

Public Support for Canada's Political System: Regional Trends

Final Report

JANUARY 2020

This study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research:

ENVIRONICS INSTITUTE FOR SURVEY RESEARCH

Environics Institute for Survey Research conducts relevant and original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading.

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Contents

- Executive Summary 1
- Introduction 2
- Outline of the report 3
- The economic context 4
- Satisfaction with democracy and elections 5
- Support for the political system and institutions 7
- Trust in political actors and institutions 9
- National pride and unity 11
- Discussion 13
- A Closer look at Quebec and Alberta 14
- Conclusions 18

Executive summary

Previous research has shown that satisfaction with political institutions and trust in political actors in Canada has gradually been rising over the past decade. This report pushes this analysis deeper, by focusing not only on the national trend, but on sub-national ones as well. The results show that the patterns are not consistent, with satisfaction with democracy and trust in political actors growing in some regions of the country and falling in others. These counteracting regional trends are obscured when they are subsumed under the national average, creating the potential for emerging fault lines in the Canadian federation to be overlooked.

The detailed findings offer both some reassurance and a clear warning for those concerned with national unity in Canada. It is reassuring that confidence in Canada's political system in Quebec is not significantly lower than average. This is notable, given Quebec's status as a minority nation within the larger Canadian federal state. Quebec's distinctiveness as a minority nation within Canada is evident in the survey data, but only on questions that touch on how Quebecers identify themselves, and not those related to confidence in the country's political system.

More worryingly, satisfaction with democracy and trust in political actors has declined significantly in Alberta. A decline was registered on every measure covered in this report, and in each case, the decline was greater than that in any other region. The largest declines did not occur immediately after the start of the recession in the province in late 2014, however. The data suggest that while Albertans initially remained hopeful, levels of satisfaction with Canadian democracy faltered after changes of government at both the provincial and federal levels in 2015 proved unable to quickly reverse the province's economic fortunes.

Because confidence in democracy was previously higher in Alberta than in the other regions, these declines leave levels of confidence in Alberta only slightly lower than average. Thus, while Albertans do not currently stand out as having significantly lower confidence in the country's political system than do other Canadians, they do stand out as the one region where confidence across a range of measures has declined sharply in recent years. If the trend continues, a significant gap in support for the political system will emerge between Alberta and the rest of Canada.

Introduction:

Confidence in democracy in a federal system

A functioning democracy depends on the support of its citizens. The popularity of specific leaders and political parties may rise and fall, but ideally without affecting the extent to which citizens are satisfied with the political system and trust in its core institutions, including the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.

In recent years, concerns have been raised about the decline in confidence in democracy in many Western countries. A previous report¹ concluded that in the Canadian context these concerns may be overstated: on the whole, satisfaction with democracy and trust in political actors in Canada has gradually been rising over the past decade, not falling. This report pushes this analysis deeper, by focusing not only on the national trend in Canada, but on the sub-national ones as well.

This approach is unusual. Discussions of confidence in democracy typically take the countries as the primary unit of analysis. Within individual countries, different sub-populations can be examined, such as younger adults, or partisans on the political left or right. These sub-populations, however, are more or less evenly distributed across the country, rather than being territorially defined.

In Canada, given the country's decentralized federal political structure, it is essential to look beyond the national trend by focusing on comparisons among provinces and regions. There are several good reasons to suspect that there could be important regional differences, not only in the extent of confidence (higher in some regions than in others), but the direction of the trend (growing in some regions and declining in others).

First, Canada was formed by the federation of different territorially based political communities, with distinct histories, cultures and languages. The most notable of these is Quebec, with its majority French-speaking population who view themselves not only as a province but as a nation within a larger state. Other regional and provincial

communities in the country also lay claim to their own histories and political cultures, some of which pre-date their entry into Confederation, and some of which crystalized afterwards. The result is the existence within Canada of multiple and sometimes competing identities and loyalties. In this context, it is possible that the level of confidence that citizens have in the Canadian political system will be conditioned by their feelings about how responsive that system is to the needs of the provincial or regional political community with which they identify.

Second, Canada's regional political identities and cultures are reinforced by the regional nature of its economy. The country's geography – in terms of both its continent-wide scale and the diversity of its topography and geology – has given rise to regional economies fueled by distinctive combinations of access to natural resources and proximity to markets. This, in turn, has not only produced regional disparities in wealth over the long-term, but also different degrees of insulation from or exposure to economic shocks in the short-term. To the extent that there is a relationship between confidence in the political system and feelings of economic security (with confidence rising or falling in tandem with the economic cycle), then the effect of this link in Canada might not be uniform across the country, as feelings of economic security may be rising in some regions and falling in others at the same point in time.

A third related issue is the regional nature of Canada's party system. The two major parties that have formed government at the federal level – the Liberals and Conservatives – have each historically drawn greater support in some regions and less in others. A transition of power from one party to another may therefore be seen to favour one region's interests over another.² In the extreme, this perception of favouritism can mean that such transitions might actually affect the amount of confidence that citizens in the different regions of the country have, not just in the party in power, but in the political system itself.

¹ Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Confidence in Democracy and the Political System* (Toronto: Environics Institute for Survey Research, September 11, 2019); <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/confidence-in-democracy-and-the-political-system>.

² See Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Canada: Pulling Together or Drifting Apart? The Confederation of Tomorrow 2019 Survey Of Canadians, Report 1 (April 2019)*, pp. 22-23; <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/confederation-of-tomorrow---2018>.

Outline of the report

This report will explore three questions:

- 1) To what extent and in what ways do levels of support for the political system in Canada, and changes in those levels over time, vary by province or region?
- 2) What is the relationship between economic conditions and the patterns of regional support for the political system in Canada?
- 3) Does a change in the political party forming government at the national level affect the patterns of regional support for the political system in Canada?

This report will address these questions first by reviewing the regional results from a variety of measures relating to confidence in the political system and trust in political actors, and then by summarizing the relevant patterns.

