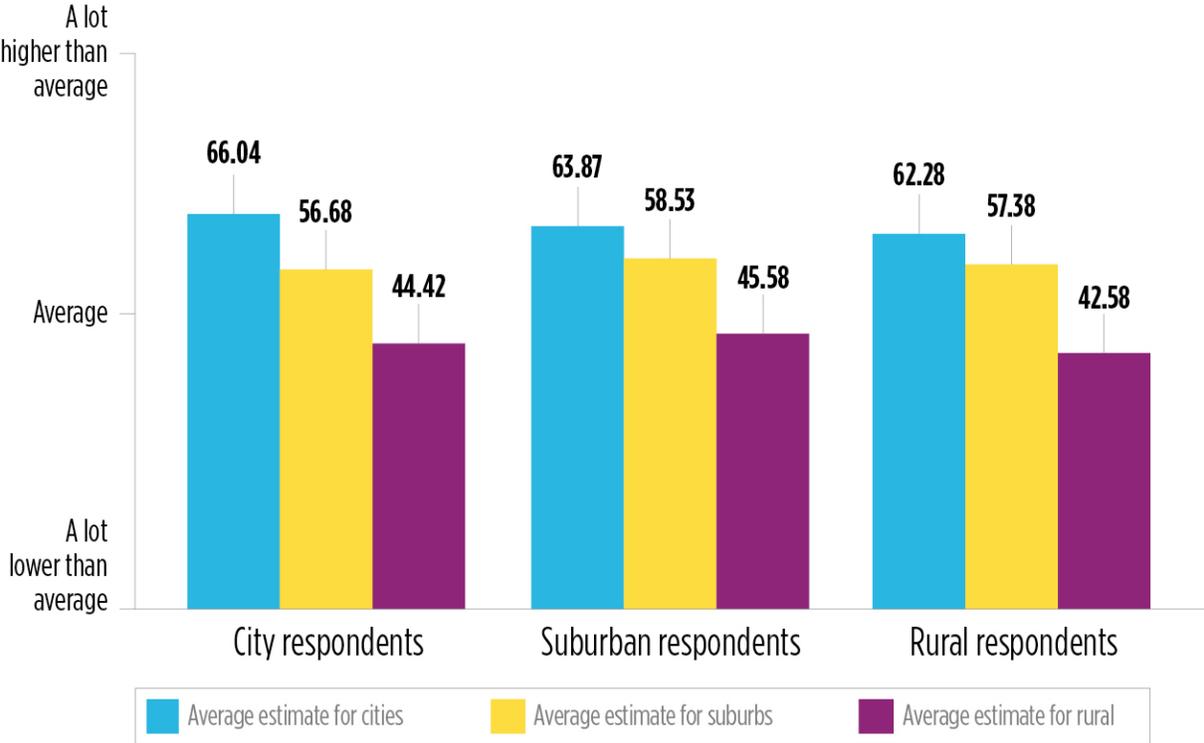
Respondents perceived a significant gap in economic growth across locales. Take urban respondents, for instance. Their perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 66.04, 56.68 and 44.42, respectively, meaning they believe economic growth in cities and suburbs is generally well above the national average and below it in rural areas. The gap of 21.62 between urban and rural places conveys significant place-based variation in urban perceptions of economic growth.

But what is interesting is that although respondents perceive significant variations between urban, suburban and rural economies, the degree of these differences is widely shared among urban, suburban and rural respondents. In other words, no matter whether respondents were in cities, suburbs or rural communities, they commonly perceived that economic growth was highest in cities, above average in suburbs and below average in rural communities.

Figure 1 shows these common perceptions. Respondents from all three types of places — urban (66.04), suburban (63.87) and rural (62.28) — perceived economic growth was highest in cities. The perception gaps among respondents was less than four on any given option.

“ We perceive significant differences in economic activity across the country but there are minimal differences in our perceptions. This formulation applies to a number of the issues covered in our analysis.

FIGURE 1: Respondents’ perceptions of economic growth in cities, suburban areas, and rural areas



