

# Confidence in Democracy and the Political System

AN UPDATE ON TRENDS IN PUBLIC OPINION IN  
CANADA

**REPORT**

SEPTEMBER 11, 2019

## Overview

This report examines current levels of public support for democracy, democratic institutions and the political system in Canada and how these have evolved over the past decade. While questions abound about the commitment of publics and politicians to liberal democracy in other countries, public support in Canada generally has either remained stable or is improving. Large majorities are satisfied with how democracy works in Canada and maintain that democracy is better than any other form of government. Most trust elections, and in recent years the

level of trust in elections has been growing. Canadians are becoming more interested in politics, and fewer doubt whether governments are really that interested in what people like them think. Finally, most Canadians have trust in one another. These trends do not undo longer-term ones, several decades in the making, which have seen citizens become less willing to defer to elites. But they do suggest that, as the 2019 federal election campaign gets underway, Canadians can have considerable confidence in themselves as a civic society.

## Background

As the 2019 federal election campaign gets underway, Canadians are readying themselves for a steady onslaught of public opinion polls telling them which parties, leaders and platforms are gaining in popularity, and which are falling behind. As citizens prepare to cast their votes, however, it is worth looking deeper, to take stock of how Canadians feel about their democratic system. If one party loses support, there is another ready to take its place. It's another story altogether if democracy itself is called into question.

Some might assume that this has happened already – that we are living in an era in which trust in democratic leaders and confidence in democratic institutions are on the decline. Certainly, there are ample examples to point to around the world of the emergence of political leaders or movements willing to challenge the norms of liberal democracy. Is Canada really any different?

This report addresses this question by examining the evolution of public support for democracy, democratic institutions and the political system in Canada over the past decade. It draws primarily on the Canadian data from the AmericasBarometer surveys, including the most recent wave conducted in July 2019. This is complemented by data from the Gallup World Poll, which puts Canada in comparative perspective.

An examination of public opinion trends shows that confidence in democracy in Canada is higher than in many other western countries, and is not on the decline. This does not undo the long-term trend, several decades in the making, which has seen citizens become less and less willing to defer to elites – whether they be leaders of political parties, corporations, unions or churches. Over the shorter term, however, confidence in democracy and democratic institutions in Canada has not been eroding.

## Data Sources

This report features data from two sources:

- The *AmericasBarometer* survey, including the 2019 survey which was conducted in Canada by the Environics Institute, in English and French, using an established online panel with a representative sample of 1,508 Canadians (aged 18 and over) between June 27 and July 10, 2019. The sample was weighted by region, age and gender to match the country's population, based on the 2016 Census. These data constitute the Canadian component of the larger AmericasBarometer 2019 survey, which covers 23 countries spanning the western hemisphere.<sup>1</sup>
- The *Gallup World Poll*, which is conducted annually in over 100 countries. This research includes a set of indicators that have been tracked in each country since 2006. Comparisons are drawn between Canada and the results for all 35 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which comprise the most relevant benchmark for Canada. The Canadian survey data were collected by Gallup in August 2018 via telephone with a representative sample of 1,009 Canadians aged 15 and over.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the AmericasBarometer data prior to 2012 were supplied by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, which takes no responsibility for any interpretation of the data.

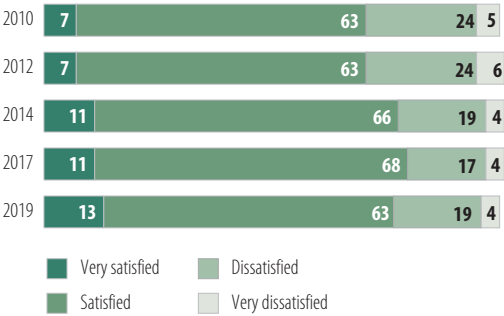
# Support for democracy and the political system

Large majorities of Canadians express support for and satisfaction with democracy in Canada and the country’s political system. Support has held steady or in some cases edged higher over the past decade.

The AmericasBarometer survey includes a series of related questions about support for democracy in Canada.