The data analyzed in this report is drawn from the Canadian portion of the AmericasBarometer surveys. The AmericasBarometer is a recurring study conducted approximately every two years and covering 23 countries spanning the western hemisphere. In Canada, the surveys were conducted online five times over the past decade: in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2019. Since 2012, the surveys have been conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research.³

It is relevant for the study that mid-way through the period under consideration (2015), the political party in power at the federal level in Canada shifted, as the Conservative government led by Stephen Harper was defeated by the Liberal party led by Justin Trudeau.

The overall sample for each survey is approximately 1,500 adult Canadians. The main limitation of the data is that the sample size for many provinces are quite small. Because of this, results for the four Atlantic provinces are combined, as are results for Manitoba and Saskatchewan. This is so, even though surveys based on larger samples have shown that attitudes within the Atlantic region or in the West of Canada can differ quite substantially from province to province.⁴ For this reason, much of the analysis presented in this report will focus on the four larger provinces (Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia), where the survey sample sizes are somewhat larger.⁵ The report will focus most specifically on Quebec and Alberta — each, for different reasons, focal points for regionally-based discontent with Canada's political system.

The AmericasBarometer surveys include a variety of questions related to confidence in the political system. These questions ask about satisfaction with, pride in, support for, respect for, trust in and approval of different political institutions or actors. For the purposes of this report, these will all be taken as different aspects of what can more generally be described as confidence in Canada's political system. Many of these questions ask respondents to express the extent of their agreement or trust on a 7-point scale. In these cases, this report will look at expressions of strong agreement or strong trust, which combine responses of six or seven on the scale.

³ The AmericasBarometer data for 2010 were supplied by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, which takes no responsibility for any interpretation of the data.

⁴ See, for instance, the reports from the Confederation of Tomorrow 2019 survey of Canadians, available at <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/confederation-of-tomorrow---2018>

⁵ In 2019, the total survey sample was 1,508; the unweighted subsamples for the four largest provinces were: Ontario, 586; Quebec, 350; British Columbia, 196; and Alberta, 151.

The Economic Context

To begin with, we will examine the ways in which the economic outlook of Canadians has shifted over the past decade.

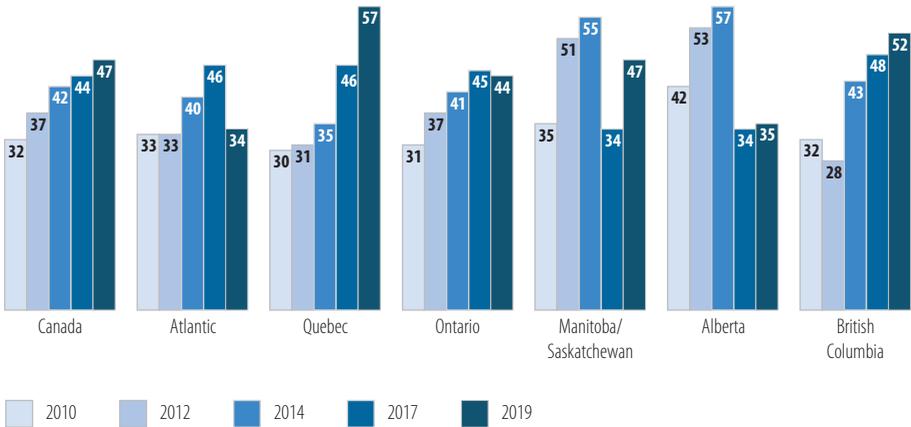
Overall, since 2010, Canadians’ economic outlook has improved. The proportion describing **the country’s economic situation** as very good or good has risen steadily, from 32 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2019. The proportion describing their total **household income** as being good enough to allow them to save from it increased from 19 percent to 31 percent over the same period.

These national trends, however, mask contrasting trends at the regional level. While the proportion of residents of Quebec, Ontario and B.C. describing the country’s economic situation as very good or good has been growing, it has been declining in Alberta (the trends in the Atlantic

provinces and in Manitoba-Saskatchewan are less definitive). A similar pattern is evident in the case of income security: across most provinces and regions, a growing proportion say their total household income is good enough to allow them to save; in Alberta, however, the proportion has been declining, at least since its recession began in 2014.

In both cases (*i.e.* whether in reference to the country’s economy or to household income), the improvements in outlook have been especially sharp in B.C. and in Quebec. Quebecers were the least likely to say the economy was doing well in 2010, and are now the most likely; they are now also the most likely to say their household income is good enough to allow them to save. The starkest contrast in trends in economic outlook, therefore, is between a steep improvement in Quebec and a significant deterioration in Alberta.

How would you describe the country’s economic situation?
% very good/good 2010-19



How would you describe the country’s economic situation?

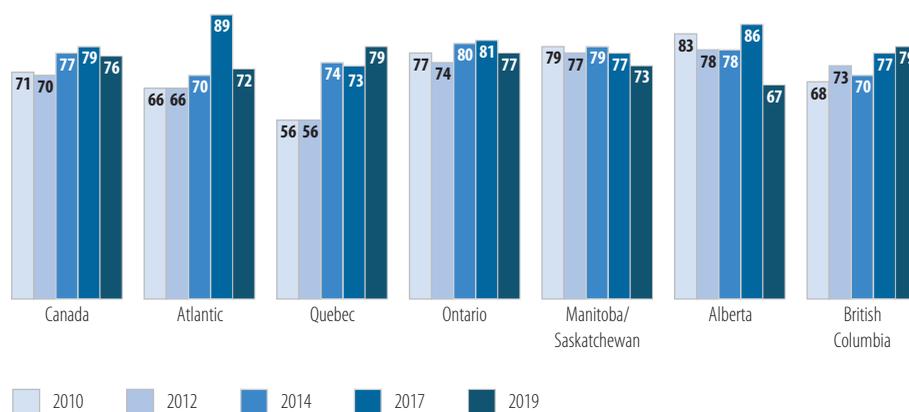
Satisfaction with democracy and elections

Most Canadians are **satisfied with the way democracy works** in their country: specifically, in the 2019 survey, 76 percent say that they are very satisfied or satisfied. The level of satisfaction has been relatively stable over the decade, although there has been a modest increase since 2012.

