

The Size of Government in Canada in 2019

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Summary

- This bulletin measures the size of government in Canada, by province, based on total government spending as a share of the economy between 2007 and 2019.
- The size of government (relative to the economy) is important because research shows it has an effect on economic growth and social progress.
- For Canada as a whole, government represented 40.4 percent of the economy in 2019, ranging from a high of 60.2 percent in Nova Scotia to a low of 29.7 percent in Alberta.
- The Maritime provinces have the largest size of government in Canada (as a share of the economy), ranging from 57.4 to 60.2 percent, while the three western-most provinces have the smallest, ranging from 29.7 to 37.2 percent of the economy.
- Increases in the size of government occurred in eight of ten provinces between 2007 and 2019.
- For Canada as a whole, the size of government as a share of the economy increased by 3.0 percentage points between 2007 and 2019.
- The largest percentage point increases in the size of government between 2007 and 2019 were in Alberta (7.3 percentage points), followed by Newfoundland & Labrador (5.5), New Brunswick (4.6), and Nova Scotia (3.3 percentage points).

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Introduction

To what degree are the resources of an economy controlled by government? In Canada, a large share of our overall resources is taxed and later spent by various governments at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. The share of overall economic activity directed or controlled by government has important implications for economic freedom, growth, and standards of living, among others.

The size of government in Canada increased enormously during the COVID-19 pandemic. The degree to which this increase is temporary—or permanent—remains to be seen. This bulletin focuses on a different question: what was the size of government in Canada before the pandemic?

Data from 2019 provide the answer. This period does not capture the significant spike in spending that began in the spring of 2020 as the pandemic took hold. Given these anomalies in the 2020 data, we use data from 2019 here to provide a full picture of the size of government in Canada in 2019, this bulletin incorporates total government spending across all levels of government. We examine individual provincial spending levels and we look at what has changed since 2007, i.e., the period before the last recession. We conclude with data on the distribution of government spending (how government spends) as well as changes in distribution since 2007.

Size of government in Canada as a share of the economy (GDP)

One way to measure the size of government is to calculate total consolidated government spending as a share of the economy (GDP). Total consolidated government spending relies on

Statistics Canada data¹ on spending by government at all levels, including municipal, provincial, and federal. Further, it includes government spending across all categories, namely, spending on goods and services and transfer payments, as well as capital transfers and subsidies. This total spending number is then compared to the size of a given economy, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). The result is a measure of the size of government which is consistent across jurisdictions and can be used to compare provinces and measure the country as a whole.

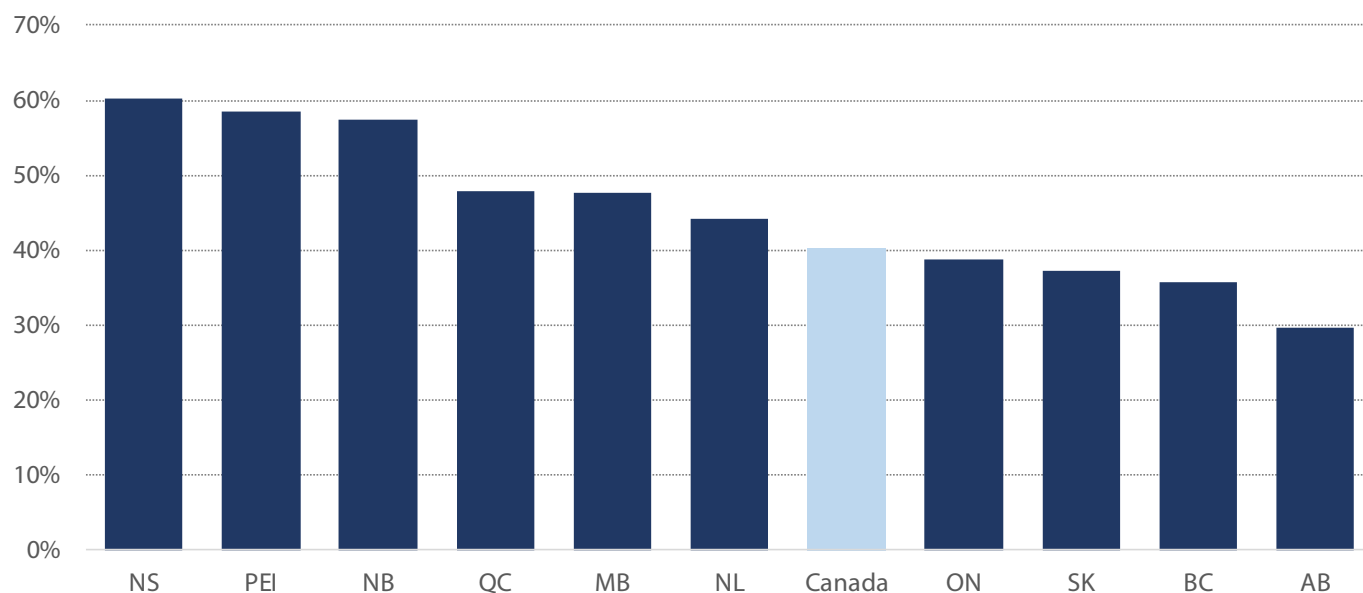
Figure 1 displays data on the size of government in Canada in 2019 for each province² and for Canada as a whole. This includes all levels of government spending adjusting for transfers between governments. The data reveal a wide range in the size of governments across the country. They represent a low of 29.7 percent of the economy in Alberta to a high of 60.2 percent of the economy in Nova Scotia. The measure for Canada shows that government represented 40.4 percent of the overall economy in 2019.