- Three in four (76%) Canadians are either very satisfied (13%) or satisfied (63%) with **the way democracy works in Canada**, compared to one in four (23%) who are dissatisfied (19%) or very dissatisfied (4%). The level of satisfaction has increased slightly since 2010.
- Similarly, seven in ten (69%) Canadians are either very satisfied (10%) or satisfied (59%) with **the way the political system works in Canada**, compared to 30 percent who are dissatisfied (25%) or very dissatisfied (5%).
- Nine in ten (92%) Canadians say that one **should support the political system of Canada** either a lot (41%) or somewhat (51%) (on a 7-point scale, where 6 or 7 is “a lot,” 3 to 5 is “some,” and 1 or 2 is “not at all”). A similar number (91%) say that they feel **proud of living under the political system of Canada** (39% feel this pride a lot, and 52% feel it somewhat). Strong feelings of support and pride have remained stable since 2010.
- Somewhat fewer Canadians express a strong degree of **respect for the political institutions of Canada** (25%), but many express some respect (61%) and few say that do not respect them (14%). The level of respect for the political institutions of Canada in 2019 is slightly higher than it was a decade earlier.

## Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada 2010 - 2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.36  
*In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada?*

## Canada’s political system: support, pride and respect 2010 - 2019

	ONE SHOULD SUPPORT POLITICAL SYSTEM			PROUD OF LIVING UNDER POLITICAL SYSTEM			RESPECT FOR POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS		
	A lot	Some	Not at all	A lot	Some	Not at all	A lot	Some	Not at all
2010	40	51	9	35	52	12	18	62	20
2012	41	50	8	39	50	11	23	62	15
2014	37	55	8	37	53	11	20	62	18
2017	41	51	7	39	52	9	22	65	13
2019	41	51	8	39	52	10	25	61	14

A lot = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; some = 3-5; not at all = 1 or 2.

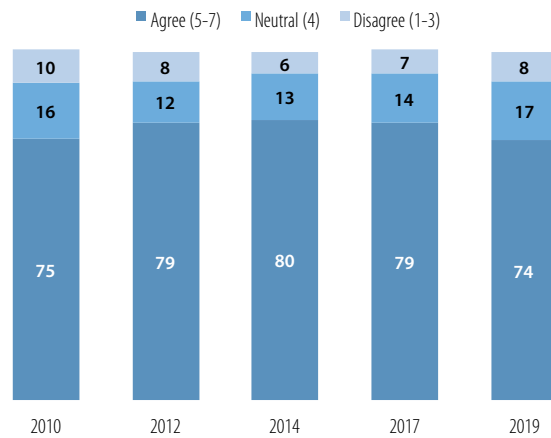
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.30b, e, f  
*To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of Canada? To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of Canada? To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Canada?*

- Three in four Canadians (74%) agree (5 to 7 on a 7-point scale), that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government,” including 52 percent who strongly agree (6 or 7 on the scale). Only eight percent disagree (1 to 3). Since 2012, the level of strong agreement (6 or 7) has declined slightly, as Canadians are more likely to say they somewhat agree (5). But the level of disagreement has remained unchanged. Younger Canadians are less likely than their older counterparts to strongly agree that democracy is better than any other form of government, and more likely to somewhat agree; across all age groups, however, very few disagree.
- When presented with three competing statements about democracy, three in four (75%) Canadians agree with the most positive one, namely that “democracy is preferable to any other form of government.” This compares to 15 percent who agree that “for people like me it doesn’t matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic,” and 10 percent who agree that “under some circumstances an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one.” Over the past decade, there has been no erosion in the proportion that agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government.