This straightforward national picture is complicated somewhat by some of the regional trends. First, there was a marked increase in satisfaction with democracy in Quebec after 2014, which is difficult to explain. This increase predates both the biggest improvement in economic

outlook in the province, and the change in government at the federal level in 2015.⁶ Second, there was a significant drop in satisfaction in Alberta between 2017 and 2019 (from 86% to 67%). It could be supposed that this is linked to the worsening economic conditions in the province, but the deterioration in economic outlook occurred between 2014 and 2017 surveys, at a time when Albertan's satisfaction with the way democracy works remained stable. The decline in satisfaction with democracy in Alberta also did not immediately follow the changes in both the federal and provincial governments that occurred in 2015.

Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada
2010-19 % very satisfied/satisfied



Would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Canada?

⁶ While the question refers to the way democracy works in Canada, it is possible that the increase in satisfaction in Quebec is linked to the outcome of the 2014 provincial election, which occurred several months prior to that year's survey. This is highly conjectural, however.

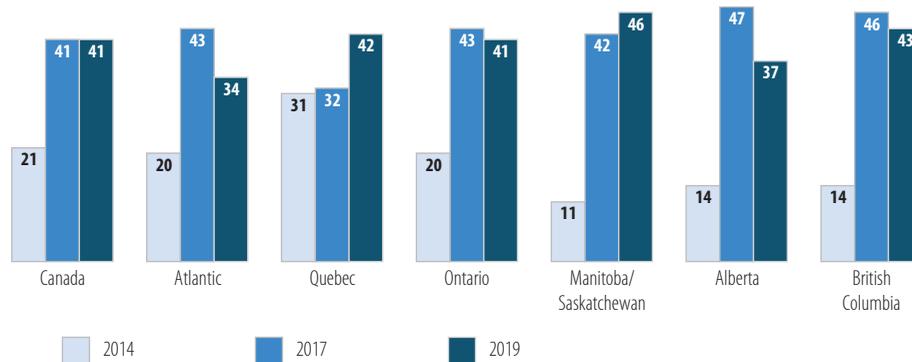
In contrast to the very gradual increase in overall satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada, the proportion of Canadians expressing **strong trust in elections** increased sharply, from 21 percent in 2014 to 41 percent in 2017; it remained at 41 percent in 2019 (this question was not asked in 2010 or 2012). The shift between 2014 and 2017 is hard to account for. It is tempting to link it to satisfaction with the outcome of the 2015 federal election, but since the increase in trust is even more acute in Manitoba/Saskatchewan and Alberta – areas of the country dominated by the federal party that was defeated in 2015 – this interpretation seems too simplistic (note also that the increase in trust in Quebec only occurs after that 2017 survey,⁷ again making it hard to link it to the outcome of the 2015 election). Another possible

explanation is that feelings of trust in elections in Canadians were affected by the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the outcome of which may have led some Canadians to feel better about their own system by comparison.

Along with the increase in satisfaction with democracy and trust in elections, there has also been a rising number of Canadians who strongly agree that **those who govern this country are interested in what people like them think**. The proportion rose somewhat in 2014 and more noticeably in 2017, before dropping back somewhat in 2019. The increases between 2014 and 2017 were larger in the Atlantic provinces and in Alberta; the drop between 2017 and 2019 was much more dramatic in Alberta.

Trust in elections

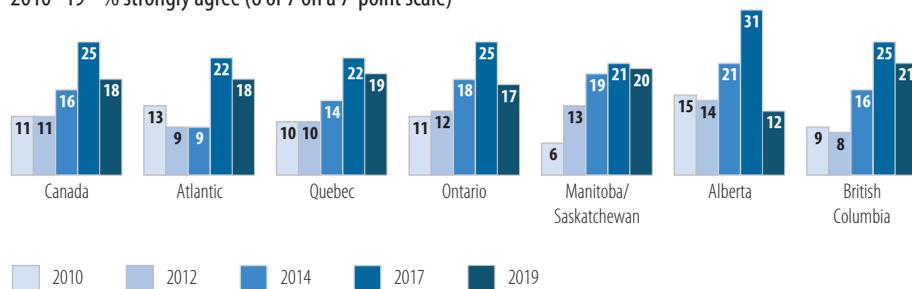
2014–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you trust elections in this country?

Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think

2010–19 % strongly agree (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think?

⁷ While strong trust in Quebec was unchanged between 2014 and 2017, weak trust declined and moderate trust grew. Between 2017 and 2019, moderate trust declined and strong trust grew.

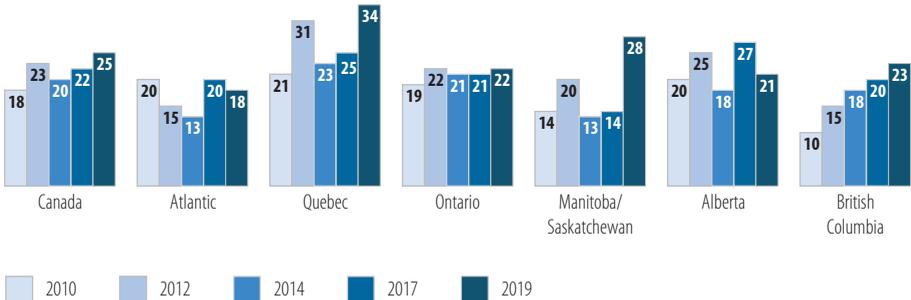
Support for the political system and institutions

The AmericasBarometer survey contains several questions about the political system. One of these was asked for the first time in 2019: Canadians were asked whether, in general, they are satisfied or dissatisfied with **the way the political system works in Canada**. Seven in ten Canadians are satisfied, and 30 percent are dissatisfied. There is some variation across regions, with satisfaction highest in Quebec (74%) and lowest in Alberta (62%).

