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Canadian Attitudes toward Competitiveness and Entrepreneurship

**A Report prepared by Joseph F. Fletcher,
Department of Political Science,
University of Toronto
for Industry, Science and Technology Canada**

Canada

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April 1992

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1. Introduction

Innovation and productivity have become watchwords in today's increasingly competitive global economy. For Canada to continue to flourish, we often hear, it must create and sustain high levels of innovation and productivity. Yet in a country so advanced and so very well off as ours surely is, we often tend simply to assume that everything will somehow continue to progress. But sometimes, if only occasionally, there is a nagging doubt. Do we Canadians really have what it takes to succeed in a highly competitive world? How willing are we to strive for excellence in our work? Are we willing to work hard enough, to take risks so as to remain competitive?

Definitive answers to such broad questions are hard to come by. Even so, it is well worth our while posing them and even more worthwhile to try to answer them, for in doing so we can go some distance toward banishing some of the more hoary myths that have grown up about Canada, its people and their culture.

Foremost among these myths is the idea that Canadian values around questions of competitiveness and entrepreneurship are somehow wanting. So prevalent is this notion that we are now quite accustomed to hearing and sometimes accepting without question any number of negative things about Canadian culture in this regard. For example, Canadians scarcely think twice when we encounter someone saying that we do not really believe in rewarding excellence or that Canadians do not place a very high value of working hard and getting ahead, or that Canadians are not very competitive by nature. Most often these ideas are elaborated by way of a comparison of one kind or another with the United States. Sometimes the comparison is based upon a reading of history; other times, upon the reading of literature. Much too rarely, however, do we see much in the way of hard data on the values of Canadians. The truth is that there has never been a systematic study of Canadian values pertaining to matters of competitiveness and entrepreneurship. Part of the reason for this is that too few researchers have actually gone out and talked with Canadians concerning our economic way of life. And so, comparisons of the kind that lie behind the old myths are never very carefully drawn.

Too often, bits and pieces of evidence on Canadian and American values are assembled from hither and yon and then are subjected to intensive theoretical inspection. The differences, often quite subtle, that have turned up are frequently magnified into emblems of a major cultural divide by social theorists interested for one reason or another in accentuating the distinctiveness of Canadian culture. Given certain types of theory-driven amplification, a matter of emphasis or degree can quickly be turned to a difference of kind. And something that once was true can be frozen in time as if nothing ever changes.

One can admit, of course, that there may be a grain of truth at the core of our myths about ourselves, without losing sight of the fact that it is no longer the whole truth, if indeed

it ever was. Our myths about what it is to be Canadian are deeply rooted in the our past, to be sure, but by same token there may be surprisingly little residue of that past in the present. As each new generation of Canadians comes into their own, they leave behind some of what has gone before. Consequently, values may begin to change, perhaps even imperceptibly at first. But over even so short a time as a generation or two, profound changes in basic values can occur often in quite unsuspected ways. To know what Canadians value today requires more than historical insight; it requires that we survey our basic values.

Even so, old myths die hard, especially when solid information about the values of a nation is so hard to come by. Unfortunately, to date survey researchers have not done enough of the necessary work for us to address anywhere near all the myths about Canadian culture that have grown up around issues of competitiveness and entrepreneurship. Still, there are enough high-quality comparative data available for us to begin to come to grips with some of the realities of Canadian values.

2. Data

Good comparative survey data are always rare. Nowhere is this more evident than on the issues of interest here. On Canadian values generally, there has been remarkably little nation-wide survey work. A partial exception to this is the 1987 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms Project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and carried out by Paul Sniderman, Joseph Fletcher, Peter Russell and Philip Tetlock. This study involved a large random sample of Canadians as well as a number of special samples of "decision makers" from across the country (for details, see Institute for Social Research, 1989). The major thrust of the investigation was to learn about the basic values of Canadians in the wake of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Consequently, many of the questions posed in the survey concerned matters directly relevant to the Charter. Fortunately, however, in addition to the main questionnaire, which was administered over the telephone, approximately 60 percent of those interviewed also completed and returned a mailback questionnaire yielding an effective sample size of 1 250 Canadians. Detailed comparisons of the mailback sample with the 1986 Census population reveal only minor deviations, suggesting that the mailback provides us with a good replica of the Canadian population (see Sniderman, Fletcher, Russell and Tetlock, 1988).

A major purpose of the mailback portion of the Charter Project study was to collect comparative data on a number of dimensions that had recently been the focus of attention in several major studies in the United States conducted by Herbert McClosky and his colleagues (McClosky and Brill, 1983; McClosky and Zaller, 1984). Their data, it should be noted,

were also collected via a mailback survey, so the Canadian data match the American not only in question wording and format, but also in mode of collection.

The particular aspect of McClosky's work that is most of interest here is his looking into the cultural foundations of the American economic system. In a book-length study co-authored with John Zaller under the title *The American Ethos*, McClosky offers a detailed account of American attitudes toward ambition, achievement, profit, competition, property and government intervention in the economy, among other concerns. While the data on such questions in Canada collected via the Charter Project are nowhere near as extensive, they do offer us a reasonable basis on which to begin a comparative analysis. There are several items that appeared in the Canadian study with no counterpart in the American data. They can be of some help in rounding out our understanding of Canadian values and, as such, will be introduced where possible. Additional comparisons with the United States are also possible because the Charter Project study also repeated several relevant items from a regional study carried out in the United States by Paul Sniderman and Thomas Piazza (see Sniderman and Piazza, forthcoming). And further comparisons can be made using the 1988 Canadian National Election Study (Institute for Social Research, 1990). This study, carried out by Richard Johnston, André Blais, Jean Crête and Henry Brady, adapted much of its basic design from the Charter Project, including the use of a mailback instrument with a number of items also drawn from McClosky's work. Relying on these several studies, there is enough comparative information to us to begin to examine at least some of the myths about Canadian culture.

3. Findings

The findings are arranged in three main subsections. As the first of the goals is to understand something about Canada, the first of the subsections (3.1) presents findings on basic Canadian beliefs and values drawn from questions about achievement, merit, the economic system, the work ethic, as well as items on competition, risk and government regulation. The next subsection (3.2) sets the Canadian findings in the broader North American context. Canada-U.S. comparisons are presented here. The final subsection (3.3) uses two indexes based on questions discussed in (3.1) and (3.2) to analyse the effect of major demographic variables on Canadian values.

In presenting these findings, my overriding concern is to allow the data speak for themselves as much as is practically possible. Rather than seeking to impose a particular theoretical framework on the survey results, I try to offer the reader substantial access to the findings. Accordingly, a considerable number of charts and graphs will be presented. Any

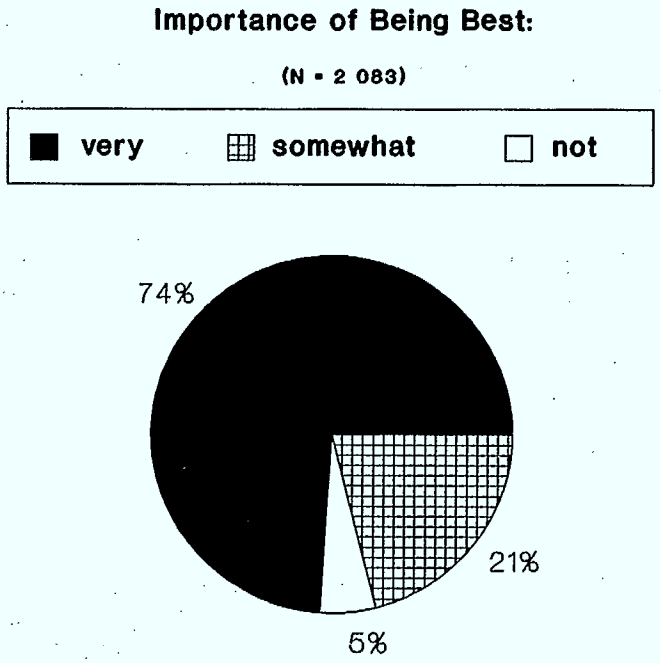
resulting burden to the reader will be lightened, I trust, by the important story that the data have to tell.

3.1 Attitudes toward Achievement and Merit in Canada

3.1.1 Core Beliefs and Values

The initial set of questions we look at reveal that Canadians value achievement highly and strongly believe that it should be rewarded. The first item to consider here is one that was administered over the telephone as part of the Charter Project study. It asked simply: **How important is it to you always to be the best at what you do?** The results, as set out in Figure 1, show that very nearly three out of every four Canadians answer "Very important" when they are asked this question. And almost everyone else answers "Somewhat important." Very few of us are willing to say that it is "Not important" to be the best at what we do. This finding is a good starting point for understanding how Canadians feel about achievement because we learn here that, in thinking about themselves and what they do, most Canadians say that striving for excellence is very important.

Figure 1



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

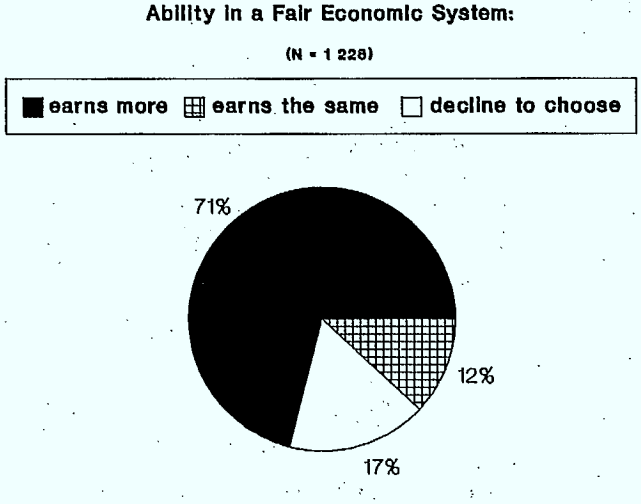
Why should so many of us report that it is very important to be the best at what we do? One possible reason is that in the course of a survey, people say such things to impress the interviewer. One can never completely rule out such a possibility, of course, but the results from another question, this time from the mailback portion of the Charter Project study, lend some support to the idea that in responding to this first item, people for the most part are telling us what they actually believe. The question read as follows:

In a fair economic system:

- □ 1 **all people should earn about the same.**
- □ 2 **people with more ability should earn higher salaries.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

Notice the wording of this first question. It asks not about what standard people set for themselves, as was the case in the previous question, but about what Canadians consider to be a fair standard for everyone. The issue here is one of simple economic justice, and what people consider to be a fair economic arrangement. Looking at the results for this question, in Figure 2, we see that slightly more than 70 percent of Canadians say that people with more ability should earn higher salaries. Just over 10 percent say that everyone should earn the same, while 17 percent chose the "Neither" or "Undecided" option. These results tell us that most Canadians think that a fair arrangement is one in which ability rewarded. Relatively few believe that everyone should end up with the same economic rewards.