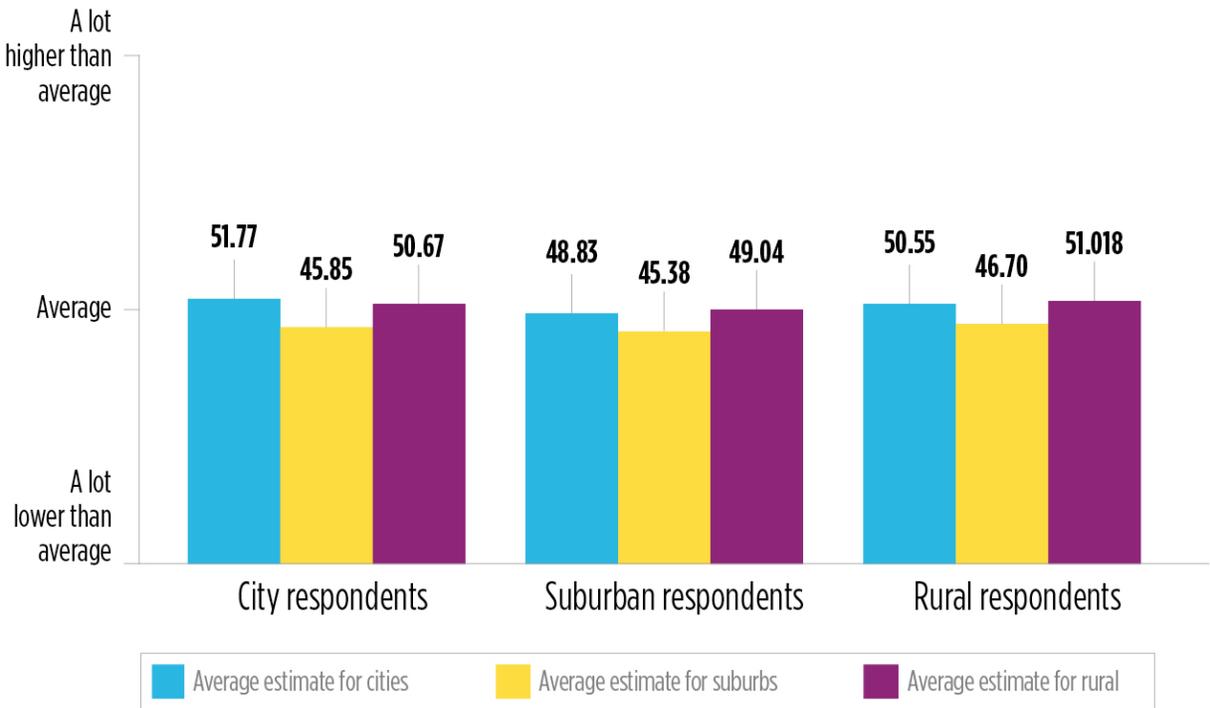
One way to think about these results: We perceive significant differences in economic activity across the country but there are minimal differences in our perceptions. As readers will see, this formulation applies to a number of the issues covered in our analysis.

UNEMPLOYMENT LEVELS

The same mostly goes for unemployment levels. We asked respondents whether the levels of unemployment in urban, suburban and rural places were below, above or at the national average. They perceived some variation in unemployment among urban, suburban and rural places but held similar perceptions about the magnitude of these differences.

Respondents from all three types of place — urban (45.85), suburban (45.38) and rural (46.70) — perceived unemployment was the lowest in suburban places (see **Figure 2**). They also perceived it was highest in rural places.

FIGURE 2: Respondents’ perceptions of unemployment levels



The largest perception gap among the different respondents was between how urban respondents and suburban respondents perceive unemployment levels in cities. The perception gap of 2.94 is small and not necessarily notable because of its size. But it is interesting because it is one of the few instances in which the perception scores are on opposite sides of the halfway point (51.77 versus 48.83).

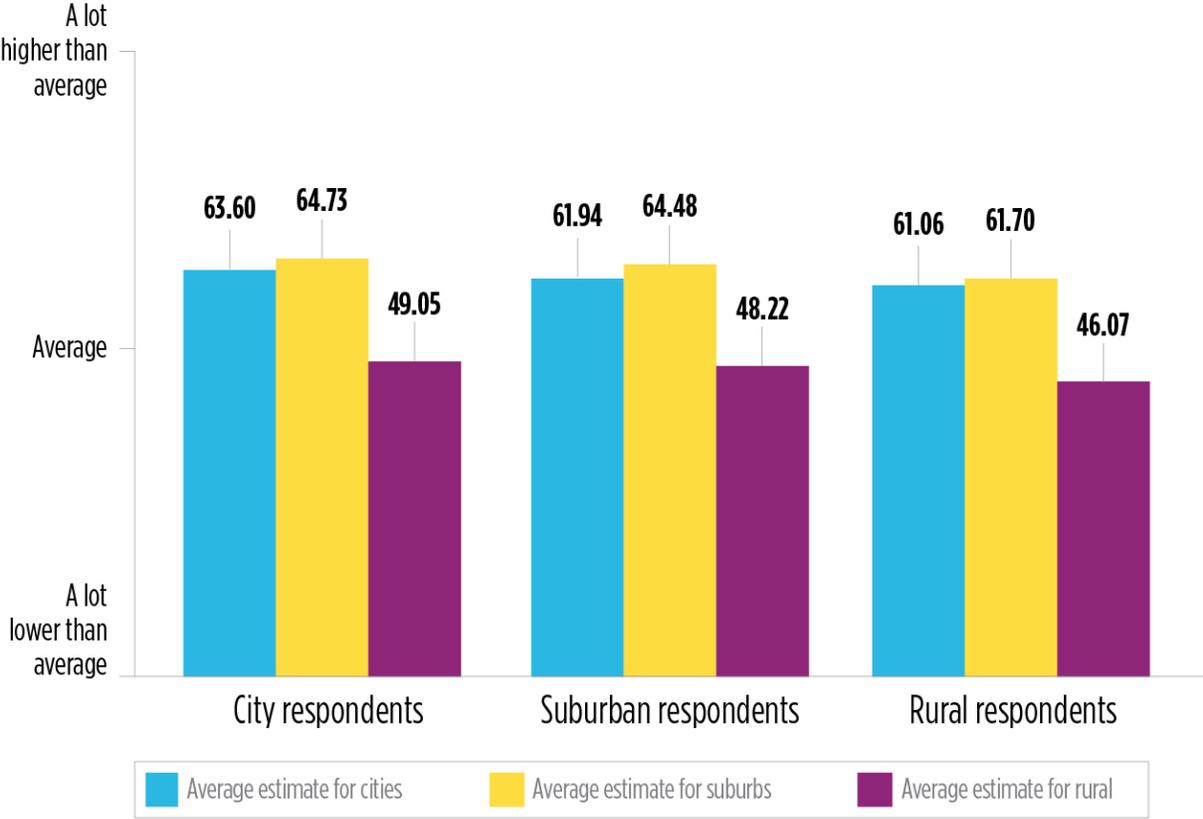
WEALTH LEVELS

Next we asked respondents whether levels of wealth in urban, suburban and rural places were below, above or at the national average. They perceived significant variation across these locales.