Three other questions have been asked regularly since 2010, regarding the amount of respect, support and pride Canadians have for their political system or institutions.

The proportion of Canadians expressing a lot of **respect for the country's political institutions** is relatively low, but has risen gradually from 18 percent in 2010 to 25 percent in 2019. The pattern differs across the country, however. British Columbia shows a steady increase, while in Ontario there has been no change. In other parts of the country, respect has risen and fallen between successive surveys. It is difficult to summarize these contrasting patterns, although it is noticeable that Quebec and B.C., on the other hand, and Alberta, on the other hand, are currently trending in opposite directions.

Respect for the political institutions of Canada
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



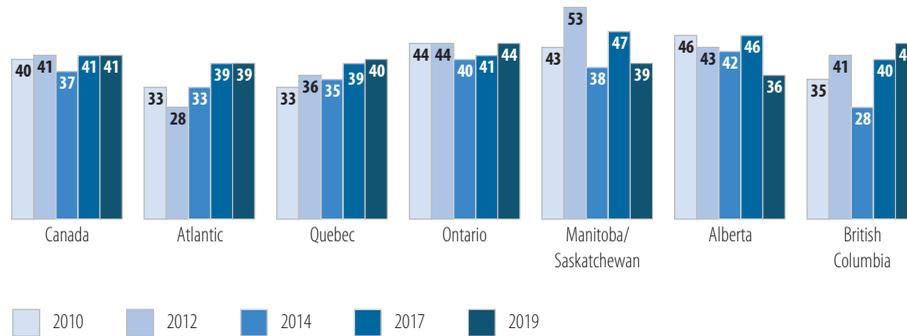
To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Canada?

Since 2010, there has been no change in the overall proportion of Canadians expressing strong support for the political system of Canada, but this again masks contrasting regional trends. Support has risen gradually in both Quebec and B.C., remained unchanged in Ontario, and fallen between 2017 and 2019 in Alberta.

The patterns are similar when it comes to feeling proud of living under Canada's political system. Overall, there was a small increase between 2010 and 2012 in the proportion saying they feel very proud, and no change subsequently. But feelings of pride in the country's political system are up in Quebec and B.C., unchanged in Ontario, and lower in Alberta – with the biggest change in Alberta coming between 2017 and 2019.

Support for the political system of Canada

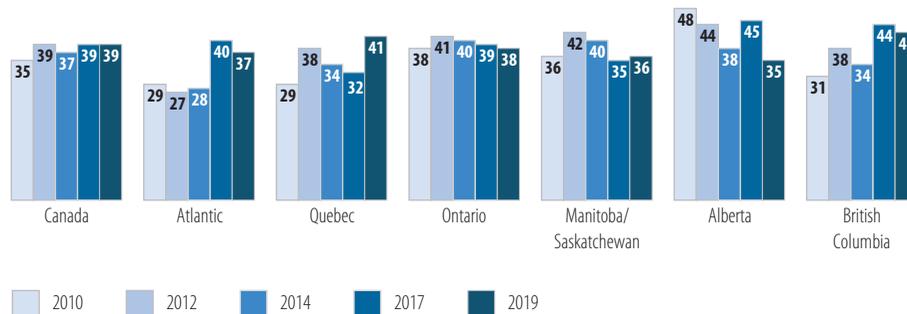
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of Canada?

Pride in living under the political system of Canada

2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of Canada?

Trust in political actors and institutions

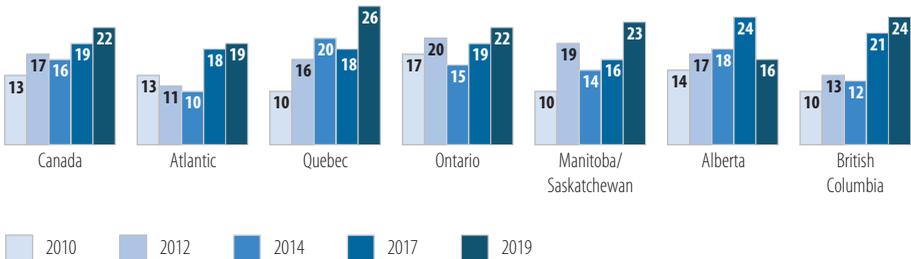
As mentioned, while it is commonly asserted that trust in political actors and institutions in Western democracies is waning, this is not the case in Canada. While only a small proportion of Canadians say they have a lot of trust in parliament or political parties, for instance, most have at least some trust – and in recent years, the proportion that has a lot of trust has been growing.

The proportion of Canadians expressing a lot of **trust in Parliament** increased steadily from 13 percent in 2010 to 22 percent in 2019. In every region or major province, this proportion is higher in 2019 than in 2010. There are, however, two nuances worth noting. First, the increase is most noticeable in Quebec, Manitoba/Saskatchewan, and B.C., where in each case the proportion in 2019 is more than double than of 2010. Second, after initially following the same positive trend, the proportion with a lot of trust in Parliament in Alberta declined sharply between 2017 and 2019.

The pattern is similar, if somewhat less pronounced, in the case of **trust in political parties**. After dropping between

2010 and 2012, the proportion of Canadians with a lot of trust in political parties has increased since. Again, however, notable regional variations lie behind this overall trend. The 5-point drop in trust between 2010 and 2012 at the national level was due almost entirely to a 17-point drop in Quebec – a drop that came in the midst of an unfolding corruption scandal in the province that led to the establishment of a commission of inquiry in 2011. The rebound in trust after 2014 is most pronounced in the Prairies, and in particular in Alberta, which initially appears puzzling as Albertans are among those least supportive of the Liberal party, which formed government federally after 2015. However, it is possible that the change in Alberta came in response to developments at the provincial level, including the emergence of a more competitive provincial party system with the unexpected victory of the NDP in the provincial election of 2015. Taken together, these contrasting ups and downs in the degree of trust in political parties in different provinces signals that the overall Canadian trend may not always reflect developments in national politics.