Figure 2



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

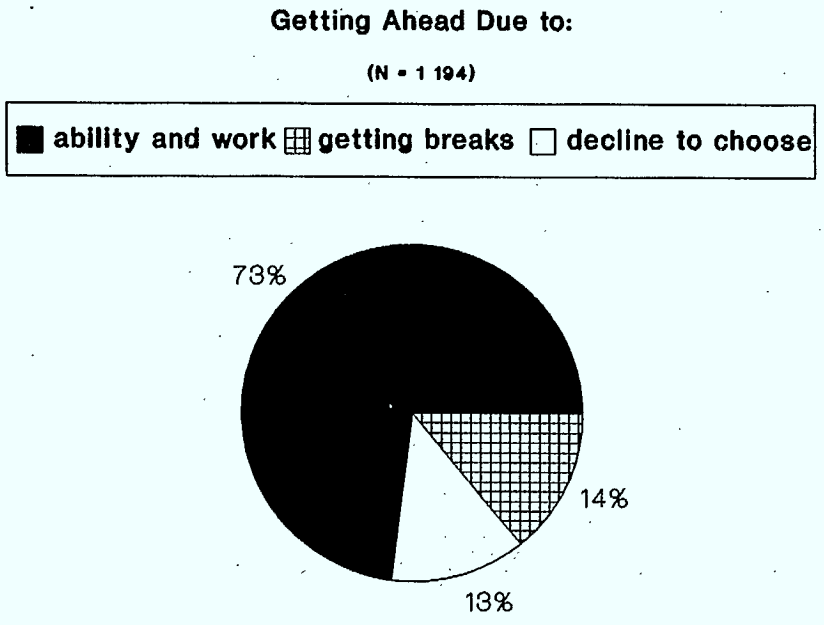
This finding helps us put the previous one in perspective. Roughly the same proportion of Canadians (just over seven in every 10) say that it is very important to strive for excellence as say that ability should be rewarded. Canadians may well be telling us that they try to be the best at what they do because they believe that excellence is rewarded in a fair economic system. We have here, then, some the basic elements of a belief or value system built around the idea of merit.

Strong parallels in the results from a third question also drawn from the Charter Project data reinforce the impression that we are tapping a very common value orientation among Canadians here. And the manifest content of this item helps us to fill in a bit more of the overall picture of this orientation. The question read as follows:

Getting ahead in the world is mostly a matter of:

- □ **1 ability and hard work.**
- □ **2 getting the breaks.**
- □ **3 Neither**
- □ **4 Undecided**

Figure 3



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

Once again, as Figure 3 testifies, nearly three-quarters of the Canadian public tell us that it is merit that counts most, for they say that ability and hard work get rewarded in the world as they know it. As it happens, this question was repeated in the National Election Study approximately one year after the Charter Project. The results were virtually identical, this time with 75 percent of the sample indicating that hard work and ability get rewarded. Both studies also indicate that only a small proportion of the population thinks that getting ahead is due to getting some kind of special break. These results fit smoothly with what we have seen earlier. And, placed alongside the earlier results, we begin to get rough sketch of a system of values that most Canadians share.

A central feature in this value system is the emphasis placed upon deserving or meriting what one earns. This is underscored in the responses we received to another question. Once again in this case a choice was presented to a random sample of Canadians. It read:

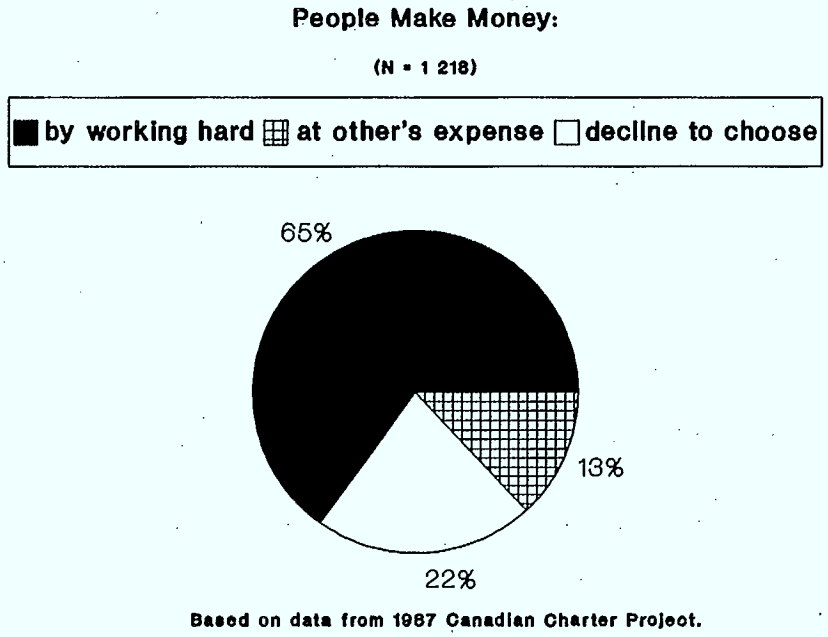
People who have made a lot of money:

- □ 1 **have usually done so at the expense of other people.**
- □ 2 **are proof of what you get if you are willing to work and take advantage of the opportunities all of us have.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

As Figure 4 suggests, few Canadians believe that money is made at other's expense. Most say that money comes from working hard and pursuing opportunities.

Stepping back for just a minute and reflecting upon the consistent pattern of results that we have observed thus far, the core elements of a merit-based system of values endorsed by a majority of Canadians begins to come into focus. Most Canadians value excellence highly. And most also think that people merit that which they achieve. For most of us, ability and hard work are the key to money and success. Moreover, relatively few of us have any serious qualms with an economic system that rewards ability and hard work.

Figure 4



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

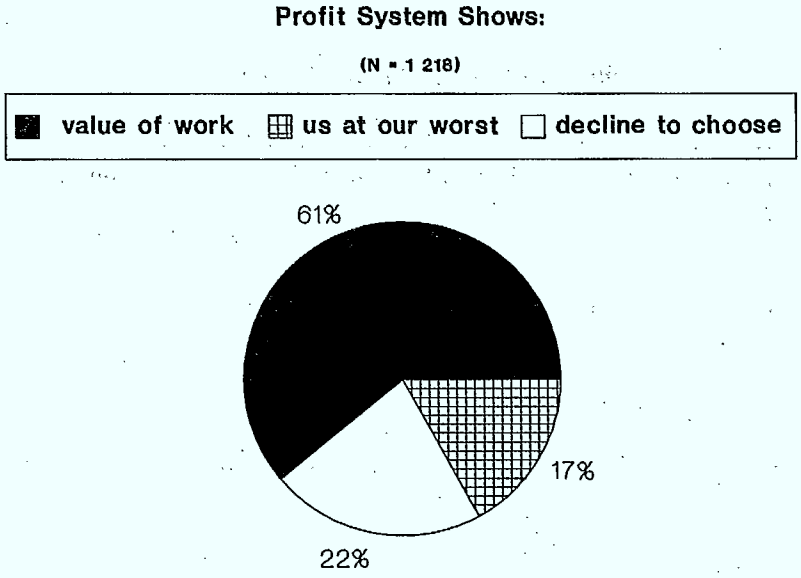
Interestingly enough, Canadians also credit our economic system with instilling in us the values of hard work and personal achievement. Consider, for example, the results that were found using this question on the profit system:

The profit system:

- □ 1 **brings out the worst in human nature.**
- □ 2 **usually teaches people the value of hard work and personal achievement.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

In the Charter Project data, 61 percent of the national sample placed a mark in the second box when responding to this question, as can be seen in Figure 5. When the question was repeated in the National Election Study, 65 percent made the same choice. While some us may have expressed a negative verdict on the profit system in answering this question, a clear majority of Canadians would seem to think it is a pretty good way of running things.

Figure 5



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

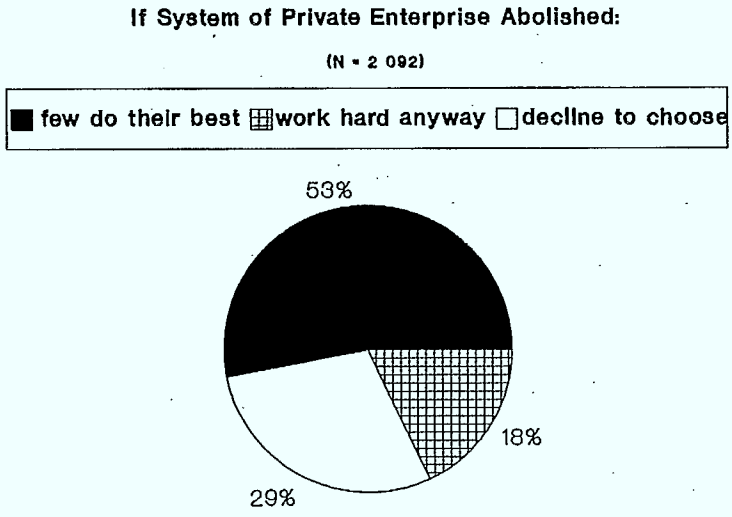
Another question, this time appearing only in the mailback to the National Election Study, puts an interesting twist on the matter. It asked Canadians to imagine what the world would be like without private enterprise. The wording on this one was:

If the system of private enterprise were abolished:

- □ 1 **most people would work hard anyway.**
- □ 2 **very few would do their best.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

The findings are perhaps not very surprising given what we have already seen in the previous question. In any case they appear in Figure 6, for they offer a unique perspective on the beliefs that Canadians have about human nature and economic systems. And what they show is that a majority of Canadians believe that without a system of private enterprise few people would be willing to continue to work as hard as they do now. It is perhaps worth also noting that fewer than 20 percent of Canadians chose the other substantive option here, meaning that relatively few think that in a world without the incentives offered in a private enterprise system most people would still work hard.

Figure 6



Based on data from 1988 Canadian National Election Study

Despite the impressive string of majorities that we have seen racked up here across a half a dozen questions, it is important to realize that the economic values of Canadians are not entirely based on considerations of merit. There are two aspects of this. The first is relatively trivial, so we can simply recognize it and move on. On each of the questions, not everyone endorsed the majority position. A number of Canadians chose the other substantive option on each of the questions. This suggests that a number of Canadians, ranging somewhere between 10 and 20 percent, evidently do not share the beliefs and values of the majority. It would seem that considerations of individual achievement, merit-based reward and the like do not figure so prominently in their particular system of values. In this sense, the economic values of Canadians are not entirely based upon merit. But there is also a second sense in which Canadians' belief in merit is incomplete. It requires, however, a bit more of our attention to draw it out.

3.1.2 A Fundamental Asymmetry

If Canadians are willing to credit the economically successful for their own accomplishments, one might suppose that they are equally likely to blame those who have not succeeded for their own failure. What may make very good sense in theory may not be at all related to the facts of the matter. We should not be too quick to make such an inference

without first asking Canadians what they think, for there is an interesting wrinkle in the Canadian system of values in this regard. It is best to talk to people and see what they say.

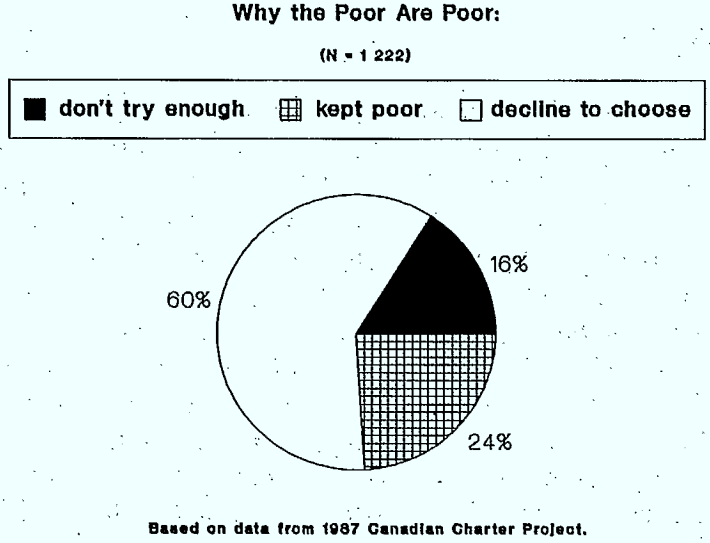
Consider then what a random sample of Canadians told us when they were asked the following question:

The poor are poor because:

- □ 1 **the wealthy and powerful keep them poor.**
- □ 2 **they don't try hard enough to get ahead.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

The responses to this item, depicted in Figure 7, indicate that irrespective of what Canadians might think of the roots of economic success, most of them are simply unwilling to lay the blame for being poor upon the poor themselves. Relatively few Canadians, it turns out, view poverty as due to lack of effort on the part of those who are poor. This does not mean, of course, that most Canadians believe that the poor are kept down by the rich. Only roughly one in four select this option. Instead we see that a majority of Canadians (60 percent) decline to choose either of the substantive options provided by the question. Indeed, most explicitly choose the "Neither" response over the "Undecided" one. In many ways this is the most realistic of the options provided to the respondents by this item. And it

Figure 7



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

makes abundantly clear that most Canadians are not likely to be sucked in by simplistic either/or formulations on survey questions, at least so long as our questions offer them a neutral option. And given that such third (and often fourth) options are a general feature of the questions being reported upon here, this particular finding increases our confidence that those who select one of the substantive responses on any of our questions really mean what they say.