## Is democracy better than any other form of government?

2010 - 2019



Agree/disagree (7-point scale):

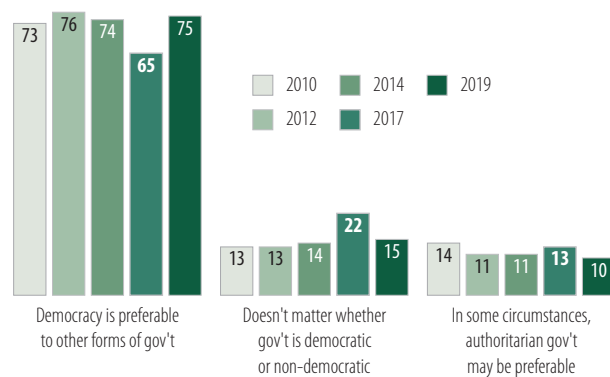
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.34d

*Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government*

## Views on democracy

2010 - 2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.37

*Which of the following statements do you agree with the most: (1) For people like me it doesn't matter whether a government is democratic or non-democratic; (2) Democracy is preferable to any other form of government; (3) Under some circumstances an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one?*

## Trust in political institutions

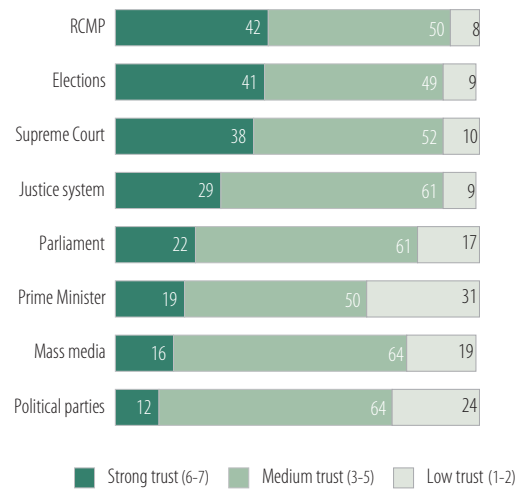
Most Canadians have at least some trust in the institutions of government, and trust in these institutions has been increasing gradually over the past decade.

The AmericasBarometer survey measures the extent to which Canadians say they trust a number of public and political institutions.

- Canadians have higher levels of trust in institutions related to the justice system than to those related more directly to government. Nine in ten Canadians, for instance, have either a high (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale) or medium level (3 to 5 on the scale) of trust in the **RCMP**, the **Supreme Court of Canada**, and the country's **justice system**. The proportion with a high level of trust in the RCMP (42%) and the Supreme Court (38%) is higher than for **Parliament** (22%), the **Prime Minister** (19%) or **political parties** (12%).
- While comparatively few have high levels of trust in the institutions of government, most Canadians have at least a medium level of trust. Thus 83 percent have either high or medium trust in Parliament – with the figures for the Prime Minister and political parties being 69 percent and 76 percent respectively. Fewer than one in five Canadians (17%) have low trust (1 or 2 on the scale) in Parliament, one in five (24%) have low trust in political parties, and about one in three (31%) have low trust in the Prime Minister.

## Trust in institutions of government

2019



Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; medium trust = 3-5; low trust = 1 or 2.

Source: Americas Barometer 2019

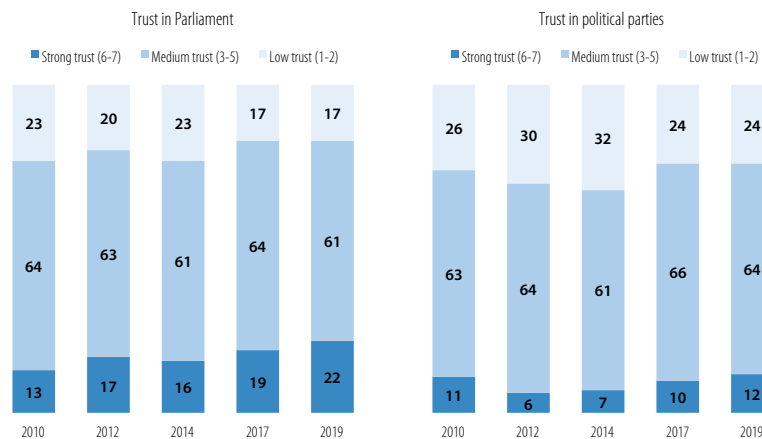
Q.30

To what extent do you trust...

- Trust in political institutions has been gradually improving over the past decade. The proportion having high or medium trust in Parliament has risen six points since 2010; in the case of political parties, there has been a six-point increase since a low of 70 percent was recorded in 2012.