To what extent do you trust the Parliament?
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you trust the Parliament?

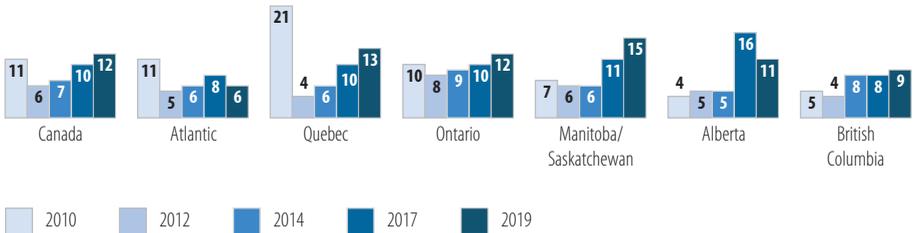
Trust in **the Supreme Court** is also gradually increasing: strong trust rose from 32 to 38 percent between 2010 and 2019. The Supreme Court of Canada plays a prominent role in Canada’s federal system as the arbiter in disputes over the division of powers between the federal and provincial governments. It is notable, then, that with one exception, strong trust in the Supreme Court is currently higher than it was in 2010 in every major region or province of the country. The exception is Alberta, where trust has oscillated and where more recently it has fallen sharply.

The trust that Canadians have in **the Prime Minister** (a question asked without naming the specific person holding the office) appears to mirror more closely the federal political cycle. After a slight decline between 2010 and 2014, the proportion of Canadians with a lot of trust in the prime minister jumped by 11 percentage points between 2014 and 2017, before edging downwards in 2019. It seems reasonable to link these changes to the waning of support for the government of Stephen Harper, and to the initial enthusiasm the new government of Justin

Trudeau – enthusiasm which had eroded somewhat by 2019. The contrasting regional trends are telling. Albertans went from being the most likely to have a lot of trust in the prime minister in 2010, to being the least likely in 2019. It is notable, however, that the decline in the proportion of Albertans with strong trust in the prime minister did not happen immediately after the change of government (that is, between the 2014 and 2017 surveys). Rather, it occurred between 2017 and 2019.

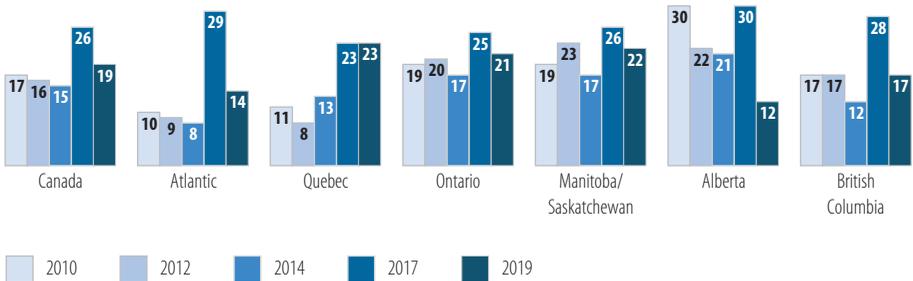
A separate question in the surveys asks more specifically about the job performance of the prime minister, this time identified by name as either Stephen Harper (in the 2010 to 2014 surveys) or Justin Trudeau (in the 2017 and 2019 surveys). In Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario and B.C., approval of the prime minister’s job performance jumped significantly between 2014 and 2017 (with the shift from Harper to Trudeau) before tailing off somewhat in 2019. In the Prairie province of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, approval dropped after 2014; in Alberta, the drop between 2014 and 2017 was very small, but was followed by a dramatic drop between 2017 and 2019.

To what extent do you trust political parties?
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you trust political parties?

To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister?
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister?

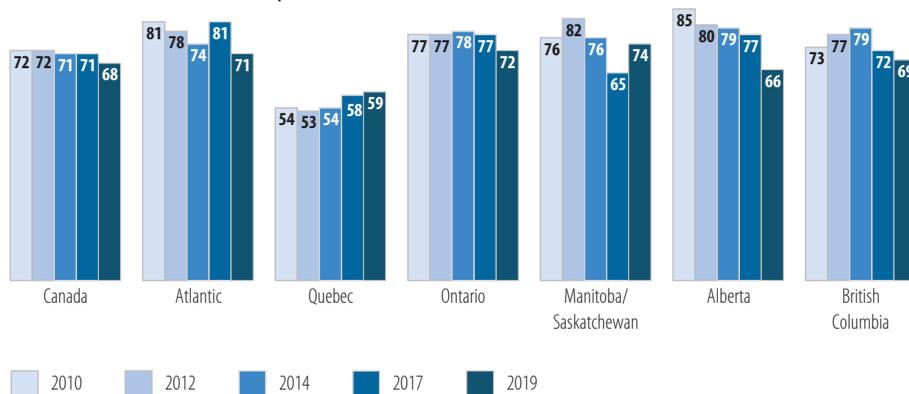
National pride and unity

About seven in ten Canadians are very **proud of being a Canadian** – a proportion that has held more or less steady since 2010. Not surprisingly, the extent of pride is much lower in Quebec, where, in 2019, 59 percent said they were very proud of being a Canadian. In Quebec, however, the proportion expressing a lot of pride in being a Canadian has been growing slowly but steadily increasing since 2012. This is in contrast to the trend in the other regions of the country, when the proportion has dipped. The most significant

decline is evident in Alberta, where the proportion expressing a lot of pride fell from 85 percent in 2010 to 66 percent in 2019. Most of this drop occurred between 2017 and 2019.