¹ For the purposes of this study, we focus on government sector spending as the primary measure of the size of government. While this stands as a good measure, it should be noted that the effective economic influence of government is larger than simply what the government spends. Additional ways by which governments can exert this influence include tax expenditures and regulatory costs. One study found that tax expenditures in Canada result in the “true” size of government being about 25 percent higher than is generally reported (Sheikh, 2014).

² Spending in each province means total consolidated government spending, i.e., the data for each province is spending at all levels of government, not simply provincial spending.

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Figure 1: Total Consolidated Government Spending as a Percentage of GDP, 2019



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021b, 2021c; calculations by authors.

The data reveal some geographic differences. In Canada, the size of government is largest in the three Maritime provinces, with Nova Scotia ranking highest at 60.2 percent of the economy, Prince Edward Island second at 58.5 percent, and New Brunswick third at 57.4 percent. The three western-most provinces have the lowest size of government as a share of the economy. Alberta had the smallest share of government spending relative to the economy at 29.7 percent, followed by British Columbia at 35.7 percent, and Saskatchewan third at 37.2 percent. It's worth noting the material gap between Alberta as the province with the smallest share of government as a proportion of the economy and second-place British Columbia.³

³ While not a central focus of this bulletin, there is a large body of research investigating the relationship

To better understand how the size of government has changed over time, table 1 presents

between the size of government and the economy, how the economy performs, and effects on social progress. One analysis conducted by economist Livio Di Matteo in 2013, for example, found the growth-optimizing level of government to be 26 percent, concluding that “few additional benefits” occur once the government sector has reached 30 to 35 percent of GDP. Interested readers can consult Di Matteo (2013) for details of that study, Tanzi and Schuknecht (1998) for further analysis on the relationship between the size of government and economic and social performance, and Whalen and Gliberman (2020) for a summary of research in this area. Further research has shown that Canada's economic performance in the latest pre-recession period was the weakest of the past five recessions (Clemens, Palacios, and Veldhuis, 2021). Given what we know of the relationship between economic growth and the size of government, this is worth noting.

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Table 1: Total Consolidated Government Spending as a Percentage of GDP, 2007 to 2019