## Trust in Parliament and political parties

2010 - 2019



Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; medium trust = 3-5; low trust = 1 or 2.

Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.30i, k

To what extent do you trust...

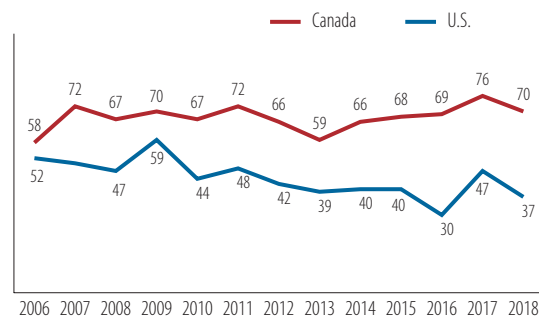
## Trust in elections

Trust in elections in Canada is either stable or improving, depending on the measure. The level of trust in elections in Canada compares favourably to levels in comparable countries.

There are two sources of data relating to the level of trust that Canadians have in their elections.

- The Gallup World Poll asks whether Canadians have confidence in the honesty of elections in their country. In 2018, seven in ten (70%) Canadians said that they did.
- Canada ranked 10th out of 34 OECD countries in terms of their level of confidence in the honesty of elections, and 20th out of the total of 125 countries included in the study. OECD countries with higher levels of confidence than Canada include the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden. Notably, the level of confidence in the honesty of elections in Canada is almost twice as high as it is in the United States (37%.)
- The level of confidence in the honesty of elections in Canada in 2018 is down six points from the peak of 76 percent reached in 2017, but remains higher than in most years since the survey began in 2006. The overall trend over the past decade is stable, with a slight downturn at the beginning of this decade being followed by a gradual increase over the past few years. This trend again stands in stark contrast to that in the U.S. South of the border, the level of confidence in the honesty of elections has fallen 22 points between 2009 and 2018; over the same period in Canada, there has been no change.
- The AmericasBarometer survey asks Canadians to say how much they trust elections in this country, measured on a 7-point scale (where 7 is “a lot” and 1 is “not at all”). In 2019, 41 percent of Canadians say they had a high level of trust in elections (6 or 7 on the 7-point scale), and 49 percent say they had medium trust (between 3 and 5). Only nine percent say they had low trust in elections (1 or 2 on the 7-point scale).
- The level of trust as measured by this survey is unchanged compared to 2017, but up significantly since 2014. The proportion of Canadians with a high level of trust in elections jumped from 21 to 41 percent between 2014 and 2017, while the proportion with low trust fell from 22 to nine percent (both figures were unchanged between 2017 and 2019).

## Confidence in the honesty of elections: Canada and the U.S. 2006 - 2019

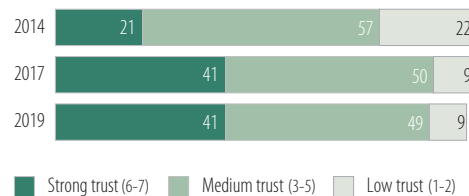


6 or 7 on a 7-point scale (1=not at all, 7=a lot)

Source: Gallup World Poll

*In this country, do you have confidence in each of the following, or not? How about honesty of elections?*

## Trust in elections (Canada) 2014 - 2019



Strong trust = 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale; medium trust = 3-5; low trust = 1 or 2.

Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.30q

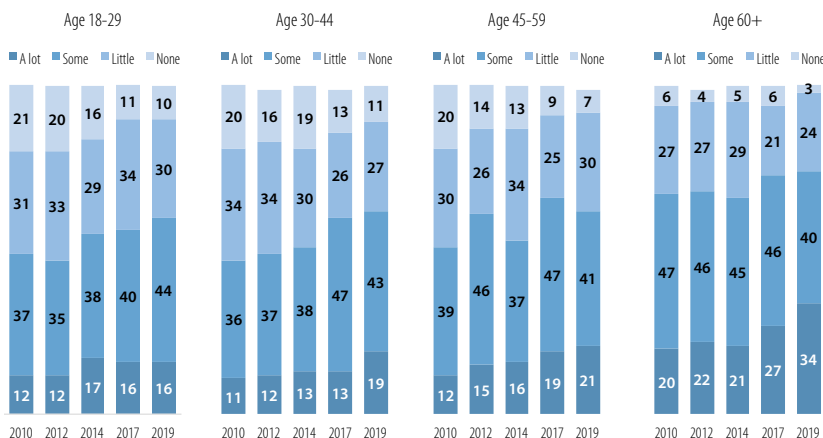
*To what extent do you trust elections in this country?*