Take suburban respondents, for instance. Their perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 61.94, 64.48 and 48.22, respectively. The gap of 13.72 between urban and rural places conveys significant place-based variation in suburban perceptions of wealth levels.

But perceptions of the magnitude of these place-based variations are clustered in a small band among urban, suburban and rural respondents. Respondents from all three types of place — urban (64.73), suburban (64.48) and rural (61.70) — perceived wealth levels were highest in suburban places (see **Figure 3**).

FIGURE 3: Respondents’ perceptions of wealth levels



The largest perception gap among respondents was between how urban respondents and rural respondents perceive wealth levels in suburban places. Their perception gap of 3.03 was slightly larger than the gap between how urban and rural respondents perceive wealth levels in rural places (2.98), but it is still pretty small.

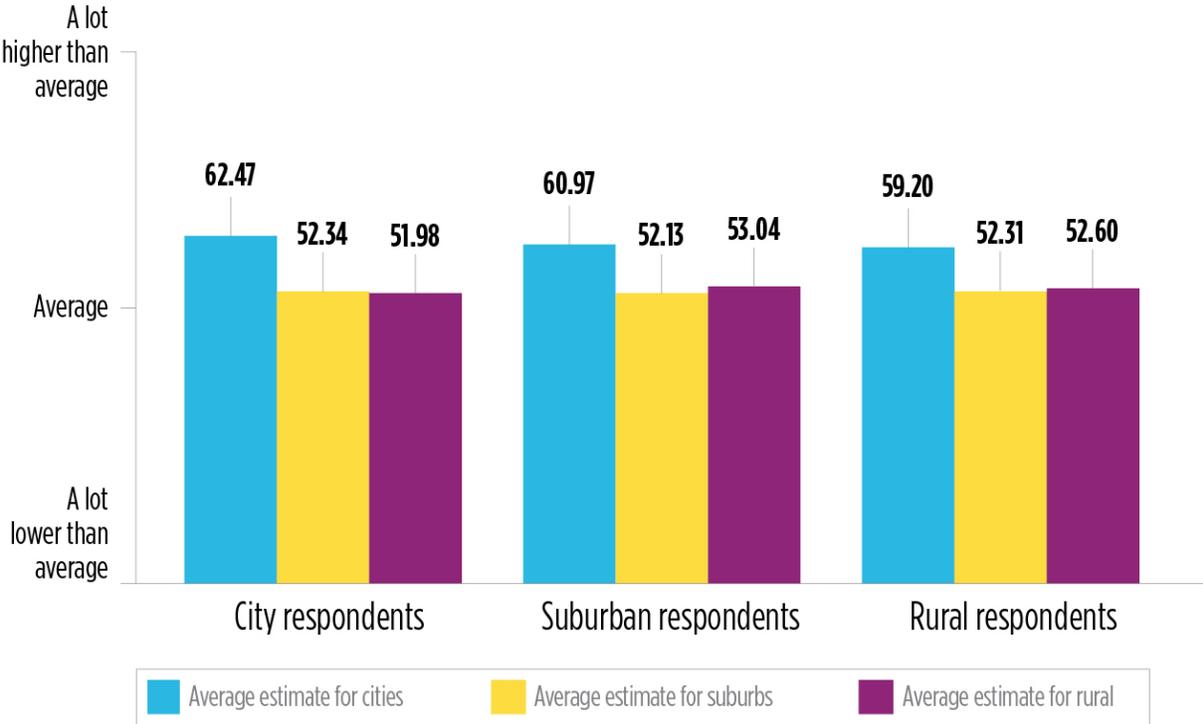
ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

We asked respondents whether economic inequality in urban, suburban and rural places was below, above or at the national average. They generally perceived inequality was much higher in cities than in suburban and rural places.

This perception was most intense among urban respondents. Their perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 62.47, 52.34 and 51.98, respectively. The gap of 10.49 between urban and rural places is a sign that urban residents perceive significant variation in the levels of economic inequality between cities and rural communities.

But, similar to the other questions, the differences in perceptions among urban, suburban and rural respondents on this issue were generally small. Respondents from all three locales — urban (62.47), suburban (60.97) and rural (59.20) — perceived inequality was the highest in cities. The largest perception gap was among urban and rural respondents about the conditions in urban places (see **Figure 4**).