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Canada	37.4%	37.9%	42.0%	41.3%	40.4%	39.9%	39.3%	38.2%	39.6%	40.3%	39.8%	40.0%	40.4%
NL	38.7%	36.0%	50.4%	44.7%	40.5%	43.2%	40.1%	40.1%	45.4%	46.4%	44.2%	44.4%	44.1%
PEI	61.6%	63.8%	65.7%	63.8%	62.8%	61.6%	60.5%	59.1%	58.5%	57.3%	57.4%	58.4%	58.5%
NS	56.9%	57.5%	60.4%	59.2%	60.8%	62.6%	61.6%	60.9%	61.0%	60.6%	60.4%	60.9%	60.2%
NB	52.7%	55.2%	57.2%	56.5%	55.4%	55.9%	56.7%	56.0%	56.2%	56.7%	56.6%	56.7%	57.4%
QC	47.4%	48.1%	49.5%	49.0%	48.9%	48.9%	49.0%	48.7%	48.4%	48.5%	48.2%	47.8%	47.8%
ON	35.8%	37.7%	41.0%	41.0%	40.8%	39.6%	39.7%	38.6%	38.2%	37.8%	38.0%	38.7%	38.8%
MB	45.0%	45.7%	48.9%	47.6%	48.6%	46.7%	46.1%	45.4%	45.9%	46.7%	46.0%	46.4%	47.7%
SK	37.7%	31.0%	36.5%	37.0%	33.0%	32.0%	29.9%	30.7%	33.6%	36.7%	35.7%	35.4%	37.2%
AB	22.4%	21.9%	27.8%	26.6%	24.8%	24.7%	23.3%	22.0%	27.0%	30.3%	29.3%	28.9%	29.7%
BC	34.8%	36.1%	39.0%	38.4%	37.6%	37.9%	37.6%	36.0%	36.5%	36.0%	35.3%	35.4%	35.7%

Sources: Statistics Canada. 2021b, 2021c; calculations by authors.

data from 2007 to 2019. The year 2007 is the last full year prior to the 2008 recession, while 2019 is the last full year prior to the 2020 recession.

Between 2007 and 2019, the size of government as a share of the economy for Canada as a whole increased by 3.0 percentage points, as detailed in figure 2. The size of government also increased in eight of the 10 provinces during that period, with the largest increase occurring in Alberta, at 7.3 percentage points.

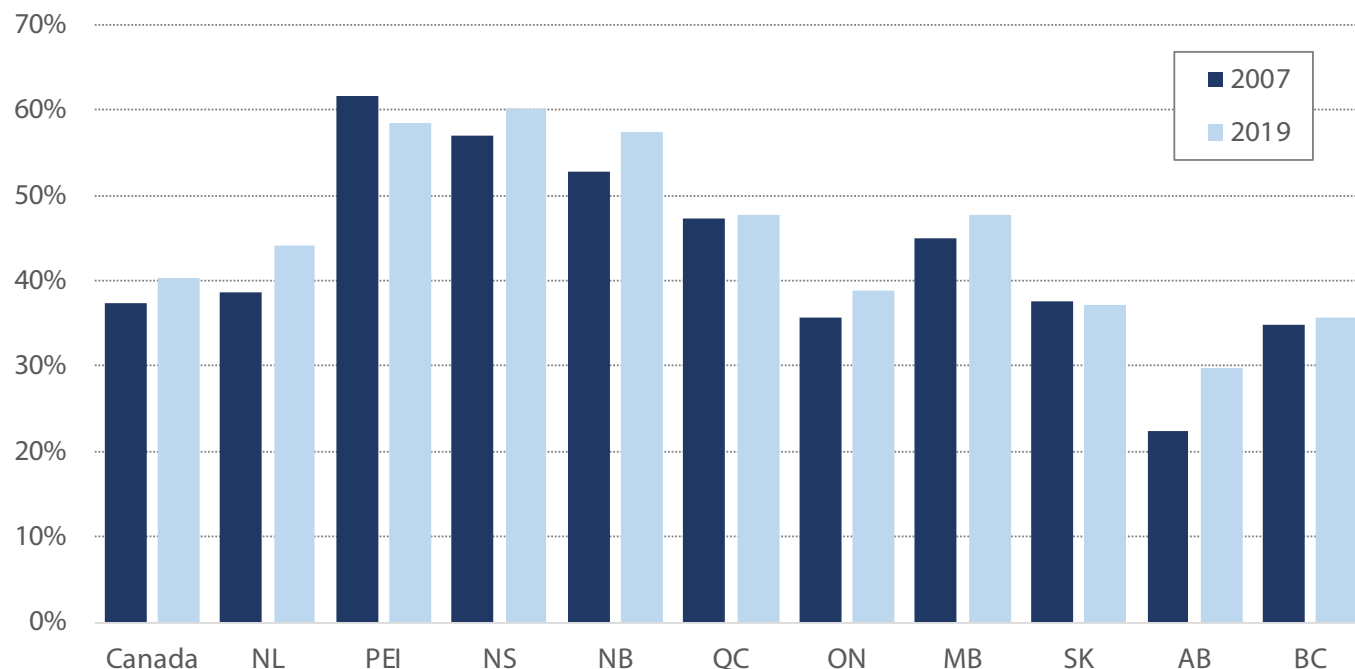
The next largest increases were all in Atlantic Canada: Newfoundland & Labrador at 5.5 percentage points, New Brunswick at 4.6 percentage points, and Nova Scotia at 3.3 percentage points. The only provinces where the size of government decreased were Saskatchewan (by 0.5 percentage points) and Prince Edward Island (by 3.1 percentage points).