## Citizens

Most Canadians are interested in politics, feel they understand the most important issues facing the country, and believe that their government is interested in what people like them think. These measures have either remained stable or improved over the past decade.

- Canadians not only trust their political institutions, they also trust one another. Eighty-five percent say that people in their community are either very (18%) or somewhat (67%) trustworthy, compared to 12 percent who say they are not very trustworthy and only three percent who say they are untrustworthy. The proportion saying that people in their community are either very or somewhat trustworthy has remained unchanged over the past decade.
- Canadians are growing more interested in politics. In 2010, 54 percent said they had a lot (14%) or some (40%) interest in politics; by 2019 this had increased to 65 percent (with 23% having a lot of interest, and 42% have some interest). Interest has grown across all age groups. The proportion of younger adults (those aged 18 to 29) who have either a lot or some interest grew from 47 percent in 2012 to 60 percent in 2019; over the same period the proportion with no interest dropped from 20 to 10 percent.

### Interest in politics 2010 - 2019 By age



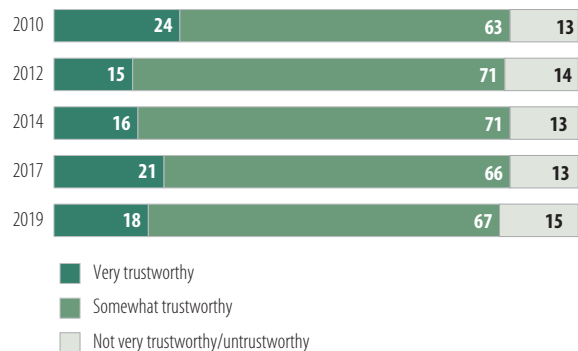
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.54

How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?

### Trust in people in your community

2010 - 2019



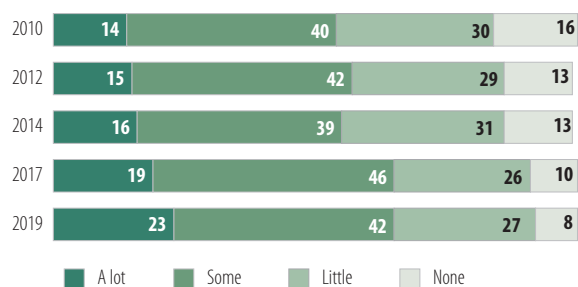
Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.11

And speaking of the people from around where you live, would you say that people in this community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy...?

### Interest in politics

2010 - 2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.54

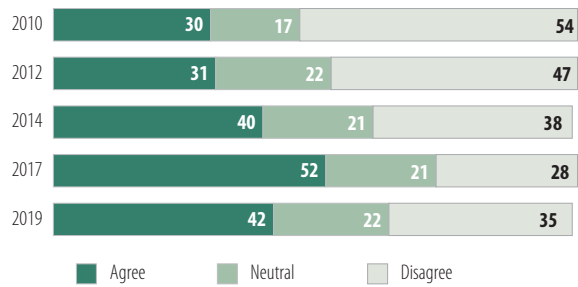
How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?



- Six in ten (61%) Canadians agree (5 to 7 on a 7-point scale) that they understand the most important political issues of the country, including 31 percent who strongly agree (6 or 7 on the scale). The proportion who strongly agree is nine points higher today than it was a decade ago.
- Just over two in five (42%) Canadians agree that those who govern their country are interested in what people like them think, including 18 percent who strongly agree. This is fewer than in the previous survey in 2017, but more than was the case at the start of the decade, when agreement stood at 30 percent. The proportion that disagree with the notion that the government is interested in what they think, at 35 percent, is 19 points lower than it was in 2010.