Leaving such methodological concerns aside, there is also an important substantive point to be made regarding the responses to this question. The clear message being sent by our respondents here is one of considerable reluctance on the part of most Canadians to blame the poor for being poor. This would seem to indicate that there is a certain asymmetry in the values of Canadians generally. On the one hand, most of us are quite willing to credit people for their successes and to attribute them to the person's ability and effort. On the other hand, we seem to be not so willing to view economic failure in such clear terms of individual responsibility.

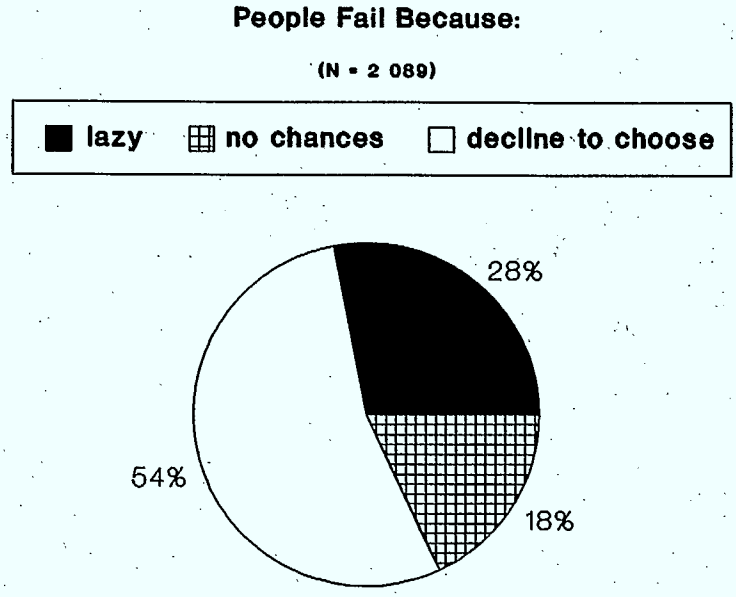
It is difficult to say just why Canadians are reluctant to see economic failure as due to personal shortcomings. Nevertheless, in looking at the results from another question, this time from the mailback portion of the 1988 Canadian National Election Study, it becomes evident this is indeed the case. In this instance the question asked was:

When people fail at one thing after another it usually means:

- □ **1 they are lazy and lack self-discipline.**
- □ **2 they weren't given a good enough chance to begin with.**
- □ **3 Neither**
- □ **4 Undecided**

Before turning to the results, consider for a moment how this question differs from the previous one asking about why the poor are poor. In this question, particularly vivid and unsympathetic wording is used to describe the people about whom the respondent is asked to make a judgment. The phrasing "those who fail at one thing after another" surely should evoke a more negative response than a question about "the poor." And indeed it does. Just over one-quarter of the national sample who answered this question replied that such people were likely to be lazy and lacking in self-discipline, as Figure 8 attests. But this is still a minority of the respondents. Most Canadians remain unwilling to attribute personal economic failure to the individual. And it isn't that they are likely to say that it is a person's circumstances that are at the root of personal failure either. Indeed, the thing that stands out most clearly here, just as we saw in the previous question, is that something over 50 percent of Canadians decline to choose either of the substantive options. This finding corroborates

Figure 8



Based on data from 1988 Canadian National Election Study.

what we saw on the item about why the poor are poor. And the fact that it comes from a different survey, concerned primarily with a different set of issues and using a different sample at a different time serves only to make the parallel the more striking. It is not often that a majority of Canadians refuse to endorse one of the substantive options offered them in the context of a survey. Indeed, in the studies from which these items were drawn, they are the only items on which a majority of the respondents say either "Neither" or "Undecided."

Evidently, when Canadians think about economic achievement and failure, they do so in somewhat different terms. Achievement is largely understood in terms of individual abilities and effort. In this regard, Canadian values seem to be largely based upon considerations of merit. The key point to recognize here is that it is only in explaining success that individual merit is so called upon. Economic failure, by way of contrast, does not seem to be typically understood in quite the same terms. Perhaps we genuinely recognize that the reasons for failure are complex, or perhaps we simply do not know why people fail. In any case, if our economic values were simply rooted in the merit principle, one would expect to find Canadians equally willing to explain failure as well as success in terms of individual merit. As it turns out, this is not the case.

None of this changes the fact that when it comes to understanding why people succeed, Canadians have a relatively clear set of ideas: achievement is due to the personal qualities of the individual, his or her own abilities and efforts. Most Canadians have little trouble applying such considerations in thinking about their world. And if we were to look at the values of Canadians only from the perspective of how they view success, we would be tempted to say that they are thoroughly rooted in the considerations of merit. It would be seriously misleading to do so, however. It is essential to appreciate that Canadians do not bring considerations of merit so readily to bear on questions of failure and poverty. In this important sense, we must recognize that Canadians do not apply the merit principle with equal rigor in thinking about success and failure. In many ways this is probably a good thing, for it enables us to leaven our social policies with a measure of compassion.

3.1.3 Perspectives on Competition and Risk

If the core value of the majority of Canadians regarding economic life is the merit principle, competition should be the mechanism by which that value is given life and expression. It is the key to better performance after all but, more importantly, it is also the device by which relative merit is ascertained in a market economy.

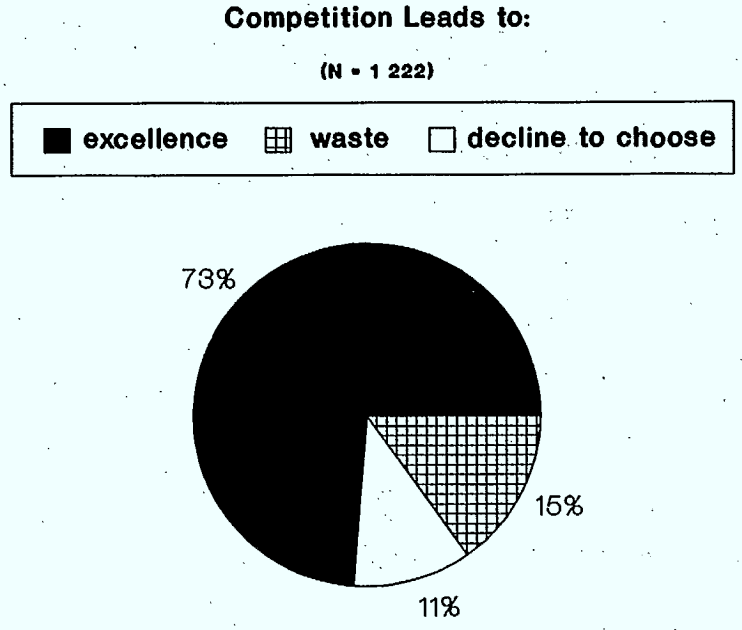
Given this essential linkage between the notion of merit and the instrument of competition, one might expect to find that Canadians place as much value on competition as they do on merit. To find out, we look to the results from several questions. The first was:

Competition, whether in school, work or business:

- □ 1 **leads to better performance and a desire for excellence.**
- □ 2 **is often wasteful and destructive.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

The reactions of Canadians to this choice are reflected in Figure 9. We see there that when asked about competition in these terms, most Canadians think it is quite a good thing for it brings about better performance and a desire for excellence. Roughly three-quarters of our respondents endorsed this view. Relatively few — 15 percent — expressed a contrary perspective on competition, pointing to what they saw as its wasteful and destructive aspects (note that in this figure and in some of the following figures, totals may not add to 100 percent due to rounding). Even fewer Canadians declined to choose one of the main options here.

Figure 9



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

Only a slightly less enthusiastic endorsement of the benefits of competition results from the next item on which we have data. Here the respondent was asked to indicate whether he or she mainly agreed or disagreed with a statement. It read:

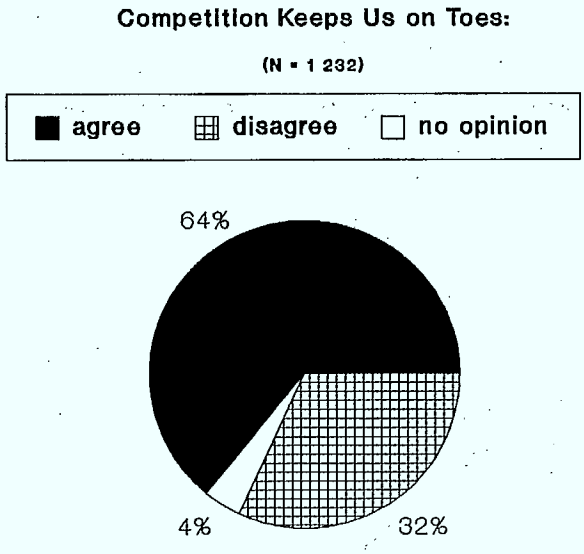
It is having to compete with others that keeps a person on his toes:

□ **1 Mainly agree**
□ **2 Mainly disagree**
□ **3 No opinion**

The resulting distribution of responses is summarized in Figure 10. Looking there we see that almost two-thirds of those surveyed endorsed this statement, while one-third indicated their disagreement with the idea that it is competition that keeps someone on his toes. Very, very few chose the "No opinion" option in this instance. Virtually identical results were obtained when this question was asked again in the National Election Study.

It is difficult to make precise comparisons between the last two questions because both the content and format differ so much across these items. Hence, we cannot be certain as to

Figure 10



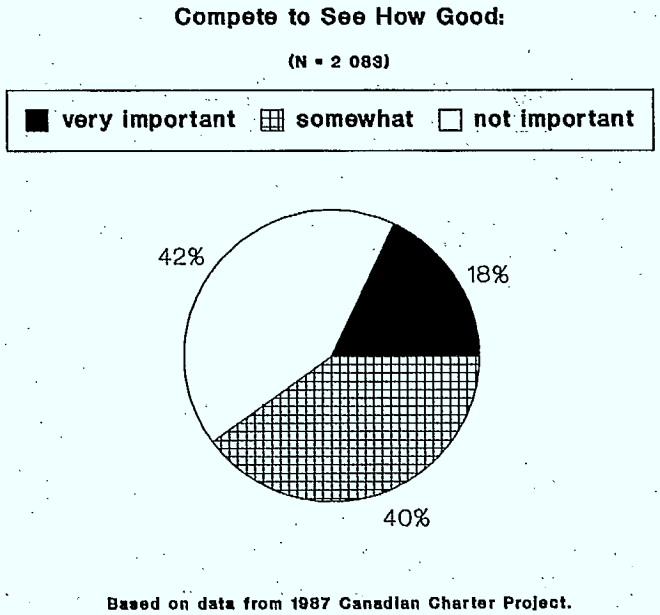
Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

what accounts for the sharp increase in negative comments regarding competition on the second item. Perhaps the response format makes a difference or perhaps the content does; it is difficult to say. For now, it seems wise simply to note that on this question as well as the preceding one hefty majorities tell us that competition brings about positive results.