Taking together all the provinces outside of Quebec, the proportion expressing a lot of pride in being a Canadian has fallen from 78 percent in 2010 to 71 percent in 2019 – a change that is somewhat obscured by the offsetting increase in pride among Quebecers.

To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)

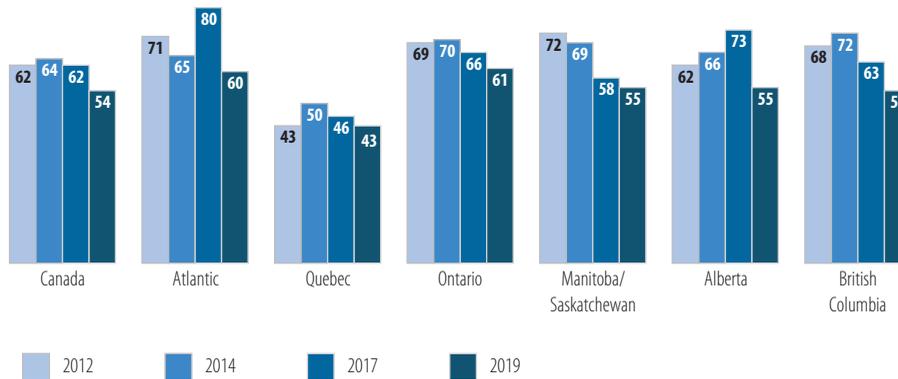


To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?

There has also been a decline in the proportion of Canadians strongly agreeing that, despite our differences, **we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country**. In 2019, 54 percent of Canadians strongly agreed, including 58 percent outside of Quebec, and 43 percent in that province. In several

regions of the country, the proportion strongly agreeing with the proposition that Canadians have many things that unite them increased between 2012 and 2017 before dropping off 2017 and 2019. The most recent drops were most acute in the Atlantic provinces and in Alberta.

Despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country
2012–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



Despite our differences, we Canadians have many things that unite us as a country.

Discussion

It is not easy to summarize the results of such a wide range of survey questions, disaggregated across the different regions of Canada. The patterns are not consistent, with positive trends in one part of the country often being offset by negative trends in another. This, however, is the one of the principal findings of this analysis. The answer to the question of whether Canadians are gaining or losing confidence in their democratic institutions depends in part on which region one is referring to. For this reason, national trends on this issue can be misleading (or at least only partly accurate), precisely because they often mask counteracting regional ones.

The fact that a trend for a population as a whole can often obscure contrasting trends among population subgroups is hardly news. It is always possible that support for a given political option could be increasing among men but declining among women, or increasing among younger

citizens but declining among older ones. Supporters of one political party naturally are more content when that party is in power, just as its opponents are more discontent. In each case, the net effect across the population as a whole may be one of no change.

In the context of a discussion of Canadian democracy, however, contrasting regional patterns are more than mere sociological curiosities. Provincial and regional political communities are the building blocks of Canada's federal state. Unlike other demographic groups, which are spread across the national territory, regional political communities are by definition spatially defined and able to express themselves politically through their provincial governments. To overlook divergent regional trends in opinion about the functioning of Canada's political institutions or actors is to risk failing to pick up on the emergence of fault lines that could destabilize the federation itself.

A closer look at Quebec and Alberta

The final part of this report provides a closer look at the trends in the two provinces which have been longstanding focal points for expressions of discontent with Canada's political system: Quebec and Alberta.

Quebec

An important finding of this analysis is that confidence in Canada's political system in Quebec is not significantly lower than average. This is notable, given Quebec's status as a minority nation within the larger Canadian federal state – and one whose political leaders frequently contest the extent of the autonomy afforded to the province under the current federal arrangement. Quebecers are currently slightly more likely than other Canadians to be satisfied with the way the political system works in Canada, and just as likely as other Canadians to be satisfied with the way democracy works. Quebecers are more likely than other Canadians to have a lot of respect for the country's key political institutions, and just as likely to feel proud of living under the political system of Canada and to feel that that political system is worthy of support. They have just as much trust as other Canadians do in elections, in parliament and in the prime minister. They also have just as much trust in the supreme court, which is important as the court is, among other things, the final arbiter of the federal-provincial division of powers.

Where Quebecers stand out is on the questions of identity. Quebecers are much less likely than other Canadians to feel a lot of pride in being Canadian (although very few feel no pride at all, indicating that while Quebecers do not embrace a Canadian identity as strongly as other Canadians, most do not reject that identity either). They are also much less likely to strongly agree that Canadians have many things that unite them as a country.

In short, Quebec's distinctiveness as a minority nation within Canada is evident in the survey data, but only on questions that touch on how Quebecers identify themselves, and not those related to confidence in the country's political system.

As we have seen, the level of satisfaction or trust that Quebecers have in political institutions and actors has been gradually increasing; on most measures, the level of satisfaction or trust in the province reported in the 2019 survey is the highest of all the surveys in the series. What the data cannot establish, however, is whether this trend should be attributed to the improvement in economic outlook in the province, or to the change in federal government. The improvement in Quebecers' economic outlook registered in the 2017 and especially the 2019 surveys is dramatic. As it coincides with the gradual improvement in confidence in democracy, it would be natural to assume that the two trends are related. The change of government, however, occurs at more or less the same time – in 2015, between the 2014 and 2017 surveys. This was followed by a significant increase in the proportion of Quebecers expressing strong trust in the prime minister (as a position, without naming the occupant) and approving the job performance of the prime minister (with the occupant named). It is therefore equally plausible to suggest that change of political stripe in Ottawa is responsible for at least part of the increase in confidence in Canada's political system registered in the province after the 2014 survey.