FIGURE 4: Respondents’ perceptions of economic inequality



GOVERNMENT DEPENDENCY

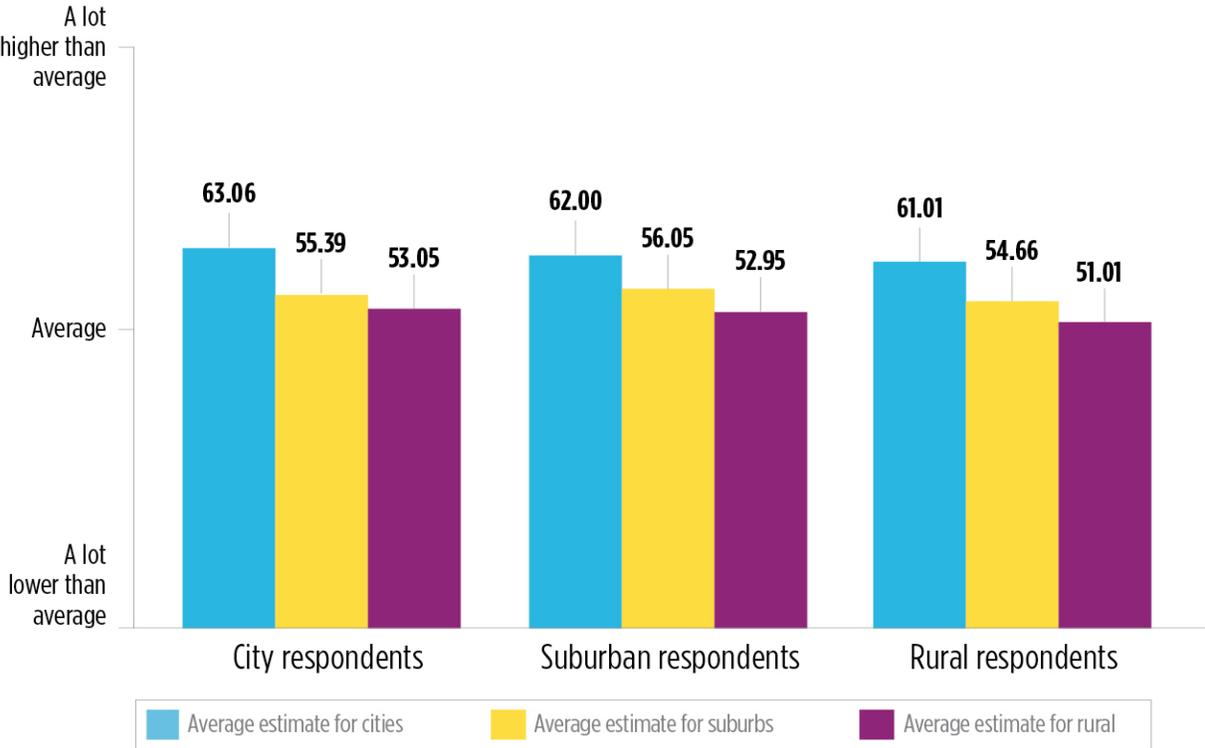
Respondents perceived significant place-based variation on the use of government services.

We asked respondents about their perceptions of the use of government services and whether government dependency in urban, suburban and rural places was below, above or at the national average.

Respondents perceived significant place-based variation on the use of government services. Rural respondents, for instance, had perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places of 61.01, 54.66 and 51.01, respectively. The gap of 10.00 between urban and rural places is a sign that rural respondents perceive significant variation in the levels of government dependency between cities and rural communities.

But, again, the differences among urban, suburban and rural respondents were minimal. Respondents from all three locales — urban (63.06), suburban (62.00) and rural (61.01) — perceived government dependency was highest in cities (see Figure 5). They also perceived it was lowest in rural places. The perception gaps among respondents was less than three on any given option (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Respondents’ perceptions of the use of government services



PARTISAN VOTING

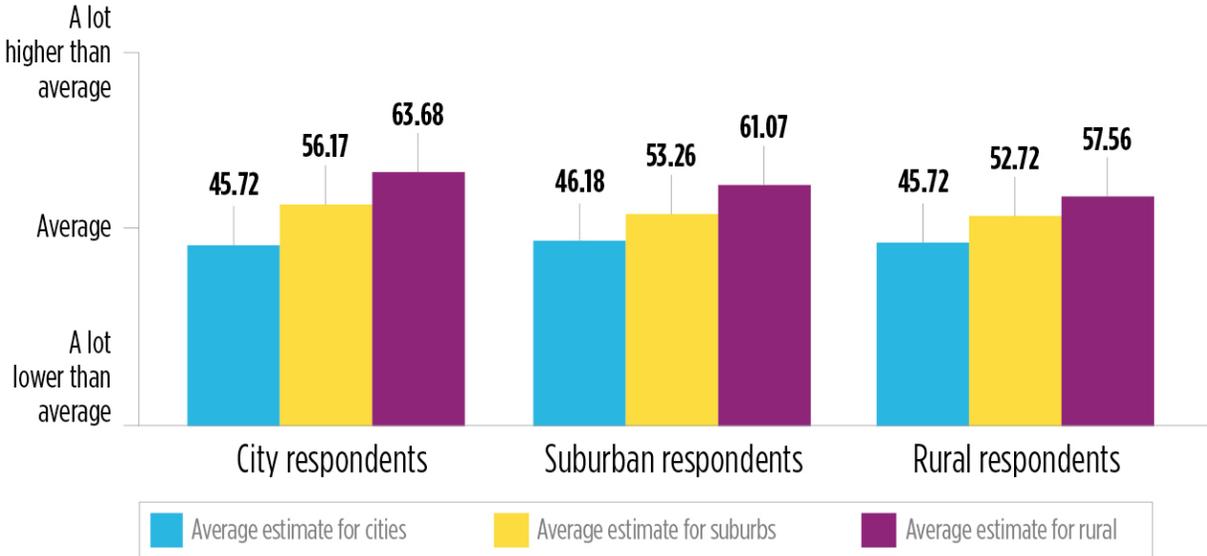
We asked respondents whether partisan preferences in urban, suburban and rural places were below, above or at the national average. The goal was to see how people perceive voting preferences across locales.