Similar problems plague any comparison of the next item with the previous two because both format and content change once more. In addition, the mode of data collection changed as well, for this question was asked of our respondents over the telephone. They were asked: **How important is it to compete against others to see how good you are?**

Figure 11 reports that only 18 percent of the respondents said that competition is very important in this instance, whereas 40 percent replied that it is somewhat important and 42 percent said that competing against others is not important at all for them. Despite the obstacles to making direct comparisons with the previous items, it is hard to resist thinking that on this measure there seems to be markedly less enthusiasm for competition than we saw on the previous items asking about its value.

Figure 11



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

Perhaps one of the keys to understanding the responses to this question is to recognize that competition is explicitly described here as a means for assessing individual merit. Moreover, the respondents were expressly being asked how important it is for them themselves to compete with others to assess how good they are at whatever they do. Thus the individual whose merit is being discussed is the respondent, not some third person who has been described as having failed or succeeded. Another key to understanding this question is to view it in the context of the very first question we discussed at the outset of this paper (page 5). The two items shared not only a common format, but also a fair bit of terrain in terms of content. The earlier item queried respondents on how important it is for them to be the best at what they do. This latter item asked the same respondents how important it is for them to compete with others to see how good they are. Given the parallels between the two items, the results are striking in how very different they are from one another. To the first question virtually three-quarters of the respondents replied "Very important." On the second item not even one in every five respondents said "Very Important." Compare Figures 1 and 11.

Considered in this light, it seems evident that while most Canadians may see competition as useful in enhancing performance, very few of them understand competition as an appropriate measure of their own worth, how good they themselves are at what they do.

To some degree, this may be related to the asymmetry we noticed earlier in how Canadians apply the merit principle, but if it is, it takes a somewhat different form here. There the contrast was in the assessments that were made about winners and losers; here the difference may be in terms of oneself and others.

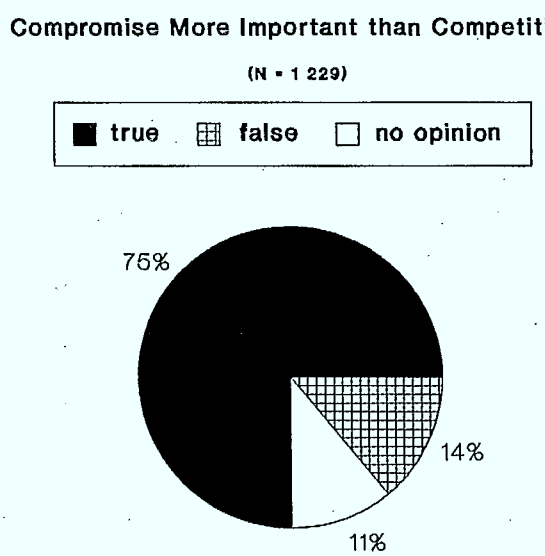
The major finding here is that Canadians may value competition highly, but only to a point. This is sharply underscored by the next set of findings, presented in Figure 12. The question on which these data are based was:

Compromise and looking for common ground are more important than competition and trying to win:

- ☐ **1 Mostly true**
- ☐ **2 Mostly false**
- ☐ **3 No opinion**

Here we see that irrespective of the high value Canadians may place on competition, very few of us would place it on a par with compromise and seeking a common ground. Indeed, 75 percent of Canadians come right out and agree that compromise is more important. Competition is thus an important value for most Canadians, but other considerations may sharply curtail the extent to which we apply it in making judgments. And

Figure 12



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

as is the case with the merit principle, Canadians expressed some ambivalence in extending it as a value in at least some domains.

Some further light can be shed upon our values in this area by looking at some of the data we have on risk taking. In competing, a person risks failure in the hope of success. Risk taking, then, is an essential aspect of competition. What value do Canadians place on taking risks? To find out, we asked two very similar questions. The first was:

One can't really get very far in life without taking some risks:

□ **1 Mainly agree**
□ **2 Mainly disagree**
□ **3 No opinion**

The second was:

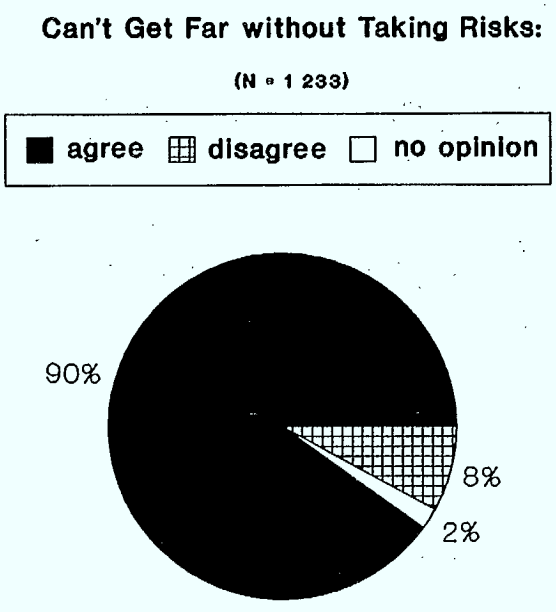
I'd want to know that something would really work before I'd be willing to take a chance on it:

□ **1 Mainly agree**
□ **2 Mainly disagree**
□ **3 No opinion**

Notice first that the format for the two questions is identical. Now turn to Figures 13 and 14. The results to these two questions are remarkably different, revealing perhaps something of the ambivalent attitude with which Canadians approach questions of risk in particular and competition in general. As Figure 13 attests, virtually everyone admits that we have to take risks if we are ever to succeed. But on the other hand, as Figure 14 illustrates, a great many of us would prefer to take risks only when we are fairly confident of actually that things will work out fine. We are, on the whole, probably not averse to risk taking, but all the same most of us want to weigh the prospects of success carefully before taking the plunge. Much the same undoubtedly applies in deciding whether to compete or not; we prefer to compete where we are most likely to succeed.

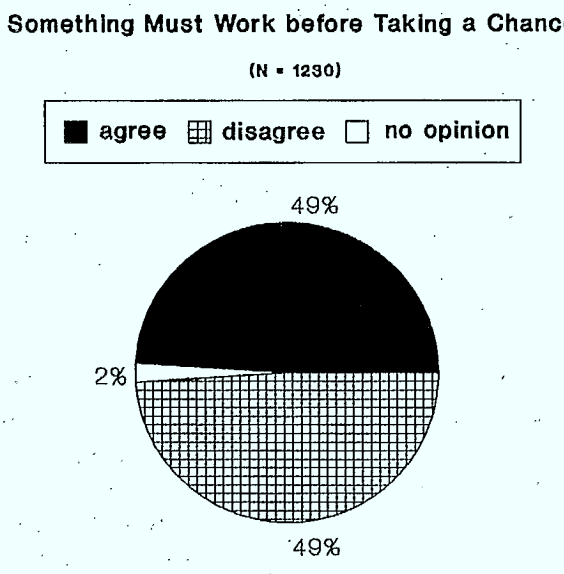
Just as with the merit principle, Canadians place high value on competition and the taking of risks, but there remains some degree of uncertainty and ambivalence in the extent to which we endorse these values. As such, Canadians do not whole-heartedly embrace either merit or competition. Here we come face to face with some of the old myths about Canadians and their culture. To evaluate these myths requires that we turn to comparative data. But before doing so, we should look at one more bit of evidence.

Figure 13



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

Figure 14



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

3.1.4 Attitudes on Government Regulation of Business

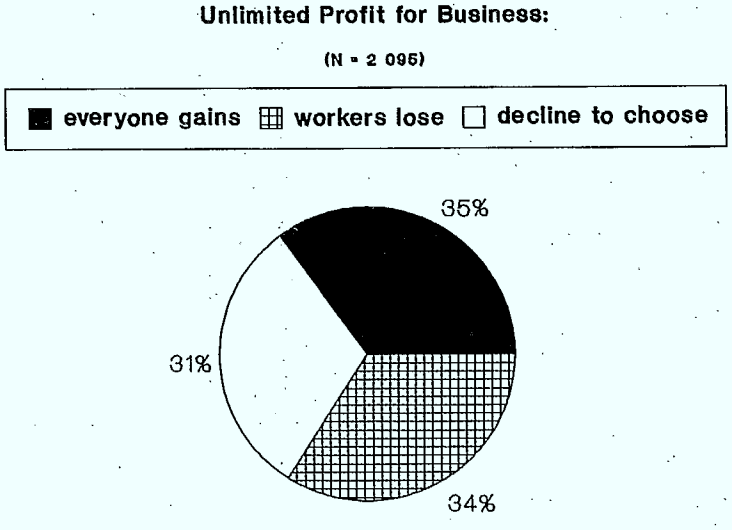
The final area in which there are some data on Canadian attitudes relevant to issues of competition and entrepreneurship is that of the regulation of business. The first question to discuss here asked what Canadians think the likely result is when entrepreneurial activities are pursued with no limits on maximizing profit. It was included in the National Election Study. Its wording was:

When businesses are allowed to make as much money as they can:

- □ 1 **everyone profits in the long run.**
- □ 2 **workers and the poor are bound to get less.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

Figure 15 contains the results. Opinion is clearly split on this one. Roughly one-third of Canadians thought that ultimately we all gain from such activity, another one-third thought that workers and the poor are likely to suffer, and a final one-third declined to choose either of the main options.

Figure 15



Based on data from 1988 Canadian National Election Study.

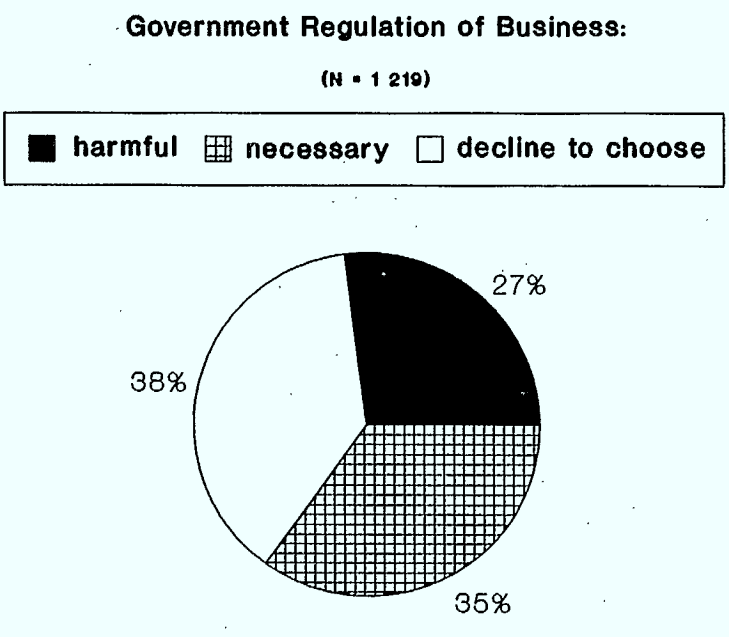
A rather similar pattern results using the next question drawn from the Charter Project. It read:

Government regulation of business:

- □ 1 **usually does more harm than good.**
- □ 2 **is necessary to keep industry from becoming too powerful.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

In this instance the percentages selecting each option are set out in Figure 16. Although there is a bit of slippage here on the part of the group that favoured unfettered business activity, nearly all of the increase is in the "Neither" or "Undecided" categories, essentially leaving intact the set of three groups of roughly one-third each. There is, in short, evidence from two different surveys that opinion on the regulation of business is more or less evenly split, with a substantial contingent unwilling or unable to express a definitive preference.