A couple of these cases are worth examining in more detail. First, the increase in Alberta's size

of government was substantial compared to other provinces (a rise of 1.9 percentage points more than the province with the next largest increase). Prince Edward Island, on the other hand, recorded the largest decrease at 3.1 percentage points though the province was starting from the position of having the largest size of government in 2007. The decrease appears dramatic, but it only reduced the province's position in 2019 to second highest share of government as a proportion of the economy, still ahead of every province except Nova Scotia. In both cases, while the size of government is a concern, it should be noted that changes in GDP are a contributing factor to that growth. In the five years leading up to 2019, Alberta had the weakest economic growth in Canada (tied with Saskatchewan, at 2.4 percent), while Prince Edward Island experienced the second strongest growth (trailing only British Columbia), at 13.5 percent (Statistics Canada, 2021a). These

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Figure 2: Total Consolidated Government Spending as a Percentage of GDP, 2007 and 2019



Sources: Statistics Canada. 2021b, 2021c; calculations by authors.

changes to the size of provincial economies are one factor contributing to relative changes in the size of government.

Distribution of government spending in Canada

Having looked at the levels and changes observed in the size of government across Canada, we conclude with data on the distribution of government spending by different categories. In other words, we look at how government spends on a yearly basis. The distribution of spending is broken into four categories: goods and services, transfer payments, capital transfers and subsidies, and interest on debt.

Table 2 provides data on the distribution of government spending for Canada as a whole, i.e., the federal government and all provinces and municipalities combined, between 2007 and 2019. The data show that most government spending during this period was on goods and services, ranging from a low of 60.5 percent in 2007 to a high of 62.6 percent in 2014. This is followed by transfer payments, which range from a low of 25.9 percent in 2007 and 2012 to a high of 27.9 percent in 2017. A relatively small share of government spending goes toward capital transfers and subsidies, ranging from 3.1 percent (in several years) to a high of 4.0 percent in 2019. Interest costs on debt range from a high of 10.5 percent in 2007 to a low of 7.1 percent in 2017.

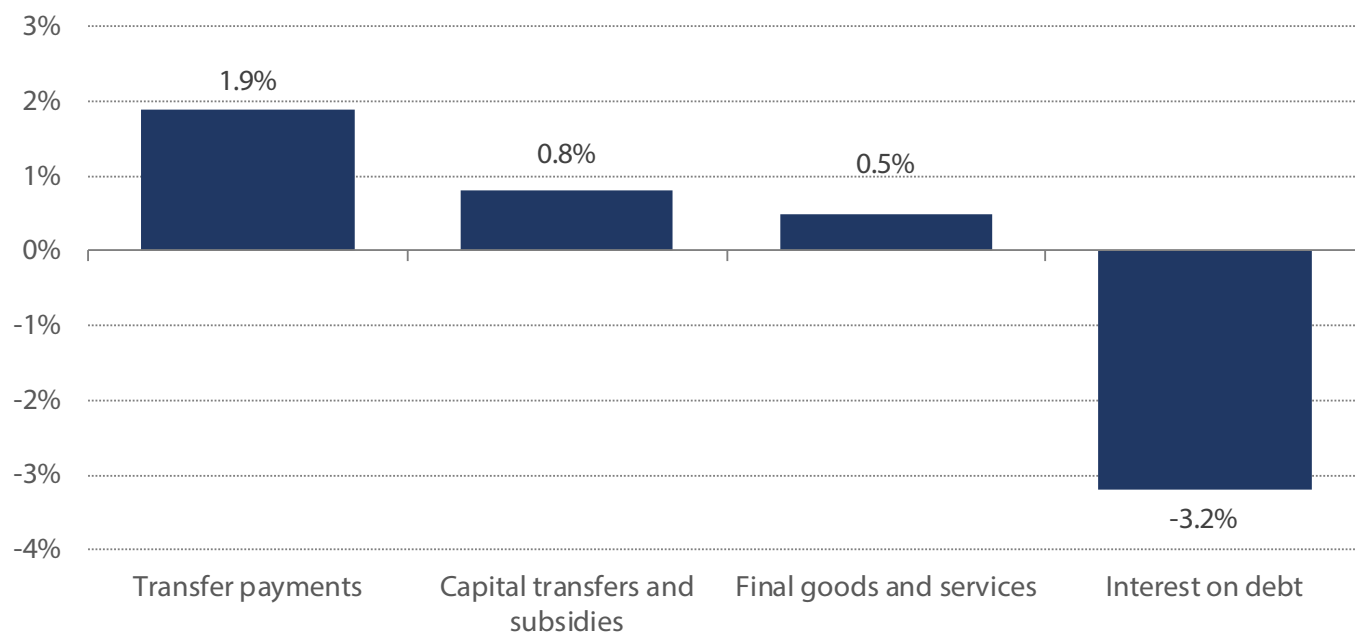
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Table 2: Distribution of Government Expenditures, Canada, 2007 to 2019