### Are those who govern interested in what people like you think?

2010 - 2019



Source: Americas Barometer 2019

Q.34f

Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

# The government

There has been little change over the past decade in the proportion of Canadians saying they have confidence in the national government, a period during which two different political parties held power. Over the same period, confidence has fallen in other comparable countries.

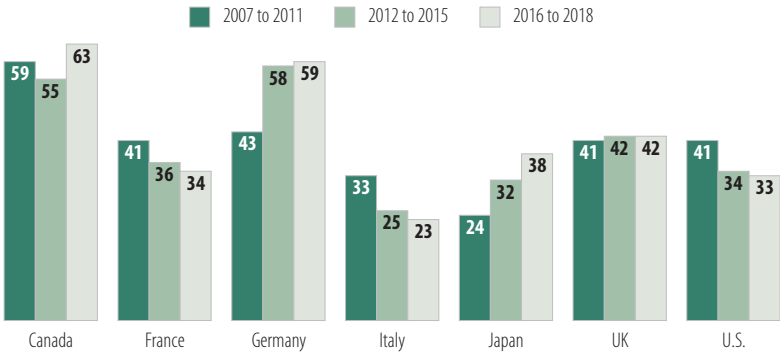
Survey questions asking about support for the current government are less meaningful indicators of public confidence in the political system as a whole because they are inevitably coloured by the relative popularity (or unpopularity) of the current president, prime minister or party in power. That said, the Gallup World Poll allows for comparisons between Canada and other countries that cover the period since 2006, during which time two different parties in Canada held office at the federal level (the Conservatives until 2015, and the Liberals more recently).

- There has been little change over the past decade in the proportion of Canadians saying they have confidence in the national government. The proportion expressing confidence averaged 59 percent between 2007 and 2011,

when the Conservatives led a minority government, 55 percent between 2012 and 2015, when the Conservatives formed a majority government, and 63 percent in the period following the election of the Liberals.

- Looking at averages over the same time periods, only one other G-7 country has seen levels of confidence in the national government as high as Canada, namely Germany (in 2018, the proportion expressing confidence in the national government was 59% in Germany and 61% in Canada). Levels of confidence in the other five countries are much lower, and in countries such as the U.S., France, and Italy, have been declining.
- Between 2009 and 2018, the proportion of Americans with confidence in their national government fell by 19 points, from 50 percent to 31 percent. Over the same period, the proportion of Canadians with confidence in their national government was unchanged (61% in each case).

Confidence in the national government (G7 countries)  
2007 – 2018 Multi-year averages



Source: Gallup World Poll  
*In this country, do you have confidence in each of the following, or not?  
How about national government?*

## Summary

Canada's liberal democracy, like that of other countries, is under pressure to continually evolve. Its institutions must give representation to a population whose backgrounds and interests are increasingly diverse. Its decision-making processes must generate responses to a range of unprecedented challenges, ranging from transformational technological change, to a rapidly changing climate, to the emergence of new global superpowers. Its citizens, on the whole, are growing older, more educated, more urban and wealthier – attributes that, among other things, bring demands for expanded services along with a greater willingness to question received wisdom.

Under these circumstances, the resilience of Canadian democracy should not be taken for granted. Over the past decade, however, the trends related to public support

for democracy and democratic institutions in Canada are generally either stable or positive. Large majorities are satisfied with how democracy works in Canada and maintain that, despite its foibles, democracy is better than any other form of government. Most trust elections and, unlike the case in some other western countries, the level of trust in elections in Canada is growing. Canadians are becoming more interested in politics, and fewer doubt whether governments are really that interested in what people like them think. Finally, Canadians also have high levels of trust in one another. None of these trends is sufficient to inoculate Canadians against problems in the future. But they are clear and consistent enough to suggest that we should be approaching the autumn election campaign more with confidence in ourselves as a civic society than with trepidation that we are losing faith in our democracy.

## **ENVIRONICS INSTITUTE FOR SURVEY RESEARCH**

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