Figure 16



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

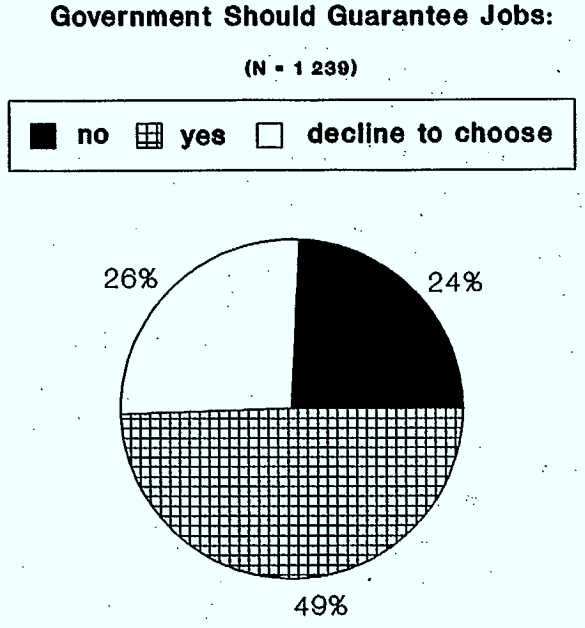
Two additional items, both from the Charter Project data, shed some further light on public attitudes toward government intervention in the economy. The first of these questions was:

In the matter of jobs and standards of living, the government should:

- □ 1 **see to it that everyone has a job and a decent standard of living.**
- □ 2 **let each person get ahead on his own.**
- □ 3 **Neither**
- □ 4 **Undecided**

As Figure 17 makes clear, nearly half of all Canadians think that the government has an important role to play in making certain that everyone has a job which provides them with an acceptable standard of living. But just about one-quarter of us feel that the government should not really concern itself about such matters. The remaining one-quarter choose not to venture an opinion on this question one way or the other. We see that the replies people gave to this question indicate that while opinion is split, many more Canadians are in favour of government action in this area than are opposed.

Figure 17



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

One should not infer from this finding that Canadians generally or even a great number of them are comfortable with the idea of depending on the government for their livelihood. As the figures on the next question indicate, a very substantial majority strongly prefer to provide for themselves as best they can rather than depend on government to get by. The question was:

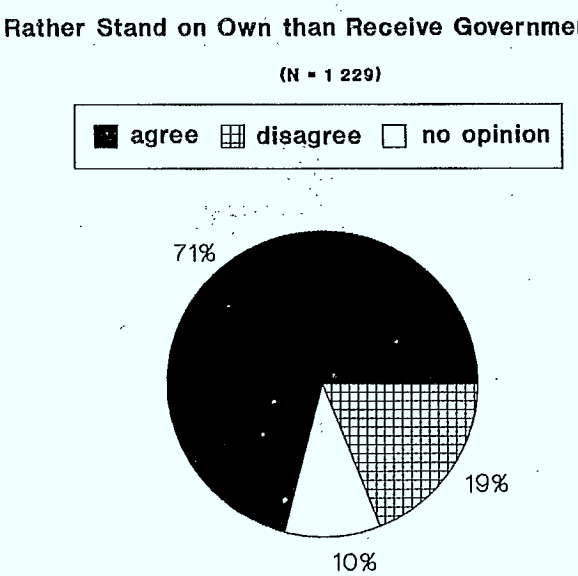
Even if I fail, I would rather be free and stand on my own feet than have to depend on the government:

- □ **1 Mainly agree**
- □ **2 Mainly disagree**
- □ **3 No opinion**

The details on the results are presented in Figure 18.

The conclusion to be drawn from this and the previous question is that Canadians as a whole tend to recognize a need for government action to ensure that everyone has work and a reasonable standard of living but Canadians have little taste for being dependent upon and beholden to government. This fits within the larger pattern of responses that we have reviewed throughout this and the previous section. Canadian attitudes exhibit some degree of ambivalence regarding competition and unbridled entrepreneurial activity on the part of

Figure 18



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

business. As it turns out, they also seem rather ambivalent regarding government regulation of business. And while many people see an important role for government to play in economic affairs, particularly in making sure that people have jobs, relatively few seem to relish the idea of depending on government to look after their welfare.

3.2 Canadian Values in the North American Context

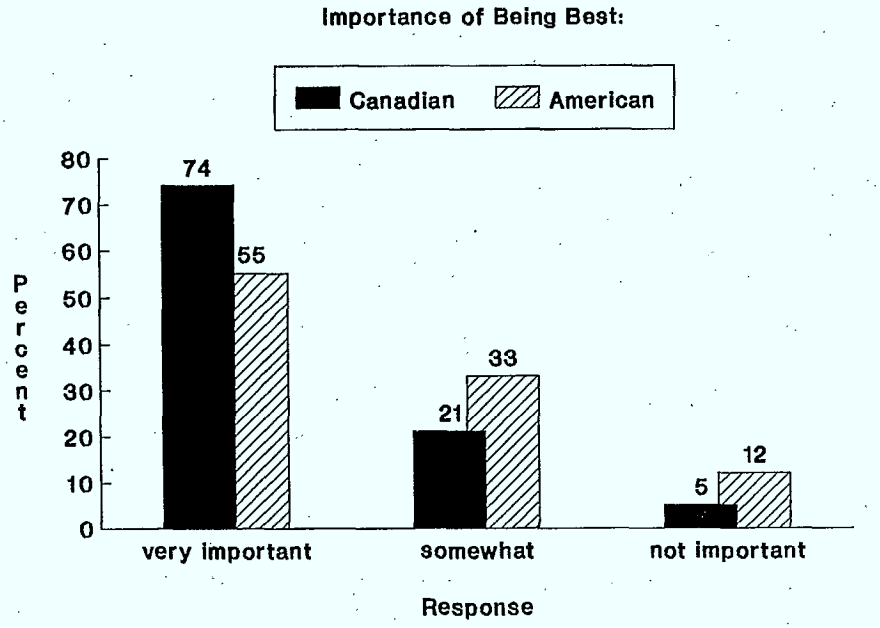
The picture that emerges throughout the preceding section (3.1) is of a people who greatly value individual achievement, believe in rewarding merit and believe in the benefits of competition. Nevertheless, the commitment that Canadians feel to each of these values is neither complete nor undifferentiated. Indeed, there are marked signs of ambiguity regarding each of these values in Canadian culture. Given this, the question remains an open one as to how do we fare in comparison with the United States in these areas. Are Canadians less achievement oriented than Americans? Are we less likely to think that merit should be rewarded? Do Americans value competition more highly than Canadians do? Are they less in favour of government regulation of business?

In endeavouring to answer such questions, we must first of all deal with the brute fact that we do not have nearly as much comparative survey data on these questions as we would like to have, particularly on the Canadian side. Accordingly, we cannot expect anything like a definitive answer to emerge from the presentation here. Still, enough of the questions discussed in the preceding section were asked on both sides of the border that a preliminary overall comparative assessment can be made of how different Canadian and American values are as they pertain to our economic way of life.

It is worth repeating here that the questions being compared employ the same wording in both countries as well as the same method of data collection. And the samples are, with only one exception on the American side, national in scope. Moreover, the data were collected, again with only one exception on the American side, only a few years apart. Despite all these advantages, we still must proceed with some caution, for the selection of questions on which we can make comparisons is nowhere near as inclusive as we would like.

We begin the comparisons as we began with the examination of Canadian cultural values, by looking at the extent to which Canadians and Americans place a high value on being the best at what they do. The comparative U.S. data in this instance are drawn from a regional study carried out in the Oakland-San Francisco Bay area by Paul Sniderman and Thomas Piazza in 1986. Percentages on the American side are based on a sample size of 1 103. The Canadian data were drawn from the Charter of Rights Project and are as reported in section 3.1.

Figure 19

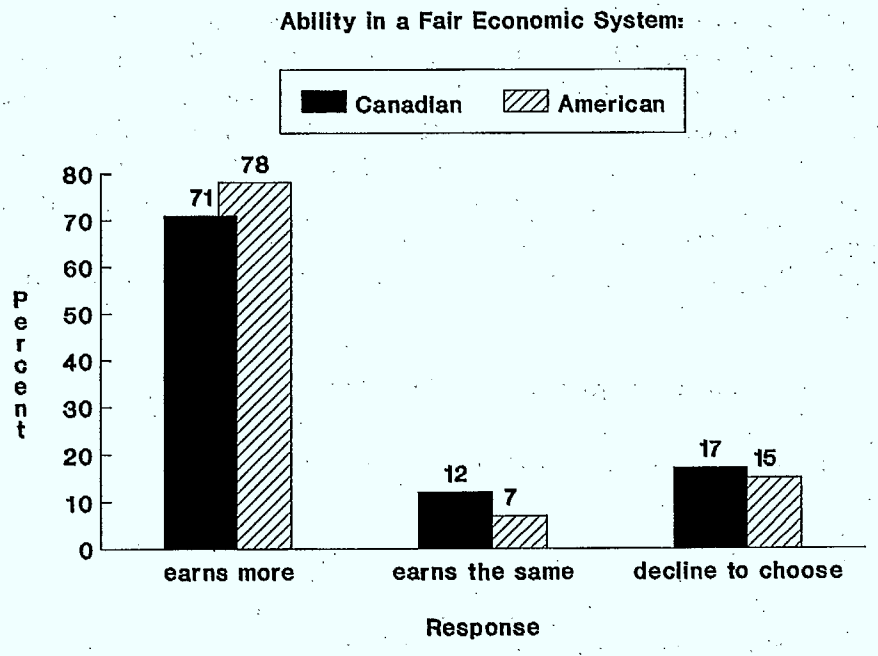


Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and 1986 Bay Area Survey - Sniderman and Piazza.

As were the Canadian data in this instance, the American data were collected over the telephone. Question wording was identical in both countries. The comparative results are presented in Figure 19. What we see here is that Canadians generally were more likely than Americans in the Bay Area to say that it is "Very important" to be the best at what they do. For their part, the Americans were more likely to say it is "Somewhat important" or "Not important." One should perhaps be careful not make too much of the difference here, because the American data were just from a single region, albeit an economically successful one. Still, Canadians seemed to value achievement at least as highly as the Americans do, and perhaps more so.

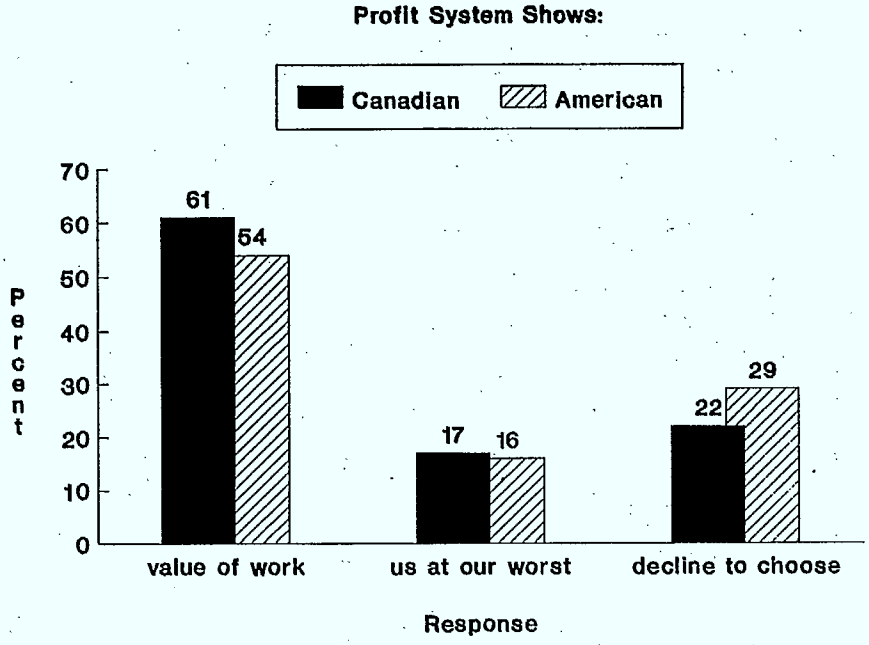
The next comparison is on the question asking whether in a fair economic system those with greater ability should earn more. In both countries the question was included in a mailback survey and the wording is as it appears in section 3.1 above. The American percentages in this instance are drawn from McClosky and Zaller's work and calculated upon a sample size of 938. As can be seen in Figure 20, the overall pattern of response in the two nations is very similar indeed. There is a slight difference, with Americans a bit more likely to say that ability should be rewarded, but the difference is very small considering the overall distribution of results.