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Change
Final goods and services	60.5%	61.1%	61.4%	61.0%	61.5%	62.0%	62.1%	62.6%	62.3%	61.9%	61.6%	61.5%	61.0%	0.5%
Transfer payments	25.9%	26.1%	26.6%	26.7%	26.0%	25.9%	26.3%	26.2%	26.9%	27.5%	27.9%	27.6%	27.7%	1.9%
Capital transfers and subsidies	3.1%	3.1%	3.2%	3.5%	3.7%	3.5%	3.2%	3.1%	3.1%	3.2%	3.4%	3.5%	4.0%	0.8%
Interest on debt	10.5%	9.7%	8.8%	8.7%	8.8%	8.6%	8.4%	8.1%	7.7%	7.4%	7.1%	7.3%	7.3%	-3.2%

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021b; calculations by authors.

Figure 3: Change in Distribution of Government Expenditures, Canada, 2007 to 2019



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2021b; calculations by authors.

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While the share of government spending on these four categories remained relatively stable in the period examined, there are overall changes in the distribution of spending. Figure 3 details the percentage point changes in each category between 2007 and 2019.

The largest compositional increase in government spending (measured as a share of total spending) during this period was transfer payments. Transfer payments increased 1.9 percentage points during the period. This increase is followed by a 0.8 percentage point increase in capital transfers and subsidies, and a 0.5 percentage point increase in goods and services. Growth in these three categories is offset by a decrease in interest costs. Interest costs on government debt decreased 3.2 percentage points during the period.

Overall, the shares of government spending by category in Canada remained relatively stable between 2007 and 2019. For Canada as a whole, the largest proportional increases were for transfer payments, and the decrease was for interest costs on government debt. The appendix

(tables A1 to A4) gives a full accounting of the changes in each year, by category.

Conclusion

Measuring the size of government in Canada is important if we are to build an understanding of the degree to which government directs resources in the economies of the provinces and in Canada as a whole. In this study, we measured the size of government (as defined by total consolidated spending) as a proportion of the size of the various economies and we also looked at the composition of government spending in Canada as a whole.

From the data above, we can see that government spending as a share of the economy has been growing in Canada, even before the pandemic. While government tends to be larger in Canada's eastern provinces and relatively smaller in the west, all but two provinces experienced growth in government spending relative to the size of the economy, meaning that government spending (consolidated) has been growing faster than the overall economy.

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Appendix

This appendix gives a full accounting of the changes for each year, for each province and for Canada as a whole, by category.