In considering the trends in Quebec, a final point to highlight is that at least one anomalous fluctuation in trust – namely the significant drop in trust in political parties in the province registered between 2010 and 2012, which is not mirrored to the same extent in any other part of the country – suggests that some results may reflect reactions to provincial political events as much as national one. Again, it is impossible to attribute causes in any definite way: while confidence in political parties in the province may have declined in the wake of the inquiry into political corruption in Quebec, this is a supposition, and other factors could be at play. The key point remains that, in the Canadian context, not only may national trends mask counter-acting regional ones, but they may equally mask regional causes (events) that may not initially come to mind precisely because they are not part of the country-level frame of reference.

Alberta

The level of satisfaction or trust that Albertans have in political institutions and actors fell noticeably between 2017 and 2019. This does not mean that Alberta currently stands starkly apart from other regions of the country on the various measures covered in this report. While it is true that levels of satisfaction or trust are now often lower in Alberta than in other provinces or regions, in most cases the difference is small and not statistically significant.

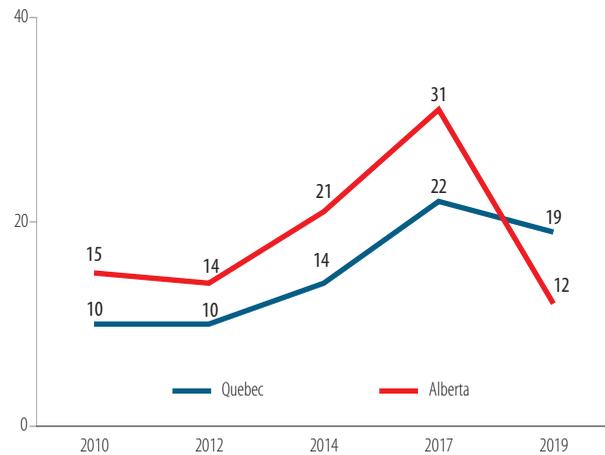
The consistency and extent of the decline in confidence registered by Albertans, however, is so striking that it warrants further emphasis. In Alberta, between the 2017 and 2019 surveys:

- Satisfaction with the way democracy works on Canada fell by 19 points;
- Trust in elections fell by 10 points;
- Strong agreement with the proposition that “those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think” fell by 19 points;
- Strong respect for the political institutions of Canada fell by 6 points;
- Strong agreement that one should support the political system of Canada fell by 10 points;
- Strong pride in living under Canada’s political system fell by 10 points;
- Trust in parliament fell by 8 points;
- Trust in political parties fell by 5 points;
- Trust in the prime minister fell by 18 points; and
- Trust in the supreme court fell by 13 points.

In sum, in Alberta, a decline was registered on every measure covered in this report, and in each case, the decline was greater than that in any other region (in fact, in most cases, confidence in democracy in other regions improved over this period, with the exception of Atlantic Canada, which registered several modest declines). Importantly, the declines are not limited to questions related to party politics (such as approval of the performance of the prime minister), but also to those related to support for the political system.

Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think

2010–19 % strongly agree (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think?

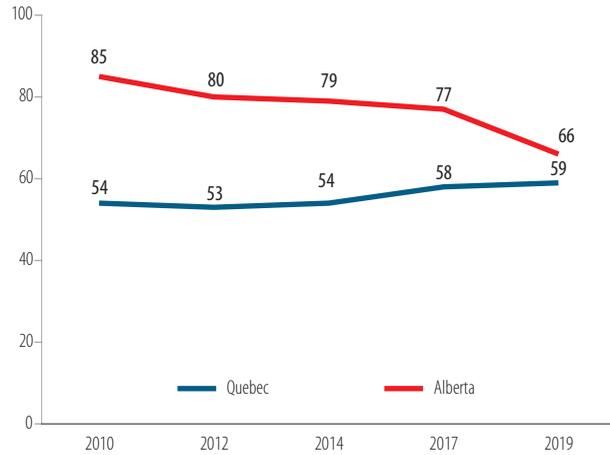
Because confidence in democracy was typically higher in Alberta than in the other regions at the start of the period covered by this study, these declines still leave levels of confidence in Alberta only slightly lower than average – so again, at the moment, Albertans do not stand out as having significantly lower confidence in the Canadian political system than do other Canadians. But they do stand out as the one region where confidence has declined sharply in recent years. Should the trend continue, therefore, a significant gap between Alberta and the rest of Canada would open up, leaving Alberta as an outlier. While it is too early to say whether this will in fact come to pass, it is certainly a trend that will need to be carefully monitored.

One other trend is worth mentioning, before proceeding to discuss possible causes. Strong pride in being Canadian has also dropped significantly in Alberta. Strong pride declined gradually between 2010 and 2017 (falling eight point over seven years), before experiencing a sharper 11-point drop between 2017 and 2019. This trend, combined with the slightly positive trend in Quebec described above, leads to the following observation: while in 2010, there was a 31-point gap between the extent of strong pride in being Canadian registered in the two provinces, by 2019 that gap had fallen to only 7-points.

Is it possible to establish the cause of decline in confidence in Canada's democracy in Alberta? Again, the survey data can only provide circumstantial evidence. Just as the positive trend in Quebec is accompanied by an improvement in economic outlook, the negative trend in Alberta is accompanied by a dramatic worsening of the economic mood. The proportion of Albertans describing the country's economic situation as very good or good dropped from 57 percent in the summer of 2014 (just prior to the economic downturn in the province) to 34 percent in 2017 (and remained at a similar 35 percent in 2019). It would be reasonable to assume that this trend and the drop in confidence are connected.

To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?

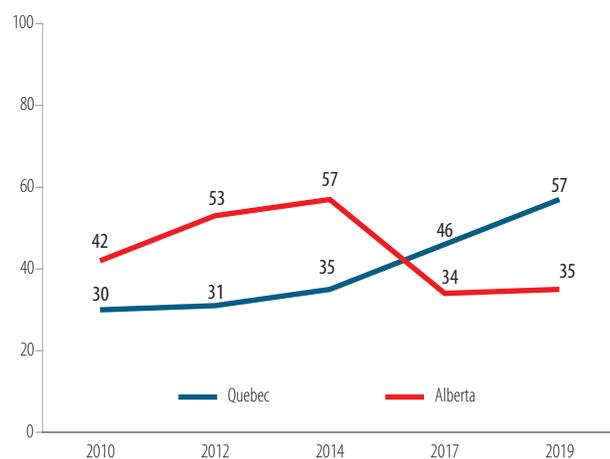
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent are you proud of being a Canadian?