Respondents perceive significant partisan variation across urban, suburban and rural places. Take urban respondents, for instance. On the question of partisan support for the Conservative Party, their perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 45.72, 56.17 and 63.68, respectively. The gap of 17.96 between urban and rural places conveys significant variation in perceptions of Conservative support between cities and rural communities. A similar yet inverted place-based variation exists for how urban, suburban and rural respondents perceive people’s support for the Liberal Party.

As far as respondents are concerned, then, Canadians’ political preferences for the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party are significantly determined by where they live. The New Democratic Party is a bit different. Respondents perceive less place-based variation in the NDP’s support, and these perceptions are widely shared by urban, suburban and rural respondents.

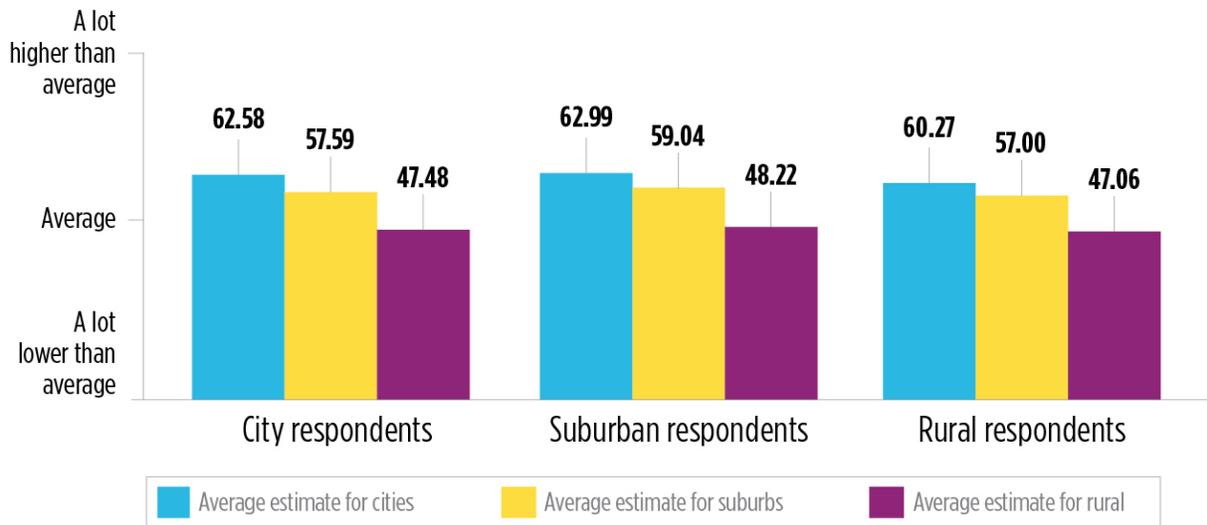
Start with the Conservative Party. Respondents from all three types of place — urban (63.68), suburban (61.07) and rural (57.56) — perceive rural residents are most likely to vote Conservative. Interestingly, though, the perception gap of 6.12 between urban and rural respondents on this question is among the highest of any topic that the research covered (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: Respondents’ perceptions of Conservative Party support



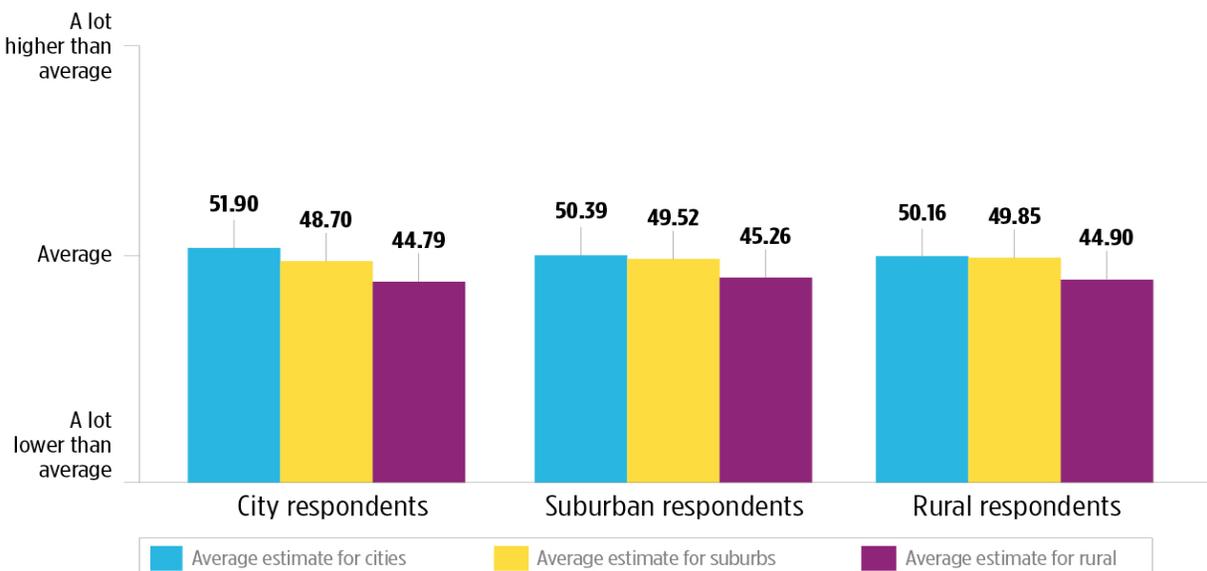
Next is the Liberal Party. Respondents from all three locales — urban (62.58), suburban (62.99) and rural (60.27) — perceive cities are most likely to vote Liberal. The perception gap is small across the different options (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: Respondents’ perceptions of Liberal Party support