Figure 20



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

Figure 21

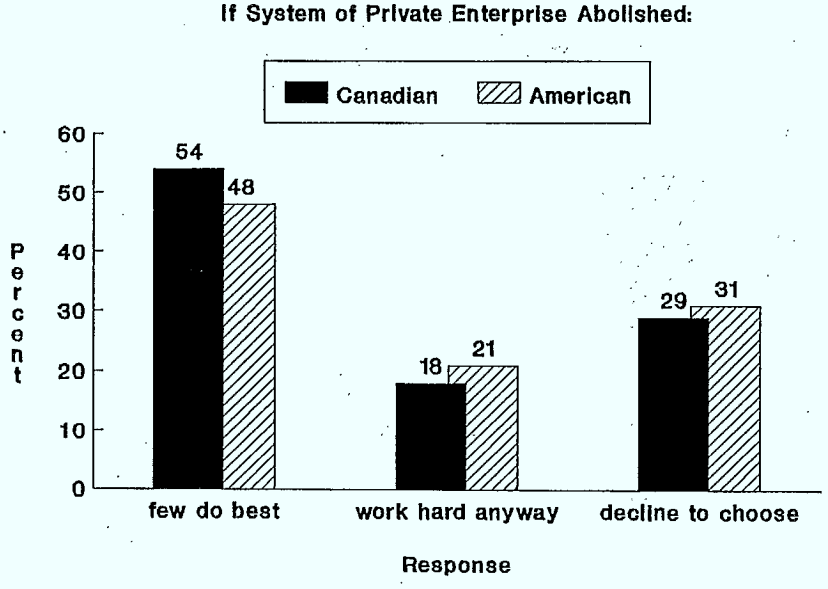


Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

An equally modest difference, only this time in the opposite direction, appears in Figure 21. It presents the comparative Canadian-American results on the question discussed earlier about the profit system teaching the value of hard work and personal achievement. The American data are again drawn from the same McClosky and Zaller sample mentioned just above. Again the differences are small and one would be hard pressed to argue any major difference across the countries here, except perhaps for the fact that the Americans were more likely to decline to choose one of the substantive options. One could also note that the National Election Study in Canada repeated this same question in 1988 and found that even more Canadians — 65 percent — put themselves in the "value of hard work" column; but this is simply diddling with sampling errors and ignoring the overall similarity of responses in the two countries.

Figure 22 compares Canadians and Americans on their ideas about what would happen if the system of private enterprise were abolished. The Canadian data are from the National Election Study; the American from McClosky and Zaller (N = 938). On this item, the Canadians were slightly more likely than the Americans to foresee negative consequences resulting from ending the private enterprise system. Fifty-four percent said that very few people would still try to do their best. Americans were very slightly more likely to envision a positive outcome. But these small differences are not the obvious story here; it is the similarities. Both Canadians and Americans were likely to see a negative outcome if the private enterprise system were somehow abolished. It is this basic similarity that the data reveal and not much of a difference.

Figure 22

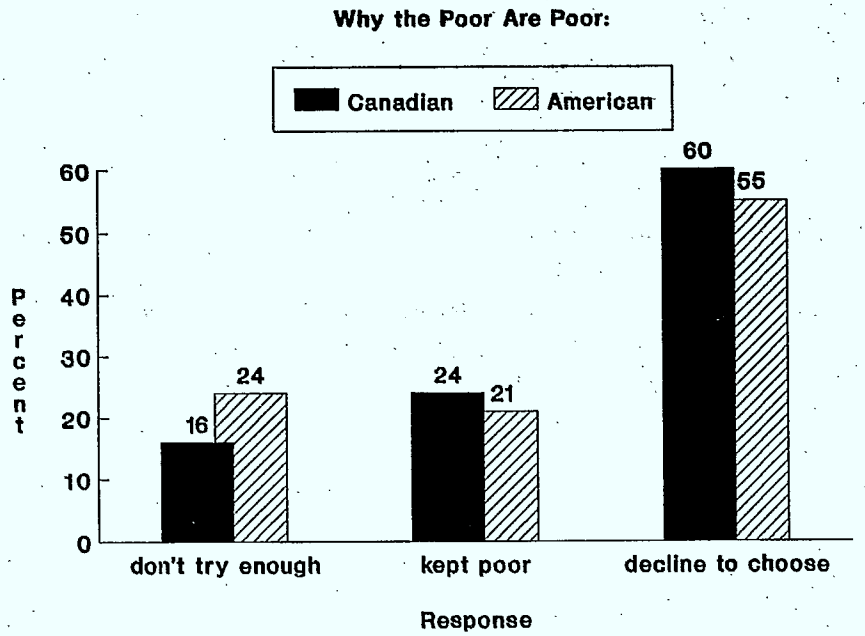


Based on data from 1988 Canadian National Election Study and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*.

Taken together, the four comparisons presented thus far suggest that when it comes to valuing excellence, rewarding ability and the benefits of the profit system, Canadians and Americans are not very different after all. Of course, we have at our disposal only a limited number of items with which to make such comparisons. There are a great many aspects of our value systems on which no comparative data are available, but where they are available, what differences we see are not all that big and they are not systematic differences in the sense that on something like support for the merit principle the citizens of one nation invariably scored higher than those in the other.

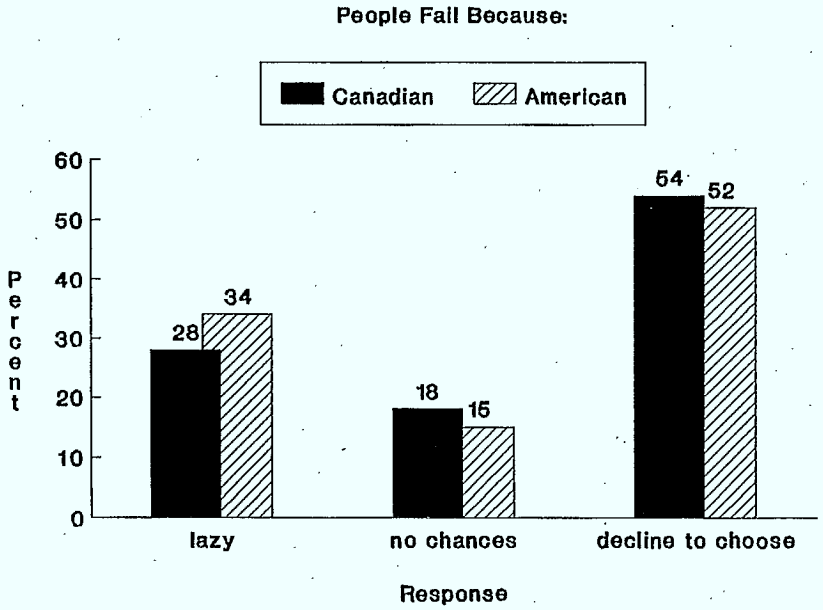
In fact, it is the marked similarities in the two nations that stand out. Take for example the findings reported in section 3.1.2 above concerning the asymmetrical way in which Canadians apply the merit principle in making judgments regarding economic success and failure. The two questions which brought this anomaly to light are both drawn from McClosky and Zaller's work, and thus American data on these same questions are available for comparative analysis. The comparisons are made in Figures 23 and 24. The American percentages are reckoned on a national sample in which the N = 938. The Canadian data in the first instance are from the Charter Project and in the second from the National Election Study. In both Figures 23 and 24, the single most obvious thing is that both Canadians and American decline to choose either of the substantive options on these two questions. We know, of course, from Figure 20 that both populations endorse the merit principle in terms of rewarding ability and effort. But what we see depicted here in the two right-hand columns

Figure 23



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

Figure 24

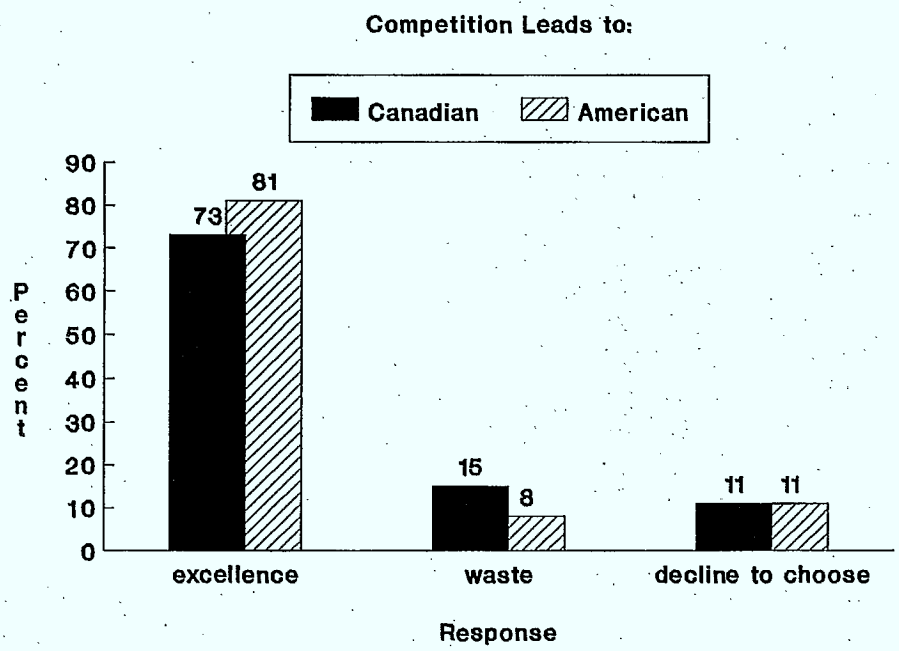


Based on data from 1988 Canadian National Election Study and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*.

of Figures 23 and 24 is that Americans are just as reluctant to place blame for economic failure on the individual as Canadians are. The point is, of course, that Americans are not appreciably different from Canadians in their application of the merit principle. Just as is the case among Canadians, the Americans are quite clear in identifying the source of success in individual ability and effort and, just as we do, they hesitate to think in these same terms when contemplating the sources of economic failure.

Strong parallels also turn up on questions pertaining to the value of competition and its benefits. Figure 25 again relies upon data from the Charter Project for Canadian data and McClosky and Zaller on the American side. It shows us that both Canadians and Americans are overwhelmingly impressed with the benefits of competition, with very few people in either country keying in on some of its possible negative consequences. Of course, some analysts in looking at these data might choose to focus their attention on the seven- or eight-percentage-point difference between Americans and Canadians that is depicted here, particularly if they have a theory about the differences between the two countries in this regard. To do so, however, is to mistake a minor difference for the major finding here. Looking at the overall distribution of responses to this question in the two countries, the general pattern of emphasizing the benefits of competition in the values of both peoples is immediately evident.