Table A1: Total Consolidated Government Spending on Goods and Services as a Percentage of Total Government Spending, 2007-2020

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Canada	60.5%	61.1%	61.4%	61.0%	61.5%	62.0%	62.1%	62.6%	62.3%	61.9%	61.6%	61.5%	61.0%	50.8%
NL	61.1%	60.2%	60.8%	62.2%	62.5%	61.2%	62.1%	62.6%	62.6%	61.6%	61.0%	61.2%	60.6%	53.7%
PEI	60.9%	61.7%	60.7%	61.8%	61.3%	61.4%	61.9%	62.5%	61.8%	60.9%	60.2%	59.6%	59.2%	51.6%
NS	63.7%	64.6%	64.1%	64.4%	64.6%	64.5%	65.0%	65.5%	65.1%	64.9%	64.8%	65.1%	65.1%	57.6%
NB	61.4%	62.2%	62.2%	62.4%	62.1%	62.4%	62.1%	62.4%	61.6%	61.7%	61.6%	62.0%	62.0%	55.5%
QC	54.6%	54.1%	55.0%	55.0%	55.2%	55.2%	55.6%	56.0%	55.7%	55.6%	55.8%	55.7%	55.6%	47.7%
ON	62.4%	63.4%	62.9%	61.9%	62.3%	63.3%	63.0%	63.6%	63.4%	63.1%	62.6%	62.1%	61.3%	50.2%
MB	63.0%	64.6%	65.0%	64.6%	64.5%	66.1%	66.5%	66.7%	65.9%	65.0%	64.9%	64.9%	64.0%	55.9%
SK	60.8%	61.6%	62.7%	61.4%	62.2%	62.6%	64.2%	64.5%	64.9%	63.5%	64.3%	64.1%	63.1%	54.4%
AB	66.4%	67.2%	68.3%	67.9%	70.1%	70.7%	70.5%	71.0%	70.0%	68.9%	67.7%	68.1%	67.2%	53.0%
BC	62.0%	62.7%	63.1%	63.0%	63.0%	63.2%	63.8%	64.0%	63.5%	62.9%	63.0%	62.9%	62.8%	50.9%

Sources: Statistics Canada. 2021b; calculations by authors.

Table A2: Total Consolidated Government Spending on Transfer Payments as a Percentage of Total Government Spending, 2007-2020

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Canada	25.9%	26.1%	26.6%	26.7%	26.0%	25.9%	26.3%	26.2%	26.9%	27.5%	27.9%	27.6%	27.7%	33.4%
NL	25.9%	26.9%	26.5%	25.6%	25.6%	26.5%	26.4%	26.7%	27.5%	29.2%	30.7%	30.5%	30.6%	33.9%
PEI	26.1%	25.6%	26.4%	26.4%	26.5%	27.1%	27.3%	27.7%	28.5%	29.5%	29.7%	29.9%	29.9%	33.5%
NS	24.5%	24.5%	25.6%	25.5%	25.3%	25.8%	25.9%	25.7%	26.5%	27.1%	27.5%	27.2%	27.3%	32.0%
NB	26.5%	26.5%	27.1%	27.0%	27.0%	27.5%	28.2%	28.5%	29.7%	30.4%	30.7%	30.4%	30.5%	33.6%
QC	27.4%	28.8%	29.1%	28.9%	28.3%	28.7%	28.8%	29.0%	29.8%	30.0%	30.0%	29.6%	29.6%	33.4%
ON	25.2%	25.0%	26.3%	26.8%	25.7%	25.0%	25.5%	25.3%	25.8%	26.2%	27.0%	26.6%	26.8%	33.6%
MB	22.2%	22.1%	22.4%	22.5%	21.9%	22.1%	22.3%	22.7%	23.8%	24.7%	25.0%	24.7%	25.3%	30.6%
SK	25.4%	26.5%	25.7%	24.2%	24.3%	25.1%	26.2%	25.7%	26.3%	26.8%	27.2%	27.2%	27.7%	33.1%
AB	22.6%	22.1%	21.9%	22.0%	21.2%	20.6%	21.4%	21.3%	22.4%	24.0%	24.2%	24.1%	24.2%	30.9%
BC	25.4%	25.4%	25.8%	26.0%	25.9%	26.2%	26.1%	26.3%	27.0%	27.9%	28.0%	28.1%	28.2%	35.1%

Sources: Statistics Canada. 2021b; calculations by authors.