Last is the NDP. Respondents from all three locales — urban (51.90), suburban (50.39) and rural (50.16) — perceive cities are most likely to vote NDP. The perception gap across the different places is also small — the largest gap, which was between urban and rural respondents on urban support for the NDP, was less than two (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8: Respondents’ perceptions of New Democratic Party support



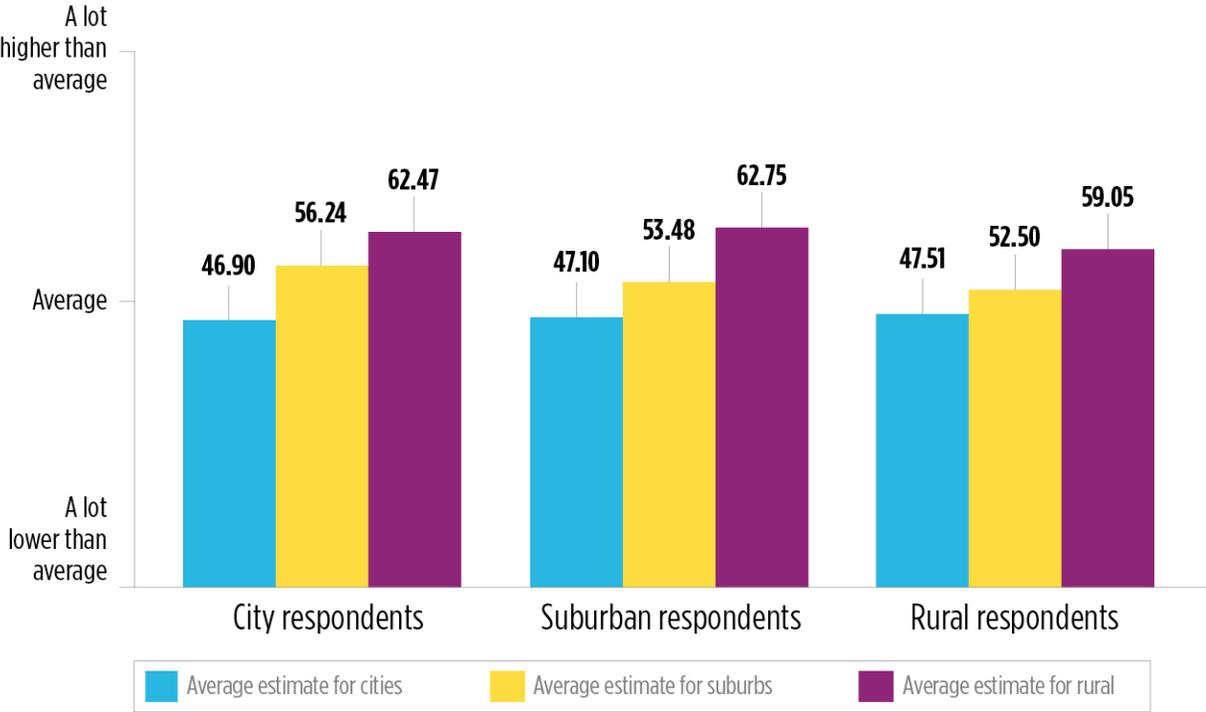
SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

We asked respondents whether conservative social views in urban, suburban and rural places were below, above or at the national average. We wanted to see if people perceive place-based variation in the distribution of social conservatism across the country.

Respondents perceive significant place-based differences, with much higher rates of social conservatism present in rural places. Take urban respondents, for instance. Their perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 46.90, 56.24 and 62.47, respectively. The gap of 15.57 between urban and rural places conveys significant place-based variation in urban perceptions of the prevalence of social conservative values.

Yet the differences in perceptions among urban, suburban and rural respondents cluster in a small band. They all agree social conservatism is most prevalent in rural communities and least common in cities. The largest perception gap, which is between urban and rural respondents about social conservatism in rural places, is less than four (see **Figure 9**).

