

Executive Summary

A series of 14 focus groups were undertaken, two in each of seven centers across Canada, including Toronto, Oshawa, Laval, Halifax, Drummondville, Vancouver and Saskatoon. All groups were undertaken between November 14th and November 20th, 2006. One group in each center comprised participants who were between the ages of 18 and 35 years, the second comprised those aged 36 years and older. Apart from the age segmentation, participants were recruited to reflect a mix of educational attainment, household income levels and occupations. To the extent possible, groups comprised a 50/50 split of men and women. Representatives of the Canadian Armed Forces were specifically excluded from participation in the focus groups.

Readers of this report should note that the findings from qualitative research are directional in nature. As they do not represent the views of a statistically significant portion of the Canadian population, the findings cannot be said to be representative of the broader population or of the populations of those centers in which the groups were conducted. However, the findings do yield significant insight with regard to the issues and considerations that underpin public views on Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. In this respect, the findings are particularly illuminating and offer guidance to policy makers and communicators alike on the ebb and flow of public opinion on this issue.

A. Summary of Findings

The issue of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan represents a volatile public opinion pressure point and a key point of vulnerability for the Government of Canada.

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is increasingly a point of concern and anxiety for many. Participants' comments suggested the state of the mission, perceptions of its likely success or failure and the continuing risks to Canadian soldiers are a grave preoccupation. This heightened concern represents a fundamental shift in the broader public agenda. Rarely, and certainly not in recent memory, has Canadian foreign affairs or international policy occupied a place of prominence among those national issues or challenges identified as key top-of-mind concerns. Such preoccupations have for the better part of the last decade or more typically focused on health care, education, the economy/jobs or the environment. And, while most national polls now still show health care and the environment among the top concerns of most Canadians, as recently as July 2006, *The Strategic Counsel* noted just under one-in-ten Canadians (7%) identifying terrorism and issues related to Afghanistan as the most important issue facing Canada.