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Table A3: Total Consolidated Government Spending on Debt Interest as a Percentage of Total Government Spending, 2007-2020

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Canada	10.5%	9.7%	8.8%	8.7%	8.8%	8.6%	8.4%	8.1%	7.7%	7.4%	7.1%	7.3%	7.3%	5.6%
NL	11.5%	11.2%	10.7%	10.0%	9.4%	9.9%	9.5%	8.6%	8.0%	7.3%	6.4%	6.5%	6.9%	6.1%
PEI	9.2%	8.5%	8.1%	7.5%	7.7%	7.3%	7.3%	7.1%	6.7%	6.2%	5.9%	5.9%	5.7%	4.7%
NS	10.0%	9.3%	8.5%	8.1%	7.9%	7.6%	7.4%	6.9%	6.5%	6.1%	5.8%	5.8%	5.7%	4.6%
NB	10.6%	9.8%	9.2%	9.1%	9.2%	8.6%	8.4%	8.0%	7.5%	7.0%	6.6%	6.6%	6.4%	5.2%
QC	13.1%	12.3%	11.2%	11.5%	11.7%	11.3%	11.2%	10.9%	10.6%	10.2%	9.9%	10.1%	9.9%	7.9%
ON	10.4%	9.6%	8.6%	8.6%	8.7%	8.6%	8.5%	8.2%	7.7%	7.4%	7.1%	7.2%	7.2%	5.3%
MB	11.7%	10.8%	9.6%	9.4%	9.2%	8.9%	8.6%	8.2%	7.9%	8.1%	8.0%	8.4%	8.5%	6.9%
SK	8.9%	8.3%	7.5%	6.7%	6.6%	6.4%	6.1%	5.8%	5.3%	5.0%	5.2%	5.6%	5.8%	4.9%
AB	7.1%	6.4%	5.5%	5.6%	5.7%	5.3%	5.2%	5.1%	4.9%	4.4%	4.5%	5.2%	5.4%	4.2%
BC	9.7%	8.9%	8.1%	8.0%	8.1%	7.5%	7.4%	7.0%	6.7%	6.3%	6.0%	6.1%	5.9%	4.3%

Sources: Statistics Canada. 2021b; calculations by authors.

Table A4: Total Consolidated Government Spending on Capital Transfers and Subsidies as a Percentage of Total Government Spending, 2007-2020

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Canada	3.1%	3.1%	3.2%	3.5%	3.7%	3.5%	3.2%	3.1%	3.1%	3.2%	3.4%	3.5%	4.0%	10.1%
NL	1.5%	1.8%	1.9%	2.2%	2.5%	2.4%	2.1%	2.1%	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	1.7%	1.9%	6.3%
PEI	3.9%	4.3%	4.9%	4.3%	4.5%	4.2%	3.4%	2.7%	2.9%	3.3%	4.2%	4.6%	5.2%	10.2%
NS	1.8%	1.6%	1.8%	2.0%	2.2%	2.1%	1.8%	1.9%	1.8%	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	1.9%	5.7%
NB	1.5%	1.4%	1.5%	1.5%	1.8%	1.5%	1.3%	1.1%	1.1%	0.9%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	5.7%
QC	4.9%	4.7%	4.6%	4.7%	4.8%	4.7%	4.4%	4.2%	4.0%	4.3%	4.3%	4.5%	4.9%	11.0%
ON	2.0%	1.9%	2.2%	2.7%	3.4%	3.1%	3.0%	2.9%	3.0%	3.2%	3.3%	4.1%	4.7%	10.8%
MB	3.2%	2.5%	3.0%	3.5%	4.4%	2.9%	2.6%	2.5%	2.3%	2.2%	2.1%	2.0%	2.1%	6.6%
SK	4.8%	3.6%	4.2%	7.6%	6.9%	5.9%	3.5%	4.0%	3.5%	4.7%	3.3%	3.1%	3.3%	7.6%
AB	3.9%	4.3%	4.3%	4.5%	3.0%	3.4%	2.8%	2.7%	2.8%	2.7%	3.6%	2.6%	3.2%	11.9%
BC	3.0%	3.0%	3.1%	3.0%	3.0%	3.1%	2.7%	2.7%	2.7%	2.9%	3.0%	2.9%	3.1%	9.6%

Sources: Statistics Canada. 2021b; calculations by authors.

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The Size of Government in Canada in 2019



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