FIGURE 9: Respondents’ of the prevalence of social conservatism



IMMIGRATION LEVELS

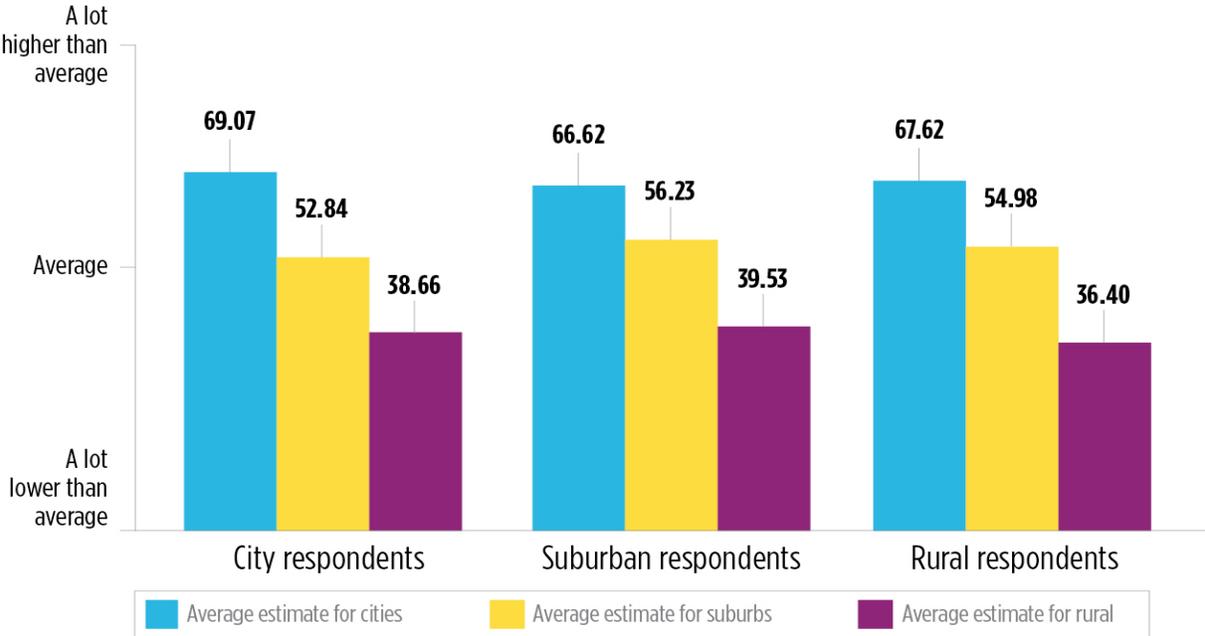
We asked respondents whether immigration levels in urban, suburban and rural places were below, above or at the national average. Respondents perceive significant place-based variation in the distribution of immigration. In fact, people’s perception of immigration is the subject of greater place-based variation than any other topic covered in PEARL’s analysis.

The largest variation is found in the perception of rural respondents, whose scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 67.62, 54.98 and 36.40, respectively. The gap of 31.22 between urban and rural places conveys significant place-based variation in rural perceptions of the distribution of immigration across the country.

People’s perception of immigration is the subject of greater place-based variation than any other topic covered in PEARL’s analysis.

As in other cases, the differences in perceptions among urban, suburban and rural respondents cluster in a narrow band of intensity. The variation between urban and rural places is 30.41 for urban respondents and 27.09 for suburban respondents, which is broadly similar to the 31.22 gap referenced above. Basically, no matter where the respondents live, they perceive a significant place-based variation in immigrant levels in cities and rural communities. (see **Figure 10**).

FIGURE 10: Respondents’ perceptions of immigration levels



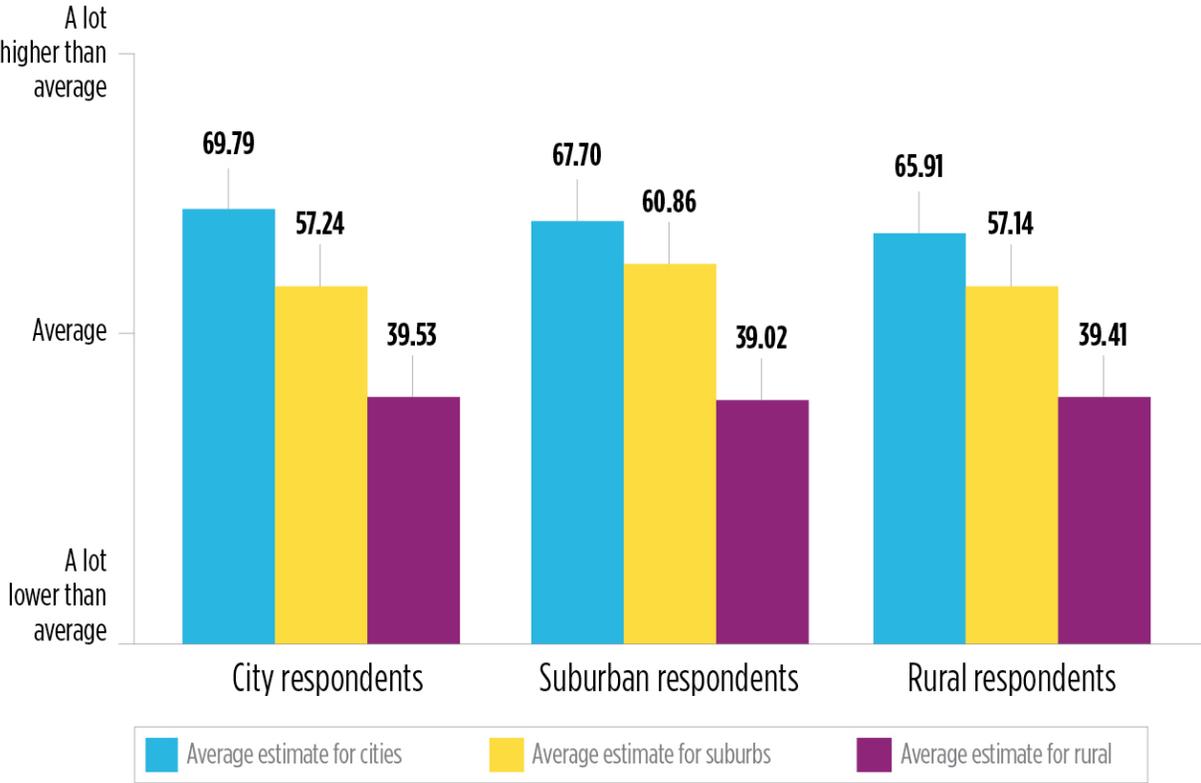
ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Finally, we asked respondents whether levels of ethnic diversity in urban, suburban and rural places were below, above or at the national average. Similar to the immigration question, there was significant place-based variation.