How would you describe the country's economic situation?

2010–19 % very good/good (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



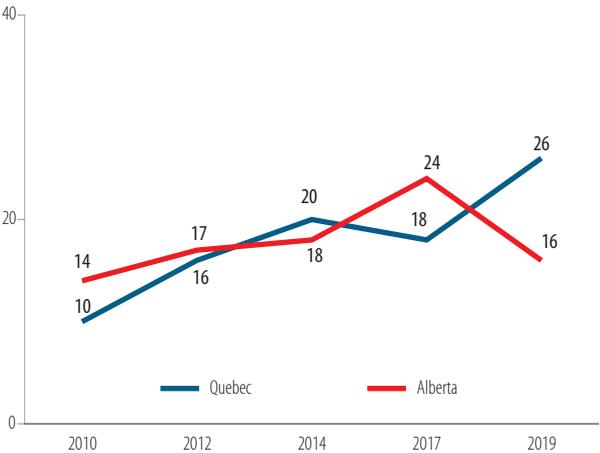
How would you describe the country's economic situation?

These series of surveys, however, provide evidence to suggest that the political response to the economic crisis in the province is a more important factor in explaining the drop in confidence in Canadian democracy than the economic crisis itself. The sharpest declines in satisfaction with democracy and trust in political actors occurred not between the 2014 and 2017 surveys – in the immediate aftermath of the economic downturn that began in the autumn of 2014 – but between the 2017 and 2019 surveys. What’s more, in many cases there was a slight improvement in satisfaction or trust measures in the province between 2014 and 2017, before an ensuing sharp decline. Albertans’ strong trust in parliament, for instance, increased by six points between 2014 and 2017, before falling by eight points. Similarly, strong trust in the prime minister increased by nine points before falling by eighteen. The proportion of Albertans strongly agreeing the those who govern are interested in what they think increased by ten points before dropping by nineteen.

This pattern suggests that, despite the onset of the recession in the province in late 2014, Albertans initially remained hopeful. This hope may have been spurred on by changes of government at both the provincial and federal levels in 2015. It is only after these changes appeared unable to quickly reverse the province’s economic fortunes that levels of satisfaction with Canadian democracy faltered. This doesn’t mean that the decline in satisfaction with Canadian democracy does not have roots in the prevailing economic conditions. But it does suggest that economics on its own is not sufficient to explain the ways in which Albertans’ view their political system has been changing.

To what extent do you trust the Parliament?

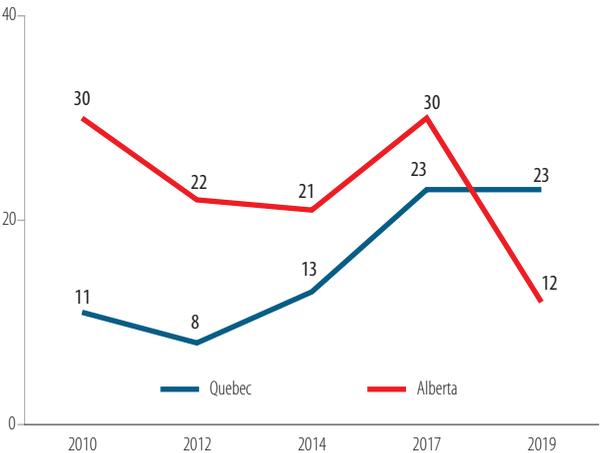
2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you trust the Parliament?

To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister?

2010–19 % a lot (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale)



To what extent do you trust the Prime Minister?

Conclusion

We are now able to offer answers to the three questions addressed in this report.

- 1) To what extent and in what ways do levels of support for the political system in Canada, and changes in those levels over time, vary by province or region?

Precise levels of satisfaction with the political system and trust in political actors vary across regions, and within each region there are variations over time, but over the ten years covered by the series of surveys examines in this report, no one region stands out consistently as an outlier. This is notable in the case of Quebec, particularly because Quebecers register a much weaker sense of Canadian identity. It is reassuring for federalists that Quebecers' distinctiveness in terms of identity does not mean that they are less supportive of the Canadian political system.

What is less reassuring for federalists is the finding that levels of satisfaction with the political system and trust in political actors have declined significantly in the most recent period in Alberta. For the time being, this does not mean that Albertans have much less confidence on Canadian democracy than their counterparts in other parts of the country, mainly because levels of confidence in Alberta were previously quite high. If the current trend continues, however, the answer to this first question may need to be revised.

- 2) What is the relationship between economic conditions and the patterns of regional support for the political system in Canada?

There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that support for the political system and economic outlook are related. Levels of satisfaction with the political system and trust in political actors in Quebec edged upwards as the economic mood improved, while they declined in Alberta following the onset of the recession in that province. At the same time, as will be noted below, there are also reasons to think that political factors may also be just as, if not more, important.

- 3) Does a change in the political party forming government at the national level affect the patterns of regional support for the political system in Canada?

The increase in satisfaction with the political system and trust in political actors in Quebec coincided both with an improved economic outlook and with the change in federal government. The fact that there was a significant increase in the province in trust in and approval of the prime minister suggests that both economic and political factors could be at play.

The case for the importance of political factors is even stronger in Alberta. The most significant declines in satisfaction with the political system and trust in political actors in that province did not come until after the 2017 survey, even though the province's recession took hold late in 2014. It is possible that both the harsher economic conditions and a perceived failure of new provincial and federal governments to redress them have combined to affect how Albertans are perceiving the Canadian political system.

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