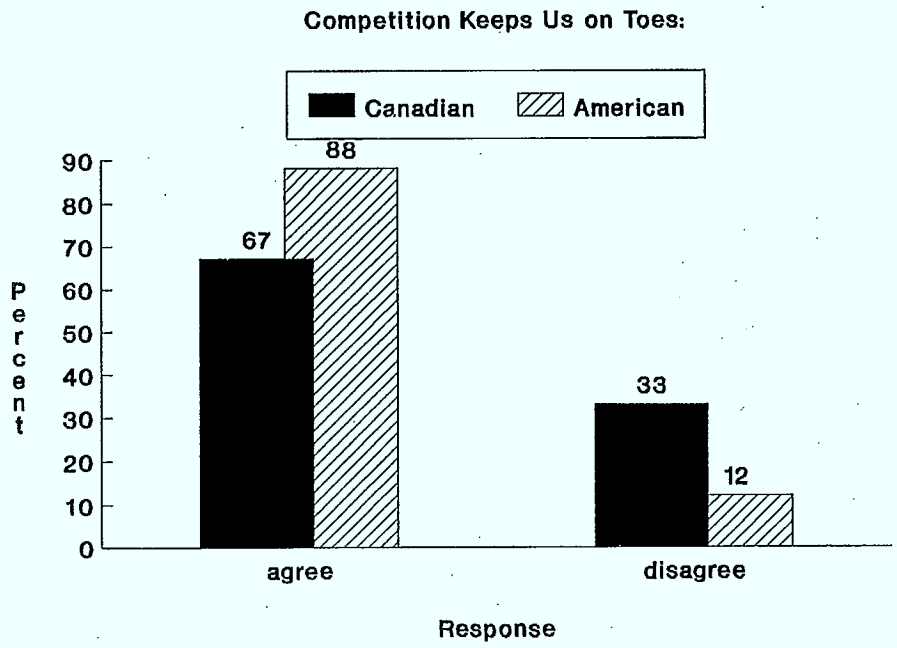
Figure 25



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

The next comparison, presented in Figure 26, provides us with an interesting illustration of where something that can appear to be a bit of evidence of a very sizable cultural divide turns out, on close inspection, not to be what it first seems to be. The data on the Canadian side are from the Charter Project; those on the United States are reported in McClosky and Zaller. The question was the same in each instance and asked whether having to compete with others keeps people on their toes. At first glance, the difference between Americans and Canadians appears to be quite substantial — something on the order of 24 percentage points. The comparison here is quite bogus, however. A careful reading of McClosky and Zaller's footnotes reveals that while most of the data reported in their book are comparatively recent, the percentages reported for this item are based upon a survey of 1 148 people conducted over 30 years ago, in 1958! So much has changed in both Canada and the United States since 1958 that any comparison of Canadian values as measured in 1987 with American values as measured in 1958 does not make a lot of sense. Two final notes on this item: first, if we consider only those respondents in the Charter Project data set who were 18 years or older in 1958, their percentages on this question look substantially more like what Americans looked like on this question in 1958; and second, the age of the question itself perhaps accounts for its sexist tone.

Figure 26

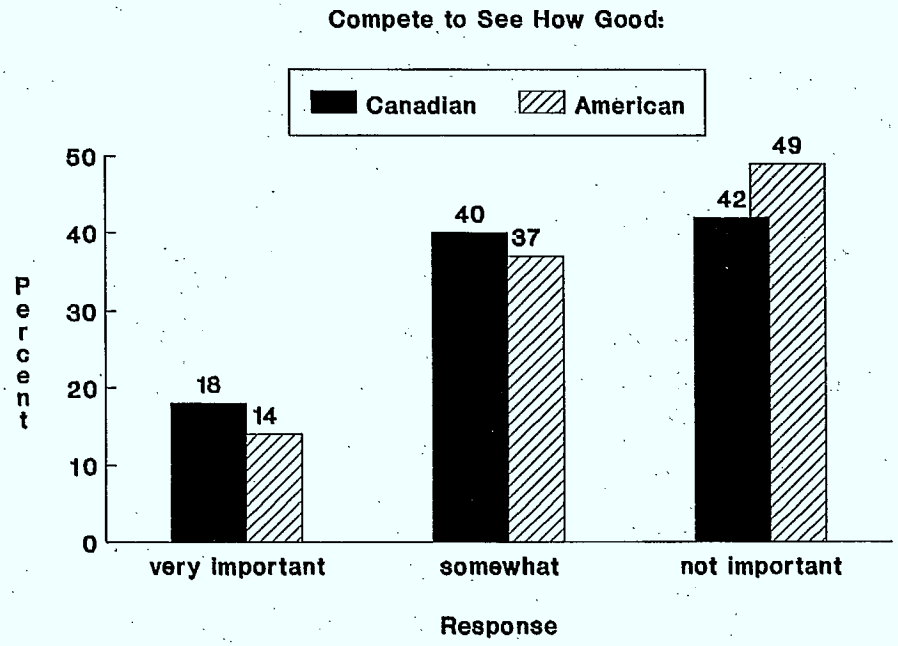


Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

Canadian-American differences in the value they place on competition are not very substantial. Americans even seem to draw much the same line on the usefulness of competition as a device for assessing one's own merit as we saw evidenced in Canada (see section 3.3.1). The same question that proves to be revealing in the Canadian case was also asked in the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area study mentioned earlier. Figure 27 offers the comparative perspective on the question of how Americans and Canadians answered the query about how important it is for them to compete with others to see how good they are. The similarities across the two populations are much more evident than the small difference between them.

The final set of Canadian-American comparisons here comprises the questions about the unconstrained pursuit of profit and government regulation of businesses discussed in 3.1.4. The Canadian results for the first item are drawn from the National Election Study, and for the second from the Charter Project. In each case, McClosky and Zaller are the source of the American data with percentages calculated on 1993 cases. The comparisons are made in Figures 28 and 29.

Figure 27

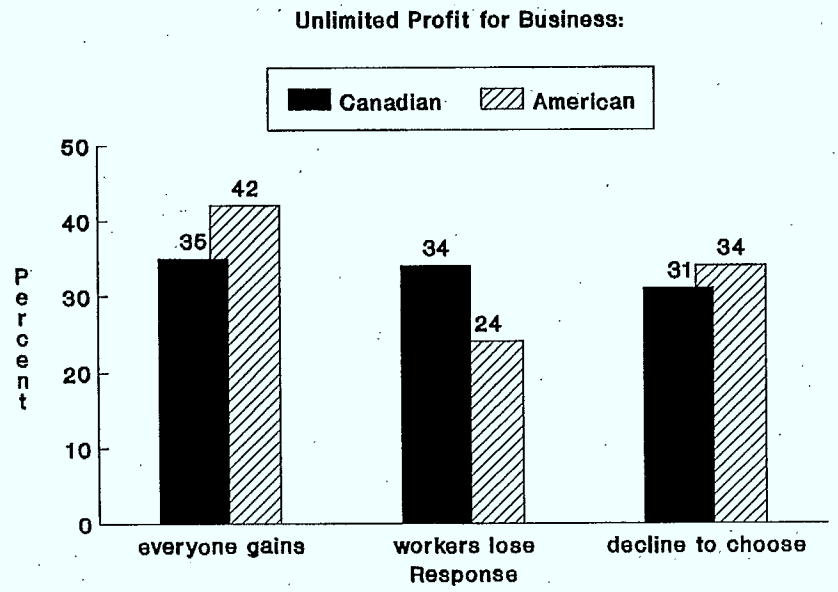


Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*.

Opinion is sharply divided in both countries on both of these questions. On the first, the Americans are a bit more optimistic regarding the results of purely pursuing profit, but not by very much. On the second, Canadians and Americans both are more likely to see regulation as necessary than as harmful, though interestingly, the Americans seem to be a bit more supportive of regulation than the Canadians. While there may be some differences between the two countries here, they are not consistent across countries. The Americans would seem to be more in favour both of pure profit seeking *and* of government regulation. There may be some other way to make sense of these findings, but the overall patterns of response in each country seem to indicate a fair of degree of ambivalence regarding competition and unbridled entrepreneurial activity on the part of business both in Canada and the United States. The similarities seem to be more striking than the differences, once again.

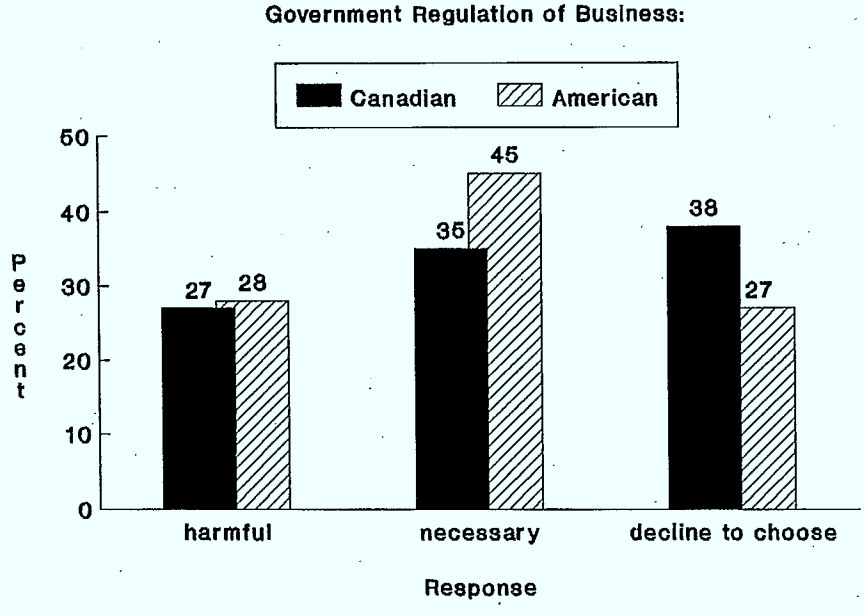
The old myths about Canadian and American cultural differences in the value placed upon achievement, merit, competition and free enterprise simply cannot be sustained based upon what we have seen here. A close look at the available data comparing the values of Canadians and Americans on issues turns up no real differences on any dimension relating to economic life.

Figure 28



Based on data from 1988 Canadian National Election Stury and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

Figure 29



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project and McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos.*

3.3 Major Demographic Factors

To a very substantial degree, the values of excellence, rewarding merit, work for profit and competition penetrate all aspects of Canadian society. There are a few important demographic differences that should be documented, however. In presenting the findings in this area, it would be immensely time-consuming to work through all the possible between group differences on each of the items for which we have data. Moreover, the exercise would be extremely tedious, for while all the relevant cross-tabulations have been run, not very many important demographic differences have emerged.