The largest variation was found among urban respondents. Their perception scores for cities, suburbs and rural places were 69.79, 57.24 and 39.53, respectively. The gap of 30.26 between urban and rural places conveys significant place-based variation in perceptions of ethnic diversity.

Yet the differences in perceptions across respondents were small. Respondents from all three types of places — urban (69.79), suburban (67.70) and rural (65.91) — perceived diversity was highest in urban places. The gap in their perception scores for ethnic diversity in rural places was less than one (see **Figure 11**).

FIGURE 11: Respondents’ perceptions of ethnic diversity





DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

We launched this research program because there was a dearth of data and analysis about whether urban and rural Canadians have different economic, cultural and political experiences and perspectives. There was certainly evidence from the United States of an urban-rural divide in that country⁷ and Canadian political outcomes seem to point in this direction here.⁸

But we were mostly operating in the realm of hypothesis and intuition. There was not a lot of data and evidence to back it up. The goal of this year-long project is to test these hypotheses and intuitions using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods.

This seems straightforward enough. But, as we discovered in our preliminary research, it is not merely enough to assess whether urban and rural residents have different experiences and perspectives. It also matters how they perceive one another's experiences and perspectives. Perceptions can matter as much as the facts themselves.



It is not merely enough to assess whether urban and rural residents have different experiences and perspectives. It also matters how they perceive one another's experiences and perspectives. Perceptions can matter as much as the facts themselves.

The Perception Gap project, which is part of a multi-jurisdictional, non-profit initiativeⁱⁱⁱ to address political polarization, has carried out empirical work on this question in the U.S. Its results are fascinating: Republicans and Democrats (particularly those on the “wings” of the two camps) have significantly distorted perceptions of one another, and growing American polarization is a result — at least in part — of these “false beliefs people have of their political opponents.”^{iv}

This point seems to be substantiated by other polling and research. A February 2020 poll, for instance, found 35 percent of urban Americans believe rural residents view them negatively and 43 percent of rural Americans feel the same about

urban residents.⁹ These perceptions may or may not be true but, over the long run, it may not ultimately matter. Distorted perceptions can fuel polarization nevertheless.

The Public Policy Forum’s research on the urban-rural divide is therefore being carried out in two stages. The first (this paper) aims to better understand people’s perceptions of the economic, cultural and political conditions in urban and rural places and the extent to which these perceptions are shaped by where they live. The second is to survey people directly about their own economic circumstances, cultural norms and political preferences. In effect, we are testing perception and reality.

Think of immigration and ethnic diversity, for instance. Respondents for this first paper believe immigration and ethnic diversity are primarily concentrated in urban and suburban places. Our second paper will compare political views on immigration and diversity along urban-rural lines. The results, as readers will see, broadly align.

More generally, as our research shows, urban and rural Canadians perceive significant variations in the economic, cultural and political conditions in cities and rural communities. It is as if urban and rural Canadians believe their experiences and perspectives — including the rates of economic growth, partisan preferences

ⁱⁱⁱ The Perception Gap project is part of More in Common, a global, non-profit organization that carries out research and other activities in support of inclusion and cohesion. See www.moreincommon.com for more information.

^{iv} See www.perceptiongap.us for the research and its findings.

and interaction with immigration and diversity — are growing further apart. This is certainly something that policymakers need to be cognizant of. The risk is that the country increasingly becomes marked by place-based poles that lack a sense of common experiences and perspectives and in turn feel attenuated from one another. There is certainly a role for public policy to help push back against this trend. One option, for instance, is new place-based policies to encourage greater investment and opportunity in rural and economically distressed places to reduce geographical inequality.¹⁰

The good news, though, is we do not have significantly different perceptions based on where we live. Urban, suburban and rural perceptions of one another's experiences and perspectives tend to cluster in a narrow range. We share broadly similar understandings about how our fellow citizens think, live and vote. In fact, the degree of commonality with respect to the perceptions among urban, suburban and rural respondents is probably higher than we would have anticipated. Put differently: Canada's "perception gap" is smaller than one might think.

“ It is as if urban and rural Canadians believe their experiences and perspectives are growing further apart. (...) The good news, though, is that Canada’s “perception gap” is smaller than one might think.

ENDNOTES

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