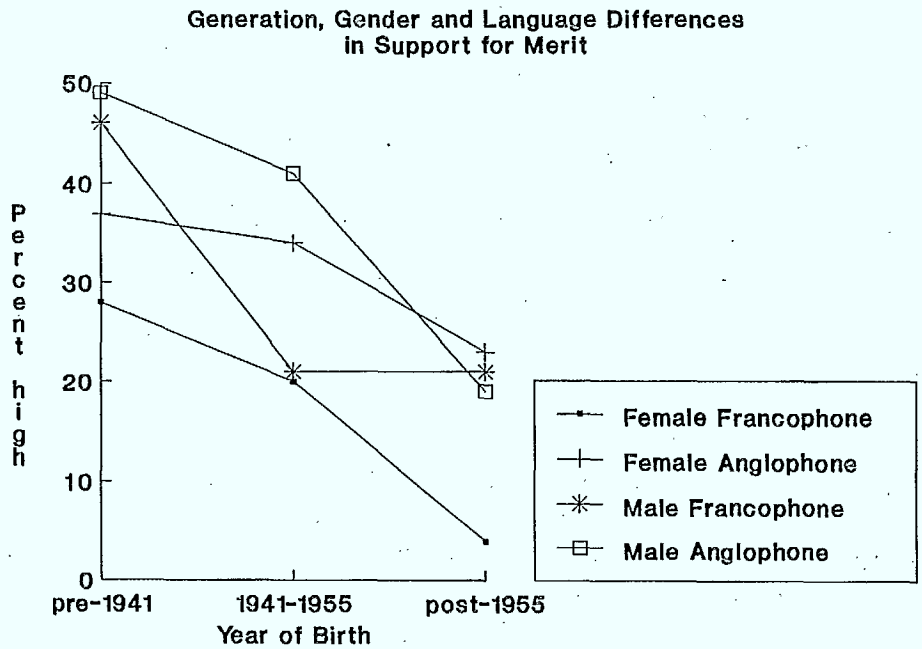
A considerable number of demographic and other variables have been examined for important effects, including age, education, gender, region, income, language group, immigration history, ethnic identification, religion and religiosity, place of birth, size of community lived in and union membership, among others. Only a few of these seem to make very much difference. And when statistical controls are applied, only three variables emerge as having much systematic impact on the values that Canadians hold relevant to our economic life. They are age, gender and language group. This means that that there are no major differences in many areas where some think may think there should be differences. Take for example the instance of union membership. For a whole variety of reasons, some people may think that union members are less likely to value competition and achievement through merit. As it turns out, union members are not all that different from non-members in this regard. Or to take another example, that of immigrants, whatever people may assume to be the case, immigrants are not very different from those who were born in Canada, at least on the value questions set out here.

In order to present the findings on demographic differences, a number of simplifications were made. Rather than working through all the questions covered in the previous sections once more, two summary indicators of basic values were constructed using conventional social scientific techniques. The first of these was called "merit" and the second "competition." A respondent's score on each of these two indexes consists of the simple unweighted sum of his or her responses to the items used in the index. The resulting distribution of scores was trichotomized for purposes of presentation. The items employed in constructing the indexes are presented in the Appendix. In analysing the demographic data using these indexes, multiple regression equations were calculated using each of the demographic variables mentioned above as predictors of scores on each index to confirm that the three demographic variables identified on the basis of cross-tabulations using the single items again emerged as the most important predictor variables. Log-linear analyses were also conducted to identify important interactions among the variables. None was uncovered, with the exception of the one described below.

One final simplification made for the purposes of presentation was that year of birth has been trichotomized to simplify the graphics. The depiction of the findings presented in the figures was verified for accuracy by calculating regression equations using the uncollapsed variables in each instance. Only slight variations were detected, none of them serious. Figures 30 and 31 summarize the major findings.

Figure 30 shows support for the value of merit in Canada broken down by year of birth, language group and gender. The overall trend is immediately obvious. Support for the value of merit is declining across the generations for all four groups. Young people are substantially less likely than their elders to place a high value on the merit principle. While it is, of course, possible that attitudes and values among younger people will change as they age, this finding of less support for the merit principle among the younger generations is consistent with the work of Ronald Inglehart, who has documented what he has called the decline of materialist values in Western democracies (1977; 1990). On this view, changes in values such as that we observe here regarding the merit principle are not simply the fleeting values of young people, which will change markedly as they advance in age. They are more enduring changes indicative of a coming of age in an era quite different from that of previous generations. Which of these explanations is more accurate is difficult to say, though both probably contain an element of truth. In any case, neither explanation alone accounts for the full pattern of differences which appear in Figure 30.

Figure 30



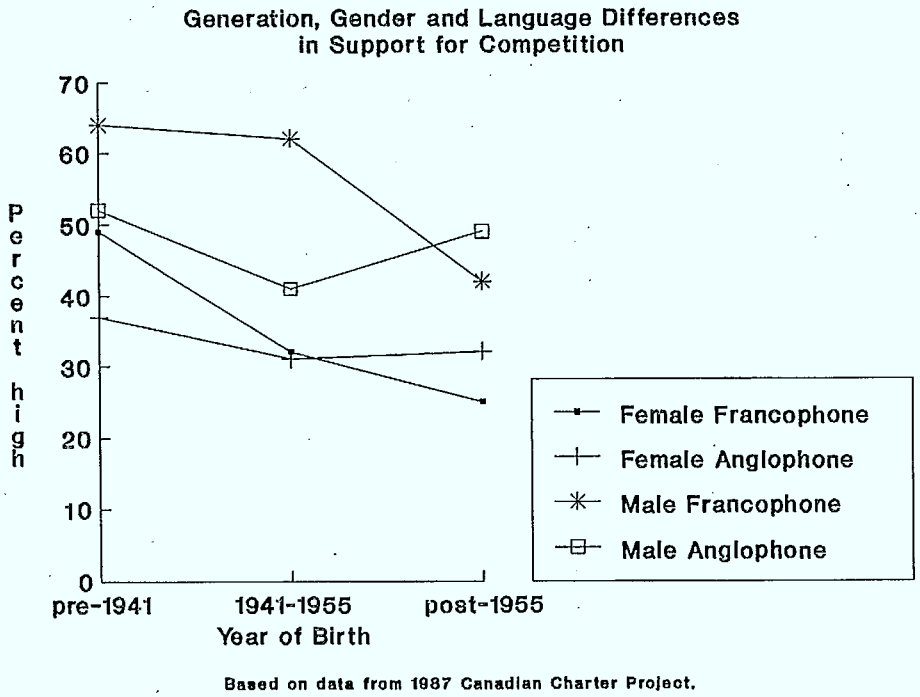
Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

Against the general pattern of decline in support for the value of merit, there are important differences between men and women and between Francophones and Anglophones. Moreover, there is an important interaction among gender and language group such that support for merit declines across generational groups most among Francophone women and least among their Anglophone counterparts. These observations are confirmed, it should be mentioned, using regressions with the full range of values on both the merit and year-of-birth measures. Thus the slope calculated for Anglophone women is —0.143, while that for Francophone women is —0.343. The comparative figures for men are —0.167 for Anglophones and —0.190 for Francophones. The overall product of these different rates of decline, interestingly, is a marked convergence among Anglophone women and Anglophone and Francophone men in the younger generation. Francophone women born after 1955, however, stand out in that they are the group least likely to value merit highly. This is true across all three age groups depicted in Figure 30, but it is particularly marked among the youngest cohort of Francophone women.

Similar findings emerge in examining changes in competitive value orientations across the generations. Figure 31 depicts the percentage of respondents in each of the four groupings that score high on the competition index, once more across the same three generations. In this instance, we note less of a clear pattern of overall decrease in competitive value orientations for each of the three groups. Still, the slopes of the lines calculated using the full range of values on the competition index and year-of-birth variable regression equation are all negative: —0.050 for Anglophone men; —0.126 for Anglophone women; —0.161 for Francophone men; and —0.248 for Francophone women. In more prosaic terms, these results tell us that Anglophone men show relatively less decline in their levels of competitiveness over time. Anglophone women also show relatively little decline over the generations in the extent to which they value competition. More marked changes are evident among the Francophone respondents, particularly among women. Among Francophone women, generational differences in the value placed on competition are by far the sharpest. And in the cohort of Francophone women born after 1955, we find the very lowest levels of competitive value orientation that occur in any of the groups discussed here.

These findings add to what we found earlier regarding merit. In this case, there is also a general decline in the traditional high value placed upon competition as we move across the generations. For all four groups, those in the younger generations are less likely to score as highly competitive in their values as are their elders. The pattern is less clear than we observed in the case of the merit principle, particularly among Anglophones, but it shows up all the same. Moreover, we find here a gender difference, with men valuing competition more highly than women.

Figure 31



Based on data from 1987 Canadian Charter Project.

All these factors — overall generational decline in the value placed on competition, language group and gender differences — combine in the case of Francophone women to produce exceptionally low levels of support for the values of merit and competition. Consequently, as was the case with the merit principle, young Francophone women place much less value on competition than anyone else.

4. Summary

Three major findings are reported in this study. The first is that Canadians greatly value achievement, believe in rewarding merit and welcome the benefits of competition. This does not mean that Canadians are either unanimous in their support for these values nor that they are always rigorous in acting upon them or applying them. It does mean, though, that it would be a mistake to characterize Canadians and their culture as somehow lacking the basic value orientations necessary to meet the economic challenges of an increasingly competitive world marketplace.

The second major finding of this study corroborates the first. When we view Canadian culture in comparison with that of the United States on questions of basic outlook regarding economic life, Canadians compare rather favourably in the emphasis they place upon excellence, merit and competition. This finding underscores the fact that the challenge facing Canada in competing in a global economy is not to change or reform our basic value orientations, but rather to devise new ways to draw upon the strengths of our existing culture and to enhance its strongest elements.

The third major finding of this study is that the high value that Canadians place upon the values of merit and competition enjoy relatively widespread support across most demographic categories. Nevertheless, there are some important exceptions to this pattern that indicate the need for immediate attention. First of all, there are generational differences in basic value orientations that signal major changes on the horizon in basic outlook on questions of merit and competition. Secondly, young Francophone women appear to place a particularly low value on merit and competition. These findings may suggest targeting strategies for programs designed to enhance competitiveness generally.

In closing, it is essential to remark on two obvious shortcomings in this study, both due to the limitations of the data at hand. The first is that the data on Canadian political culture discussed here were not collected with a study of competition and entrepreneurship in mind. Hence the range of questions at our disposal is limited. Even so, a consistent picture emerges from the data on these aspects of Canadian culture. Canadians endorse the essential values of an entrepreneurial culture. They believe in the pursuit of excellence and believe it should be rewarded. Hard work is also highly valued and they believe that competition enhances performance and that risk taking is an essential aspect of modern life.

The second shortcoming is that we do not have any data on those directly involved in business. In the samples of the general population used for this study, only a handful of respondents reported that they were self-employed, so detailed analysis of this segment of the population is not feasible using a cross-sectional study of the population at large. Moreover, the special samples of the Charter Project did not include entrepreneurs. Accordingly, we cannot assess the extent to which the attitudes and values of among those in business may differ or coincide with those of the general population.

Annex

This annex contains the wordings for the questions used in constructing the measures of support for merit and competition. All questions are from the 1987 Charter of Rights Project (Institute for Social Research, 1989).

Merit

In a fair economic system:

- □ 1 all people should earn about the same.
- □ 2 people with more ability should earn higher salaries.
- □ 3 Neither
- □ 4 Undecided

Getting ahead in the world is mostly a matter of:

- □ 1 ability and hard work.
- □ 2 getting the breaks.
- □ 3 Neither
- □ 4 Undecided

People who have made a lot of money:

- □ 1 have usually done so at the expense of other people.
- □ 2 are proof of what you get if you are willing to work and take advantage of the opportunities all of us have.
- □ 3 Neither
- □ 4 Undecided

The profit system:

- □ 1 brings out the worst in human nature.
- □ 2 usually teaches people the value of hard work and personal achievement.
- □ 3 Neither
- □ 4 Undecided

Annex (continued)

The poor are poor because:

- ☐ 1 the wealthy and powerful keep them poor.
- ☐ 2 they don't try hard enough to get ahead.
- ☐ 3 Neither
- ☐ 4 Undecided

Competition

Competition, whether in school, work or business:

- ☐ 1 leads to better performance and a desire for excellence.
- ☐ 2 is often wasteful and destructive.
- ☐ 3 Neither
- ☐ 4 Undecided

It is having to compete with others that keeps a person on his toes:

- ☐ 1 Mainly agree
- ☐ 2 Mainly disagree
- ☐ 3 No opinion

How important is it to compete against others to see how good you are?

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